

## Pericles' Funeral Oration

Pericles of Athens

429 BC

Most of those who have stood in this place before me have praised the tradition of this speech that closes our ceremony. It is good, they have felt, that solemn words should be spoken over our fallen soldiers. I do not share this sentiment. Acts deserve acts, not words, in their honor; and to me a state funeral, such as you have witnessed, would have been honor enough. Our trust in the great bravery of this great number of the fallen should not depend on one man's eloquence. Moreover, it is very hard to speak appropriately when many of a speaker's hearers will scarce believe that he is truthful. For those who have known and loved the dead may think his words scant justice to the memories they would hear honored, while those who did not know them may occasionally, from jealousy, suspect me of overstatement when they hear of feats beyond their own powers. For it is only human for men not to bear praise of others beyond the point at which they still feel they can rival their exploits. Transgress that boundary and they are jealous and incredulous. But since the wisdom of our ancestors enacted this law I too must submit and try to suit as best I can the wishes and feelings of every member of this gathering.

My first words shall be for our ancestors; for it is both just to them and fitting that on an occasion such as this our tribute of memory should be paid to them. For, dwelling always in this country, generation after generation in unchanging and unbroken succession, they have, by their hard work and courage, handed down to us a free country. So they are worthy of our praise; and still more so are our fathers. For

they added to our ancestral patrimony the empire that we hold today and they delivered it, not without blood and toil, into the hands of our own generation; while it is we ourselves, those of us now in midlife, who consolidated our power throughout the greater part of the empire and secured our City's complete independence both in war and peace.

Of the battles that we and our fathers fought, whether we were winning power abroad or gallantly withstanding nearby enemies, whether Greek or foreign, I will say no more: these are too familiar to all of you. I'd rather set forth the spirit in which we faced them, and the Athenian constitution and Athenian way of life that brought us to greatness, and to pass from these things to the dead themselves. For I think it not unfitting for these things to be recalled in today's solemnity; and it is appropriate that this whole assembly of both citizens and strangers should hear these things.

For our system of government does not copy the systems of our neighbors; we are a model to them, not they to us. Our constitution is called a democracy, because power rests in the hands not of the few but of the many. Our laws guarantee equal justice for all in their private disputes; and as for the election of public officials, we welcome talent to every arena of achievement, nor do we make our choices on the grounds of class but on the grounds of excellence alone. And as we give free play to all in our public life, so we carry the same spirit into our daily relations with one another. We have no black looks or angry words for our neighbor if he enjoys himself in his own way, and we even abstain from little acts of churlishness that, though they do no mortal damage, leave hurt feelings in their wake. Open and tolerant in our private lives, in our public affairs we keep within the law. We acknowledge the restraint of reverence; we are obedient to those in authority and to the laws, especially to those that give

protection to the oppressed and those unwritten laws of the heart whose transgression brings admitted shame.

Yet ours is no workaday city only. No other city provides so many recreations for the spirit – contests and sacrifices all the year round, and beauty in our public buildings to cheer the spirit and delight the eye day by day. Moreover, the City is so large and powerful that all the wealth of all the world flows in to her, so that our own Attic products seem no more familiar to us than the fruits of the labors of other nations.

And how different from our enemies is our attitude toward military security! The gates of our City are flung open to the world. We practice no periodic deportations, nor do we prevent our visitors from observing or discovering whatever “secrets” might prove of military advantage to an enemy. For we do not place our trust in secret weapons but in our own faithful courage.

So too with education. The Spartans toil from early childhood in the laborious pursuit of courage, while we, free to live and wander as we please, march out nonetheless to face the selfsame dangers. Here is the proof of my words: when the Spartans advance into our country, they do not come alone but with all their allies; but when we invade our neighbors we have little difficulty as a rule, even on foreign soil, in defeating men who are fighting for their own homes. Moreover, no enemy has ever met us in our full strength, for we have our navy to look after at the same time that our soldiers are sent on service to many scattered possessions; but if our enemies chance to encounter some portion of our forces and defeat a few of us, they boast that they have driven back our whole army, or, if they are defeated, that the victors were in full strength. Indeed, if we choose to face danger with an easy mind rather than after rigorous training and to trust rather in our native manliness than in state-sponsored courage, the advantage lies with us; for we are spared all the tedium of practicing for future hardships, and when we find ourselves among them we are as brave

as our plodding rivals. Here as elsewhere, then the City sets an example that deserves admiration.

We are lovers of beauty without extravagance, and lovers of wisdom without effeminacy. Wealth to us is not mere material for vainglory but an opportunity for achievement; and we think poverty nothing to be ashamed of unless one makes no effort to overcome it. Our citizens attend both to public and private duties and do not allow absorption in their own affairs to diminish their knowledge of the City's business. We differ from other states in regarding the man who keeps aloof from public life not as "private" but as useless; we decide or debate, carefully and in person, all matters of policy, and we hold, not that words and deeds go ill together, but that acts are foredoomed to failure when undertaken undiscussed. For we are noted for being at once most adventurous in action and most reflective beforehand. Other men are bold in ignorance, while reflection will stop their going forward. But the bravest are surely those who have the clearest vision of what lies before them, glory and danger alike – and yet go forth to meet it.

In doing good, too, we are the exact opposite of the rest of mankind. We secure our friends not by accepting favors but by granting them. And so this makes friendship with us something that can be counted on: for we are eager, as creditors, to cement by continued kindness our relation to our friends. If they do not respond with the same warmth, it is because they feel that their services will not be given spontaneously but only as repayment of a debt. We are alone among mankind in doing men benefits, not on calculation of self-interest, but in the fearless confidence of freedom.

In a word, I say our City as a whole is an education to Greece, and that our citizens yield to none, man by man, for independence of spirit, many-sidedness of attainment, and complete self-reliance in limbs and brain.

That this is no vainglorious phrase but actual fact is proven by the universal leadership that our way of life has won us. No other city of the present day goes out to her ordeal greater than ever man dreamed; no other is so powerful that the invader feels no bitterness when he suffers at her hands and her subjects no shame at the indignity of their dependence. Great indeed are the signs and symbols of our power. Men of the future will wonder at us, as all men do today. We need no Homer or other man of words to praise us; for such give pleasure for a moment, but the truth will put to shame their imaginings of our deeds. For our pioneers have forced a way into every sea and every land, establishing among all mankind, in punishment or beneficence, eternal memorials of their settlement.

Such then is the City for whom, lest they should lose her, the men whom we celebrate died a soldier's death; and it is but natural that each of us, who survive them, should wish to spend ourselves in her service. That, indeed, is why I have spent many words on the City. I wished to show that we have more at stake than men who have no such inheritance, and to support my praise of the dead by making clear to you what they have done. For if I have chanted the glories of the City, it was these men, and men like them, who have adorned her with such splendor. With them, as with few among Greeks, words cannot magnify the deeds that they have done.

Such and end as we have here seems indeed to show us what a good life is, from its first signs of power to its final consummation. For even where life's previous record showed faults and failures, it is just to weigh the last full measure of devotion against them all. There they wiped out evil with good and did the City more service as soldiers than they did her harm in private life. There no hearts grew faint because they loved their riches more than honor; no poor man shirked his duty in the hope of future wealth. All these they put aside to strike a blow for the City. Counting the quest to avenge her honor as the most glorious of all ventures, and leaving Hope,

the uncertain goddess, to send them what she would, they faced the foe as they drew near him in the strength of their own manhood; and when the shock of battle came, they chose rather to suffer the utmost than to win life by weakness. So their memory has escaped the reproaches of men's lips, but they bore instead on their bodies the marks of men's hands, and in a moment of time, at the climax of their lives, were rapt away from a world filled, for their dying eyes, not with terror but with glory.

Such were the men who lie here and such the City that inspired them. We survivors may pray to be spared their bitter hour but must disdain to meet the foe with a spirit less daring. Fix your eyes on the greatness of Athens as you have it before you day by day, fall in love with her, and when you feel her great, remember that this greatness was won by men with courage, with knowledge of their duty, and with a sense of honor in action, who, if they failed in private life, disdained to deprive the City of their services but sacrificed their lives as their best offerings on her behalf. So they gave their bodies to the commonwealth and received, each for his own memory, praise that will never die, and with it the grandest of all sepulchers, not that in which their mortal bones are laid, but a home in the minds of men, where their glory remains fresh to stir to speech or action as the occasion may require.

For the whole earth is the sepulcher of famous men; and their story is not graven only on stone over their native earth but lives on far away, without visible symbol, woven into the stuff of other men's lives. For you now, it remains to rival what they have done and, knowing that the secret of happiness is freedom and the secret of freedom a brave heart, not idly to stand aside from the enemy's onslaught. For it is not the poor and luckless, the ones who have no hope of prosperity, who have the most cause to reckon death as little loss, but those for whom fortune may yet keep reversal in store and who would feel the change most if trouble befell them. Moreover, weakly to decline the trial is more painful to a man of

spirit than death coming sudden and unperceived in the hour of strength and confidence.

Therefore I do not mourn with the parents of the dead who are here with us. Rather, I will comfort them. For they know that they have been born into a world of manifold chances and that he is to be accounted happy to whom the best lot falls – the best sorrow, such as is yours today, or the best death, such as fell to these, for whom life and happiness were bound together. I know it is not easy to give you comfort. I know how often in the joy of others you will have reminders of what was once your own, and how men feel sorrow, not for the loss of what they have never tasted, but when something that has grown dear to them has been snatched away. But you must keep a brave heart in the hope of other children, those of you who are still of an age to bear them. For the newcomers will help you forget the gap in your own circle, and will help the City to fill up the ranks of its workers and its soldiers. For no man is fitted to give fair and honest advice in council if he has not, like his fellows, a family at stake in the hour of the City's danger. To you who are past the age of vigor I would say: count the long years of happiness so much gain to set off against the brief space that yet remains, and let your burden be lightened by the glory of the dead. For the love of honor alone is not staled by age, and it is by honor, not, as some say, by gold, that the helpless end of life is cheered.

I turn to those among you who are children or brothers of the fallen, for whom I foresee a mighty contest with the memory of the dead. Their praise is in all men's mouths; and even if you should rise to heroic heights, you will be judged harshly for achieving less than they. For the living have the jealousy of rivals to contend with, but the dead are honored with unchallenged admiration.

If I must speak a word to those who are now in widowhood on the powers and duties of women, I will cast all my advice into one brief sentence. Great

will be your glory if you do not lower the nature that is within you – hers greatest of all whose praise or blame is least bruited on the lips of men.

I have said what I had to say, according to the law, and the graveside offerings to the dead have been duly made. Henceforward the City will support their children until they come of age: such is the crown and benefit she holds out to the dead and to their kin for the trials they have undergone for her. For where the prize is highest, there, too, will you find the best and the bravest.

And now, when you have finished your lamentations, let each of you depart.

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