

Funeral Oration by Pericles

- Date** ■ 431 B.C.
Place ■ Athens, Greece
Type of Source ■ Speech (original in ancient Greek)
Author ■ Pericles, as recalled by the historian Thucydides
Historical Context ■ The Athenians honored soldiers who died in battle by having a famous citizen give a speech after their military funeral. This speech was given by Pericles, the greatest statesman of Athens, at the end of the first year of the Peloponnesian War (see *Atlas of World History*, pages 32–33). Pericles used his speech to both honor the fallen soldiers and to rally those in attendance to continue fighting the Peloponnesian War. Here he champions the Athenian cause by describing the virtue of their democracy and freedom.
- Two years after giving this speech, Pericles died of plague (ironically brought about largely by Pericles' own strategy). After years of fighting, Athens was forced surrendering to Sparta.

Our **constitution** does not copy the laws of neighboring states; we are rather a pattern to others than imitators ourselves. Its administration favors the many instead of the few; this is why it is called a democracy. If we look to the laws, they afford equal justice to all in their private differences; if no social standing, advancement in public life falls to reputation for capacity, class considerations not being allowed to interfere with merit; nor again does poverty bar the way, if a man is able to serve the state, he is not hindered by the **obscurity** of his condition. The freedom which we enjoy in our government extends also to our ordinary life. There, far from exercising a **jealous** surveillance over each other, we do not feel called upon to be angry with our neighbor for doing what he likes, or even to indulge in those injurious looks which cannot fail to be offensive, although they inflict no **positive penalty**. But all this ease in our private relations does not make us lawless as citizens. Against this fear is our chief safeguard, teaching us to obey the **magistrates** and the laws, particularly such as regard the protection of the injured, whether they are actually on the statute book, or belong to that code which, although unwritten, yet cannot be broken without acknowledged disgrace.

Further, we provide plenty of means for the mind to refresh itself from business. We celebrate games and sacrifices all the year round, and the elegance of our private establishments forms a daily source of pleasure and helps to banish the **spleen**; while the magnitude of our city draws the produce of the world into our harbor, so that to the Athenian the fruits of other countries are as familiar a luxury as those of his own.

If we turn to our military policy, there also we differ from our antagonists. We throw open our city to the world, and never by **alien acts** exclude foreigners from any opportunity of learning or observing, although the eyes of an enemy may occasionally profit by our **liberality**; trusting less in

constitution
the Athenian constitution was unwritten

obscurity
hardship

jealous
suspicious

positive penalty
good outcome

magistrates
judges

spleen
bad temper

alien acts
laws to prohibit outsiders from entering

liberality
openness

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system and policy than to the native spirit of our citizens; while in education, where our rivals from their very cradles by a painful discipline seek after **manliness**, at Athens we live exactly as we please, and yet are just as ready to encounter every legitimate danger. In proof of this it may be noticed that the **Lacedaemonians** do not invade our country alone, but bring with them all their confederates; while we Athenians advance **unsupported** into the territory of a neighbor, and fighting upon a foreign soil usually vanquish with ease men who are defending their homes. Our united force was never yet encountered by any enemy, because we have at once to attend to our **marine** and to dispatch our citizens by land upon a hundred different services; so that, wherever they engage with some such fraction of our strength, a success against a detachment is magnified into a victory over the nation, and a defeat into a reverse suffered at the hands of our entire people. And yet if with habits not of labor but of ease, and courage not of art but of nature, we are still willing to encounter danger, we have the double advantage of escaping the experience of hardships in anticipation and of facing them in the hour of need as fearlessly as those who are never free from them.

system and policy
laws and rules

manliness
Pericles is saying that while Spartans train to be brave, Athenians are inherently brave.

Lacedaemonians
Spartans

unsupported
Pericles is exaggerating here. Though Athens did occasionally fight battles unassisted, they often had allies.

marine
navy

Source: Thucydides, "Pericles' Funeral Oration from the *Peloponnesian War*," *Ancient History Sourcebook*, August, 2000, <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/pericles-funeralspeech.html>> (May 24, 2011).