

P E R I C L E S
by Plutarch

By the power of his eloquence, and the money embezzled from Athens' unwilling allies, Pericles built Athens into a beautiful city and a powerful empire. Athenian imperialism, however, soon led to war with Sparta.

Augustus Caesar observed some foreigners at Rome one day, carrying puppies and monkeys and fawning foolishly over them. He walked over and asked them whether the women in their country did not bear children. By this princely reprimand, he disapproved of the waste of natural affections on unnatural objects.

Nature has given us a desire to learn and to love. We should not waste this good desire on trivial pursuits, but should study human virtue. In the acts of great men, we find a proper and natural object for our attention. The reader will inevitably grow in wisdom and eagerness to imitate their good example. Virtue has this strange power: to know her is to love her. Whoever learns of virtue will want to know her better, and will notice her presence in his life.

The same cannot be said about the arts, where the subject under study is only the products of men and not the men themselves. Great art may be produced by contemptible human beings, and therefore art does not inspire virtue in us. It does not necessarily follow that if the work delights, the workman must be praised.

Antisthenes replied wisely to someone who praised a flute-player: "But still he's a contemptible fellow -- otherwise he would not be such a good flute-player." And King Philip of Macedonia said to his son, Alexander the Great, after he had sung at a banquet like a master of music: "Are you not ashamed, my son, to sing so well?" It is enough for a king to give his time and treasure to encourage the arts, but if a king personally practices such things, whatever skill he may acquire becomes evidence of time wasted that he should have spent at statecraft.

When we study the acts of great men -- rather than the great acts of men -- we take fire from their understanding so that virtue burns and shines in our own life.

Pericles was born into the best families of Athens, both on his father's and mother's side. He received a good education from his teachers, including the philosopher Zeno. So adept was Zeno at sophistry that it was said Zeno could prove any proposition to be false.

Pericles learned most from Anaxagoras, who imparted to young Pericles the majesty and gravity he had in all his sayings and doings, superior to all arts of popularity. Anaxagoras was the first philosopher to attribute the order of the world to intelligence, rather than to chance or necessity, and to explain power as the affinity of similar things. With his mind occupied by such thoughts, Pericles

was dignified in his language and serene and calm in his movements. Nothing could shake his majestic composure.

One day, Pericles was in the marketplace of Athens doing business, and all day long some noisy pest kept following him around, yelling vituperation. He even followed Pericles home. Throughout the ordeal, Pericles maintained his composure. It was dark by the time Pericles arrived home, so he gave orders for one of his servants to take a torch and guide this critic safely back to wherever he lived.

Some people said that Pericles was only trying to fool the public with a false front of virtue. But Zeno replied that if Pericles were faking virtue, his detractors should do the same, because even pretending to be good, if this is continued for long enough, will give a man the desire and practice that is needed for good habits.

Pericles was very wealthy, and his skill with words made him famous in Athens while he was still a young man. But because he was afraid of being ostracised, and banished for being too great a man, Pericles stayed out of politics for a long time. He was not at ease among common people, but when he decided to participate in public affairs he joined the democratic party. His rival, Cimon, led the aristocratic party. Once he entered politics, Pericles gave up going to dinner with his friends, and he avoided all social events of any kind, believing that familiarity breeds contempt.

Such friendly meetings do indeed make it impossible to keep up a front of counterfeit majesty. Perfect virtue, however, is most excellent in common things, and welcomes scrutiny. Truly good men do not put on one face for strangers and another for their friends.

Only rarely did Pericles appear in public, and only on the most important occasions. Then, when he spoke to the people, his words were like thunder and lightning. By far, he was the best orator of his day, both for style and content. The old men noted a striking resemblance to Pisistratus in the way Pericles looked and talked.

Thucydides [not the historian], a noble and distinguished citizen, later took Cimon's place as Pericles' principal political opponent in Athens. When the king of Sparta asked Thucydides whether he or Pericles was the better wrestler, Thucydides said: "When I throw him and get the fall, he insists that there was no fall, and by his powers of persuasion makes the spectators, in spite of their own eyes, believe him."

Cimon was famous as a successful general and had more wealth than Pericles. Cimon did many acts of personal charity for the poor, such as inviting them to his house for a free buffet at any time, giving them clothes, and letting them pick fruit on his land.

To compete with Cimon for the affections of the poor, Pericles began the use of the public treasury for new purposes, such as plays and other amusements, and distributions of money to the public. By the measures he introduced, the Athenians were transformed from a sober and thrifty people, who maintained themselves by their own labors, into unscrupulous and lazy addicts of public funds.

The government shrivelled into insignificance as the people, led by Pericles, overruled the decisions of their elected representatives. With the populace steering policy by their uproar, Pericles became the most powerful man in Athens, yet he had never been elected to any public office. Having, in effect, bought their support, he made use of the masses against his political opponents so that he became a king disguised as a champion of the people. Pericles contrived to have his rival Cimon ostracized, even though Cimon had won many glorious victories over the barbarians and had filled the city with treasure.

War broke out between Athens and Sparta. When Cimon volunteered to come back and join the Athenian army, which he had commanded as its general many times, Pericles and his party compelled Cimon to leave. The Spartans gave the Athenians a severe beating, and the Athenians became anxious for peace. But the Spartans refused to deal with Pericles or any of the democrats, and would negotiate with no one but Cimon, whom they respected.

Cimon arranged a peace on good terms, but again Cimon was sent away from Athens. This time, however, Cimon departed not as a banished vagabond but as the commander of an armada of 200 ships on an expedition to Cyprus, where he died.

Thucydides, Cimon's close relative and a wise man, took over leadership of the aristocrats against Pericles and his democrats. Thucydides was not as good a general as Cimon, but he was much better at oratory -- in fact, the equal of Pericles. At first the rift in Athens was not serious, and hardly more than the ancient contest between the haves and the have-nots. But with the personal rivalry between Pericles and Thucydides, aggravated by resentment over the bad treatment of Cimon, partisan rancor became very passionate. To fortify his power, Pericles spent even more public funds on lavish plays, pageants, and public banquets. He indulged the Athenians like spoiled children to keep from losing them to Thucydides.

The Parthenon and all of the famous statues and buildings of Athens were paid for using the money that had been collected from the Greek allies to finance the war against the Persians. The aristocrats in Athens vehemently objected to such use of the money, saying that the allies would be right to consider this an open act of tyranny when they saw that the money raised for the war was being embezzled to adorn Athens like a whore. But Pericles responded that the Athenians could do as they pleased with the money because they really deserved it. Moreover, said Pericles, there were enough military supplies, so it was proper to spend the surplus on buildings that would give Athens eternal honor and create jobs. Thus most of the artisans and craftsmen of Athens owed their pay to Pericles, along with the soldiers and sailors.

The plans for the construction were on a very grand scale. With all of these buildings going up at the same time, there was such a rivalry among the craftsmen that they not only built them exquisitely well, but also quickly, so that their masterpieces could be admired. In only a few years, most of the construction was finished.

As the work was in progress, Thucydides and the aristocrats managed to get a vote that the expense was excessive. Pericles then said to the Athenians: "Then let the cost go to my account, not yours, but also let the inscription on the buildings be my name." After hearing this, the Athenians changed their minds and ordered Pericles to go ahead and to spare no expense.

An ostracism was called, and Thucydides was the victim. Now Pericles had undisputed authority as the greatest man in Athens. He became less of a persuader and more of a commander, but he never went too far in exercising arbitrary authority. Pericles was generally able to lead the Athenians along by their own consent. Persuasion was always his preference, but he sometimes issued orders when it was absolutely necessary for the public good.

Pericles' objective was always to make Athens prosperous and powerful. He never took bribes or used his power for his own profit in any way. Because of this, the Athenians trusted Pericles and had confidence in his character. Therefore they listened when he spoke, and by his words he steered them, using the twin rudders of their hopes and fears, through the many crises that were bound to occur in such an empire. When the Athenians were downhearted, Pericles cheered them up; and when they were reckless, he made them cautious.

Pericles plainly proved the truth of what Plato said about rhetoric, that it is the government of the souls of men, and its chief business is to address the emotions, which are like the strings or keys of the soul, and require a skillful touch to be played on with effect.

The family of Pericles, however, was not happy with him. Although he had inherited a large estate, Pericles was too parsimonious. At least, that was the opinion of the women in his household. All daily expenditures were meticulously accounted for. Pericles would not trust his sons with any of the family business, but instead would rent all of his property for a sum of cash, out of which he bought whatever was needed. Pericles had, in fact, no business except politics.

Pericles neglected his old teacher, Anaxagoras, to the point that Anaxagoras was nearly dead from starvation. Pericles finally ran to his bedside and begged Anaxagoras not to die, and thus deprive him of such a valued counselor. Anaxagoras replied: "Pericles, even those who use a lamp put oil in it so it can give light."

In his military affairs, Pericles was very cautious. He would not, if he could help it, risk any fight where the odds were not heavily in his favor. Although others admired generals whose rash adventures achieved brilliant success through good luck, Pericles did not try to imitate them.

One Tolmides got together a band of a thousand Athenian volunteers to plunder Thebes, and Pericles saw that there was not a good chance of success. Before the assembly, he urged Tolmides to be more cautious, and said: "If you will not take my advice, then wait and be ruled by time, the wisest counselor of all." But Tolmides went ahead, and he and a large number were killed. This incident confirmed Pericles' reputation for prudence among the Athenians.

The Athenian navy conquered many cities and islands, and compelled them to pay taxes. The intoxication of success gave the Athenians high hopes of eventually conquering Egypt and Sicily. With all of these wild projects in the air, Pericles had a hard time restraining the Athenians' passion for foreign conquest and focussing their attention on a showdown with Sparta. Sparta and Athens had a thirty-year truce in force, but hostilities continued in a cold war.

The whole Greek world was divided between allegiance to Athens or to Sparta. Armed conflict could not be far in the future, so this was no time for the Athenians to be getting involved with distant wars. Parts of the Athenian empire revolted. The Corinthians, Aeginetians, and Megarians begged the Spartans to save them from the greedy imperialism of Athens, so the Spartans sent ambassadors to Athens to try to resolve these complaints.

Pericles at this time was in trouble and facing impeachment because of several scandals. One was the matter of Phidias the sculptor. Because of his friendship with Pericles, Phidias had been placed in charge of all building projects. But also because of that friendship, Phidias had many enemies. Pericles' enemies had decided to use Phidias to find out how the people might decide if Pericles himself were tried before them.

They bribed one of Phidias' workmen to accuse Phidias of pilfering some of the gold that should have gone to cover the statue of Athena. Pericles had foreseen such an accusation, and had advised Phidias to put on the gold so that it could easily be stripped off and weighed. At the trial, Pericles challenged the accuser to do this. But the truth of the indictment soon became irrelevant as envy of Phidias' reputation became the main motivation for conviction, and he was put in jail, where he died soon afterwards. There was suspicion that Pericles had arranged to have Phidias poisoned to keep him quiet, but some thought that Pericles' enemies had done this murder in order to create that suspicion.

Also, there was the matter of Aspasia, who had run a brothel until Pericles divorced his wife and married her. Aspasia was indicted for being disrespectful to the gods. The charge seemed to implicate Pericles himself. That led the Athenians to reopen the old question of excessive expense in the public building projects. A decree was passed that Pericles would have to give a full accounting to a jury of 1500.

Pericles therefore started up the smoldering war with Sparta and blew it into a flame, knowing that in the crisis the Athenians would forget about their accusations and rally to him as their leader. He contrived a quarrel between the Athenians and the Megarians, and this quarrel was to be arbitrated by the Spartans. The Athenian representative was murdered, and Pericles blamed it on the

Megarians. They, however, disclaimed any responsibility and suggested that Pericles had the man murdered so he could have his war.

Because of this murder, the Athenians declared war on the Megarians, thus breaking the thirty-year truce with Sparta. The Spartans gave the Athenians an ultimatum to take back the declaration of war, and Pericles persuaded them not to. Then the Spartans asked the Athenians to get rid of Pericles, but this had the opposite of its intended effect. Pericles became a hero in Athens because it was clear that he was hated and feared by the enemy.

So the war with Sparta started. The Spartans invaded the territory of Athens, cutting down trees and burning farms to provoke the Athenians to come out from behind their walls and fight. Pericles decided that it was too dangerous to risk a battle, and instead he pursued a strategy for making the Spartans leave without fighting them directly. The Athenians had naval superiority, therefore they could invade at any point along the whole coastline of Greece. By using their ships, they could do so much damage that the Spartans would be forced to go back to guard their own territory.

The Athenians did not like to be on the defensive, and they accused Pericles of cowardice. He had to endure a lot of abuse while he waited for his strategy to bear fruit. Even his friends pestered Pericles with complaints, and the comedians of Athens made him the target of savage and funny ridicule. "Trees will grow back; dead men will not," was the response of Pericles to his detractors. Despite the unpopularity of his policy, Pericles managed to keep the Athenians inside their fortifications, knowing that despite all of their boasting they could not realistically expect to win a battle with the Spartans.

Like a good captain, when a storm comes up at sea, who takes care of managing the ship and ignores the pleading and screams of the frightened passengers, Pericles did what was necessary and refused to allow taunts or tears to distract him. He made new distributions of money so that the Athenians would stop complaining about the war.

A plague broke out in Athens. In the crowded city, the plague spread quickly, and soon there were dead bodies everywhere. The Athenians blamed Pericles for bringing this war and this plague upon them, so they voted him out of office and fined him. As a bee leaves its stinger in the wound, the Athenians stopped bothering Pericles once he stepped down from his authority over them.

But now trouble came to Pericles from his own family. For a long time, the household of Pericles had grumbled about his frugality. Xanthippus, his son by his first wife, had married a young lady with very expensive tastes. Xanthippus was especially unhappy with his meager allowance.

Without Pericles' permission, Xanthippus put down his father's name as surety for a loan. When Xanthippus defaulted, the lender came looking for Pericles. Not only did Pericles refuse to pay, but he also sued his son. Xanthippus retaliated by spreading scandalous stories about his father's private life. This rift between father and son continued until Xanthippus died of the plague.

Pericles lost his sister and many other friends and relatives in the plague, but he never lost his majestic composure until the plague took his last son. Although he tried, Pericles could not keep from crying at his son's funeral. The Athenians had never seen Pericles cry in all his life.

The leaders that had tried to take the place of Pericles had proved to be inferior, so the Athenians asked Pericles to take charge again. He forgave their insults and ingratitude, and they forgave him because of his personal tragedies, which they considered punishment enough for his former pride. They even allowed his bastard son by Aspasia to become his lawful heir and to take the name of Pericles.

Soon the plague caught Pericles too, and he gradually lost his powers of mind and body until finally he died. While he was on his death-bed, the leading men of Athens were talking about the great things that Pericles had done for the city. They thought that he could not overhear them, but Pericles raised himself up and said that they had forgotten the thing in his life that he was most proud of: his moderation in the use of tyrannical power. Not only was Pericles merciful and courteous among so many vicious enemies, but he also had the good judgment to realize that he deserved praise for not allowing himself to be carried away by feelings of hate or anger.

Like Mount Olympus, the home of the immortals, which towers above the storm clouds and is always bright with sunshine, so Pericles was superior to the petty emotions of greed, anger, envy, and revenge. His godlike dignity and demeanor earned him the nickname of "The Olympian."

Immediately after the death of Pericles, corruption in Athens got much worse. Comparing Pericles with the men who succeeded him in the government, the Athenians finally appreciated how great a loss was his death. Even his greatest enemies were compelled to confess that Pericles had used wisely the power they begrudged him, and his critics, who had lampooned and reviled him, finally gave him the credit that his real virtue deserved.

Source: <http://www.ahistoryofgreece.com/biography/pericles.htm>