

FOCUS: Τhe Deceptive Thucydides Trap:

I realize that Graham Allison has important things to say about the dangers of catastrophic conflict posed when a rising power threatens to disrupt a pre-existing hegemony. But I am irritated at the way that the trope of the [Thucydides Trap](#) has been used.

The Thucydides Trap claims to be shorthand way of describing the grand-strategic dilemmas of the Classical Greek city-states of Athens and Sparta in the second half of the -400s. But it is a bowdlerized version. The actual complexities of the situation have been elided.

Thus important parts of the lessons that can be drawn from Thucydides's description in *The Peloponnesian War* of the start of the war have been ignored.

And lessons can be drawn. For, as Thucydides said, he had tried to write his history as:

a treasure for all time! [because] knowledge of the past! [is] an aid to the interpretation of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it!

The situation in the second half of the -400s in the Greek world was thus:

The Spartan oligarchy had held preeminence. It had conquered and continued to dominate Laconia and Messenia. Its enslavement of their populations meant that Sparta alone, among major city-states, had a large and rich enough class of landlords who could train intensively for war, since they did not have to assist in the farming themselves.

But there was a big problem with the Spartan system, as Aristotle was to note: Rich Spartan men tended to marry rich Spartan women. Thus, over time, wealth inequality grew. This diminished the size of the pool of Spartan landlords who could afford the full training regimen. The number of full Spartans in the military phalanx was dropping steadily, by perhaps a quarter in each generation.

The Athenian democracy, by contrast, was gaining in strength from generation to generation.

Athens held a central place as the maritime-commercial hub of a Greek world rapidly growing in population and wealth. Each generation saw more economic activity flow through Athens. Each generation saw Athens grow bigger and richer. Each generation saw more silver flow into its treasury. Athens had "excessively cleverly" transformed other city states agreements to provide warships to stave off any renewed Persian invasion into cash payments to Athens, which Athens then could and did use as it wished. Thus each generation saw the power of the Athenian state grow as well. And each generation saw a greater share of other Greek city-states become what local democrats elsewhere called "allies" and local oligarchs elsewhere called "subjects".

In 500 Athens would have had no chance in an all-out war with Sparta. In 430 it could go toe-to-toe. By 360, had catastrophic defeat in the Peloponnesian War been avoided, Athens' hegemony would have been near indisputable.

In this situation what, from a rational perspective, should the grand strategy of Athens in the second half of the -400s have been? It is clear:

- *Do not annoy the Spartan lion.*
- Focus on growing trade and commerce
- Focus on making alliances
- Focus on solidifying the nascent Athenian empire.

The future was on the side of Athens.

Korkyra came to Athens at the start of the 430s, and said "we will join your alliance if you well help us push Sparta's ally Korinth out of Epidamnos". The Athenian answer should have been this: "You have not been our friend in the past. Join our alliance first. Then, in a generation, we will back you in all your disputes. But not now."

Instead, Athens backed Korkyra with military force. And Korinth went to Sparta. Sparta was, usually, wary of large long-term commitments outside its heartland—the main purpose of its army, after all, was to keep the helots subservient and the taxes flowing, which was hard to do if the Spartan phalanx was far from Laconia. But Athens' choice of open military confrontation with a key Spartan ally was enough to overcome their reluctance.

And so the Athenian Empire fell.

The lesson for a rising power? Whatever you seek to do now that may be very difficult will be easy in two generations. So postpone doing anything potentially difficult and wait for the tide to bring all the good things to you.

The lesson for a declining hegemonic power is somewhat more complex. Outside the frame of Thucydides is the Peloponnesian war, Sparta was not the beneficiary of its generation long war against Athens. The beneficiaries were in the short-run, Persia; in the medium-run, Thebes; and in the long-run, Makedon. A declining power should take a long, hard look at itself, and consider whether curbing this particular rising power is in its own long-run interest. The task for a declining power is to create a world in which it can live comfortably when it is no longer **hegemon**. You can argue over whether Sparta would have had a comfortable and valued place in a counterfactual Athenian Empire *circa* -300. But it certainly did not have such a place in the post-Athenian Hellenistic world of Thebans, Argaiads, and Hellenistic despots.

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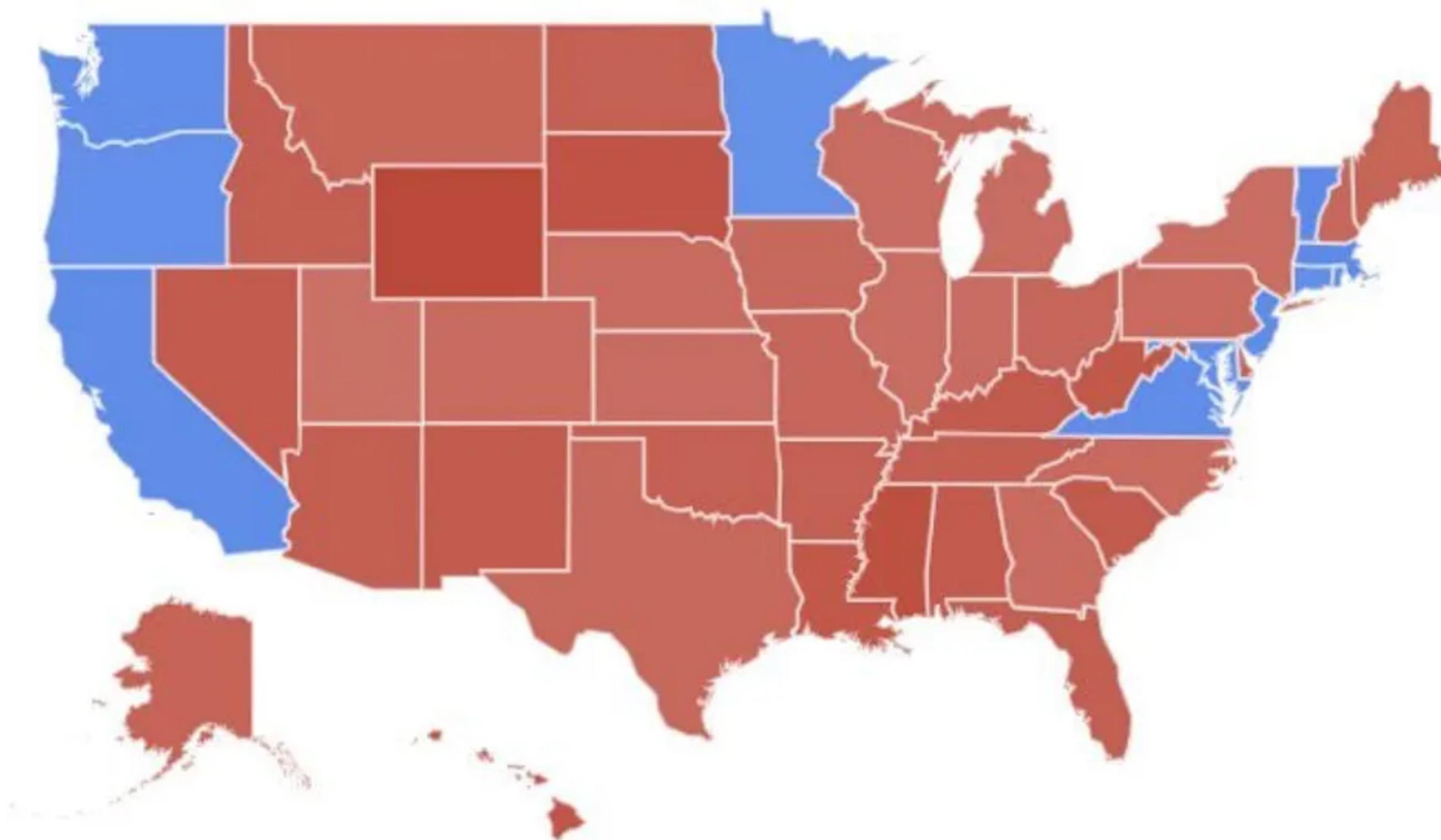
Martin Heidegger: [Dasein and der FÃ¼hrer](#): "The German people has been summoned by the FÃ¼hrer to vote; the FÃ¼hrer, however, is asking nothing from the people; rather, he is giving the people the possibility of making, directly, the highest free decision of all: whether it " the entire people " wants its own existence (Dasein), or whether it does not want it. On November 12, the German people as a whole will choose its future, and this future is bound to the FÃ¼hrer. [...] There are not separate foreign and domestic policies. There is only one will to the full existence (Dasein) of the State. The FÃ¼hrer has awakened this will in the entire people and has welded it into a single resolve!"

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Â§s:

Frank Leroy: â€˜[Luke Dash](#), one core developers of Bitcoin just got all his Bitcoins stolen. But let's pretend anyone can safely store their life savings in crypto. Luke Dash Jr.: â€œMy PGP key is compromised, and at least many of my bitcoins stolen. I have no idea how. Help pleaseâ€. What the heck @FBI@ic3 why canâ€™t I reach anyone??? Nevermind many. Itâ€™s basically all goneâ€!

Ben Klemens: [Mastodonâ€”and the pros and cons of moving beyond Big Tech gatekeepers](#): â€˜Standards-based interoperability makes a comeback, sort ofâ€. The most common metaphor is emailâ€. The current W3C [Activity Streams 2.0 standard](#) used by Mastodon and friends, offer a grammar for expressing things a user might do, like "create a post" or "likeâ€ a post with a given ID" or "request to befriend a certain userâ€â€! The ActivityPub standard is an actor-based model which specifies that servers should have a profile for each actor providing a universal resource indicator (URI) for each actor's inbox and outbox. Actors can send a GET request to their own inbox to see what the actors they follow have been posting, or they can GET another actor's outbox to see what that specific actor has been posting. A POST request to a friend's inbox places a message there; a POST request to the user's own outbox posts messages for all (with the right permissions). The standard specifies that these various in- and outboxes hold activities in sequential order, much like our familiar social media timelinesâ€. In theory, they all intercommunicate; in practice, not so muchâ€!

Steve Vladeck: [The Chief Justice's Year-End Report](#): â€˜Justice Gorsuchâ€™s two-page dissent (joined by Justice Jackson) has it exactly rightâ€. Justice Gorsuch and I might disagree about whether the pandemic still justifies *other* public health-related measures. But the notion that expelling migrants is necessary to prevent the spread of COVID has no factual predicate today (assuming it ever had one). And because it doesnâ€™t, thereâ€™s just no case for granting a stayâ€!

David Glasner: [You Say Potato, I Say Potahto; You Say Tomato, I Say Tomahto; You Say Distribution, I Say Expectation - Uneasy Money](#): â€˜Olivier Blanchardâ€ expressing fears about an impending wage-price spiral that cannot be controlledâ€ unless the monetary authority is prepared to imposeâ€ substantially higher unemploymentâ€. Unless the deep systemic forces that cause inflation are addressed politically rather than left, by default, to be handled by the monetary authority, inflation will remain a persistent and vexing problemâ€. Inflation may sometimes be triggered by the attempt of a particular sector of the economy to increase the relative price of the goods or services that it provides, thereby increasing its share of total income at the expense of other sectors, I seriously question whether this is a typical, or even frequent, sourceâ€. â€œIn the end, forcing the players to accept the outcome, and thus stabilizing inflation, is typically left to the central bank. By slowing down the economy, it can force firms to accept lower prices given wages, and workers to accept lower wages given prices. It is a highly inefficient way to deal with distributional conflicts. One can/should dream of a negotiation between workers, firms, and the state, in which the outcome is achieved without triggering inflation and requiring a painful slowdownâ€â€!

Doug Jones: [GPT3 and me \(Instructorâ€™s edition\)](#): â€˜For short answer questions with clear cut answers, students can do pretty well if they just let GPT3 do the work. Teachers in the future may have to give up on short answer questions, or make them in-class rather than take home. For longer answer questions, students might or might not eek out a passing grade by just letting GPT3 do all the work. But a student might do better than that by combining GPT answers with their own knowledge, e.g. evaluating the GPT answers, getting multiple GPT answers, inputting the question in different forms, editing and supplementing the responses. For many students this could work better than just trying to answer questions on their own. Teachers will have to come up with creative responses to this challenge. For my part, next semester I may or may not try some version of having students consult GPT3 and comment on the answersâ€!

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