

Famous Speeches: Pericles' Funeral Oration

By Pericles, adapted by Newsela staff on 01.25.17

Word Count **1,011**



Pericles' Funeral Oration painted by Philipp Foltz in 1852.

Editors Note: Democracy had its beginnings in Athens around 500 B.C. Athens and its ally, king-led Sparta, defeated the Persians at different times over the next 20 years. The golden years of democracy in Athens followed for the next 70 to 80 years. But tension between the Athenian democracy and the Spartan monarchy made the one-time allies into bitter enemies. The resulting Peloponnesian War between 431 and 404 B.C. ended when Sparta defeated Athens.

This famous speech by Athenian ruler Pericles praising democracy, after the first year of war with Sparta, describes a form of government that is about to end and not be revived for almost 2,000 years. The Funeral Oration by Pericles was a part of the annual public funeral for the war dead.

"I Want To Speak Of How Our Empire Became Great"

Our ancestors have always given speeches at funerals to honor those fallen in battle, so I must do the same. I hope I can offer the right words for all who hear me. Saying too little or too much could make it difficult to touch upon the truth.

Therefore, I will speak first of our ancestors, for it is right that we remember and honor them when we mourn those that have died. Our fathers and their fathers struggled to give us a free state and a great empire. And we have carried on the work of improving it at times of peace and times of war. But before I praise the dead, I want to speak of how our empire became great, because it is important to hear this from time to time.

We are called a democracy since we are ruled by the hands of the many, not the hands of a few. Our government does not copy our neighbors' for we have equal justice for all. Our citizens are rewarded for merit. Exceptional citizens can be rewarded by joining the government. We are also free to do as we like in our private business. We trust one another and are not angered by a neighbor if he does what he likes. A man may help his country even if he is poor. We are prevented from doing wrong by respect for the authority and law. We work to protect the injured from those that would do them harm.

"We Help Our Neighbors Freely With An Honest And Fearless Spirit"

We provide many relaxations from work, for we have regular games and holidays throughout the year. Our homes are beautiful and every day we seek to be happy and free from sadness. We enjoy the goods of other countries as freely as our own.

Our military training is superior to that of our enemies. All may enter our city and we never expel a foreigner or prevent him from learning anything that might help our enemies. Our enemy harshly trains its youth to make them brave, however, we live at ease and are equally ready to face the dangers which they face. The proof is seen as we go alone into a neighbor's country and have little difficulty defeating them. We can be as brave as those who never allow themselves to rest because our strength lies in what is gained by discussion that prepares us for action. We think before we act, while our enemy is courageous from ignorance.

We help our neighbors freely with an honest and fearless spirit. We do not ask for anything in return. There are mighty monuments to our power that make us the wonder of this world and the world to come.

Such is the city for which these men nobly fought and the greatness of Athens is seen in those that have died for its glory.

"In An Instant, They Passed From The Scene, Not In Fear But In Glory"

These men have met evil with goodness. They knew the punishment of their enemies was sweeter than wealth or the pleasures of life. They have fallen in the name of a noble cause and in the face of death, they did not run from battle to save their lives. On the battlefield their feet stood fast, and in an instant, they passed away from the scene, not in fear but in glory.

Such was the end of these worthy men of Athens, whose value cannot be expressed in words. But day by day, fix your eyes upon the greatness of Athens until you become filled with the love of her and know that this empire stands because of the men who knew their duty and freely gave their lives to their country. The bodies of these men do not lie in tombs, for the whole earth is the tomb of famous men. There is an unwritten memorial to them, not in stone but in the hearts of men. Make them your examples, knowing that courage is freedom and freedom is happiness.

"Honor Them With Your Strength"

Now do I offer comfort to parents of the dead who stand among us. You know that your dead have passed away with highest honors. However, I know how hard it is to make you feel this. For the good fortune of others will too often remind you of the gladness which once lightened your hearts. I know that sorrow is felt more deeply for the life that has been taken from you.

To you who are their sons and brothers, I see that the struggle to be like them will be a hard one. Honor them with your strength. To their widows, let me say in these few words, that the strength that is natural to your gender will add greatness to their glory.

I have given these men the honor they deserve and tried to use the most fitting words I had. Their children will now receive support from our grateful Athens until they are grown up: this is how Athens crowns her sons, living and dead, after a struggle like theirs. And now, when you have honored and grieved for your own dead, you may depart.

Quiz

- 1 Select the paragraph from the section "I Want To Speak Of How Our Empire Became Great" that BEST explains WHY Pericles is proud of Athens' history.
- 2 Which section highlights the idea that both bravery and intelligence are important for victory?
- (A) "I Want To Speak Of How Our Empire Became Great"
 - (B) "We Help Our Neighbors Freely With An Honest And Fearless Spirit"
 - (C) "In An Instant, They Passed From The Scene, Not In Fear But In Glory"
 - (D) "Honor Them With Your Strength"
- 3 Which two of the following sentences from the speech contain CENTRAL ideas?
- 1. *Saying too little or too much could make it difficult to touch upon the truth.*
 - 2. *We provide many relaxations from work, for we have regular games and holidays throughout the year.*
 - 3. *Such is the city for which these men nobly fought and the greatness of Athens is seen in those that have died for its glory.*
 - 4. *Make them your examples, knowing that courage is freedom and freedom is happiness.*
- (A) 1 and 2
 - (B) 2 and 3
 - (C) 3 and 4
 - (D) 1 and 4
- 4 Which option is an accurate summary of the section "Honor Them With Your Strength"?
- (A) Those who lost loved ones will feel a lot of sadness, but their strength and the support of Athens will help them to honor the dead.
 - (B) The greatness of Athens should remind all enemies that there is no honor in fighting since Athens has the strength of its men and women.
 - (C) There is nothing that Athens or its people can do to comfort the parents of the dead, but the children will easily forget and move on.
 - (D) Though many people are sad because men have died in battle, they should rejoice in the beauty and good fortune of others such as Sparta.

Answer Key

- 1 Select the paragraph from the section "I Want To Speak Of How Our Empire Became Great" that BEST explains WHY Pericles is proud of Athens' history.

Paragraph 4:

We are called a democracy since we are ruled by the hands of the many, not the hands of a few. Our government does not copy our neighbors' for we have equal justice for all. Our citizens are rewarded for merit. Exceptional citizens can be rewarded by joining the government. We are also free to do as we like in our private business. We trust one another and are not angered by a neighbor if he does what he likes. A man may help his country even if he is poor. We are prevented from doing wrong by respect for the authority and law. We work to protect the injured from those that would do them harm.

- 2 Which section highlights the idea that both bravery and intelligence are important for victory?

- (A) "I Want To Speak Of How Our Empire Became Great"
(B) "We Help Our Neighbors Freely With An Honest And Fearless Spirit"
(C) "In An Instant, They Passed From The Scene, Not In Fear But In Glory"
(D) "Honor Them With Your Strength"

- 3 Which two of the following sentences from the speech contain CENTRAL ideas?

1. *Saying too little or too much could make it difficult to touch upon the truth.*
2. *We provide many relaxations from work, for we have regular games and holidays throughout the year.*
3. *Such is the city for which these men nobly fought and the greatness of Athens is seen in those that have died for its glory.*
4. *Make them your examples, knowing that courage is freedom and freedom is happiness.*

- (A) 1 and 2
(B) 2 and 3
(C) 3 and 4
(D) 1 and 4

- 4 Which option is an accurate summary of the section "Honor Them With Your Strength"?
- (A) **Those who lost loved ones will feel a lot of sadness, but their strength and the support of Athens will help them to honor the dead.**
 - (B) The greatness of Athens should remind all enemies that there is no honor in fighting since Athens has the strength of its men and women.
 - (C) There is nothing that Athens or its people can do to comfort the parents of the dead, but the children will easily forget and move on.
 - (D) Though many people are sad because men have died in battle, they should rejoice in the beauty and good fortune of others such as Sparta.