

The Allison Rap on Thucydides' Trap
Introducing Graham Allison to a Committee for the Republic Salon

Ambassador Chas W. Freeman, Jr. (USFS, Ret.)
Senior Fellow, the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University
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I'm Chas Freeman. I chair the Committee for the Republic. It is a pleasure to welcome our many contributing members to this salon. And it is a special privilege to welcome Graham Allison as our speaker tonight.

Graham Allison is a friend who was my colleague as assistant secretary of defense. He is a renowned scholar of defense policy. He can justly claim much of the credit for making the Kennedy School and the Belfer Center at Harvard the great international institutions they are. He's also a very well known author. Until recently, the most famous of his many books was "*Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*." I imagine many here tonight have read it.

Dr. Allison's most recent book has probably now achieved even greater fame than his earlier work. In "*Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*," he takes up the question of what happens when an established power feels challenged by a rising one. The phrase with which he described this interaction – the "Thucydides Trap" – is now part of the language of contemporary statecraft in both China and the United States as well as elsewhere. Thucydides may be long dead but, thanks to Graham Allison, he can't keep his trap shut!

Thucydides is, of course, the author of a great history, *The Peloponnesian War*. For those of you who haven't read it for a while, the story line goes something like this. The Persians tried to conquer the Greeks. The Athenians led the resistance to this, making alliances that created a *de facto* empire over which they presided. The growth in Athens' power alarmed Sparta, the previously dominant Greek polity.

Quarrels between Athenian and Spartan protectorates threatened the stability of Greece. When their allies actually began to fight, Sparta and Athens were tipped into a great war. In the end, the rising power, Athens, was defeated, but Sparta, the power determined to sustain the *status quo*, was greatly weakened. The war between Athens, Sparta, and their allies permanently divided, destabilized, and weakened the Greek world. After much turmoil, Macedon, a small, semi-barbarous kingdom on the Greek periphery emerged as the dominant power there.

We live amidst obvious parallels to this history. After the defeat of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, Americans led the resistance to Soviet expansion in Europe and Asia, in the process creating a sphere of influence for ourselves that spanned the globe. To the alarm of many, as China's power grows, American primacy is crumbling. Fear, honor, and interest now drive U.S. policy toward China.

But there, I think, the analogy begins to break down.

In Greece, the rising power (Athens), was a democracy, with all the fickleness that Plato thought characteristic of populist political systems. The status quo power (Sparta), was a military autocracy, staid, sober, and strategically calculating. The rising power was a naval power, its conservative adversary a land power. The rising power had an empire. The status quo power had none.

In what might be called “the Allison rap on Thucydides’ trap.” the ideological and geopolitical characteristics of the challenger and the challenged have effectively been reversed. The rising state today, China, unlike Athens, is a land power with no empire. It is anything but democratic and is sober and strategically calculating. The challenged power today, the United States, unlike Sparta, is a great naval power with something very much like an empire. It is a democracy that is becoming notorious for its erratic leadership and semi-autistic approach to its foreign relations. And it is trying to "make itself great again" by discarding the relationships and institutions it once led. That is not much like Sparta, despite the odd combination of feminism and the cult of the warrior that Sparta had in common with the contemporary United States.

Some have questioned Dr. Allison’s grasp of the details of Greek history or the nuances of Sinology. They miss the point. His book, “*Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*,” isn’t about the Greeks and it isn’t about China. It is not a mechanistic thesis. It is a hypothesis that invites both examination and countermeasures.

On the basis of substantial evidence, Graham Allison posits that there is a strong likelihood of a clash between an established power like the United States and a rising one like China. But he does not assert that this is inevitable. On the contrary, he cites instances, like Britain’s deft handling of its eclipse by American wealth and power, in which no clash occurred.

I’m hoping that, in addition to outlining his findings, Professor Allison will share with us his insights into how great powers can avoid the sort of conflict that Sparta and Athens fell into. What does history teach us about the odds of conflict? What should we ask of China to reduce those odds? What should we Americans do? Do US commitments to allies increase or diminish the risk of war? How about China’s dependent neighbor, north Korea? What difference does it make, other than to the level of destruction that conflict would entail, that the United States and China are both nuclear powers?

In short, in light of the Allison rap on Thucydides’ trap, how should the United States best deal with China’s rise?

Graham, the podium is yours.