

# REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved  
OMB No. 0704-0188

Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing this collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.

<b>1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY)</b> 03-05-2023		<b>2. REPORT TYPE</b> FINAL		<b>3. DATES COVERED (From - To)</b> N/A	
<b>4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE</b>  Strategic Failure 2,418 Years in the Making				<b>5a. CONTRACT NUMBER</b> N/A	
				<b>5b. GRANT NUMBER</b> N/A	
				<b>5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER</b> N/A	
<b>6. AUTHOR(S)</b>  Jacob Kenneth Jernigan				<b>5d. PROJECT NUMBER</b> N/A	
				<b>5e. TASK NUMBER</b> N/A	
				<b>5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER</b> N/A	
<b>7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b>  Writing & Teaching Excellence Center Naval War College 686 Cushing Road Newport, RI 02841-1207				<b>8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER</b> N/A	
				<b>9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b>  N/A	
<b>10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)</b> N/A				<b>11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)</b> N/A	
				<b>12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT</b> Distribution Statement A: Approved for public release; Distribution is unlimited.	
<b>13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES</b> A paper submitted to the faculty of the NWC in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the curriculum. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the NWC or the Department of the Navy.					
<b>14. ABSTRACT</b>  Through the foundational actuality that both the Sicilian Expedition during the Peloponnesian War and the invasion Iraq during the Global War on Terrorism were definitive strategic failures, and the following comparative analysis, one clearly concludes that it is very appropriate to conceive of the Iraqi theater as analogous to the "Sicilian Expedition". In discussing this topic further one can benefit from von Clausewitz's prescription for engaging in "critical approaches" of military operations. This paper begins with a brief factual accounting of the immediate and long-term effects of both operations in the context of their respective conflicts. Then, it compares the effects of both cases and concludes by acknowledging how this might impact the means we employ in modern and future strategic dilemmas.					
<b>15. SUBJECT TERMS (Key words)</b> Sicilian Expedition, Peloponnesian War, Iraq, Global War on Terrorism, Secondary Operations					
<b>16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:</b>			<b>17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT</b> N/A	<b>18. NUMBER OF PAGES</b>  10	<b>19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON</b> Director, Writing Center
<b>a. REPORT</b> UNCLASSIFIED	<b>b. ABSTRACT</b> UNCLASSIFIED	<b>c. THIS PAGE</b> UNCLASSIFIED			<b>19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (include area code)</b> 401-841-6499

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE

Newport, RI



**Strategic Failure 2,418 Years in the Making**

*“Military organizations overall, and even particular installations, embody national pride and self-esteem. When they fail, and in particular when they fail catastrophically, confidence in government itself is shaken, for the first duty of government in national defense.”<sup>1</sup>*

## **Two ‘Catastrophic’ Strategic Failures**

Separated by only about 1,600 miles, the Sicilian Expedition during the Peloponnesian War and the invasion of Iraq during the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) represent what Carl von Clausewitz would call “secondary operations”<sup>2</sup>. Both were conducted by democratic, hegemonic naval powers that were embroiled in protracted conflicts, both of which had begun as limited regional wars. Most importantly for this analysis, the operations, which were initiated from a place of strength and arguably arrogance, are now known to be definitive examples of catastrophic overreach and strategic failure.

Military failures are often the result of one side facing an insurmountable enemy force, pure unfortunate chance, or suffering from simple incompetence.<sup>3</sup> “However, not all military failures fall into these convenient categories... They are failures of the organization, not of the individual.”<sup>4</sup> From a strategic perspective, this is the shared nature of both campaigns, and understanding that basic origin is the requisite first step in establishing to what extent it is appropriate to conceive of the Iraqi theater as the GWOT's "Sicilian Expedition" in its strategic effects.

Through that foundational actuality and the following comparative analysis, one clearly concludes that it is very appropriate to conceive of the Iraqi theater as analogous to the “Sicilian Expedition”. In discussing this topic further one can benefit from von Clausewitz’s prescription for engaging in “critical approaches” of military operations. This paper begins with a brief factual accounting of the immediate and long-term effects of both operations in the context of their respective conflicts. Then, it compares the effects of both cases and concludes by

acknowledging how this might impact the means we employ in modern and future strategic dilemmas.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Sicilian Expedition**

The Sicilian Expedition is infamous for good reason. It is frequently identified as the self-inflicted turning point in the Peloponnesian War, which ended with the defeat of Athens. Thucydides' unrestrained summary of the conclusion of Athens' campaign in Sicily is as follows:

“This was the greatest Hellenic achievement of any in this war, or, in my opinion, in Hellenic history; at once most glorious to the victors, and most calamitous to the conquered. They were beaten at all points and altogether; all that they suffered was great; they were destroyed, as the saying is, with a total destruction, their fleet, their army-everything was destroyed, and few out of many returned home. Such were the events in Sicily.”<sup>6</sup>

The immediate effects of the expedition, which began impacting Athens' war effort long before their ships even arrived on Sicily, was the diversion of significant resources and manpower from the existing centers of gravity on the Greek mainland. These expenditures were described as the “sums which the state had already spent upon the expedition and was sending out in the hands of the generals” and the “many talents in all [that] were being taken out of the city.”<sup>7</sup> While avoiding discussing ‘what if scenarios’, it is inarguable that the allocation of these funds and military forces to the opening of a distant second front, meant the Athenians could not provide potentially decisive support for campaigns closer to Athens. Demosthenes describes this reality during the campaign when he states, “it would be more profitable for the state to carry on the war against those who were building fortifications in Attica...besides which it was not right to squander large sums of money to no purpose by going on with the siege.”<sup>8</sup>

After its defeat in Sicily, the longer-term implications of Athens' overreach began to manifest. Domestically, the Athenian people were utterly demoralized and “seized by fear and

consternation quite without precedent” which led political changes to be made to the city’s leadership.<sup>9</sup> Abroad, the balance of power that had sustained the protracted conflict began to shift. By the end of the year, Sparta had allied itself with the aggrieved factions on Sicily, which enabled them to meaningfully bolster its naval forces.<sup>10</sup> “Neutrals now felt that even if uninvited they no longer ought to stand aloof from the war, but should volunteer to march against the Athenians, who, as each city reflected, would probably have come against them if the Sicilian Campaign had succeeded.”<sup>11</sup> The described loss of status also contributed to uprisings in outlying Athenian territories, which demanded that Athens further divert forces from the main fronts of the conflict.

Despite this, Athens was successful in reconstituting enough resources and manpower to endure in the conflict for another ten years.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, it became increasingly clear that the damage done by the Sicilian Expedition could not be undone or sufficiently compensated for, and this played a significant role in the city’s defeat in the Peloponnesian War.

### **The Iraqi Theater**

At the outset of the GWOT, the primary objective was to defeat those who were responsible for the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, Al-Qaeda, and those who had enabled them, the Taliban. The United States developed an effective and sound strategy for achieving its goal. “The multifaceted response crafted by America’s military, diplomatic, and intelligence services would ultimately see the Taliban regime overthrown and Al-Qaeda deprived of its sanctuary before Christmas 2001.”<sup>13</sup> Invading Iraq was not part of this foundational strategy.<sup>14</sup>

Yet at its peak, the United States had roughly 170,300<sup>15</sup> servicemembers in Iraq, and in total the United States has spent an estimated \$862 billion<sup>16</sup> on military operations in Iraq and Syria since it opened the secondary theater in 2003. That represents a massive diversion of

forces, resources, and attention from the “forgotten war”<sup>17</sup> and its primary theater in Afghanistan. This secondary excursion began during a period in which the security situation in Afghanistan was deteriorating and proved measurably detrimental to the war effort in that country.<sup>18</sup> The overextension and impact of insufficient forces did not spare Iraq either and as late as 2007, Central Command’s Admiral William Fox “believed the United States was dangerously short of a strategic reserve of forces and equipment to deal with other threats in the Mideast and South Asia”.<sup>19</sup>

The war deeply divided the American people in ways they had not been at the outset of the GWOT and invasion of Afghanistan. While the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) was unanimously supported in Congress, the 2002 AUMF for the invasion of Iraq was opposed by as much as 30 percent of members. The general mistrust of the federal government that followed the revelations of inaccurate intelligence that had justified the invasion was a major contributor growing resentment towards America operations in Iraq and decreased popular support for the GWOT.

The decision to invade Iraq also resulted in farther reaching consequences, beyond the direct military implications and diminished domestic support for the war. First, destroying Hussain’s regime destabilized Iraq and surrounding countries.<sup>20</sup> The power vacuum it left resulted in civil unrest and violent uprisings that provided an opportunity for previously nascent Jihadist and terrorist organizations to proliferate and spread across borders.<sup>21</sup> The most notable example of this is the birth and rapid expansion of ISIS, which is now consistently recognized as a greater threat to the United States and its allies than Al-Qaeda now is. In addition to the genesis of new hostile forces, the invasion of Iraq gutted the United States-led coalition that invaded Afghanistan. Prior to the invasion, Secretary of State Colin Powell warned the President that, “You’re going to hear from your coalition partners... They’re all with you, every one, but they

will go away if you hit Iraq.”<sup>22</sup> The United States attacked Afghanistan with a coalition of 51 nations and only one of them, the United Kingdom, following the United States into Iraq.

### **Ignoring Risk**

Clausewitz took great care when defining the very limited circumstances under which dividing one’s forces is proper.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, he provided an explicit warning for those who consider such operations: “Since forces are divided and the theater is enlarged, it also carries greater risk.”<sup>24</sup> As we have seen, that risk was ignored in both the Sicilian Expedition and the invasion of Iraq—to disastrous strategic effects. However, the real question at hand is, how appropriate is it to compare those effects? How similar were the outcomes?

The effects bear a shocking resemblance in both cases and can best be identified through a few key lenses, including that they caused an otherwise unnecessary diversion and expenditure of human capital and other resources which proved detrimental to ongoing campaigns in the primary theater of the conflicts, namely the Greek mainland and Afghanistan. The resulting failures caused significant division and loss of morale among the military as well as civilian populations at home, which weakened the standing of the ruling political regimes. Perhaps most consequentially, they both resulted in a longstanding loss of legitimacy in the eyes of the nations’ allies and enemies alike. It is telling that observations made at the time of the Sicilian Expedition can so adequately describe what occurred in Iraq.

“Indeed the expedition became not less famous for its wonderful boldness and for the splendor of its appearance, than for its overwhelming strength as compared with the peoples against whom it was directed.”<sup>25</sup> In both cases, the nations struck with significant force against what was estimated to be a much weaker opponent. And yet in both instances they struggled or outright failed to decisively subdue the enemy and control its territory. The scale of allocations to

the new theaters committed the attacking powers to them in ways that could not be rolled back, and imbued the endeavors with a "too big to fail" status. This ensured that they would continue to entangle and distract from the originally established war objectives longer than anticipated.

“Indeed, at this moment, when they were now upon the point of parting from one another, the danger came home to them more than when they had voted for the expedition; although the strength of the armament, and the profuse provision which they observed in every department, was a sign that could not but comfort them.”<sup>26</sup>

When it comes to domestic implications, the people of both nations quickly became disillusioned with the operations, and support for them rapidly deteriorated in the face of consistent setbacks. Once committed to the theater, it proved exceedingly difficult to safely extricate American forces from Iraq,<sup>27</sup> and to this day there are American servicemembers stationed there despite the reality that “Americans were eager to have all the troops home”.<sup>28</sup> The Athenians were simply incapable of conducting such an operation, and when their forces were destroyed the people of Athens began to “despair of salvation.”<sup>29</sup> As noted in the opening of this paper, in democratic societies, this results in the delegitimization of ruling administrations and often foreshadows dramatic political changes and shifts in strategic approaches to security issues.

Most consequential in both cases, however, was the loss of standing and respect by the nations’ peers. In a statement that could directly apply to the war in Iraq, Alcibiades argues that invasions that are not directly tied to the primary and previously justified war goals will result in the nations being vulnerable at home while creating new enemies abroad. “I affirm, then, that you leave many enemies behind you here to go there far away and bring more back with you.”<sup>30</sup> This happened in both cases to catastrophic effect. For Athens it tipped the balance of power in the conflict and ultimately contributed to their loss in the war. For the United States, the reputational damage incurred by the thinly veiled unilateral action is still felt today. Furthermore,

it is regularly used by peer-competitor or hostile nations to further undermine American creditability.<sup>31</sup>

Through the gift of time, the effects of Athens' failed secondary operation have been understood for over two millennia. Unfortunately, the true scale of America's strategic overreach in Iraq is still playing out today and in a foreboding way, will not be fully understood until long into the future.

### **Countering with Operational Success**

Were one to argue that the comparison of the Iraqi Theater in the GWOT and the Sicilian Expedition is not an accurate one, they might likely contrast the fact that Athens was comprehensively defeated both in the Sicilian Expedition and subsequently in the larger Peloponnesian War, while one can argue that the United States achieved its operational goals in Iraq and subsequently has not lost its GWOT more than ten years later.

From an operational perspective this is true. The invasion of Iraq ultimately did not result in complete failure, let alone the "total destruction"<sup>32</sup> of the invading forces as was the case in Sicily. Every individual in the Athenian force was either killed, imprisoned, or sold into slavery.<sup>33</sup> However, the United States' successful conquest and subsequent occupation of Iraq had the effect of ousting Saddam Hussein's regime from power and eventually standing up a democratic oriented government in its place, all while suffering comparatively few casualties. Furthermore, the United States and its coalition partners have since destroyed the ISIS caliphate that was born out of the instability the invasion of Iraq caused, and effectively managed the organization's capacity to conduct significant operations against Americans or American assets in the region.

However, this argument falls victim to the same thinking that enables all prolonged wars when “means become ends, tactics become strategy, boundaries are blurred, and the search for a perfect peace replaces reality.”<sup>34</sup> Even if the United States continues to successfully carry out its GWOT, America’s operational success in Iraq does not supersede or compensate for the strategic failure that the invasion has proven to be. The casualties and resource expenditure incurred on both sides of the fighting in Iraq and the depreciation of American’s reputation in the Middle East and around the world, likely needed not be suffered. They would not have been, if only the United States had made a sounder strategic decision about expanding its limited war goals against Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan into a larger global conflict with no singular military or political objective.<sup>35</sup>

#### **Avoiding the Fate of Athens**

“Military history is one of the oldest branches of history.”<sup>36</sup> In arguing that it is appropriate to consider the Iraqi Theater the “Sicilian Expedition” of the GWOT, this analysis makes the case that America’s leaders could have benefited from further study of Athens’ strategic failures. In fact, many military theorists have weighed in on this very concept.

“More than 2500 years ago in ancient China, Sun Zi wrote of the chaotic Warring States period that ‘there has never been a protracted war from which a country has benefited’ and ‘hence what is essential in war is victory, not prolonged operations.’ Reflecting on the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides wrote in fifth-century BCE, ‘[i]t is a common mistake in going to war to begin at the wrong end, to act first, and wait for disaster to discuss the matter.’ In the second book of *On War*, von Clausewitz observes, ‘[y]et insofar as that aim is not the one that will lead directly to peace, it remains subsidiary and is also to be thought of as means .... What remains in the way of ends, then, are only those objects that lead directly to peace.’”<sup>37</sup>

As the United States continues to recover from the strategic effects of the invasion of Iraq, it must keep these lessons in mind. The means that it now brings to bear in modern conflicts, such as the war for Ukraine and in its confrontations with China, will determine their

outcomes. In the deeply competitive current global security environment, the United States cannot afford to embark on another “Sicilian Expedition”. If it does, it will no longer have the chance to recover as it did after Iraq. For an understanding of the threat such a failure poses, just look to the fate of Athens.

---

<sup>1</sup> Cohen, Eliot E., Gooch, John. *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War*. New York: Free Press, 1990. Pages 31-32.

<sup>2</sup> Clausewitz, Carl von. *On War*. Edited by Michael Eliot Howard and Peter Paret. Princeton: University Press, 1989. Page 618.

<sup>3</sup> Cohen. pg 2

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. pg 3

<sup>5</sup> Clausewitz, pg 156

<sup>6</sup> Strassler, Robert B., editor. *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*. New York: Free Press, 1998. Page 478.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. pg 378

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. pg 455

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. pg 481

“Nevertheless, with such means as they had, it was determined to resist to the last, and to provide timber and money, and to equip a fleet as they best could, to take steps to secure their confederates and above all Euboea, to reform things in the city upon a more economical footing, and to elect a board of elders to advise upon the state of affairs as occasion should arise.”

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. pg 482

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. pg 481

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. pg 75

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. pg 73

“Rumsfeld was saying that we needed to bomb Iraq. And we all said...no, no. Al-Qaeda is in Afghanistan. We need to bomb Afghanistan. And Rumsfeld said there aren’t any good targets in Afghanistan. And there are lots of good targets in Iraq. I said, “Well, there are lots of good targets in lots of places, but Iraq had nothing to do with it.”

“Clarke would later vent, “Having been attacked by Al-Qaeda, for us to now go bombing Iraq in response would be like our invading Mexico after the Japanese attacked us at Pearl Harbor.”

<sup>15</sup> Anastacio, Nicholas. Murrey, Mark. (March 20, 2023). *The Iraq war — by the numbers*. Meet the Press. <https://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/meetthepressblog/iraq-war-numbers-rcna75762>.

<sup>16</sup> Crawford, Neta C. *Blood and Treasure: United States Budgetary Costs and Human Costs of 20 Years of War in Iraq and Syria, 2003-2023*. Watson Institute for International & Public Affairs, 2023. <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/papers/2023/IraqSyria20>.

<sup>17</sup> Willaims. pg 195

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Robinson, Linda. *Tell Me How this Ends: General David Petraeus and the Search for a Way Out of Iraq*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2008. Page 294.

<sup>20</sup> Williams. pg 159

<sup>21</sup> Aboul-Enein, Youssef. (April 25, 2023) *The War Against Al Qaeda*. Synchronous Lecture.

<sup>22</sup> Williams. pg 74

<sup>23</sup> Clausewitz. pg 619-622

<sup>24</sup> Clausewitz, pg 619

<sup>25</sup> Strassler. pg 378

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 6.31.1

<sup>27</sup> Robinson. pg 307

“Withdrawal is the trickiest military maneuver of all, and the commanders were determined to minimize the vulnerability of both the departing troops and those left behind.”

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Strassler. pg 481

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. pg 367

<sup>31</sup> Press Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin.” The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, March 22, 2023, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/202303/t20230322\\_11047208.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/202303/t20230322_11047208.html). Press release.

<sup>32</sup> Strassler. pg 477

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. pg 478

<sup>34</sup> Cronin, Audrey Kurth. *The ‘War on Terrorism’: What Does it Mean to Win?*. Journal of strategic studies. Page 179.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

“This implies that the United States should engage in a war on violent extremism anywhere, and thus fight an open-ended global campaign everywhere – a classic recipe for imperial overstretch.”

“Along with the demand for zero risk at home, such narrow thinking yielded reactionary, expeditionary responses instead of prioritization according to enduring US interests in deciding where to deploy.”

<sup>36</sup> Cohen. pg 35

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. pg 177