

Pericles Funeral Oration

The Athens of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle was a democracy. Its leading political figure was Pericles who was born into a wealthy family in 495 BC. Sometimes holding office and sometimes commanding the Assembly with his thoughtful oratory, Pericles was the leading politician in Athens from about 460 BC until his death in 429 BC. Athens became the leading city in Greece during Pericles' time, but he was unable to avoid war with the city's Sparta. In the first winter of the Peloponnesian war, Pericles gave a funeral oration, excerpted here, praising the first Athenians to die in the war. He used the occasion to explain the excellence of Athenian democracy. This speech became the model for later funeral orations including Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

Most of my predecessors in this place have commended him who made this speech part of the law, telling us that it is good that it should be delivered at the burial of those who fall in battle. For myself, I think that the worth which these dead displayed in deeds, would be sufficiently rewarded by honors also shown by deeds; such as you now see in this funeral prepared at the people's cost. And I could have wished that the reputations of many brave men were not to be imperilled in the mouth of a single individual, to stand or fall according as he spoke well or ill.... However, since our ancestors have stamped this custom with their approval, it becomes my duty to obey the law and to try to satisfy your several wishes and opinions as best I may.

I shall begin with our ancestors: it is both just and proper that they should have the honor of the first mention on an occasion like the present. They dwelt in this country from generation to generation, and handed it down free to the present time by their valor. And our own fathers, who bestowed on us the empire we now possess, also deserve praise.... But what was the road by which we reached our position? What was the form of government under which our greatness grew? What was the national character out of which it sprang? These are questions which I will try to answer before I proceed to my praise these men....

Our form of government is not modeled on the constitutions of our neighbors; instead of imitating others we are actually an example to them. So far as the name goes we are called a democracy, because the power rests with the majority instead of a few. But though every citizen has equal rights under

the law with respect to his private duties, high standing and honor in the community depend on a man's merit, his achievement in some pursuit, and no one is debarred by poverty and obscurity of birth from contributing what he can to the well-being of the city. We are free people not only in our management of affairs but in our personal tolerance of one another's everyday conduct. We do not get angry at our neighbors for doing as they please or try to inflict on them the petty marks of disapproval which, though harmless, are so unpleasant to experience. While this spirit of tolerance prevails in our private lives, in our public affairs it is fear more than anything else that keeps us law-abiding, obedient to the magistrates of the moment and to the laws, especially those whose purpose is to help the victims of wrongdoing and those unwritten laws which men by common consent are ashamed to transgress.... We throw open our city to the world, and never exclude foreigners from any opportunity of learning or observing, although the eyes of an enemy may occasionally profit by our openness. We strive for distinction but with economy, and for intelligence without the loss of energy. Thus we use wealth to meet the needs of action, not the craving for display, and think it is no disgrace to admit poverty but a real disgrace not to act to escape it. Again we combine the conduct of public and private affairs in the same person and make it possible for others, though absorbed in their work, to gain some insight into politics; for unlike other peoples we judge the man who takes no part in this at all a useless, not just a "quiet" person. Hence we also arrive at sound decisions, not just sound ideas, on policy because we do not believe that action is spoiled by discussion, but by failure to be informed through debate before the necessary action is taken. In fact this is another point in our superiority: we are unusually daring and also unusually disposed to weigh the pros and cons of a proposed undertaking, while with others ignorance brings boldness and second thought brings hesitation. One would not go wrong in saying that the bravest men are those who foresee most clearly the dangerous as well as the pleasurable possibilities and still are not deterred from taking the risk.

Again, so far as generosity goes we are the opposite of most men: we try to win friends not by accepting kindness but by conferring it. We know that the man who does a favor is the firmer friend; he will keep the debt alive out of good will toward the recipient, while the debtor does not feel it so keenly, knowing that a good turn will be put down as payment on his debt, not as a real favor. Our fearless way of serving others rests on the confidence of freedom rather than on the calculations of profit; in this too we are unique.

To sum it all up, I say not only that our city as a whole is a school for all Greece, but that in my opinion there is no other place where the individual can develop independence and self-reliance so easily, so gracefully, and in so many

directions.... Athens alone, in our time, is greater than her own fame when the test comes; she alone gives the invader no excuse for annoyance at the quality of the foe who handles him so roughly, and her subjects no ground for complaint that their masters do not deserve to rule them.

I have spoken at some length upon the character of our country to show that our stake in this struggle is not the same as the Spartans who have no such blessings to lose, and also that the praise of the men over whom I am now speaking might be established by definite proofs. This oration is now in a great measure complete; for the Athens that I have celebrated is only what the heroism of these and their like have made her, men whose fame, unlike that of most Greeks, will be found to be only equal to what they deserve. And if a test of worth is wanted, it is to be found in their closing scene; not only in those cases where death set the final seal upon their merit, but also in those youths where it gave the first glimpse of merit to come. For there is justice in the claim that steadfastness in his country's battles should be a cloak to cover a man's other imperfections; since the good action has blotted out the bad, and his merit as a citizen more than outweighed his demerits as an individual. Choosing to die resisting, rather than to live submitting, they fled only from dishonor, meeting danger face to face, and after one brief moment, while at the summit of their fortune, escaped, not from their fear, but from their glory. So died these men as is fitting for Athenians. You, their survivors, must determine to have their unchanging resolution on the battlefield. Don't be contented with ideas derived only from the words of orators about the advantages of defending your country. You must yourselves realize the power of Athens, and observe her from day to day, till love of her fills your hearts. Then, when all her greatness is clear, you must reflect that it was by courage, sense of duty, and a keen feeling of honor in action that men were enabled to win all this. That they allowed no personal failure to deprive their country of their valor, but they laid it at her feet as the most glorious contribution that they could offer. Take these men as your model, and judging happiness to be the fruit of freedom and freedom of valor, never decline the dangers of war....