Funeral Speech for Athenian Heroes

by Pericles, 431 B.C.

The Greek leader Pericles (PER ih kleez) (about 495–429 B.C.) helped to make the government of Athens open to all citizens. Although only free men were considered citizens, Pericles worked to ensure that both rich and poor alike could participate and share in the responsibilities of leadership. This form of government developed into what we call a democracy. Leaders were chosen for their talents and skills, not because of their wealth. This selection is from a speech given by Pericles at a public funeral for the Athenian men who died in a war against Sparta in 431 B.C. It was written down by the historian Thucydides (thoo SIHD ih deez) who lived about the same time as Pericles. What does Pericles think about his government and his city? Why is this funeral an appropriate time for him to speak about the government and way of life in Athens?

Our form of government does not enter into rivalry with the institutions of others. We do not copy our neighbors, but are an example to them. It is true that we are called a democracy, for the administration is in the hands of the many and not of the few. But while the law secures equal justice to all alike in their private disputes, the claim of excellence is also recognized. When a citizen is in any way distinguished, he is preferred to the public service, not as a matter of privilege, but as the reward of merit. Even poverty is not a bar, but a
man may benefit his country whatever be the obscurity of his condition.

And we have not forgotten to provide for our weary spirits many relaxations from toil. We have regular games and sacrifices throughout the year. At home the style of our life is refined; and the delight which we daily feel in all these things helps to banish melancholy. Because of the greatness of our city the fruits of the whole earth flow upon us; so that we enjoy the goods of other countries as freely as of our own.

Then, again, our military training is in many respects superior to that of our adversaries. Our city is thrown open to the world, and we never expel a foreigner or prevent him from seeing or learning anything of which the secret is revealed to an enemy might profit him. We rely, not upon management or trickery, but upon our own hearts and hands. And in the matter of education, whereas they from early youth are always undergoing laborious exercises which are to make them brave, we live at ease, and yet are equally ready to face the perils which they face.

...An Athenian citizen does not neglect the state because he takes care of his own household; and even those of us who are engaged in business have a very fair idea of politics. We alone regard a man who takes no interest in public affairs, not as a harmless but as a useless character. If few of us are originators, we are all sound judges, of a policy. The great impediment to action is, in our opinion, not discussion, but the want of that knowledge which is gained by discussion preparatory to action... To sum up: I say that Athens is the school of Hellas, and that the individual Athenian in his own person seems to have the power of adapting himself to the most varied forms of action with the utmost versatility and grace... And we shall assuredly not be without witnesses; there are mighty monuments of our power which will make us the wonder of this and of succeeding ages... Such is the city for whose sake these men nobly fought and died. They could not bear the thought that she might be taken from them; and every one of us who survive should gladly toil on her behalf.

Pericles concluded the speech with his belief that it was worthwhile for the citizens of Athens to work, fight, and give their lives, if necessary, for their city. Pericles took great pride in his city, its people, and its democracy. You may have heard United States government leaders make similar remarks about our country.