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The 30% solution — when war without end ends: Spengler



By **DAVID P. GOLDMAN, Spengler** | MARCH 13, 2016 9:57 AM (UTC+8)



During the Cold War, the assumption that nations are rational actors dominated foreign policy research, and with good reason: the United States and the Soviet Union pursued their rivalry by rational means. Mathematical simulation provided baseline scenarios for conflict management. Today, the emergence of militant Islam as a major (and perhaps the most important) strategic threat to the United States challenges the old assumption of rationality. Where this assumption prevails, as in the effort to bring Iran into the strategic architecture of Western Asia, it is deeply controversial.



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Cold War planners had the benefit of an extensive body of academic work and a consensus that embraced the majority of practitioners. Today, academic research into the prospective behavior of actors with limited rationality is rare.^[i] Policymakers are forced back to guesswork about practical issues, for example, the prospect of supporting “moderate” Islamists against less-moderate Islamists. Public debate over pressing issues is highly colored by ideological rhetoric.

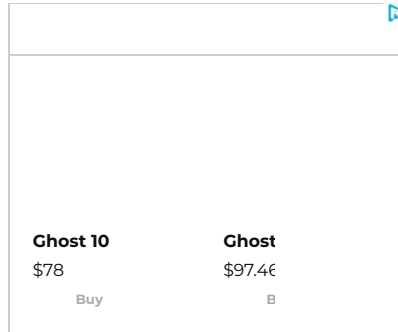
Analyzing irrational impulses in the context of real-world events is an inherently contradictory exercise. Paranoid schizophrenics may act with great rationality in the service of an irrational delusion. Distinguishing an irrational impulse from the rational means placed at its service requires highly subjective judgments. When an irrational impulse is combined with irrational leadership (for example, Adolf Hitler's personal conduct of the war in the Eastern Front), we encounter yet another order of complexity. I have argued that Franz Rosenzweig's Existentialist sociology of religion provides indispensable insights into this phenomena.^[ii]

Nonetheless, the foreign policy failures of the United States and its coalition partners in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria and elsewhere during the past fifteen years have taught us that rationality is overrated. We observe behavior on the part of combatants that appears suicidal. Here some historical examples provide a helpful starting point. We encounter in many of the great conflicts of the past elements of irrationality, including overtly suicidal actions, which provide insights into the kind of conflicts that have emerged during the past two decades and are likely to continue through the rest of the present century. A fresh look at great conflicts of the past should provide a corrective to our past preoccupation with rationality.

Nations do not fight to the death, but they frequently fight until their pool of prospective fighters has reached a point of practical exhaustion. In most cases, this involves reaching the 30% mark where casualties are concerned.

Wars of this character demarcate many turning points in world history. They include the Peloponnesian War, the Thirty Years War, the Napoleonic Wars, the American Civil War and, at least in some respects, the two World Wars of the 20th century. The 30% solution appears yet again in Germany's casualty figures during the Second World War. Germany lost 5,330,000 of 17,718,714 men aged 15-44 years, or again 30% of the total.

There are disturbing similarities in these wars to the present situation in Western Asia.



There is no simple common characterization that applies to all the wars of demographic exhaustion, but there surely are common elements to be found in all or most of them. These include the belief that the alternative to pursuing the war would be national ruin, as well as the belief of ordinary soldiers that the war will lead to their social and economic advancement for ordinary soldiers (the “field marshal’s baton in the rucksack”). These were existential wars rather than wars of choice in the minds of the major combatants. Wide historical surveys risk selecting data that fits broad patterns, to be sure, but the parallelisms are sufficiently compelling to make the effort worthwhile.

What we know of these wars challenges the usual way in which we think about rationality in politics. With hindsight, the decision to initiate and continue hostilities on this scale seems an act of madness. In most cases, moreover, the greatest number of casualties occurred after hope of ultimate victory had diminished or disappeared. The principal actors, to be sure, evinced a certain kind of rationality, albeit of a perverse order: They believed that failure to fight and win would undermine their national *raison d’être*. In fact, their fear of national decline was not entirely misplaced.

In many cases the consequence of war was a catastrophic decline marked by falling birth rates and declining population, wealth and power after the cessation of hostilities. The population of Greece declined sharply after the Peloponnesian War. After the Napoleonic Wars, France entered a long period of demographic stagnation and relative decline. The American South suffered a long and terrible economic setback. And Germany came out of the 20th century in aggravated demographic decline.



Battle of Aegospotami, Peloponnesian War

The belief among combatants in wars of exhaustion that nothing less than national survival was at stake was not wholly irrational, although in some cases the cause of national decline appears more psychological than objective. The Greek city-states after Alexander appear to have lost their will to live; France, after dominating Europe for a century and half, entered a long period of demoralization after Napoleon’s defeat. Germany has regained economic power and international standing, but fails to reproduce.

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We may conjecture that a combination of objective economic stress and a subjective crisis of national identity join to create conditions for a perfect storm. In that case combatants are motivated to fight to the death, and a very large proportion of them have had the opportunity to do so. The proportion we observe most often is 30% of the military-age male population, as in the Napoleonic Wars, the South in the American Civil War, and Germany in the Second World War. Casualty rates in the ancient world were considerably higher, in part because the pool of military-age citizens was not typically needed for manual labor.

Detecting such patterns has great practical importance, because perfect storm conditions are possible, indeed difficult to avoid, in the contemporary world—notably in the Sunni-Shia conflict in Western Asia. The intra-Muslim conflict, to be sure, remains scattered among geographically-contained civil wars and proxy conflicts, but it has the potential to erupt into a much larger war of exhaustion. The combination of economic stress and the cultural challenges to traditional life in the Muslim world is explosive, and might give rise to civilization wars on the scale of the past.

Before attempting to identify common patterns among these great wars, a summary of the scale of the conflicts is in order.

Athens in the Peloponnesian War

The Casualties: Athens lost half its adult male population in the course of the war. According to Barry L. Strauss, "Hoplite numbers were cut by 50% or more between 431 and 394, from 22,000 to c. 9,250. There were c. 15,000 *thetes* in ...it is difficult to imagine more than 5,000-7,000 *thetes* in 394. Hence, the adult male citizen population of Athens after the Peloponnesian War was 14,000-16,250. It had been over 40,000 in 434, so the cost of the Peloponnesian War to Athens in citizen population was some 60%.^[iii]



Athenian hoplite helmet

The Causes: The expansion of the Athenian Empire, in the conventional reading, led Sparta to believe that Athens had grown too powerful. Tribute from Athens' colonies paid for half of the city's food supply and made it possible for Athenian democracy to support a large part of its population with imports. The economy shifted away from a base among small-holding farmers to slaveholders and subsidized soldiers. ^[iv] Aristophanes, a traditionalist, railed against the changes in Athenian society. One of his stage characters in *The Wasps* declares, "We have now a thousand towns that pay us tribute; let them command each of these to feed twenty Athenians; then twenty thousand of our citizens would be eating nothing but hare, would drink nothing but the purest of milk, and always crowned with garlands."

Thucydides argued that the Athenian mob's desire for subsidies motivated the disastrous Sicily Campaign of 413-415 B.C.E. Athens

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voted to attack Syracuse “on a slight pretext, which looked reasonable, [but] was in fact aiming at conquering the whole of Sicily ...The general masses and the average soldier himself saw the prospect of getting pay for the time being and of adding to the empire so as to secure permanent paid employment in the future.”[\[v\]](#)

The consequences: Thirty-three years after the Spartan (and Persian) victory over Athens in 404 B.C.E., Thebes defeated Sparta and liberated its *helot* population. Macedon conquered Athens and Thebes in 338 B.C.E., and Greece began a rapid demographic decline. Aristotle blamed Sparta’s defeat at the hands of Thebes on its declining population (“the city could not support one shock, and was ruined for want of men”[\[vi\]](#)). Modern archaeologists note “the disappearance in the [eastern Peloponnese], by about 250 B.C.E., of the dense pattern of rural sites, and of the intensive agriculture that implies.” This rural depopulation was associated with “a growing divide between a small class of wealthy individuals and an increasingly impoverished free lower class of citizens, declining in numbers relative to slaves and immigrants.”[\[vii\]](#)

The 2nd-century Greek general Polybius later complained, “In our time all Greece was visited by a dearth of children and generally a decay of population, owing to which the cities were denuded of inhabitants, and a failure of productiveness resulted, though there were no long-continued wars or serious pestilences among us ... For this evil grew upon us rapidly, and without attracting attention, by our men becoming perverted to a passion for show and money and the pleasures of an idle life, and accordingly either not marrying at all, or, if they did marry, refusing to rear the children that were born, or at most one or two out of a great number.”[\[viii\]](#)

The Peloponnesian War is of special interest to policy-making today because a certain interpretation of the war has been advanced to justify America’s efforts to promote democracy in the Middle East. Two recent histories of the war, by Donald Kagan[\[ix\]](#) and Victor Davis Hanson[\[x\]](#), were prominently associated with the policies of the late George W. Bush administration. Prof. Hanson went so far as to claim that Athens’ efforts to export its democratic political system helped bring about the conflict with oligarchical Sparta. This interpretation requires us to reject the account of Thucydides, who blames the rapacity of the Athenian democrats and the mob they alimented for the campaign against Syracuse, a fellow democracy.

Hanson and Kagan treat the Syracuse disaster as an unfortunate mistake rather than view it with Thucydides as a tragic outcome of Athens’ inherent character flaws. Hanson blames the disaster on the malign influence of Alcibiades, and Kagan blames the Athenian general Nicias. I think it soundest to follow Thucydides. Scholars with an ideological stake in notion that democracy is a universal political salve find themselves defending the indefensible when a democracy does it. Perhaps the closest analogy to Athens’ drive for empire is the Confederate dream of a Caribbean slave empire before the American Civil War—a depredation on the part of another democracy. More on this is found below.

France in the Napoleonic Wars

The Casualties: After Waterloo France probably was demographically exhausted. France suffered between 1.4-1.7 military deaths as well as a very large number of civilians, out of a total population of 29 million. As noted, the population aged 20 to 40 comprised two-fifths of the total population (a characteristic number for pre-industrial societies. Assuming gender parity, men of military age would have comprised about one-fifth of the population. The total military manpower pool of Napoleonic France was less than six million men, so civilian and military casualties together exceeded 30% of the total number.

The Causes: From a modern vantage point it seems odd to think of Napoleon's conquests as an existential rather than an elective war. The founding of the French state, though, was bound up with a quasi-religious belief in France's divine mission. As Aldous Huxley wrote of Cardinal Richelieu, "In working for France, he was doing God's external will. *Gesta Dei per Francos* was an axiom, from which it followed that France was divine, and those who worked for French greatness were God's instruments, and that the means they employed could not but be in accord with God's will."^[xi] France's war aims "had been rationalized into a religious principle by means of the old crusading faith in the divine mission of France and the divine right of kings,"^[xii]

Religious wars had consumed France during the sixteenth century. In 1618, Bohemia's rebellion against Austria began the Thirty Years War. France determined to challenge Austria and Spain for pride of place in Christendom. Richelieu subsidized the Protestant side, paying Sweden's King Gustavus Adolphus to intervene against Austria. The first half of the Thirty Years War was fought between Protestants and French proxies; the second half (starting with the French intervention of 1635) was fought largely between Austria and Spain.

In Spain, France found an antagonist whose ambitions mirrored her own. As the political theorist Juan de Salazar wrote in 1619, "The Spanish were elected to realize the New Testament just as Israel had been elected to realize the Old Testament. The miracles with which Providence had favored Spanish policy confirmed this analogy of the Spanish people to the Jewish people, so that 'the similarity of events in all epochs, and the singular fashion in which God has maintained the election and governance of the Spanish people, declare it to be his chosen people by law of grace, just as the other was his elect in the times of Scripture ... From this it is proper to conclude from actual circumstances as well as sacred Scripture that the Spanish monarchy will endure for many centuries and will be the last monarchy.'"^[xiii]

Salazar evinced "a not uncommon attitude at court and among part of the Castilian elite."^[xiv] France emerged from the Thirty Years War as the dominant land power in Europe, while Spain began its long national decline.



Massacre of the Innocents by Pieter Bruegel The Elder

Europe's population rose from 110 million to 190 million during the 18th century, in part due to gains in the productivity of agriculture; the French population rose from 19 million to 28 million, of which two-fifths were between the ages of 20 and 40. Unemployment rose sharply during the economic crisis of 1785-1794, and provided the raw material for the Revolution's mass conscription.^[xv] During the Thirty Years War, the Imperial general Albrecht von Wallenstein created mass mercenary armies that lived off the land, transforming warfare while starving the civilian population. Napoleon did Wallenstein one better, employing mass citizen armies to conquer France's neighbors, thereby attracting a multinational horde to his banner.

Napoleon famously (if perhaps apocryphally) said that one can do anything with bayonets except sit on them. Like Wallenstein, Napoleon became the most powerful man in Europe by undermining traditional society and summoning the young men freed by the dissolution of civil society. Schiller well depicted Wallenstein in his 1799 dramatic trilogy as the creature of his army as much as his creator. Napoleon could recruit soldiers with a field marshal's baton in their rucksacks without offering them new worlds to conquer.

So powerful was the ambition of ordinary soldiers under Napoleon that he retained his popularity despite the Russian blunder. After the retreat from Russia he was able to recruit an army of 350,000 by 1813. This time his German satrapies revolted, and defeated him at the Battle of Leipzig. In 1814 the European powers exiled him to Elba, yet he returned to France a year later and quickly raised 200,000 more soldiers. After Waterloo France's demographic resources probably were too drained to support another mass army.



Charge of the Royal Scots Greys at Waterloo

The Consequences: After Europe's population explosion in the 19th century, the Great Demographic Transition began in France, where fertility fell sharply relative to the rest of Europe. As Gregory Macris observed, "France, once the most populous nation in Western Europe, saw its population growth inexplicably slow in the early 1800s. Awareness of population decline in the halls of government and in the popular press led to strategic heartburn. The leadership class fretted over potential threats from the faster-growing Germans and pondered 'the end of France as a nation.'[\[xvi\]](#)

Attempts to explain French demographic decline in terms of economics, urbanization or other objective indicators do not provide adequate answers. The most recent research by the French national demographics institute asserts that the reasons were psychological rather than objective. In a March 2012 study, Gilles Pison of the French National Institute of Demographic Studies wrote:

In the mid-18th century, women in both [France and Germany] had 5 or 6 children on average. But by the end of the century, the practice of birth control was spreading in France, and fertility fell from 5.4 children per women in the 1750s to 4.4 in the 1800s and 3.4 in the 1850s. In Germany, on the other hand, it was not until the late 19th century that German women, in turn, started to limit their family size. This timing differential is often attributed to the early spread of Enlightenment ideas across France, or to the lifting of religious constraints.[\[xvii\]](#)

Contemporary observes in the middle of the 19th century compared France's decline to that of Greece after the Peloponnesian War. A British historian remarked in 1857 that the infertility "observed with regard to the oligarchies of Sparta and Rome had its effect even on the more extended citizenship of Athens, and it even affected, in our times, the two hundred thousand electors who formed the oligarchy of France during the reign of Louis Philippe."[\[xviii\]](#)

The collapse of the French conceit of national election led to a long national demoralization and the eclipse of France as the dominant European power. With hindsight, one can argue that Napoleon's wars were existential after all.

The American Confederacy



The last day at Gettysburg

The Casualties: Gary Gallagher summarized the South's losses as follows: "The Confederacy mobilized between 750,000 and 850,000 men, a figure representing 75 to 85% of its available draft-age white military population (only the presence of slaves to keep the economy running permitted such an astonishing mobilization. At least 258,000 of them perished during the war...and those wounded in combat totaled nearly 200,000. Deaths thus ran to about one in three of all men in uniform." In all, the South lost close to 30% of its military-age men, the same proportion as France during the Napoleonic Wars.[\[xix\]](#)

The Causes: If Napoleon's soldiers carried a field marshal's baton in their rucksacks, the Confederates carried an overseer's whip. Southerners had been fighting for slave territory in Texas, Kansas and other disputed territories for a generation. They continued to fight for the chance to acquire slaves. Lincoln's election portended the end of the expansion of slave territories, without which the Southern economic system would strangle in a decade or two. Jefferson Davis offered to acquiesce to Lincoln's election if only Lincoln would sanction the conquest of Cuba as a slave territory. The definitive history of Southern ambitions is found in Robert E. May's 1973 book, *The Southern Dream of a Caribbean Empire* (1973). He writes, for example:

The *Memphis Daily Appeal*, December 30, 1860, wrote that a slave "empire" would arise "from San Diego, on the Pacific Ocean, thence southward, along the shore line of Mexico and Central America, at low tide, to the Isthmus of Panama; thence South—still South!—along the western shore line of New Granada and Ecuador, to where the southern boundary of the latter strikes the ocean; thence east over the Andes to the head springs of the Amazon; thence down the mightiest of inland seas, through the teeming bosom of the broadest and richest delta in the world, to the Atlantic Ocean." [\[xx\]](#)

For those who do not believe that democracies start wars, the Confederacy is a stumbling block. Like Pericles' Athens, it democratically decided to conduct an imperial war of enslavement with the enthusiastic support of its lower classes. Like Napoleon's soldiers, the Confederates fought with bravery and abandon until the point of demographic exhaustion. It is interesting to observe that the bloodiest battles (Cold Harbor, Chickamauga, the Wilderness) all took place after the South's chance for victory had fallen markedly due to the Union victories at Vicksburg and Gettysburg in July 1863. The rate

of casualties increased sharply in the second half of 1863 and the first half of 1864, as the South responded to its losses by fighting all the more desperately.

The consequences: In the American South, per capita income was higher than the Midwest's in 1840, but fell to half that of the Midwest by 1880. By 1950, it was still only 70% of that of the Midwest.[\[xxi\]](#)

The Middle East today

The Causes: Several important countries in the Middle East are subject to perfect storm of demographics and economics. The population cohort aged 15 to 24 years in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Iran jumped from 15 million in 1995 to about 30 million in 2010. This bulge population has poor prospects. Youth unemployment, according to the World Bank, stands at 30% in Iran and 35% in Iraq. The concept hardly applies to Syria, whose economy is in ruins after five years of a civil war that has displaced perhaps 10 million Syrians out of a population of 22 million. Never, perhaps, has such a large military-age population encountered such poor future prospects in a war zone dominated by non-state extremist actors.



ISIS fighters

The prospects for economic stabilization of the region's main actors are poor. The official unemployment rate is 11%, but only 37% of the population is considered economically active, an extremely low ratio given the concentration of Iran's population in working-age brackets. Social indicators point to deteriorating conditions of life are alarming. The number of marriages has fallen by 20% since 2012. "In Iran, the customary marriage age range is 20-34 for men and 15-29 for women ... 46% of men and 48% of women in those age ranges remain unmarried," according to a June 2, 2015 report in AL-Monitor.[\[xxii\]](#)

Economic problems explain part of the falling marriage rate, but the corrosion of traditional values also is a factor. Iranian researchers estimated late in 2015 that one out of eight Iranian women was infected by chlamydia, a common venereal disease that frequently causes infertility.[\[xxiii\]](#)

When Ayatollah Khomeini took power in 1979, the average Iranian woman had seven children; today the total fertility rate has fallen to just 1.6 children, the sharpest drop in demographic history. Iran still

has a young population, but it has no children to succeed them. By mid-century Iran will have a higher proportion of elderly dependents than Europe, an impossible and unprecedented burden for a poor country.

At \$30 a barrel, moreover, Iran's oil and gas revenues are less than \$30 billion a year, by my calculations, and less than half of the country's \$64 billion budget for fiscal year 2014.^[xxiv] Iran's sudden aging will be followed by Turkey, Algeria, and Tunisia. Iran is the most literate Muslim country, thanks in large part to an ambitious literacy campaign introduced by the Shah in the early 1970s. Literacy is the best predictor of fertility in the Muslim world: Muslim women who attend high school and university marry late or not at all and have fewer children.^[xxv]

Between 2005 and 2020, Iran's population aged 15 to 24, that is, its pool of potential army recruits, will have fallen by nearly half. Meanwhile Pakistan's military-age population will rise by nearly 50%. In 2000, Iran had half the military-age men of its eastern Sunni neighbor; by 2020 it will have one-fourth as many. Iran's bulge generation of youth born in the 1980s is likely to be its last, and its window for asserting Shiite power in the region will close within a decade.

More important, 45% of Iran's population will be over the age of 65 years by 2050, according to the United Nations' World Population Prospects constant fertility scenario. No poor country has ever carried such a burden of dependent elderly, because poor countries invariably have a disproportionate number of young people. Iran is the first country to get old before it got rich, and the economic consequences will be catastrophic. This is a danger of which Iran's leaders are keenly aware.

Saudi Arabia has the opposite problem: it has a high fertility rate and a growing cohort of young people, and may lack the financial resources to meet their expectations. At present oil prices, Saudi Arabia will exhaust its monetary reserves within five years, according to a 2015 report by the International Monetary fund.^[xxvi]

There are no official data on poverty in Saudi Arabia, but one Saudi newspaper used social service data to estimate that 6 million of the kingdom's 20 million inhabitants are poor, some desperately so. After the 2011 "Arab Spring" disturbances, Riyadh increased social spending by \$37 billion—or \$6,000 for every poor person in the kingdom—in order to preempt the spread of discontent to its own territory.

Saudi Arabia now spends \$48.5 billion on defense, according to IHS, and plans to increase the total to \$63 billion by 2020. The monarchy has to match Iran's coming conventional military buildup after the P5+1 nuclear agreement to maintain credibility. If oil prices remain low Saudi Arabia will have to sharply reduce subsidies, opening the risk of social instability.



Kurdish women soldiers

Turkey faces yet another sort of demographic challenge. It fought a four-decade war with its Kurdish separatists that killed perhaps 40,000 people. The problem is that Turkey is gradually becoming Kurdish. The Kurds have 3.3 children per female versus only 1.8 for ethnic Turks, demographer Nicholas Eberstadt estimates, which means that within a generation, half the recruits to the Turkish army will come from Kurdish-speaking homes. Turkey's intervention in the Syrian civil war is motivated in large measure by its fear that the Kurds will succeed in creating an independent self-governing zone on their border, and link up with the Kurdish autonomous region in Iraq.

Demographics, economics and ideology in Asia Minor, the Levant and Mesopotamia combine to create the conditions for a perfect storm. Political analysis of the region tends to focus on the ideological and religious rivalries among Iranian Shi'ism, Sunni Wahhabism and Turkish neo-Ottoman aspirations. To this must be added the demographic and economic challenges that face oil monocultures in an adverse financial environment in the midst of a treacherous demographic transition.

That challenges conventional ways of assessing the options open to rational actors. Game theory considers the behavior of individuals with well-defined interests; it does not consider situations in which one or more of the players (for example) suffers from an inoperable brain tumor. Iran may decide that its existential interest requires it to expand its Shi'ite empire now, before its rapid aging deprives it of manpower and financial resources. Saudi Arabia may decide that its ability to control its own restive population requires pre-emptive action against its Shia opponents. Turkey may decide that the threat of territorial amputation requires pre-emptive action against the Kurds.

30% solution here again?

To a great extent, all of this is happening now, through proxy wars: Saudi Arabia and Turkey are engaged in a proxy war with Iran in Syria and to some extent elsewhere in the region. Iranian Revolutionary Guard troops are heavily engaged in Syria, and Saudi Arabia has threatened to introduce its own troops in the country. The problem is that Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey all face fundamental economic and demographic challenges to internal stability that will get worse within a horizon of five to ten years.

American planners have sought to stabilize the region through proxies (supporting “moderate Islamists” in Syria against the Assad regime, encouraging the Iranians to join the regional security architecture, and so forth). Conditions for a perfect storm on the scale of past wars of exhaustion already prevail, and the likelihood of another war of exhaustion on the scale of the Napoleonic Wars or the Thirty Years War is much higher than foreign policy analysts seem to appreciate. The result may be the 30% solution we have seen so many times in history, and the appropriate American response may be not to extinguish the fire, but to maintain a controlled burn.

[i] See for example *Heaven on Earth: Variety of Millenarian Experience*, by Richard Landes (Oxford 2011); *Death Orders: The Vanguard of Modern Terrorism*, by Anna Geifman (Praeger 2010); and *How Civilizations Die (and Why Islam is Dying, Too)*, by the present author (Regnery 2011).

[ii] David Goldman, op. cit.

[iii] *Athens After the Peloponnesian War: Class, Faction and Policy*, by Barry S. Strauss (Routledge 2014), p 81

[iv] *Maritime Trades in the Ancient Greek World*, by Charles M. Reed (Cambridge University Press 2003) p. 16.

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