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Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?

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***Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* By Graham Allison.** Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. 2017. Pp. 384. \$20.95, hardcover.

Graham Allison's *Destined for War* asks difficult, important questions about U.S.-China relations and appropriately applies Thucydides' *History* to modern geopolitics. Allison is, in fact, largely responsible for reintroducing Thucydides into the national conversation, for which any historian or classicist should thank him. However, the book comes not without its flaws, particularly problematic bias and basic misunderstandings of Greek history. This review will offer the prospective reader a quick overview of the book's argument and structure before detailing its positive and negative features.

The Thucydides's Trap, as explained by Allison, is the condition in which a rising power threatens to overtake a ruling a power. The ancient historian Thucydides recognized this condition as he recorded the causes of the Peloponnesian War in the fifth century BCE, hence its name. According to Allison, this condition very often leads to war and could do so between the United States and China, if both states do not adjust accordingly. He divides the book into four parts. The first—and shortest—part delineates the rise of China over the past several decades. The second delves into history, both ancient and more recent, showing examples of historical attestations of the Thucydides's Trap. Part three lays out the dynamic between and respective natures of the United States and China. Finally, part four offers twelve clues for peace based on historical precedents and four suggested paths forward. Appendix One outlines the "Thucydides Trap Case File," the sixteen times in the past five centuries when a rising power has threatened to displace a ruling power and whether each resulted in war. Appendix Two anticipates and aims to refute seven "straw men" counterarguments.

Allison is at his best when he offers a sober, unbiased perspective on the dynamic between the United States and China. It is difficult for many Americans to see our country as anything but exceptional; America is the only superpower and will continue to be, we believe, for the rest of our lives. Allison's questioning of this preconceived notion is both healthy and invaluable. He details how and why the Chinese economy has already surpassed that of America and how and

why China may be a closer geopolitical and military rival than most Americans are willing to acknowledge (6-24). His thoroughness should give even the most close-minded believer of American exceptionalism pause.

While Allison effectively combats some of our prejudices, he unfortunately reinforces others. Although the work fashions itself as world history, its Euro-American-centrism is glaringly apparent. The “Thucydides Trap Case File” outlines sixteen historical events from the past five hundred years. Out of the thirty-nine states (several of the events contain more than two states), only three non-European, non-American states appear (China once and Japan twice), less than eight percent. If we include the original Thucydides trap (Athens vs. Sparta) and the main focus of this book (the United States vs. China), we are left with four out of forty-three non-European, non-American states, still less than ten percent. One of the seven “straw men” that Allison lists in Appendix Two is “Selection Bias.” He attempts to refute this counterargument by saying, “The Case File includes *all* [his emphasis] instances we have been able to find in the past years in which a major rising power threatened to displace a ruling power. Because this includes the entire universe of cases (as opposed to a representative sample), the Case File is immune to charges of selection bias” (287). It is, perhaps, telling that his “entire universe” is comprised of the United States, Europe, Japan, and China. Lest one think that the case file focuses only on global conflicts, a quick look at the listed “domains” of the sixteen cases refutes this thought. While some conflicts listed were indeed fought over “Global Power” or “Global empire and trade,” others were regional conflicts fought over “Land power in western Europe” or “Land and sea power in northern Europe” (244). The war between Athens and Sparta was itself a regional conflict, only settled when the much larger (and non-European) Persian Empire entered the fray. It is with a hint of irony that the bias that leads Americans to dismiss a rising China, which Allison vehemently rails against, is the same one that leads Allison himself to conflate European and World history.

Some ancient historians have complained that the renewed focus on “the Thucydides’s Trap” diminishes Thucydides’ rich *History* down to this one simple observation. While this is true, it is hardly Allison’s fault. He has done Thucydidean scholars a service by bringing Thucydides into the national conversation; it is up to others to offer a fuller, deeper depiction of the ancient historian. What Allison *can* be blamed for, however, are the many factual mistakes he makes when discussing Thucydides and ancient Greek history. Here are a few as examples. He remarks how Thucydides did not live to see the end of the Peloponnesian War (xv). While Thucydides left his narrative unfinished, he showed a clear awareness of the war’s end in earlier passages. He falsely praises the Greeks for inventing architecture and sculpture (28). He calls Athens and Sparta “states that had managed to exist peacefully for decades” before the Peloponnesian War (29). Most observers are aware of Sparta’s warlike nature and records show that Athens was at war all but one year in the decades preceding the Peloponnesian

War. Furthermore, these two powers fought a major war against one another in the decades to which Allison is referring. He states that “[T]he Persian invasion in 490 BCE forced the Greeks to come together as never before” (31). The Greeks did not band together until the second Persian invasion a decade later. He erroneously refers to Athens’ subjects as “colonies” (32). Most troublingly, he repeatedly depicts Pericles as striving for peace with Sparta (37, 37, 40, 155), when the opposite was true.

The copy is refreshingly clean, aside from a missing quotation mark (xi). Grammar traditionalists might be dismayed at Allison’s proclivity for sentence fragments (i.e. 232-3) or his misuse of the semicolon (i.e. 239), but these are certainly stylistic choices, not copy errors. There are other stylistic points that may annoy some readers. He chooses the masculine pronoun for an indefinite observer; for example, “Anyone harboring such a thought in 1940 or 1950 would have been out of his mind” (232). He misuses superlatives; such as when, he calls Athens and Sparta “the ancient world’s two most fabled powers” (30). He does write in a concise, accessible manner; however, he has the tendency to take this too far and unnecessarily gloss common terms and names, for instance, “hyperbole: exaggeration for the purpose of emphasis” (viii) or “George Orwell—of 1984 fame” (201).

Despite its flaws, *Destined for War* does the important work of applying history’s lessons to today’s world. Ancient historians and classicists will be disappointed in its treatment of ancient Greece. However, the dynamic Allison labels the Thucydides’s Trap is true to Thucydides and, as Allison asserts, relevant to today’s conflicts. Most importantly, this work broaches uncomfortable, yet necessary, questions about the United States’ place in the world.

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