

Pericles Replies to the Spartan Ultimatum

(Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, translated by Rex Warner, Penguin Books, 1972, pages 118-122.)

Finally an embassy arrived with the Spartan ultimatum... They said simply: 'Sparta wants peace. Peace is still possible if you will give the Hellenes [Greeks] their freedom.'

The Athenians then held an assembly in order to debate the matter... Many speakers came forward and opinions were expressed on both sides... Among the speakers was Pericles, ...the leading man of his time among the Athenians and the most powerful both in action and in debate. His advice was as follows:

'Athenians,' he said, 'my views are the same as ever: I am against making any concessions to the Peloponnesians [those who live on the Peloponnesian peninsula, like Spartans and Corinthians]...

'...[The Spartans] prefer to settle their complaints by war rather than by peaceful negotiations, and now they come here not even making protests, but trying to give us orders.

'...If you give in [to a smaller demand], you will immediately be confronted with some greater demand, since they will think you only gave way...through fear. But if you take a firm stand you will make it clear to them that they have to treat you properly as equals. And now you must make up your minds what you are going to do—either to give way to them..., or to go to war—as I think we should do...

'Now, as to the war and to the resources available to each side, I should like you to realize that we are not the weaker party. The Peloponnesians cultivate their own land themselves; they have no financial resources either as individuals or as states; then they have no experience of fighting overseas, nor of any fighting that lasts a long time, since the wars they fight against each other are, because of their poverty, short affairs. Such people are incapable of often manning a fleet or often sending out an army, when that means absence from their own land, expense from their own funds and, apart from this, when we have control of the sea...

'...And as for seamanship, they will find that a difficult lesson to learn... It is not something that can be picked up and studied in one's spare time; indeed, it allows one no spare time for anything else.'

'...we must try to think of ourselves as islanders; we must abandon our land and our houses, and safeguard the sea and the city. We must not, through anger at losing land and homes, join battle with the greatly superior [land] forces of the Peloponnesians...

'I could give you many other reasons why you should feel confident in ultimate victory, if only you will make up your minds not to add to the empire while the war is in progress, and not to go out of your way to involve yourselves in new perils. What I fear is not the enemy's strategy, but our own mistakes.'