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Defensive Measures in Italy in 192 BC: Genuine Alarm or Alarmist Charade?

In this paper, I aim to demonstrate how our understanding of a particular episode in the political history of the Roman Republic can be refined and improved by an insight from game theory. Prior to each of the four largest overseas military expeditions of the period 200-146 BC, our sources depict members of the senatorial elite arguing that war was necessary for preventive reasons. Some scholars have rejected these reports mainly on the grounds that the mass of evidence suggests that the foreign states in question posed no immediate threat. However, such an approach requires discarding testimony that is otherwise internally consistent. Others are inclined to accept the authority of the sources and conclude that the elite habitually reacted in a paranoid manner. While it may be true that an excessively fearful outlook sometimes drove elite demands for war, close examination of the sources for three out of the four wars (the Second and Third Macedonian and Third Punic Wars) suggests that the elite cannot have genuinely believed the claims they were making about the aggressive intentions of its proposed enemy, since the Senate took no defensive actions in Italy and in two of the cases claimed that its enemies possessed fleets when Roman legates must have known that this was false.

The case of the Syrian War is less clear. In the years 192 and following the Senate did take specifically defensive measures in Italy designed to repel a possible invasion by Antiochus III. These maneuvers have been taken as proof by most scholars that the Senate genuinely believed in the possibility of a Syrian sneak attack on Italy. However, this response is surprising after the Senate's demonstrable lack of concern about Philip V in 200. While Philip and Antiochus both had fleets that would have made an invasion of Italy theoretically possible, Roman legates had warned Rome in advance of Philip's aggressive intentions, while legates to Antiochus in 192 had reported only that there was as yet no "matura causa" for war. With no Syrian army in Greece, no Syrian fleet in the Adriatic, and Carthage clearly compliant, the Senate's apparent anxiety, though not unimaginable, remains puzzling.

While the Senate's defensive actions make it impossible to prove that its fear was insincere, neither are those actions proof of its sincerity, since another interpretation is possible. I use a game theoretical model of mass/elite communication to show how the defensive maneuvers in Bruttium and Sicily may have been intended as a "costly signal" meant to increase the domestic audience's belief in the Senate's honesty. The audience would have perceived the signal as costly because, if the defensive measures were a charade, ambitious Roman commanders were being diverted from real opportunities for military achievement elsewhere. The model shows that a costly signal is more persuasive than a costless signal because the sender incurs costs that are well spent only if the signal is sincere. Only senders who gain more from convincing the audience that the signal is sincere than they lose from the costs incurred wish to send such a signal. If an audience is uncertain exactly how much an insincere sender gains by persuading them of the sincerity of the signal, a costly signal causes the audience to revise its belief in the sincerity of the signal in a positive direction. Considering this case in the context of other examples of

elite threat inflation, we cannot rule out the possibility that defensive maneuvers prior to the Syrian War were intended as a form of domestic pro-war propaganda.