Primary Source Activity
The Ancient Greeks

Lesson 4 Glory, War, and Decline

Pericles’s Funeral Oration

This excerpt is from a speech by the Athenian leader Pericles around 431 B.C., after the first battles of the Peloponnesian War. The speech was given at an Athenian funeral for slain soldiers. It is from an account by the Greek historian Thucydides. Funerals after the first battles were public rituals in Athens. Pericles used the occasion to make a statement about the bravery of the soldiers and why it was necessary to fight for Athenian democracy. The funeral was held during the first winter of the Peloponnesian War. Pericles’ speech is still widely read today. The Peloponnesian War lasted for 27 years.

Directions Read the following excerpt and think about why Pericles would remind Athenians, in the first year of the war, why it was important to defend democracy.

Excerpt from Pericles’s Funeral Oration

Thus choosing to die resisting, rather than to live submitting, they ... met danger face to face ... So died these men as became Athenians. You, their survivors, must determine to have as unfaltering [loyal] a resolution in the field, though you may pray that it may have a happier issue. ... [Y]ou must yourselves realize the power of Athens, and ... 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, and that no personal failure in an enterprise could make them consent to deprive their country of their valor, but they laid it at her feet as the most glorious contribution that they could offer. For this offering of their lives ... they each of them individually received ... [the] 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. ... These take as your model and, judging happiness to be the fruit of freedom and freedom of valor, never decline the dangers of war.
Primary Source Activity  Cont.

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Analyzing Primary Sources

Directions  Answer the following questions.

1. Identifying  When did Pericles make his speech?

2. Describing  What did Pericles say the slain men had met face-to-face?

3. Explaining  Is Pericles proud of the men for dying in battle? Why or why not?

Critical Thinking

4. Analyzing  Why do you think Pericles reminded Athenians during the first year of war of the importance in fighting for Athenian democracy?