**RedZone Podcast Episode #104: The Spartan Regime: Leadership, Character and Strategy – with Paul A. Rahe**

Bill: I know we only have a couple of minutes to work with here.

Paul: We're good. I'm good until five of three.

Bill: Okay.

Paul: So I scheduled two hours for this.

Bill: Okay. Well, I think a good starting point is that I was led to your material and your writing through The Art of Manliness podcast. And [00:00:30] I run a podcast that really addresses leadership at the information technology leaders, business IT leaders and entrepreneurs, and I have a very varied podcast that deals with all issues from leadership to personal development to security in IT issues, and it's a wide range of different topics.

Bill: And so I've had philosophers [00:01:00] on, I've had certainly a lot of book authors and a variety of topics, and I was particularly interested in your work on Spartans, because I myself am to start, ironically I'm doing a Spartan race this coming weekend. I'm a part of a group that does Spartan races, which is really interesting because... By the way, I'm not recording anything right now, I thought we could just take a minute or two just to build context around the conversation.

Bill: [00:01:30] And so it's really interesting to me. I've always been fascinated with the Mongols, I've always been fascinated with Samurais, Spartans, Comanches, like every culture has their sort of warrior class, and I've been really interested in that thematically, even if you look at the cover of my podcast, it has a guy holding a sword. So it's really interesting. And so I just wanted to give you some of the basis. And some of the people listening, I think [00:02:00] I'll probably be asking some questions related to... that maybe you haven't covered in the books before, but are really more of your interpretation of some of the principles that you see. And I've seen your writing and how you even gone up through the 1700s into European and Montesquieu and in Rousseau and end up through the American founding fathers.  
Bill: And so maybe we could just have some [00:02:30] fun sometimes and just go back and forth between what you feel our cultures have learned from the archaic time periods.

Paul: Sure.  
Bill: Now you have a book coming out as well, so I want to make sure I bring that up in this show. It's coming out in September, correct?

Paul: August 6th.

Bill: Oh, August 6th, right around the corner.

Paul: Oh yeah, very close.

Bill: Oh, fantastic.

Paul: I have copies.

Bill: That's great.

Paul: [00:03:00] It still hasn't shown up on Amazon. I mean it's listed, but they're not shipping yet. But that'll happen soon. The release date is 6th August, but my experience in the past is Amazon starts shipping three, four weeks ahead of time.

Bill: Oh, well, fantastic. Well, is there anything in particular that you find particularly compelling and interesting that you really would like me to ask questions [00:03:30] about? I mean, I certainly have a lot of questions about your book that I've read that you referred to on The Art of Manliness. But is there other like research and things that we could relate to... Go ahead.  
Paul: One thing you might want to bring up is, grand strategy. What is grand strategy? And how does it differ from strategy? And, you know, every one of the books that I've written [00:04:00] has grand strategy in the... these recent Sparta books, has grand strategy in the title or the subtitle. So I'm arguing for a way of thinking about foreign affairs, that is not fully in fashion right now.

Bill: Well, the thing is I am on board with that. I'm really on board with that, because I think a lot of people wonder like, "What can we learn [00:04:30] from the past?"

Paul: Right.

Bill: And I think there's a whole camp that's like, "Well, we can't learn much. You know? We should really just forward face." But you know, I am really interested. Like I will never ever be an expert on this time period. Yet I'm deeply interested when I listen to experts on the time period when I do my own reading from that. So it's like, what can I learn? So as a leader, about thinking through strategy and grand strategy. It's like I was just reading some of the conclusion material of your book [00:05:00] just recently and you mentioned... that was the last chapter. The last chapter was grand strategy.

Paul: Yes.

Bill: And how they were trying to preserve their culture and trying to preserve their way of life. And then all of a sudden, boom, the new power comes on board. And you know, how they respond to that... It's interesting from a leadership perspective right now, in my world, leadership is very much action-oriented, [00:05:30] because the innovation required requires you not to rest on your laurels. It's interesting as we talk through strategy and grand strategy. One of the questions I was going to ask you is, were the Spartans as aggressive as they were? Were they slow to act to...? Were they slow to mobilize? And I love for you to comment on that, because I want to kind of debunk the myths about... I'd love to lay into what people really fear and adore in popular [00:06:00] culture about the Spartans. But then what are some of the things that we really don't know because we're not historians, we're not deeply versed in the Greek texts and have done the research, that would dispel some of the myths? I mean, we can talk about that as well.

What are the biggest myths about Greek, in Spartan Lore? And I have a couple listeners that have asked me to ask you some questions as well that I'll bring up during it.

Paul: Sure, sure, sure.

Bill: Well, what do you think? Do you want to...? Is just a good [00:06:30] starting point? Did you have anything else that you wanted to ask me before jumping in?  
Paul: Nope, nope.

Bill: Okay. All right. Well let me just start the recording here. All right, Paul. I want to welcome you to the show today.

Paul: Pleasure to be with you.

Bill: Well, we have been connected through a podcast I listen to and your book, The Spartan Regime. It's character, origins and grand [00:07:00] strategy. And I know that you are also releasing a new book in August. And what's the title of that book going to be?

Paul: The new book is called Sparta's First Attic War, the grand strategy of classical Sparta 478 to 446 BC. There was another book in between Spartan Regime and Sparta's First Attic War called The Grand Strategy of Classical Sparta, The Persian Challenge focused on the Persian wars. [00:07:30] So what this third book is focused on is the period between the Persian wars and the onset of what we think of as the Peloponnesian war. But of course, what the Spartans and the other Peloponnesians would have thought of as, and did think of as the Attic War.

Bill: Now, just for my listeners, just what I want to do is visually sort of tee them up for what we're going to talk about [00:08:00] today, and that the area of the world we're going to talk about so that everybody sort of can understand where we are and where we are in history, and we can build from there. So we're basically talking about the Mediterranean regions, really ancient Greece, correct?

Paul: Yes. In the eastern Mediterranean in particular. So, the islands between Turkey and the Balkan Peninsula, and then [00:08:30] the Greek cities on the mainland within the Balkan Peninsula.

Bill: Now the Spartans that we're talking about, actually it was interesting, I was reading sort of perusing some of the back parts of your book as I was, as concluding in there was a mentioned to World War II to Patty and to resistance fighters from World War II that [00:09:00] resisted Hitler in this area. Was this directly in Crete, this resistance or you had spent some time in the mountains in the areas around this area? Was that the mountains that essentially were right through the middle of Sparta?

Paul: Okay. The man I was speaking with was Patrick Leigh Fermor, who had captured the German commander on Crete during World War II and had spirited him off to Cairo. [00:09:30] He worked underground dressed as a shepherd up in the mountains in Crete, but there was resistance also within the Peloponnesus and Paddy's home. He died just a few years ago. Paddy's home was in Kardamyli, in the Mani, in the southern Peloponnesus, in the area that the Spartans controlled in the classical period.

Paul: So I went to meet him, [00:10:00] because I figured he knew something about resistance in that region. And I was concerned with the fact that certain kinds of geography and I mean mountainous areas are conducive to banditry, but also to a resistance of an occupation. And in Messenia, which the Spartans occupied, there are mountains, and it was my conviction, still is my conviction that there were runaway helots, [00:10:30] these would be the subordinate population within the Spartan domain, hiding out in those mountains and raiding the fertile land down below in the river valley.

Bill: Yeah. This is it. And I'm really looking forward to asking you questions about that. It was really interesting reading that, because I had read a book recently by Chris McDougall, who wrote a book called the Natural Born Heroes, and it was about the resistance fighters in these Greek islands. [00:11:00] And so it just kind of collided me. He is actually the founder of the barefoot running movement as well.

Bill: So this mountainous area, so talking more about Sparta. So Sparta had this mountainous region right through the middle. What was...?

Paul: Taygetus.

Bill: Taygetus.

Paul: Yeah. Look, Sparta's in a river valley, the Eurotas river valley. Messenia where the bulk of Sparta's helots [00:11:30] who do the farming for them, they live in the Permessos river valley. In between those two river valleys is the Taygetus Massif. It's a mountain range really, rather than just simply a mountain. So one of the strategic problems that the Spartans have is to control both areas. They have to be able to travel easily from one river valley over the mountains or [00:12:00] round the mountains to the other river valley. It's a real challenge. And they managed it.

Their dominion in both the south-western and south-eastern Peloponnesus is almost contrary to nature because of that mountain range that lies between the two regions within the southern Peloponnesus.

Bill: Well, it's fascinating that the actual... I think I mentioned this to you when we were talking, before jumping [00:12:30] on the air here, is I participate with a group of local friends of mine in Spartan races, which is essentially an obstacle course race run anywhere between three to 20 miles. And the irony is it's in a mountain. And so there's four major mountain races and there's a variety of others that are not in mountains, but it was super interesting to read about this mountain [00:13:00] divide between the two Messenia and Laconia that you had just referred to.

Paul: Yeah. The Spartans would have had to march over those mountains at a pretty fast pace. So they really had to be in shape.

Bill: So I'm really interested in dispelling myths and how was Sparta founded? And there's a whole cultural myth and legend around [00:13:30] Sparta and Spartans and what is the genesis that you think from your research of when Sparta, if there was such a thing as founded? And then maybe we could talk about the culture and what is true about their culture, and what is a sort of a myth.

Paul: Yeah, okay. The Spartans, the story they tell about their founding is they came from northern Greece, from the other side of [00:14:00] the Corinthian Gulf, which separates the Peloponnesus from northern Greece, and that they cross the Corinthian Gulf on rafts. And then made their way, along with other Dorians into Messenia, the Argolid and Laconia, which is to say where Sparta was. I see no reason why the myth should [00:14:30] not be true. What we do know, and we have more solid information on, is archeologically we begin to see a set of villages in Laconia in the 9th century BC. There's reason to think that they coalesce into a single political community between the 9th century BC and the 8th century BC, and come to dominate the whole river valley [00:15:00] from top to bottom and the mountainous areas nearby, both the eastern slopes of Mount Taygetus, and the other mountains that lie between them and the sea.

Paul: At the end of the 8th century, they then apparently, again this is according to their own story, but we have some material, literary material that goes back to a period maybe 60 years [00:15:30] later, they launch a war to conquer the Permessos river valley in Messenia on the other side of the mountain, and they succeed. There is then a rebellion two generations later. And we have poetry from that time of rebellion referring back to the first conquest of Messenia, but also celebrating the reconquest of Messenia.

Paul: All right. In the course of taking on this challenge [00:16:00] of controlling these two river valleys, the Spartans articulate a way of life, and also they articulate a political constitution, that is the ancestor of our own political constitution. That is to say it involves a division of powers in the Spartan case between two kings who function as priests and [00:16:30] as generals, but also as leaders. A gerousia, something like a senate, which is say a council of elders probably drawn from the aristocratic classes and assembly that includes every citizen, and a body of figures called ephors, which means supervisors. And they seem to be elected to one year terms. [00:17:00] And there's good reason to think that they're elected in such a way that the common people, ordinarily, that most of the ephors are commoners, there being five of those.

Paul: So the community is run by a balance between these different groups. What it means is they can't do much of anything unless there's a consensus. That makes sense because the one thing that could lead to their being in deep, deep trouble vis-a-vis this [00:17:30] helot class, which outnumbers them maybe seven to one, maybe five to one, maybe four to one people, the ancient evidence says seven to one. Some people think that's impossible. But what we do know is they are badly outnumbered and that the helots in Messenia on the other side of the mountains have a sense of themselves as being members of a political community. So the helots are a kind of nation in bondage, and very [00:18:00] apt to rebel. If you want to keep control of those helots, the one thing you absolutely need is solidarity among the master class, and this elaborate constitutional framework that they articulate guarantees that any decision that gets made will have been thoroughly aired and that pretty much everyone is on board with it, even those who were initially dubious [00:18:30] about the wisdom of it.

Bill: So the helots... And just clarify something for me. As I was reading, the helots were under this framework. This framework of a political infrastructure was not just for the Spartans, but it was for the subjugated class as well.

Paul: Yes. Now they don't have a vote.

Bill: Okay.

Paul: They're part of it in the sense that they live within the territory. They have a certain residual [00:19:00] rights to a part of what they grow, They have families and so forth. But they don't play any role in the larger decision making. And they're very much a subjugated class, an exploited class. And that brute fact means that the Spartans have to organize their lives around maintaining their control over these people. [00:19:30] And so their lives are military, not in the sense that they often go to war. In fact, they tend to try to avoid war, but that they are always preparing for war. So what you have to think about is Spartan life is the life of an armed camp. And that sounds grim, but in fact, it's less grim than you might think. There's lots of sports, [00:20:00] there's lots of hunting.

Bill: It seems like you said that there is... what I really got from your book is that it seemed to be they were... It's a huge dichotomy. It's almost hard to read in some respects, because you expect this warrior class to just be all about war, but then there is dance and there's music and poetry and sports and gymnastics. How did they reconcile that? Was it just this upper class of men that were just basically [00:20:30] living, both preparing for war and also having fun at the same time?  
Paul: Yes, yes. Look, think of it, at certain times of the year there are baseball camps for major league baseball teams. Usually in warm weather places like Florida as they're preparing for the season to come on. Now they work hard every day. They've run, they exercise in a great variety of ways. They pitch, [00:21:00] they bat, they work on their skills, to suppose that they're not enjoying themselves would be a big mistake. Yes, it's physically very demanding, but people thrilled to that.

Bill: And then you also mentioned that there was an egalitarian, maybe that's the wrong word, but there was a, almost like a socialist framework that nobody could own, that no one could, to keep symbols [00:21:30] of wealth, unless maybe it was horse racing, but you weren't able to like acquire land and kind of build up your empire within the... Maybe you can explain that, because that seems very interesting how these warriors, you think they'd want to come out like the Vikings and sort of bring home the loot, but I didn't get that sense from your book that they were wired that way.

Paul: It's very communal. So the men have their meals together until [00:22:00] probably the age of 45. They spend their nights sleeping in a kind of encampment with the squad. If they see their wives, they do it surreptitiously in the middle of the night. So everything really is focused on the relations between men in a 15 man group called a syssitia, which is about the size of a squad in the United States army. [00:22:30] And everything is about comradery and rivalry of a friendly sort between these men. And the rivalry takes the form of sports, but also, the competition in marching, counter marching, and all the things that soldiers do.

Paul: I once wrote a blog post about West Point. I'd given a talk at West Point [00:23:00] and I called it Sparta on the Hudson. And it really is something like that. They all have their meals together, they live in dormitories, they are on sports teams, they're always working out, and they're studying hard.

Bill: Now there are also... so to become a part of this, I don't want to call it a fraternity, but become a part of this squad or become a part of this elite [00:23:30] group, you were taken from your mother at a seven or eight years old, correct?

Paul: Yeah. You're taken away from your mother at seven years old, and then you are put through a kind educational system they call the agoge, and there are stages in it. And it shifts almost the way we shift from cub scouts to boy scouts to explorers. [00:24:00] Perhaps because the boy scouts were really modeled on ancient Sparta. Certainly Baden Powell was aware of ancient Sparta.

Paul: So the idea is to build trust and comradery within age classes that advanced together to more and more demanding challenges of mainly a physical sort, but not just a physical sort. So [00:24:30] they're trained in this elaborate way, and at a certain stage, probably when they're about 18, they have to go off individually, and they live in the mountains, and they have to steal food, and they may be used to police the helots that are runaways in [00:25:00] the mountains.  
Paul: And after this year of withdrawal from the community, they come back, and those who have succeeded are initiated into one of these squads, these syssitia. And it's very much like a fraternity in the sense that you cannot join a syssitia unless everybody consents to it. And every single member of the syssitia has what you might call a black ball, [00:25:30] and can say, "No, we will not take this person."

Paul: And obviously what they're looking for is somebody to fight next to them in the battle line. Somebody they can trust with their own lives. And then you spend the next 27 years pretty much living with the people in your syssitia.

Bill: Now, on the agoge, before you get to the [00:26:00] syssitia level, why did they try...? So the helots were this subjugated kind of class of slaves. And then when you went into the agoge, I was reading, the kids, the young boys were essentially not treated very well. It seemed like that they were deprived of food, they were essentially challenged continually, and they almost lived like a helot. It seemed like they lived like a subjugated servant. [00:26:30] Why did the Spartans want them to be that low to the ground? And why did they want them to be that? To get that feeling?

Paul: Your way of putting it I think is very well. They want them to experience something like the life of the helots so that they know what would be in store for them if they were to fail in battle. So you give them a sense of the value of liberty by exposing [00:27:00] them to something very much like slavery.

Bill: So that discomfort, they really valued that, just because it's so counter-intuitive in some respects, because by exposing to that discomfort they're also... the syssitia is dancing and their poetry and they're sort of living this expanded life, but they actually deeply know almost a poverty abject experience. That's very interesting.

Paul: [00:27:30] Well, think what bootcamp is like for a would be United States marine. It's very similar. You have somebody yelling at you, cursing you, you get put through your paces, you get pushed to your limits. And what they're trying to do is twofold. Build up your strength and your abilities and your skills, but also build up your pride. The [00:28:00] fact that you can endure. And look, endurance is very important for the kind of warfare that the Spartans and all the other Greeks engage in, at least on land, which is to say hoplite warfare. You have to think of it as something like an ongoing rugby scrum. You have a group of men lined up, eight deep, each man bears a [00:28:30] shield, there's a hook in the middle of the shield, he puts his arm through it. There's another hook on the right side of the shield, his right. And he lays hold of that. His shield covers his left side, and it covers the right side of the man next to him. So the shield is almost useless for individual fighting. It's very [00:29:00] good however, for fighting in a phalanx.

Paul: And so what you have is a clash of people with these shields against other people with these shields, and in the right hand of each man is a spear, and if he loses it, he can resort to a sword that he has by his side. And there's pushing and shoving and stabbing that is part of this warfare. So what's required [00:29:30] to win, staying power, endurance. And that's what these young Spartans learn. They learn to put up with pain, with discomfort, and they gain in the kind of physical strength to stand their ground and shove their way through.

Bill: Okay. So that's what I was going to ask, is that how do you actually kill someone if they're just matched up shield against shield, but basically they're just trying to [00:30:00] thrust the spears in between the gaps in the-

Paul: Or over the top.

Bill: Over the top?

Paul: Yeah. And the two places where a hoplite is most vulnerable, the neck and the groin, because it's very hard to... They may wear a breast plate, but that will not protect your neck and it won't protect your groin. They may wear a helmet, it may protect the head by and large, but [00:30:30] not the neck. They may wear greaves on their legs, but they don't protect the groin. So it's either over the top with the spear or under or around the shield with a sword. It's a rough way to die.

Bill: Yeah. Okay, and basically in this warfare, in this era was it in these groups of squads of eight deep, how many wide were they in a general, [00:31:00] from like a battle formation?

Paul: It depends on the terrain. And of course it depends on how many of them there are. They cannot spread out, because they need to be close to one another so the shields interlock.

Bill: Okay.

Paul: If the shields aren't interlocking, it's useless. But the question you put points to something important, numbers matter. You really have to have a large community. [00:31:30] And so this particular style of warfare which comes in, in the late 8th and early 7th centuries requires a measure of democracy. So these Spartans, to come back to this question of equality that you raised earlier, they're called the equals or the peers. And I think peers may be the better word, because they are a lordly lot, but among themselves, they're all for putting down [00:32:00] inequality, except for one inequality, the inequality that some are stronger than others. So they compete for excellence of a certain kind, but they don't compete in the sense of keeping up with the Joneses, having the fanciest new car, having jewelry, having the beautiful clothing. So, at one [00:32:30] level, what you have is a kind of a socially enforced equality in which you don't want to stand because you're one of the peers. In another way you have sharp inequalities, because some people have more prowess than others. So they're highly competitive in certain areas and uncompetitive in other areas.

Bill: Yeah, it seems like that would be a [00:33:00] way to kind of mitigate that otherwise a natural urge to want to compete in other domains with wealth or status or who has the most horses or whatever it may be back then, it was-

Paul: Right. And you know, they do have horses. And one of the rules is you can take anybody's horse and ride it. So though there are differences in wealth and some people have, [00:33:30] you know, horses are the portions of the time, because they're expensive to sustain, there is a sharing of them. There's a sharing of hunting dogs. There is a kind of communal feeling.

Paul: The other thing is there's very little privacy, because you live together. And it's a small community, never more than say 10,000, at the time of the Persian War is 8,000. So everybody [00:34:00] knows everything about everyone. And if you've made a fool of yourself at some point in your life, everyone will remember it. It's tremendous social pressure to perform.  
Bill: Yeah, that seems like it's a competitive cauldron. And there's been some American-Indian cultures are the same way. I mean, and even the American-Indians when they send their warriors out for their, I don't know what they call it necessarily, I'm not an expert, [00:34:30] but like their spirit quest or they go out alone and they have to, it's similar to what the Greeks did with the Spartan way of from the agoge experience.

Bill: And you said that they sent them out into the mountains for a year back to the agoge when they're 18. Which is really interesting, because my son is 16. And so they would send the boys, men out at 18 into the mountains. And from your book and said [00:35:00] the helots were... essentially the rogue helots were in the mountains. They sent the Spartan boys out with knives for a year. First of all, I'd like you to confirm that and just like what actually was the experience like, and how do you learn that? Is it from oral tradition? Like who's actually recording these facts that a historian like you would know how to interpret that, to come up with those?

Paul: It comes from a [00:35:30] variety of sources. One of them is Herodotus who writes a bit about the Spartans, because they were involved in the Persian wars. Thucydides writes about them, because they were involved obviously in the great war between Athens and the Peloponnesians. In the 4th century after the Spartans defeat the Athenians, they set up an empire. And the consequence of that is though they had been secretive in the past, [00:36:00] they're not really capable of being secretive anymore. And there are a whole series of figures who get to know Sparta rather well, including to students of Socrates, Critias who writes a treatise on Sparta that we only have snippets of. Xenophon who writes a treatise that we have in its entirety, but also later figures, the younger than these two Plato, another student of Socrates writes about them both in [00:36:30] his republic and in his laws. And Aristotle wrote a constitution of the Lacedaemonians. The Spartans calls Lacedaemon. Just as he wrote a constitution of the Athenians. We have Aristotle's constitution of the Athenians. We don't have his constitution of the Spartans, or regime of the Spartans, might be a better translation.

Paul: But figures like Plutarch did have that, [00:37:00] and they drew heavily on it. So we have material from Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Plutarch, and we have snatches of material from other figures who read these writings about Sparta. And what they had to tell us fits together pretty well. Now this business of going off for a year is called the krypteia. You've probably heard of kryptonite if you've ever seen a superman movie. Well [00:37:30] the root word means, secret.

Bill: Okay.

Paul: So this is a kind of secret service in which they go undercover, so to speak, for a year. And they live something like helots, rather than like Spartiates. And in many cultures, there are rites of passage when you go from one condition to another condition. We have rights [00:38:00] of passage, baptism, we have marriages. You go from being unmarried to being married. We have funerals. You go from living to dead. They had rites of passage that were connected with coming of age. Some Christian churches have confirmation, there are various ceremonies within Judaism that are similar to this, and actually [00:38:30] there are ceremonies within Islam as well that have to do with coming of age.

Paul: So the Spartans have this in a fairly elaborate way and there are stages, and these stages involve tests that you have to pass in order to move on to the higher ranks. We have graduations, 8th grade graduations, high school graduations, college [00:39:00] graduations. I'm a parent, I have to go to these things. They're awful.

Bill: I agree with that. 8th grade, I don't understand, what do we accomplish here?

Paul: Yes, right. It's just... Oh God! But anyway.

Bill: So clearly, sending them away into the mountains was a significant test for a year in there. They're living like the helots. You often [00:39:30] quote in the book some philosophers that from the 16th in 1700, Montesquieu and Rousseau, and you actually started the book out, and I think this is really fascinating. And I'd like to see why you did that. Here's the quote from Rousseau. This is clearly about the Spartans and the Lacedaemonians. The crimes inspire in us horror. Sometimes their virtues [00:40:00] themselves make us shiver, because we are weak and pusillanimous in good times and bad. Everything that bears a certain character or force and vigor seems to us impossible. The incredulity that we parade is the work of our cowardice rather than that of our reason. And that was from Rousseau. And you started the book out that way. Can you give me some, where you were going with that, because that's really powerful.

Paul: [00:40:30] Well, an awful lot of the scholarship on Sparta in the 20th century and stretching into the 21st century has been guilty of incredulity. A simple refusal to believe what the ancient sources tell us about Sparta. So that in the 30s, there was a book written by a French scholar called Le Mirage Spartiate, The Spartan Mirage. I don't believe there was much of a Spartan mirage. [00:41:00] I think the problem is exactly what Rousseau identified in the 18th century, which is, we live comfortable bourgeois lives and we just can't believe that these people were as tough, and as disciplined and as dedicated, as they obviously were.  
Paul: Now another reason I use the passage from Rousseau is this, [00:41:30] in the 19th century and in the 20th century and into the 21st century, there's a great fascination with Athens. And there is a propensity for us to imagine that the Athenians were just like us. And so we looked to Athens as a kind of model for democracy. Prior to the French Revolution, no one, one [00:42:00] figure I can think of as an exception to this, Marchamont Nedham looked to Athens as a model. They looked to Sparta and they looked to Rome.

Bill: Okay.

Paul: So Rousseau is in some ways typical. I could have extracted a very similar statement from a figure in the Scottish enlightenment named Adam Ferguson, who wrote a book on the history of civil society. And Adam [00:42:30] Ferguson was familiar with the highlanders in Scotland. And when you read him talking about Sparta, you can see that he's really talking about the highlanders who lived a life not unlike that of the Spartans.

Bill: Yeah. I think there's a shocking part to it, because we grow up, tend to be soft in the Western world. And it's [00:43:00] unbelievable to think that you would take the children away at seven. But what's really interesting, I'm not sure for, I think you mentioned it in the book, but if you didn't, I know maybe you can confirm this story or not, but the mothers, when they were reintroduced to the mothers, was that a relationship gone forever or was the...? Because the stories I've heard is that the mothers would say, "Listen, go out to battle and win the battle, and either come back their swords [00:43:30] and their shields or you come back with your head on someone else's, or something of that nature.

Paul: It's more laconic. The Spartan mother handed the shield to her son and she says, "With it or on it." Okay. With it means, you kept your shield, you fought in battle. On it means, you're dead. Now the alternative is you throw it away and you run [00:44:00] as fast as you can. Now you can't run with that shield. It's too bulky and too heavy, they'll catch you. So if you lose in battle, you throw away your shield. And what the Spartan mother says to him is, "With it or on it."

Paul: My view is we have the sayings of the Spartan women. We have a bunch of these that Plutarch records. [00:44:30] I think the between mothers and sons is intensified by taking the boy away from the mother. That is to say there is deep longing on both sides. And you frustrate that longing, you intensify that longing.

Bill: Sure, sure.

Paul: So there's a kind of irony here that in trying to loosen the relations, they actually tighten the relations.

Bill: [00:45:00] Now from the clearly, abundance of writing on the topic, how tough, and that's not the right question, but how tough were the Spartans? Meaning if a Spartan were in battle, what was the force multiplier? Like was one Spartan worth 10 helot warriors or was one Spartan the equivalent of 30? And was it clearly the physical presence [00:45:30] or was it their ability to think that made them different? Is there any...?

Paul: There are three different things that make them different. One is, physical strength. If you devote yourself to gaining in physical strength, you're likely to be pretty good. The second thing is drill. The other [00:46:00] Greeks are amateurs on the battlefield. They're farmers, they are soldiers on the weekend, if there is a weekend. There's not a whole lot of drilling. The Spartans can maneuver, a command can be given and they can do it. So marching and counter marching and changing the formation and so forth, they're really very capable of that. So they've got a flexibility that other Greek armies don't have. [00:46:30] The third thing is prestige. At some point the Spartans begin having a lambda for Lacedaemon on their shields. And what it means is if a Spartan army is closing in on you, you know who it is closing in on you, it's the Spartans closing in on you. And one of the things that we see is the other side simply cuts and runs.

Paul: [00:47:00] There's a great battle in 418 BC in Mantinea which I have written about in a book that's coming out next summer called Sparta's Second Attic War. And at that battle, two armies, the Spartans and some of their local allies, the Argives, some Athenians the Mantineans, they join in battle. The armies are roughly equal in size. The [00:47:30] argives are the great rivals of the Spartans within the Peloponnesus, and this is their chance to become the dominant power. They close, and it's the Spartans on one side versus the Argives on the other in that part of the battle line, and the argives cut and run.

Bill: Just ran?

Paul: Yeah. So, you know, prestige is a tremendous force multiplier, because if you think you're going [00:48:00] to be beaten, the way to try to save your life is to cut and run. So, that's one part of it. But the other part of it is endurance. I said something about strength, but it's more than just raw strength. The Spartans don't give up. And of course, the famous example of that is Leonidas and the 300 at Thermopylae [00:48:30] where they fight to the death. If you are a Greek hoplite from some other city, you don't want to fight against people who are going to fight to the death. You want to fight against people who you will clash with and then they will cut and run. But the Spartans will never cut and run.

Bill: A lot of people listening are like, "Okay, Bill, [00:49:00] what's this have to do with me today?" And I'm endlessly fascinated with a warrior cultures. I think I mentioned to you, I love reading about the Spartans, the Mongols, the Comanches, the Samurai. In the context of Spartans, what can we learn from them from a leadership perspective that you think stands out from this class, this culture, this [00:49:30] political system, that looking back on this, we can see that in the middle of the United States, you know, we're in our 250 year, 300 year run right now. The Spartans went about, they went about 400 years?

Paul: Yes. Something like that. Yes.

Bill: So what can we learn from them, from their mistakes and their strength and their leadership?

Paul: Well, one thing you can learn is survival of a political community depends in some measure [00:50:00] on the virtues of the members of that political community. And look, we halfway understand this. If you look around the United States, can you think of a sports team called the Athenians?

Bill: No, we can't.

Paul: There are Spartans everywhere. Not least at Michigan State University. When I dream at night, sometimes I dream [00:50:30] of giving a lecture at halftime about the ancient Sparta at a Michigan State, University of Michigan football game. This will never happen, I assure you, but it would be fun. But there are Spartans everywhere. And why? Because there are coaches and schools that want their sportsmen, especially [00:51:00] their football teams, but basketball teams too, to have that kind of endurance and strength and team spirit that was exemplified by the ancient Spartans.

Paul: Now look, sports are a preparation for war. They're in some sense an image of war. The kind of language that coaches use on the eve of a game is warlike language. [00:51:30] So for a country to be able to defend itself, it has to be able to put forces in the field that are not unlike the Spartans. And for a country to be very effective, they need to build up the kind of prestige that the Spartans build up. You need to have a reputation. You don't want to take those people on. They're real trouble. That's one part of it.

Paul: [00:52:00] Another part of it I think is important is political institutions. One of the reasons that we've been tolerably successful in the United States is we have political institutions designed to provide for deliberation and perhaps produce wisdom, but also designed to produce consensus. So we have a separation of powers between a president, [00:52:30] the judiciary, the legislature, and within the legislative body, it's divided between the senate that has a certain character, and the house that has another character. All of this slows down decision making, but when decisions get made, they usually stick. And that's a great advantage, resoluteness.

Bill: Sure.

Paul: Which can arise [00:53:00] from domestic harmony, promoting domestic harmony. And we're not always so successful at that, but we've done pretty well over the years. The consequence is that we have a reputation. You don't really want to mess with the Americans.

Bill: Well, I love how you brought this ancient culture [00:53:30] to life. I really enjoy reading the book. And I've also noticed, and you and I talked about this, about this concept between your books, these themes that are building around strategy and grand strategy. And this also has a leadership element to it as well. A lot of my listeners, we talk about innovation quite a bit and we talk about the ability to respond, and the ability to change one's mind and being a mobile, [00:54:00] not just with your human body, but being agile with your mind. I'm curious, what did you mean by grand strategy and strategy as you wrote out these books, and maybe you could talk to us about that.

Paul: Okay. Strategy is focused on a particular struggle. How are we going to win this struggle in these circumstances? And so it's very much tied up with [00:54:30] the passing moment, and would be tied up with the technology of the moment, the circumstances in which we find ourselves in now. Grand strategy is something that political communities develop over time. Sometimes because they have brilliant leadership, more often by a process of trial and error [00:55:00] in which they learn what it is they need to protect. They come to be governed by a particular political regime that has a particular imperatives, and that fosters a way of life that they want to protect. And there are certain things that are permanent in conditions. The geography is more or less permanent.

Paul: [00:55:30] So grand strategy looks at a political community in its situation over time, over long periods of time. And it asks, "What is necessary for this political community to flourish?" And it asks, "What threatens the flourishing of this political community?"

Paul: Grand strategy involves [00:56:00] looking at not just warfare, but looking at the economy, looking at diplomacy, looking at one's rivals and potential enemies and their character, what they're likely to do. So if you were a practitioner of grand strategy today, you would want to know what makes Russia tick? [00:56:30] What is it that Vladimir Putin is aiming at? What are their resources like? Are they overreaching? Are they much less powerful than they pretend to be? And you'd ask the very same questions about China. What is it they're aiming at? Is that compatible with our flourishing? What sort of resources do they bring to the table? What can we do [00:57:00] to limit their capacity to advance their cause in a way that is damaging to us? So you have to know what your own interests are. You have to know what your own concerns are, and then you have to apply the same kind of analysis to other countries of significance, including your allies or your potential allies. What is it they want? How can we keep them on board?

Paul: So you think in a much larger way. You're not thinking about [00:57:30] winning this battle, or even necessarily this war. You're thinking about flourishing in the long run.  
Bill: How strong was Rome at this time? Clearly Sparta declined, and it declined at some point. Was there an event that caused the decline or is it just gradually just disappeared [00:58:00] because it just got diluted? The culture was diluted in its message and just became a greater part of Rome.

Paul: What destroyed Sparta's strength and reduced it to a kind of backwater that was a kind of Disneyland in later times was overreaching. The Spartans of the 7th, 6th, and 5th century, most of it anyway, [00:58:30] understood that their culture, their way of life was a hothouse flower. They understood that they did not have the manpower to create and sustain a great empire. So they practiced a kind of Peloponnesian isolationism, and they sallied forth from the Peloponnesus this Peninsula that's sort of at the bottom of the Balkans, only when they had to, when there [00:59:00] was a threat from the outside that was apt to overwhelmed them, like the Persians, or the Athens, with her empire. But when they were done with the war, they returned to their homeland, they didn't seek to become a great imperial power.

Paul: At the end of the third Attic War, at the end of what readers of Thucydides often call the Peloponnesian War in 404 [00:59:30] BC, the Spartans changed their grand strategy. Instead of following a policy of isolationism in order to preserve their way of life, they chose an imperial venture. The effect of the imperial venture was that it displayed all of the weaknesses that earlier generations of Spartans had warned against. That is to say when they went abroad they lost their sense of discipline, because there was nobody in their community [01:00:00] watching them. In the absence of surveillance, they went wild. They learned that their manpower was insufficient for the task, and they got themselves into a series of struggles with other powers including, the Boeotians, the Thebans in particular, in which they fought repeated wars with these people and taught them how to fight.

Paul: [01:00:30] And the Thebans worked out a technique on the battlefield that could blow a hole in the battle line of the enemy. Instead of lining up eight deep, they lined up 25 deep in one corner of the battlefield, and the aim was to knock a hole in the enemy phalanx, pour through that hole and hit him from behind.

Paul: [01:01:00] So the Spartans didn't keep up in a certain sense, technologically. The technology of war, under pressure from the Spartans, the Thebans experimented, and they tried something new, and it worked. And so in 371, the Thebans defeat the Spartans, and the Spartans can't really sustain themselves thereafter, because of the loss of manpower. And so, in the aftermath of this [01:01:30] battle of Leuctra in 371, the Thebans and their Boeotian allies liberate the Messenians from the Spartans. So they lose the economic foundations for their maintaining a way of life that makes them strong and dangerous.

Paul: Now this by the way is at a time when Rome is still a power in Italy and has not expanded beyond Italy.

Bill: Okay. [01:02:00] That makes sense. That's interesting. So that answers one of my questions about innovation as far as, they didn't quite keep up to the battlefield tactics and then lost a critical part of their empire, Messenia to that group.

Bill: Well, this is great and I really enjoyed our conversations, Paul. We'll have to do a round two when your book releases here in the next [01:02:30] month and a half.

Paul: Yeah. Very good. I look forward to it. It's a pleasure being with you.

Bill: Yeah. Thank you very much.

Paul: Okay. Take care. Bye.