



Pericles of Athens and the Birth of Democracy

Donald Kagan

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Kagan, faithful to his lifelong fascination with Pericles . . . gives us an accessible and invaluable account of his life and deeds."--Allan Bloom, author of "The Closing of the American Mind.

Pericles of Athens and the Birth of Democracy Details

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From Reader Review Pericles of Athens and the Birth of Democracy for online ebook

Matthew says

through and incisive treatment of athens' preeminent leader.

Elias Vasilis Kontaxakis says

For Pericles knew that any successful society must be an educational institution. However great its commitment to individual freedom and diversity, it needs a code of civic virtue and a general devotion to the common enterprise without which it cannot flourish or survive.

Pericles is one of my heroes of history; perhaps it's fair to say I idolize him. If the Peloponnesian War was a Greek tragedy, Pericles was its tragic hero, and I only regret that there isn't more information on the man. Our chief sources are Thucydides, who worshipped him as I do, and Plutarch, who is useful but prone to drama. The great Greek historian, Donald Kagan, compiles everything we know into a semi-biography: *Pericles of Athens and the Birth of Democracy*. I enjoy Kagan's writing and can feel passion seeping through his scholarly demeanor. The book's historical context is just as important as its topic: the first print run was in 1990 when the cold war was ending, with US democracy reigning triumphant over Soviet Union communism, and sprouts of democratic revolutions occurring all over the globe. This period is directly responsible for Kagan's popularity; his superb treatment of the Peloponnesians War served as an analysis and comparison to history's other great imperialist democracy: classical Athens. Now in *Pericles* Kagan details not the war, but its champion, and illustrates what's best and worst about the person most responsible for Greece's golden age.

Pericles was a military general and political statesmen for Athens during the fifth century BCE. He rose to power by leading the pro-democratic and anti-Spartan party in the city. Before this time democracy was not considered *de facto* positive—it was a form of government that sprung up as a response to tyranny (also not *de facto* negative during this time) and utilized the political power of the city's citizen military. Not until Pericles did democracy begin to receive ideological support, and tyranny ideological condemnation. While Pericles was not inherently more powerful than his opposition—Athens had ten generals at once and many more statesmen—his eloquence and gravity made him more influential as time went on. He used his influence to steer Athens into imperialism, and by enacting tribute from 'military allies' accumulated vast wealth for the city. As Athens flourished it came into direct conflict with Sparta, with whom Pericles began the long and devastating Peloponnesian War. Sparta won, Athens was broken, and the golden age of Greece ended in misery for all.

This summary paints Pericles as a bad guy, and indeed I'm indebted to Kagan for not minimizing the great evils and mistakes the statesmen made. Pericles' power was so great he resembled a tyrant himself, and his imperialistic and hawkish policies brought just as much shame as glory to Athens. He was not interested in having Athenians dictate their own fate, but used rhetoric to persuade them to further his political goals. His obstinate support (towards the end of his life) for a doomed and uncompromising war policy destroyed the very city he spent his life building up, and served as ammunition for anti-democratic sympathy throughout the rest of time. He died denying his mistakes, and the massive political vacuum left in his wake showed how pathetic Athenian democracy had become.

I stress these negatives because they ground the unbelievable virtues and brilliance of Pericles' accomplishments. To begin with, he was an outstanding human being: above corruption, a disciple of philosophy and reason, calm and collected in every crises, and most of all completely in love with the city he spent his life serving. To Pericles Athens was the world, and everything he did was for her. His imperialistic tendencies was in an attempt to enrich his people...and that's exactly what he did. The money enacted from her allies didn't simply go to Athenian oligarchs, but was spent on artistic patronage, building programs, and public education. Athenians paid no taxes and had public services available to all (public servants were given salaries for the first time). Pericles ensured the military protection of her client states, from both Sparta and Persia. Honestly my "hawkish" adjective above is unfair: while Pericles did lead Athens to war with Sparta, he spent a great deal of time and energy trying to prevent it, and then later bring about peace. It was ironically his moderate policies that led to the conflict, as his unwillingness to either comprise the Athenian empire or dedicate it to senseless tyranny allowed his enemies to fester and rise against her. Kagan makes a great effort arguing this point, and I find it persuasive.

In other words, Pericles is the perfect caricature for a benevolent imperialist. Yes he believed in exerting his will over others, but it was for their benefit, with all the evils and goods that entails. But most of all—and this is the key point—he did it through democratic institutions. Kagan's greatest accomplishment is in illustrating how everything Pericles did was accomplished through Athenian democracy. And each time he subjugated an enemy he instilled a (pro-Athenian) democratic government in place of their monarchy. In this way Pericles was attempting to forge a forced UN-like international system; indeed all her "allies" met regularly to vote and make group decisions, and Athens' vote counted as only one. Of course you couldn't vote against her, and this reveals the tyranny behind the democracy. But even this is progress, historically speaking.

I hope I don't sound like I'm justifying the Athenian empire, but I find Pericles utterly fascinating. He is the first person in history to argue for the merits of political equality and personal freedoms. He made huge innovations in international relations by urging states to resolve conflict first through arbitration instead of going to war (which Sparta wouldn't), and establishing defensive alliances in lieu of aggressive ones. He spent his city's money on the betterment of its citizens and beautifying its land. The Parthenon, arguably the greatest piece of architecture in the humanist tradition, was his crown-jewel. The devastating irony is that these same actions also led Athens into direct conflict with Sparta, and by stubbornly appealing to men's reason and moral virtue, would not acknowledge the ferocious and desperate state the Peloponnesian War evolved into. I very much want to be like Pericles—possessing a moral vision that I'm able to communicate and put into action—while yet avoiding the evils he manifested. In his position I don't know what different choices I would have made, but if I presume to become a leader of either myself or others, I have to learn the triumphs and pit-falls of history's ideological heroes. And there are few better to examine than Athens' "first citizen."

Alex says

Pericles (495 – 429 BCE) didn't invent democracy - that was Cleisthenes - but he was its biggest hero, or its biggest goat, leading Athens through its golden age and also setting in motion the Peloponnesian War that Athens totally lost (404 BCE). Which was really more of a minor setback; I always thought Sparta ended Athenian democracy, but actually Sparta's occupation was relatively brief . It was Alexander the Great who put an end to it almost a century later (338 BCE).

But still: Athens under Pericles is the Athens we know, the Athens of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Aristophanes,

Euripides and Socrates. Athens in the 300s was a shadow of itself, and Athens might not have entered (or stayed in) the Peloponnesian War if not for Pericles' stubbornness. So one could say, if one were feeling dramatic, that Pericles both created and destroyed the Golden Age of democracy. It's Pericles Sophocles is talking about in Oedipus Tyrannus; it's Pericles who was foster father to the great traitor and Socrates-fucker Alcibiades; it's Pericles who's responsible for the greatest defense of Athenian democracy, the Funeral Oration. It's also Pericles who was probably an atheist, btw. It certainly seems, then, that he deserves a great biography.

Unfortunately this isn't it. This is pretty boring.

Tony says

I thought the last chapter was over editorial, and biased. I thought the rest of the book was pretty good.

Jamie says

Hard to through

Gregg Wingo says

Professor Kagan's history-lite books are great reads for those interested in Greek studies and not willing to assault the translated Classical works or incapable of reading Ancient Greek. "Pericles of Athens" is less a work of historical analysis than popular biography but it is also a synthesis of Kagan's thoughts on one of the first Great Men of history.

While Great Man history has declined within the profession its appeal to the amateur is still very, very strong. Kagan attempts to take us into the mind of a popular politician and visionary. This is no small feat when your historical figure dates from the 5th century B.C.E., a time just at the edge of the historical record and the dawn of the Western tradition. The book is organized by chapters that reflect on the aspects of the individual: Democrat, Aristocrat, and, even, Hero in the Classical sense. Piecing together scraps of documents, bits of rock, the tragedies and comedies of playwrights, and, of course, Thucydides Kagan breathes life and humanity into this remote figure, this august but long dead body.

Perhaps, most importantly, this is an America book. It is not meant to be staid or high brow. It is written for the common man and his democracy and nation. The Classical tradition has never been more accessible to Americans and emerging democracies around the world. Or in the good doctor's own words: "Those who wish to help them grow and flourish could do worse than to turn for inspiration and instruction to the story of Pericles of Athens and his city, where once, against all odds, democracy triumphed."

?? ? says

good

Karen says

This book is very interesting, especially for those who are interested in politics, history, the Hellenic period or Homer. I looked a while for a good book on Pericles; this seems to be the best one out there.

Bb says

Well written and very interesting. Liked how he made analogies to 20th Century strategies. This is pure history but reads closer to a novel than a history book. Highly recommend this gentle read.

William2.1 says

Because of a dearth of primary source materials author Kagan must progress here by way of thematic chapters: "The Statesman," "The Visionary," "The Peacemaker," and so on. We see the people, the buildings, the wars, the navy, the art, the pantheism, the slaves, the empire, the rebellions, the legal system, etc., but there's very little about the man himself, which I suppose is not surprising 2,400 years later. This was fine with me as I tend to dislike the traditional cradle-to-grave biographical story arc. In terms of primary sources there's Pericles's Funeral Oration reported by Thucydides in his *History of the Peloponnesian War* and I think two other speeches. There's Plutarch's biography, written 400 years after the fact, and various mentions here and there. That's it. So Kagan is stuck with providing an overarching view of Pericles's times and locale. Still I found a lot to like about the book because what I wanted was a refresher on the way the Athenian Empire was formed and how it was maintained. Kagan spent about twenty years writing his four volume opus on the Peloponnesian War *before* undertaking his slimmer, more condensed version (*The Peloponnesian War*, Viking, 2003). So almost every line in the later volume has the sonorous ring that you'd expect from a lifetime's immersion in one's subject matter. The creation of *Pericles of Athens* one suspects was not so felicitous. There are two turgid patches that I skipped: one at the end of "The Peacemaker," the other at the end of "The Educator." Otherwise smooth sailing. It's perhaps not surprising that Kagan's later chapters on the Peloponnesian War are his strongest. These constitute a condensed almost capsule overview of the conflict. Interesting, too, uncanny in fact, is how many of the diplomatic moves made by Pericles during that conflict resemble 20th-century geopolitical maneuvering. Kagan without too much effort establishes the workings of this brilliant political mind. *Recommended with some reservations.* PS: I have a smart friend here at GR who is highly knowledgeable about the cutting edge scholarship of this period. Let's be clear, this book is not for such a person. It is for the general reader.

Piker7977 says

Donald Kagan presents a brilliant perspective on Athenian politics in Pericles of Athens and the Birth of

Democracy. Rather than deliver a straight forward biography of a great man of history, Kagan dissects his life into key phases and forms chapters based on a unique chronological theme-based narrative rather than event driven topics. The result is a wonderful blend of political treatise, history, and biography.

This work tells more about the development of democracy and Athens than its principle figure. Imagine that Kagan's unique approach is like a highway laid down for the reader. The stretching pavement on this journey is the events of Pericles life but it winds through detailed scenery of the times. The events that shaped Athens and democracy are well told in an accessible fashion which is enhanced by relevant comparisons to the 20th Century. This helps modern readers grasp the concepts without relying too heavily on contemporary ideas. Such an approach would leave the history clouded as the political terms took on a completely different meaning in 5th Century B.C.

The idea of Pericles is always in the background. For example, Kagan discusses the early democratic order in Athens and follows that up with a comparison of democracy under Pericles. This man was able to strengthen it's foundations and keep it a sound system which serves as an example for generations. Perhaps this is the only way left to write about Pericles as it is doubtful that new biographical material may appear outside of Plutarch and Thucydides. In essence this book is about a political legacy and the beauty of a rare flower in the forest of political history.

Readers who are looking to become acquainted with classical thought need to read this book in order to understand how little removed Athens is from our perspectives. This is the brilliance behind Pericles' contribution to the world and also Kagan's book. If anything at all, folks should read the last four pages just as an introduction to the precious nature of a functioning democratic system.

Michael Anderson says

Great study of the man and all his roles.

Chris says

It is little wonder that Lincoln's Gettysburg Address was inspired by Pericles' "Funeral Oration." (Incidentally, The argument for this is brilliantly laid forth by Garry Wills in *LINCOLN AT GETTYSBURG*, which I can't recommend enough.) Both Lincoln and Pericles, separated by 2,300 years, faced seemingly insurmountable odds during massive conflicts that threatened to rip their nations apart. Both men were tasked with persuading a fickle democratic people to sustain this war effort in the face of mounting setbacks, costs, and casualties. Both succeeded, at least in some measure. It is no small historical irony that both of these men would die, directly in consequence of the wars that occasioned their great speeches, before their plans came to fruition.

This is not to suggest the the bulk of this biography on Pericles--the greatest democratic leader produced by ancient Athens--focuses solely on Pericles' speeches or even on the Peloponnesian War (a 30-year conflict that in any case began only two years prior to Pericles' death). Instead, Donald Kagan (whose masterful *THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR* is a must-read) uses the limited historical sources available to construct a meaningful and insightful portrait into the man and the society in which he lived.

In fact, this is a biography in name only; it is just as much a superb history of the classical, Golden age of Athens, right up until the plague that beset the city two years into the Peloponnesian War. The problems facing democracies--everything from the tyranny of the majority to the danger of demagoguery--is examined closely. Worth reading (although it would have more meaning and impact if you've read some other, more general ancient Greek history first).
