

## Thucydides Book II:

In this section of the text, Thucydides describes the first two years of the war between the Athenians and the Peloponnesians. The first act of violence was the attack upon Plataea, a city allied with Athens, by a Theban force. This group was defeated and many prisoners were captured. There was a breakdown in communication between Athens and Plataea, and despite the wishes of the more powerful state, Plataea executed all of the prisoners which it held. “After the affair at Plataea, the [ thirty year peace] treaty had been broken by an overt act, and Athens at once prepared for war, as did Lacedaemon and her allies.” (ii 7)

At this point, the author enumerates all of the participants on each side, and describes the two camps as “full of young men whose inexperience made them eager to take up arms”, and a region held in the grip of anticipation of an outcome, reading signs and oracles to attempt to predict the fate of the combatants. Archidamus, the Lacedaemonian king gives a speech to his forces in which he emphasizes the dangers of war and the strength of the opponent while highlighting the just nature of his cause. In Athens, Pericles gives up his private lands so that if Archidamus (who was a personal friend) chose not to ravage them, he could not be accused of receiving favors from the enemy. He also advised the Athenian army to stay within the confines of the city behind its strong defenses rather than protecting its hinterlands from every attack. The result of this was an overpopulation of Athens by emigrants from farmland around it, which among other concerns violated a Pythian oracle about inhabiting certain sacred lands.

Expecting a response from Athens, Archidamus paused to assault (unsuccessfully) a border fortress called Oenoe. This delay allowed the Athenians to complete the removal of their property into the city, and drew censure in the public eye. Thucydides defends the king’s decision, saying that “he, it is said, expected that the Athenians would shrink from letting their land be wasted, and would make their submission while it was still uninjured; and this was why he waited.” (ii 18) He then proceeded to invade Attica at the time of the harvest and ravaged the territory surrounding Athens. This led to public debate within the city, as many demanded a response, branding Pericles “the object of general indignation”. (ii 21) Pericles, “seeing anger and infatuation just now in the ascendant, and confident of his wisdom in refusing a sally, would not call either assembly or meeting of the people, fearing the fatal results of a debate inspired by passion and not by prudence.” (ii 22) Archidamus’ army did not attack Athens, but retreated by a different route, leaving destruction in its wake.

Athens attacked several areas by sea, having naval superiority by a large margin, and also gained an important ally via marriage in Sitalces. The fighting during the winter of the first year was limited to naval attacks by the Athenians, and the city focused on burying its dead. Pericles gave an oration at the funeral, in which he discussed the critical differences between Athens and its contemporaries. He emphasized freedom and law as the cornerstones of democracy, and military might and openness as complementary elements of Athenian success. In his pride for his city, he says that “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.” (ii 41). This is a demonstration of a contributing factor in the origins of the war itself, and Pericles continues to say “Such is the Athens for which these men...nobly fought and died; and

well may every one of their survivors be ready to suffer in her cause” (ii 41). In his eulogy, he continues to allude to the city’s motivations for war, saying that “grief is felt not so much for the want of what we have never known, but for the loss of that which we have long been accustomed.” (ii 44) Though he is referring here to the parents of the dead, he is also clearly discussing the mood of the city as a whole in terms of its lost power.

The second year of the war is marked by a plague in Athens, which devastated the city. This led to a change in the local mood, “for as the disaster passed all bounds, men, not knowing what was to become of them, became utterly careless of everything, whether sacred or profane.” (ii 52) This led to rapid spending, and a mood of despair in the city. This was exacerbated by a second invasion by the Peloponnese army, and again Pericles refused to let the Athenians respond. Criticism of Pericles rose, and the city attempted against his will to send emissaries to negotiate with Lacedaemon. He responded by addressing the city, at which point he brought forth several arguments in his defense. He argued that the pride and well-being of the city was more important than that of the individual, saying that “A man may be personally ever so well-off, and yet if his country be ruined he must be ruined with it; whereas a nourishing commonwealth always affords chances of salvation to unfortunate individuals.” (ii 60)

Moving to discussing the war directly, he states that “For those who have a free choice in the matter and whose fortunes are not at stake, war is the greatest of follies. But if the only choice was between submission with loss of independence and danger with the hope of preserving that independence – in such a case it is he who will not accept the risk that deserves blame, not he who will.” (ii 61) Arguing that setbacks should not make Athens sue for peace, he continues and claims that “you should remember also that what you are fighting for is not merely slavery as an exchange for independence, but also loss of empire and danger from the animosities incurred in its exercise” (ii 63). In other words, Athens stands to lose more because of its exalted standing before the war; “letting it go is unsafe”. Using these arguments, Pericles succeeded in reliving the fighting spirit of Athens. However, as Thucydides points out, the city’s strength and unity was dependent on him as an individual. “In short, what was nominally a democracy became in his hands government by the first citizen. With his successors it was different. More on a level with one another and each grasping at supremacy, they ended by committing the conduct of state affairs to the whims of the multitude” (ii 65). And this was a key to the downfall of the great Athenian empire.