

## **Pericles' Funeral Oration (With Corresponding Questions)**

Pericles (around 495-429 B.C.E.)

"Funeral Oration" supposedly delivered in winter, 430

(from Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, book 2)

Retold in English by Stan Rummel

### **Section 01: Thucydides' Introduction**

In the same winter the Athenians gave a funeral at the public cost to those who had first fallen in this war. It was a custom of their ancestors, and the manner of it is as follows. Three days before the ceremony, the bones of the dead are laid out in a tent which has been erected. Their friends bring to their relatives such offerings as they please. In the funeral procession cypress coffins are carried in cars, one for each tribe -- with the bones of the deceased placed in the coffin of their tribe. Among these is carried one empty bier decked for the missing, that is, for those whose bodies could not be recovered. Any citizen or stranger who pleases, joins in the procession. The female relatives are there to wail at the burial. The dead are laid in the public sepulcher in the Beautiful suburb of the city, in which those who fall in war are always buried. The exception is those slain at Marathon, who for their singular and extraordinary valor were interred on the spot where they fell.

After the bodies have been laid in the earth, a man chosen by the state, of approved wisdom and eminent reputation, pronounces over them an appropriate panegyric. Then everybody leaves. Such is the manner of the burying. Throughout the whole of the war, whenever the occasion arose, the established custom was observed. Meanwhile, these were the first that had fallen, and Pericles, son of Xanthippus, was chosen to pronounce their eulogium. When the proper time arrived, he advanced from the sepulcher to an elevated platform in order to be heard by as many of the crowd as possible, and spoke as follows:

### **Section 02: Pericles Puts the Speech in Context**

"Most of my predecessors in this place have commended the man who originally made this speech part of the law. They told us that the speech should be delivered at the burial of those who fall in battle. I myself think that the worth displayed in deeds would be sufficiently rewarded by honors shown by deeds -- such as you now see in this funeral prepared at the people's cost.

"I wish that the reputations of many brave men would not be put in jeopardy by the words of a single individual -- to stand or fall according as he spoke well or ill. For it is hard to speak properly about a subject where it is even difficult to convince your hearers that you are speaking the truth. On the one hand, the friend who is familiar with every fact of the story may think that some point has not been set forth with that fullness that he wishes and knows it to deserve. On the other, he who is a stranger to the matter may be led by envy to suspect exaggeration if he hears anything above his own nature. For men can endure to hear others praised only so long as they can each persuade themselves of their own ability to equal the actions recounted. When this point is passed, envy comes in and with it incredulity.

"However, since our ancestors have stamped this custom with their approval, it becomes my duty to obey the law and to try to satisfy your wishes and opinions as best I may.

### **Section 03: Pericles Raises Three Questions**

"I shall begin with our **ancestors**. It is both just and proper that they should have the honor of the first mention on an occasion like the present. They lived in our country without break in the succession from generation to generation, and handed it down free to the present time by their valor.

"If our remote ancestors deserve praise, much more do our own **fathers**, who added to their inheritance the empire which we now possess, and spared no pains to be able to leave their acquisitions to us of the present generation.

"Lastly, there are few parts of our dominions that have not been augmented by **those of us here**, who are still more or less in the vigor of life. We have furnished the mother country with everything that can enable her to depend on her own resources whether for war or for peace. Consider our collective story. It tells of military achievements that gave us the lands we possess. Think of the heroic deeds by which we and our fathers stemmed the tide of Hellenic or foreign aggression. You know these themes well, and I won't dwell on them.

"But there are **questions I should try to answer** before I proceed to my panegyric upon these men. What was the road by which we reached our position? Under what form of government did our greatness grow? What are the collective habits out of which our greatness sprang? I think the answers to these questions are appropriate for this occasion. Everyone here -- whether citizens or foreigners -- will benefit from listening.

#### **Section 04: Athenian Government and Life**

"Our constitution does not copy the laws of neighboring states. We set the pattern for others rather than imitate them. Our administration favors the many instead of the few. This is why it is called a **democracy**.

"Take the laws. They afford equal justice to all in their private differences. Or advancement in public life falls to reputation for capacity rather than social standing. Class considerations are not allowed to interfere with merit. Nor 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 that we enjoy in our government extends also to our **ordinary life**. Far from spying on each other, we don't feel called upon to be angry with our neighbor for doing what he likes. We don't even to indulge in 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. Fear is our chief safeguard against this. Fear teaches us to obey the magistrates and the laws. We pay particular attention to the protection of the injured. It doesn't matter whether there is a written law. We also follow an unwritten code that 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 year round. The elegance of our private establishments forms a daily source of pleasure and helps to banish the spleen. 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 their own.

#### **Section 05: The Military**

"If we turn to our **military policy**, there also we differ from our enemies. We throw open our city to the world, and never exclude foreigners from any opportunity of learning or observing, although the eyes of

an enemy may occasionally profit by our liberality. We trust less in system and policy than in the native spirit of our citizens.

"In education, our rivals from their very cradles seek after manliness by a painful discipline. In Athens we live exactly as we please. Yet we 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. 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.

"No enemy has ever encountered our united force, because we have at once to attend to our navy and to dispatch our citizens by land upon a hundred different services. When enemies have triumphed over some fraction of our strength, they have magnified their success against a detachment into a victory over the whole. When they have been defeated, they have claimed they suffered a reverse at the hands of our entire people.

"We cultivate habits of ease, not labor. We come by our courage naturally, not through hard discipline. We are just as willing as any other people to encounter danger, but we have a big advantage. Since we don't experience hardships until they come, we face them in the hour of need as fearlessly as those who are never free from them.

### **Section 06: Athenian Government and Life**

"These are not the only points in which our city is worthy of admiration. We cultivate refinement without extravagance and knowledge without effeminacy. We employ wealth more for use than for show, and place the real disgrace of poverty not in being poor but in declining the struggle against it. Our public men attend to their private affairs as well as politics. Our ordinary citizens, though occupied with the pursuits of industry, are still fair judges of public matters. We are different from any other country, because we look at a man who takes no part in public duties as useless -- not just unambitious. We Athenians are able to judge at all events if we cannot originate. Instead of looking on discussion as a stumbling-block in the way of action, we think it an indispensable preliminary to any wise action at all.

"In our **enterprises** we present the singular spectacle of daring and deliberation, each carried to its highest point, and both united in the same persons. Decision are usually made through ignorance and lack of reflection in other countries. But the palm of courage will surely be adjudged most justly to those who best know the difference between hardship and pleasure and yet are never tempted to shrink from danger.

"In **generosity** we are equally unique. We acquire our friends by conferring, not by receiving, favors. Yet, of course, the doer of the favor is the firmer friend of the two, in order by continued kindness to keep the recipient in his debt. The debtor feels that the return he makes will be a payment, not a free gift. And it is only the Athenians, who, fearless of consequences, confer their benefits not from calculations of expediency, but in the confidence of liberality.

### **Section 07: Athens, the School of Hellas**

"In short, I say that as a city we are the school of Hellas. I doubt if the rest of the world can produce a man who, where he has only himself to depend upon, is equal to so many emergencies, and graced by so happy a versatility, as the Athenian. The power of the state acquired by these habits proves that this is no mere boast thrown out for the occasion, but plain matter of fact. For Athens alone of her contemporaries is found when tested to be greater than her reputation, and alone gives no occasion to her assailants to blush at the antagonist by whom they have been worsted, or to her subjects to question her title by merit

to rule. Rather, the admiration of the present and succeeding ages will be ours, since we have not left our power without witness, but have shown it by mighty proofs. Far from needing a Homer for our panegyrist -- or other of his craft whose verses might charm for the moment only for the impression which they gave to melt at the touch of fact -- we have forced every sea and land to be the highway of our daring, and everywhere, whether for evil or for good, have left imperishable monuments behind us. Such is the Athens for which these men, in the assertion of their resolve not to lose her, nobly fought and died; and well may every one of their survivors be ready to suffer in her cause.

### **Section 08: The Worth of the Heroes**

"Indeed if I have dwelled at some length upon the character of our country, it has been to show that our stake in the struggle is not the same as theirs who have no such blessings to lose, and also that the panegyric of the men over whom I am now speaking might be by definite proofs established. That panegyric is now in a great measure complete; for the Athens that I have celebrated is only what the heroism of these and their like have made her -- men whose fame, unlike that of most Hellenes, will be found to be only commensurate with their deserts.

"If a test of worth be wanted, it is to be found in their closing scene, and this not only in cases in which it set the final seal upon their merit, but also in those in which it gave the first intimation of their having any. For there is justice in the claim that steadfastness in his country's battles should be as a cloak to cover a man's other imperfections. The good action has blotted out the bad, and his merit as a citizen more than outweighed his demerits as an individual. But none of these allowed either wealth with its prospect of future enjoyment to unnerve his spirit, or poverty with its hope of a day of freedom and riches to tempt him to shrink from danger. No, holding that vengeance upon their enemies was more to be desired than any personal blessings, and reckoning this to be the most glorious of hazards, they joyfully determined to accept the risk, to make sure of their vengeance, and to let their wishes wait. While committing to hope the uncertainty of final success, in the business before them they thought fit to act boldly and trust in themselves. Thus choosing to die resisting, rather than to live submitting, they fled only from dishonor, but met danger face to face, and after one brief moment, while at the summit of their fortune, escaped, not from their fear, but from their glory.

### **Section 09: The Whole Earth for Their Tomb**

"So died these men as became Athenians. You, their survivors, must determine to have as unfaltering a resolution in the field, though you may pray that it may have a happier issue. Don't be contented with ideas about the advantages to defending your country, though these would furnish a valuable text to a speaker even before an audience so alive to them as the present. You must yourselves realize the power of Athens, and feed your eyes upon her from day to day -- till love of her fills your hearts. Then, when all her greatness breaks upon you, you must reflect that it was by courage, sense of duty, and a keen feeling of honor in action that men were enabled to win all this. No personal failure in an enterprise could make them consent to deprive their country of their valor. They laid it at her feet as the most glorious contribution that they could offer. Through this offering of their lives made in common by them all, they each individually received that renown which never grows old, and for a sepulcher, not so much that in which their bones have been deposited, but that noblest of shrines wherein their glory is laid up to be eternally remembered upon every occasion on which deed or story shall call for its commemoration. For heroes have the whole earth for their tomb. In lands far from their own, where the column with its epitaph declares it, there is enshrined in every breast a record unwritten with no tablet to preserve it, except that of the heart. These take as your model and, judging happiness to be the fruit of freedom and freedom of valor, never decline the dangers of war. For it is not the miserable that would most justly be unsparing of their lives. Such people have nothing to hope for. It is rather they to whom continued life may bring

reverses as yet unknown, and to whom a fall, if it came, would be most tremendous in its consequences. And surely, to a man of spirit, the degradation of cowardice must be immeasurably more grievous than the unfelt death which strikes him in the midst of his strength and patriotism!

#### **Section 10: To the Parents**

"Comfort, therefore, not condolence, is what I have to offer to the parents of the dead who may be here. Numberless are the chances to which, as they know, the life of man is subject. But fortunate indeed are they who draw for their lot a death so glorious as that which has caused your mourning, and to whom life has been so exactly measured as to terminate in the happiness in which it has been passed. Still I know that this is a hard saying, especially when those are in question of whom you will constantly be reminded by seeing in the homes of others blessings of which once you also boasted. For grief is felt not so much for the want of what we have never known, as for the loss of that to which we have been long accustomed.

"You who are still of an age to sire children must bear up in the hope of having others in their stead. Not only will they help you to forget those whom you have lost, but will be to the state at once a reinforcement and a security. Never can a fair or just policy be expected of the citizen who does not, like his fellows, bring to the decision the interests and apprehensions of a father. Those of you who have passed your prime must congratulate yourselves with the thought that the best part of your life was fortunate, and that the brief span that remains will be cheered by the fame of the departed. For it is only the love of honor that never grows old. Honor it is, not gain, as some would have it, that rejoices the heart of age and helplessness.

#### **Section 11: To Other Survivors**

"Turning to the sons or brothers of the dead, I see an arduous struggle before you. When a man is gone, everyone praises him. Should your merit be ever so transcendent, you will still find it difficult not merely to overtake, but even to approach the renown of our heroes. The living have envy to contend with, while those who are no longer in our path are honored with a goodwill into which rivalry does not enter.

"On the other hand, if I must say anything on the subject of **female excellence** to those of you who will now be in widowhood, it will be all comprised in this brief exhortation. Great will be your glory in not falling short of your natural character; and greatest will be hers who is least talked of among the men, whether for good or for bad.

#### **Section 12: Pericles' Closing Remarks**

"My task is now finished. I have performed it to the best of my ability, and in word, at least, the requirements of the law are now satisfied. If deeds be in question, those who are here interred have received part of their honors already, and for the rest, their children will be brought up till manhood at the public expense. The state thus offers a valuable prize, as the garland of victory in this race of valor, for the reward both of those who have fallen and their survivors. And where the rewards for merit are greatest, there are found the best citizens

"And now that you have brought to a close your lamentations for your relatives, you may depart."

Related Questions:

1. **What picture of Athenian democracy does the speech give?**
2. **What effect do you think the whole speech would have had on the audience?**
3. **How is the speech structured?**
4. **In one sentence, what is the essential 'message' of the speech? How does the structure support this message?**