

Pericles Defends His Policy

(Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, translated by Rex Warner, Penguin Books, 1972, pages 158-162.)

After the second invasion of the Peloponnesians there had been a change in the spirit of the Athenians. Their land had been twice devastated, and they had to contend with the war and the plague at the same time. Now they began to blame Pericles for having persuaded them to go to war and to hold him responsible for all the misfortunes that had overtaken them; they became eager to make peace with Sparta and actually sent ambassadors there, who failed to achieve anything. [Sparta had probably insisted that Athens completely give up its empire.] They were then in a state of utter hopelessness, and all their angry feelings turned against Pericles.

...He, therefore, since he was still a general, summoned an assembly with the aim of putting fresh courage into them and of guiding their embittered spirits so as to leave them in a calmer and more confident frame of mind. Coming before them, he made the following speech:

'I expected this outbreak of anger on your part against me, since I understand the reasons for it; and I have called an assembly with this object in view, to remind you of your previous resolutions and to put forward my own case...

'...The whole world before our eyes can be divided into two parts, the land and the sea, each of which is valuable and useful to man. Of the whole of one of these parts you are in control—not only of the area at present in your power, but elsewhere too, if you want to go further. With your navy as it is today there is no power on earth—not the King of Persia nor any people under the sun—that can stop you from sailing where you wish. This power of yours is something in an altogether different category from all the advantages of houses or of cultivated land. You may think that when you lose them you have suffered a great loss, but in fact you should not take things so hard; you should weigh them in the balance with the real source of your power and see that, in comparison, they are no more to be valued than gardens and other luxuries that go with wealth. Remember, too, that freedom, if we preserve our freedom by our own efforts, will easily restore us to our old position; but to submit to the will of others means to lose even what we still have. You must not fall below the standard of your fathers, who not only won an empire by their own toil and sweat, without receiving it from others, but went on to keep it safe so that they could hand it down to you. And, by the way, it is more of a disgrace to be robbed of what one has than to fail in some new undertaking. Not courage alone, therefore, but an actual sense of your superiority should animate you as you go forward against the enemy. Confidence, out of a mixture of ignorance and good luck, can be felt even by cowards; but this sense of superiority comes only to those who, like us, have real reasons for knowing that they are better placed than their opponents...

'...And do not imagine that what we are fighting for is simply the question of freedom or slavery: there is also involved the loss of our empire and the dangers arising from the hatred that we have incurred from administering it. Nor is it any longer possible for you to

give up this empire, though there may be some people who in a mood of sudden panic and in a spirit of political apathy actually think that this would be a fine and noble thing to do. Your empire is now like a tyranny: it may have been wrong to take it; it is certainly dangerous to let it go. And the kind of people who talk of doing so and persuade others to adopt their point of view would very soon bring the state to ruin...

'...Remember, too, that the reason why Athens has the greatest name in all the world is because she has never given in to adversity, but has spent more life and labor in warfare than any other state, thus winning the greatest power that has ever existed in history, such a power that will be remembered forever by posterity, even if now (since all things are born to decay) there should come a time when we are forced to yield: yet still it will be remembered that of all Hellenic [Greek] powers we held the widest sway over the Hellenes [Greeks], that we stood firm in the greatest war against their combined forces and against individual states, that we lived in a city that had been perfectly equipped in every direction and that was the greatest in Hellas [Greece].'