

Pericles Praises Athens

Pericles was one of Athens' most important leaders. Thucydides, in his History of the Peloponnesian War, included a speech by Pericles. At the time, Athens was at war with Sparta. The purpose of the speech was to honor the Athenians who died in that war. In the speech Pericles goes beyond praising the men who died in battle. Pericles speaks of the glory of Athens. He speaks especially of Athens' strong democratic form of government. The actual words are those of the historian, Thucydides. The speech is known as "Funeral Oration of Pericles." It is one of the most famous speeches in history.

Our form of government does not enter into rivalry with the institutions of others. We do not copy our neighbors, but are an example to them. It is true that we are called a democracy, for government is in the hands of the many and not of the few. But while the law secures equal justice to all alike in their private disputes, the claim of excellence is also recognized; and when a citizen is in any way distinguished, he is elected to the public service, not as a matter of privilege, but as the reward of merit. Neither is poverty a bar, but a man may benefit his country whatever may be the obscurity of his condition.

And we have not forgotten to provide for our weary spirits many relaxations from toil; we have regular games and sacrifices throughout the year; at home the style of our life is refined; and the delight which we daily feel in all these things helps to banish melancholy. Because of the greatness of our city, the fruits of the whole earth flow in upon us, so that we enjoy the goods of other countries as freely as of our own.

And in the matter of education, whereas the Spartans from early youth are always undergoing laborious exercises which are to make them brave, we live at ease, and yet are equally ready to face the perils which they face.

...For we are lovers of the beautiful, yet simple in our tastes, and we cultivate the mind without loss of manliness. Wealth we employ, not for talk and show, but when there is a real use for it. To acknowledge poverty with us is no disgrace; the true disgrace is in doing nothing to avoid it. An Athenian citizen does not neglect the state because he takes care of his own household; and even those of us who are engaged in business have a very fair idea of politics. We alone regard a man who takes no interest in public affairs, not as a harmless, but as a useless character...

In doing good, again, we are unlike others; and we make our friends by conferring, not by receiving favors...

To sum up: I say that Athens is the school of Hellenic Greece.

Source: Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, translated by Rex Warner (Penguin Books, 1954.)

Stop and Review

1. Why does Pericles say that Athens is a democracy?
2. Why are some citizens elected to public service?
3. According to Pericles how are the Athenians different from the Spartans?
4. What do you think Pericles meant when he said that Athens is the "school of Hellenic Greece"?
5. Given everything that you have read about Athens, do you think it is a good model for other societies to follow? Explain your answer.