

Friends, Brothers, Athenians!

“Too long have we been subject to the silver tongue of Pericles. It is no wonder that his words strike such a cord with we Athenians, for he has had all the benefits of a noble birth¹ and has had much association with the greatest minds of our time, including the venerable Anaxagoras,² whereas we of much more humble means are fated to do with what we have at our disposal, and have naught but to practice our rhetoric with the beasts of the field. So do not be surprised, fellow Athenians, when the slippery speech of Pericles seems reasonable and good to your ears, for he as had much practice.

“But there have been other men in our history with as much practice as he, including, as you all surely know, the tyrant Pisistratus. I do not think it be out of line to point out the obvious similarities between Pericles and he,³ both physically and otherwise, for as Pisistratus ruled with his fist, so equally does Pericles rule with his deftness of tongue, and I warn you all that this man is not so innocent of intent as he would like us to believe.

“Was it not Pericles who, using what powers of persuasion that were given to him, was instrumental in ostracizing Cimon,⁴ a true Athenian despite what anyone may say, and far from ever showing loyalties to the Spartans, despite his family’s connection? Remember how we regretted that he was ostracized when we saw how bravely he fought against the Spartans, and how loathsome the news of his death in Cyprus was?⁵ And was it not this very Pericles who managed, through his adept persuasion, to get Thucydides ostracized as well,⁶ though he himself seemed to escape the exile far too easily? It is as it seems; this man has been engaged in solidifying power and influence for himself, and we Athenians have been his instrument!

“But aside from these instances, a man must be judged by his character, for even if a man has brought himself into power rather shrewdly, it is the manner of his leadership and his treatment of others that is most important. How does the man fare, then, in this department? Need I remind you of the blunders and shady business he has involved himself in? Surely his squandering of the treasury⁷ is enough to bring his judgment into question. I would argue that the transfer of this vast wealth from Delos to our fair city enraged our allies far more than anything else they could accuse us of. What greater good did it bring to move the treasury here? Would it not have been wiser to leave it where it was and instead make the trip to Delos to retrieve what we needed, when we needed? Surely this would have been wiser, in order to keep our relations with the Peloponnesus in a better state. And what did he spend it on? Temples and buildings⁸—objects which certainly add to the prestige of our fair city, but things we can do without. He could have spent it on any number of worthy things, but he squandered it on adornments. Yet even in

¹ Plutarch, *The Rise and Fall of Athens: Nine Greek Lives*. Translated by Ian Scott-Kilvert, (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc.; London: Clays Ltd., St Ives plc, 1960)

6.3

² Plutarch, 6.4

³ Plutarch, 6.7

⁴ Plutarch, 6.9

⁵ Plutarch, 6.10

⁶ Plutarch, 6.6 & 6.14

⁷ Plutarch, 6.12

⁸ *ibid*

this he was shrewd and calculating, for now we have no cause to use this against him since he offered to pay for these projects out of his own pocket, which our pride would not allow.⁹ As surely as I am standing here, he would never have offered his own purse to pay for these projects, but only said he would in order to regain public support. Do you see how deep his scheming runs? Can we trust a man as cunning as this?

“I feel it my duty as an Athenian to remind you of the vanity of this man who stands before us, harkening us to listen to his advice. This is the man whose court is filled with our own, freeborn Athenian women, who are there solely to grace his bed.¹⁰ This is the man who forsook his own wife for the love of that whore Aspasia, whose impiety knows no bounds. Do you not remember the womanish blubbery he employed in order to extol sympathy for her?¹¹ And this is the same man whose pride was so great that he had Pheidias, who constructed the statue of Athena, place his own image into the relief on Athena’s shield!¹² What greater arrogance is this; that he would want his own face immortalized in a place where only the gods should be? I dare say that our progeny will be a trifle confused to see this fine relief tainted by a squill-head.

“Pericles demands that we not concede to the requests of the Spartans.¹³ He claims that if we do we will become subject to them, essentially their slaves, and that in order to retain our equality we must, therefore, deny them their request.¹⁴ But what evidence do we have of this? Certainly such a thing must be unacceptable, but think about it. Suppose we do as the Spartans request and lift the siege of Potidaea. Suppose we leave Aegina and the Hellenes independent and revoke the Megara decree.¹⁵ What will we lose? We will still be Athens. We will still be a sovereign nation, a free nation and an independent nation. He warns us against overextending ourselves with fresh conquest,¹⁶ but I say that we have already overextended ourselves. What is Potidaea to Athens? What are Aegina and the entire rest of the Hellenes to Athens? Why must we trouble ourselves with them? People may say that the Peloponnesians might consider us weak if we give up the siege and leave the Hellenes independent, and this is undoubtedly something Pericles would have you believe, but I would argue that it would be nothing but a sign of restraint, a sign of self-empowerment. By no means should we take down our walls or cease to fund our military, but neither should we exercise them arbitrarily. There is no need to test the strength of our walls; there is no need to send our young men off to battle, if we can avoid it. Pericles wants us to think of ourselves as an island,¹⁷ but we aren’t! We are a Hellenic nation in a Hellenic community of nations, and while we are supreme among them all, we must not abuse our relationships with them. Yes, it is true that we dominate

⁹ Pericles, 6.14

¹⁰ Pericles, 6.13

¹¹ Pericles, 6.32

¹² Pericles, 6.31

¹³ Strassler, Robert B., *The Landmark Thucydides*.
(New York: Simon and Schuster Inc., 1998)
1.140.1

¹⁴ Thucydides, 1.140.4-5

¹⁵ Thucydides, 1.140.3

¹⁶ Thucydides, 1.144.1

¹⁷ Thucydides, 1.143.5

the Aegean,¹⁸ but just because we *can* use our navy to dominate the Peloponnesus does not mean that we *should*.

“I know that it is not a pleasant thought, but perhaps Sparta and her allies do have a point. Perhaps we have been a slight overbearing in our treatment of them. Pretend you are a Naxian or a Lesbian. How would you feel if you saw the money you contributed to the League taken from its agreed resting spot by the most powerful nation in all of the Hellenes and placed behind their walls? Would that not enrage you, as it has enraged our allies? I am not excusing their militancy and desire to engage in war with us. But I am sympathizing with them, and recommend that we all do likewise. If there is a way that we can fend off this war without becoming slaves to Sparta, I think we should. After all, as Pericles himself has said, chance is a factor in warfare,¹⁹ and chance levies her heavy hand arbitrarily, disregarding a nation’s pride, power, nobility or morality. It could very well be us that she turns against rather than the Spartans. Pericles downplays the many avenues the Spartans could use to harm us, but how does he know what they will and will not do? How does he know that the Spartans would never build land fortifications in Athens?²⁰ What if, for some reason, we are unable to stop them? Surely, our *triremes* are adept at attacking both the sea and the land,²¹ but what if chance turns in their favor and not ours? What if, as unlikely as it may seem, the Spartans and her allies develop a navy equal—dare I say superior—to our own? Who is Pericles to say that it will never happen?²² And I seriously doubt Pericles’ understanding of human greed if he seriously thinks that there would be no Athenian, as honorable and loyal a people as we are, who could not be bought by the bribery of the Spartans.²³

“I conclude by decrying the claim of Pericles that this war is a necessity.²⁴ I believe that it is entirely possible to ward off hostilities between ourselves and our fellow Hellenes. I refute the claim that to compromise with the Spartans would be an act of condemning ourselves to slavery, and urge all Athenians not to be swayed by sweet-tongued Pericles, but rather look at the situation abstractly so that one might make a wiser, well-informed decision that is not doomed by exuberance and the fleeting securities of national pride.”

Spoken by *Kourasmenos Daktylos* o son of *Anagki Ypnos* of the deme Acharnae

¹⁸ Thucydides, 1.142.5

¹⁹ Thucydides, 1.140.1

²⁰ Thucydides, 1.142.2-4

²¹ Thucydides, 1.142.5

²² Thucydides, 1.141.3-4; 1.142.6-9

²³ Thucydides, 1.143.2

²⁴ Thucydides, 1.44.3