

The Speeches

On Justifying a War: Pericles' First War Speech (432 BCE)

The First Peloponnesian War concluded in 446 with the Thirty Years' Peace. By the time Pericles would have given this speech, however, Athens had already clashed with the Peloponnesian League again in various proxy conflicts across Greece. Sparta regarded Athens in breach of the 446 treaty on several fronts and began to issue formal demands for concessions.

When a last Spartan delegation arrived in Athens bearing a final ultimatum—Sparta wanted peace but would go to war if Athens refused to allow the rest of the Greeks their autonomy—a meeting of the Athenian Assembly was called to deliberate what response the city would make. Many men spoke at that meeting, “some arguing

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that war was necessary,” others that compromises should be made in the interest of peace (1.139). In the end, though, Pericles prevailed on his fellow citizens to stand their ground as a matter of principle against the Peloponnesians’ demands, even if meant accepting the prospect of war. The Athenians “made a response to the Spartans just as he suggested, in both detail and spirit” and the Spartan “envoys left for home and were no longer sent to negotiate” (1.145).¹

The themes and questions that Pericles raises in this, his first speech in the *History*, offer insight into how Athens had come to articulate its role and position in Greece and shed light on “Periclean” policy, at least as Thucydides understood it, perhaps partially in retrospect. Pericles’ arguments for why “command of the sea is a powerful thing” hearken back to Thucydides’ account early in the work of how the emergence of navies dramatically changed Greece (1.8–15)

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and the question of whether it is preferable to be, in modern terms, a “whale” (a sea power) rather than an “elephant” (a land power) remains a point of debate today. This speech as a whole also represents an impressive lesson in how to deflect blame for inciting a war while simultaneously formulating pretexts for one.

Pericles does, however, issue the Athenians salutary warnings: the thrill of voting for war does not always carry over to the actual fight, and war itself should not be combined with attempts at territorial expansion. Knowing what we do now—and what Thucydides himself did then—about the long-term course of the war (especially the fate of the Sicilian Expedition: see “On Launching a Foreign Invasion: The Sicilian Debate”), it is difficult not to hear an ominous ring in Pericles’ memorable admonition to his fellow citizens: “I fear our own mistakes more than the enemy’s schemes.”

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[140] Τῆς μὲν γνώμης, ὧ Ἀθηναῖοι, αἰεὶ τῆς αὐτῆς ἔχομαι μὴ εἶκειν Πελοποννησίοις, καίπερ εἰδῶς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους οὐ τῇ αὐτῇ ὀργῇ ἀναπειθομένους τε πολεμεῖν καὶ ἐν τῷ ἔργῳ πράσσοντας, πρὸς δὲ τὰς ξυμφορὰς καὶ τὰς γνώμας τρεπομένους. ὀρώ δὲ καὶ νῦν ὁμοῖα καὶ παραπλήσια ξυμβουλευτέα μοι ὄντα, καὶ τοὺς ἀναπειθομένους ὑμῶν δικαίῳ τοῖς κοινῇ δόξασιν, ἦν ἄρα τι καὶ σφαλλώμεθα, βοηθεῖν, ἢ μηδὲ κατορθοῦντας τῆς ξυνέσεως μεταποιεῖσθαι. ἐνδέχεται γὰρ τὰς ξυμφορὰς τῶν πραγμάτων οὐχ ἦσσαν ἀμαθῶς χωρῆσαι ἢ καὶ τὰς διανοίας τοῦ ἀνθρώπου· δι' ὅπερ καὶ τὴν τύχην, ὅσα ἂν παρὰ λόγον ξυμβῆ, εἰώθαμεν αἰτιᾶσθαι.

Λακεδαιμόνιοι δὲ πρότερόν τε δῆλοι ἦσαν ἐπιβουλεύοντες ἡμῖν καὶ νῦν οὐχ ἦκιστα. εἰρημένον γὰρ δίκας μὲν τῶν διαφορῶν ἀλλήλοις διδόναι καὶ δέχεσθαι, ἔχειν δὲ ἐκατέρους ἃ

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History of the Peloponnesian War 1.140–144

[140] Athenians, I have always maintained that we must not make concessions to the Peloponnesians, though I do realize that people are often more passionate when they are first convinced to go to war than when they actually wage it; that as circumstances change, so too does resolve. Now I see that I must give you the same, or virtually the same, counsel yet again, and I am going to insist that those of you now making up your minds either stand by our collective decisions, even if they lead us astray, or else take none of the credit for their wisdom if we do succeed. Events can unfold just as errantly as human intentions, which is why we so often blame bad luck when things fail to go as planned.

It was clear before that the Spartans were plotting against us and that has become even clearer now. The terms of the treaty dictated

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ἔχομεν, οὔτε αὐτοὶ δίκας πω ἤτησαν οὔτε ἡμῶν
διδόντων δέχονται, βούλονται δὲ πολέμῳ μάλλον
ἢ λόγοις τὰ ἐγκλήματα διαλύεσθαι, καὶ
ἐπιτάσσοντες ἤδη καὶ οὐκέτι αἰτιώμενοι
πάρειςιν. Ποτειδαίας τε γὰρ ἀπανίστασθαι
κελεύουσι καὶ Αἴγιναν αὐτόνομον ἀφιέναι καὶ τὸ
Μεγαρέων ψήφισμα καθαιρεῖν· οἱ δὲ τελευταῖοι
οἶδε ἦκοντες καὶ τοὺς Ἕλληνας προαγορεύουσιν
αὐτονόμους ἀφιέναι.

Ἵμῶν δὲ μηδεὶς νομίση περὶ βραχέος ἂν
πολεμεῖν, εἰ τὸ Μεγαρέων ψήφισμα μὴ
καθέλοιμεν, ὅπερ μάλιστα προύχονται εἰ
καθαίρεθείη μὴ ἂν γίνεσθαι τὸν πόλεμον, μηδὲ ἐν
ὑμῖν αὐτοῖς αἰτίαν ὑπολίπησθε ὡς διὰ μικρὸν
ἐπολεμήσατε. τὸ γὰρ βραχὺ τι τοῦτο πάσαν
ὑμῶν ἔχει τὴν βεβαίωσιν καὶ τεῖραν τῆς γνώμης,
οἷς εἰ ξυγχωρήσετε, καὶ ἄλλο τι μείζον εὐθύς
ἐπιταχθήσεσθε ὡς φόβῳ καὶ τοῦτο ὑπακούσαντες·
ἀπισχυρισάμενοι δὲ σαφὲς ἂν καταστήσαιτε
αὐτοῖς ἀπὸ τοῦ ἴσου ὑμῖν μάλλον προσφέρεσθαι.

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that we mutually submit and accept appeals for arbitration and that, in the meantime, each side be allowed to keep the territory it already has. They, however, have never sought arbitration; nor have they accepted our requests for it. They want to resolve this conflict by war, not diplomacy, and have already taken to issuing orders in place of requests. They demand that we quit Potidaea, allow Aegina its independence, and repeal the Megarean Decree. Now these latest emissaries have come to proclaim that we have to let the Greeks be independent.

Nobody here should think we will be going to war for nothing if we refuse to repeal the decree, the demand at the top of their list—if it is repealed, they claim, then there will be no war. Nor should anyone feel any lingering remorse about going to war over a matter so “small.” This minor issue actually encompasses within it the whole proof and test of your resolution.

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[141] Αὐτόθεν δὴ διανοήθητε ἢ ὑπακούειν πρὶν τι βλαβῆναι, ἢ εἰ πολεμήσομεν, ὥσπερ ἔμοιγε ἄμεινον δοκεῖ εἶναι καὶ ἐπὶ μεγάλη καὶ ἐπὶ βραχεία ὁμοίως προφάσει μὴ εἶζοντες μηδὲ ξὺν φόβῳ ἔξοντες ἃ κεκτήμεθα τὴν γὰρ αὐτὴν δύναται δούλωσιν ἢ τε μεγίστη καὶ ἢ ἐλαχίστη δικαίωσις ἀπὸ τῶν ὁμοίων πρὸ δίκης τοῖς πέλας ἐπιτασσομένη.

Τὰ δὲ τοῦ πολέμου καὶ τῶν ἐκατέρους ὑπαρχόντων ὡς οὐκ ἀσθενέστερα ἔξομεν γνῶτε καθ' ἕκαστον ακοῦοντες. αὐτουργοὶ τε γὰρ εἰσι Πελοποννήσιοι καὶ οὔτε ἰδίᾳ οὔτ' ἐν κοινῷ χρήματά ἐστιν, ἔπειτα χρόνιων πολέμων καὶ διαποντίων ἄπειροι διὰ τὸ βραχέως αὐτοὶ ἐπ'

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If you capitulate to them, then they are just going to bully you over something bigger once they see you succumb in this instance to fear. But if you are firm, you will make it clear to them that they have to treat you as equals.

[141] So, make up your minds at once: either to submit before harm comes to you or go to war (in my opinion the better course), be the pretext major or minor. Do not make concessions or act out of fear for our possessions. When neighbors circumvent procedure and start issuing demands, large or small, to their equals, it is always tantamount to the same thing: slavery.

As to matters of war, and the means that both sides have available for it, if you listen to each of my points you will see that we are not in the weaker position. First of all, the Peloponnesians farm their own land and possess neither private nor public wealth. Second, they

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ἀλλήλους ὑπὸ πενίας ἐπιφέρειν. καὶ οἱ τοιοῦτοι οὔτε ναῦς πληροῦν οὔτε πεζᾶς στρατιάς πολλάκις ἐκπέμπειν δύνανται, ἀπὸ τῶν ἰδίων τε ἅμα ἀπόντες καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν αὐτῶν δαπανῶντες καὶ προσέτι καὶ θαλάσσης εἰργόμενοι· αἱ δὲ περιουσίαι τοὺς πολέμους μᾶλλον ἢ αἱ βίαιοι ἐσφοραὶ ἀνέχουσιν. σώμασί τε ἐτοιμότεροι οἱ αὐτουργοὶ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἢ χρήμασι πολεμεῖν, τὸ μὲν πιστὸν ἔχοντες ἐκ τῶν κινδύνων κἂν περιγενέσθαι, τὸ δὲ οὐ βέβαιον μὴ οὐ προαναλώσειν, ἄλλως τε κἂν παρὰ δόξαν, ὅπερ εἰκὸς, ὁ πόλεμος αὐτοῖς μηκύνηται.

Μάχη μὲν γὰρ μιᾷ πρὸς ἅπαντας Ἑλληνικὰς δυνατοὶ Πελοποννήσιοι καὶ οἱ ξύμμαχοι ἀντίσχειν, πολεμεῖν δὲ μὴ πρὸς ὁμοίαν ἀντιπαρασκευὴν ἀδύνατοι, ὅταν μῆτε βουλευτηρίῳ ἐνὶ χρώμενοι παραχρημὰ τι ὀξέως ἐπιτελώσι πάντες τε ἰσόψηφοι ὄντες καὶ οὐχ ὁμόφυλοι τὸ ἐφ' ἑαυτὸν ἕκαστος σπεύδῃ, ἐξ ὧν φιλεῖ μηδὲν ἐπιτελὲς γίγνεσθαι. καὶ γὰρ οἱ μὲν ὡς μάλιστα τιμωρήσασθαί τινα βούλονται, οἱ δὲ ὡς

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have no experience of prolonged wars overseas because their poverty curtails even the conflicts they have with each other. They cannot outfit ships or deploy infantry because of the periods of absence and personal expense that doing so would require. What is more, they are cut off from the sea. State funds are better at sustaining wars than are compulsory private taxes and farmers will be quicker to volunteer their persons than their property for a war effort. They think they can rely on their bodies to prevail in the face of danger but worry that their resources will be exhausted if the war should drag out unexpectedly, as it is likely to do.

The Peloponnesians might be able to hold their own against the rest of the Greeks in a one-off battle, but they cannot carry out a full-scale war unless it is against an enemy that has made comparable counter-preparations. That is because they are incapable of taking swift and

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ἤκιστα τὰ οἰκεῖα φθειραὶ. χρόνιοί τε ξυνιόντες ἐν βραχεί μὲν μορίῳ σκοποῦσί τι τῶν κοινῶν, τῷ δὲ πλέονι τὰ οἰκεῖα πράσσουσι, καὶ ἕκαστος οὐ παρὰ τὴν ἑαυτοῦ ἀμέλειαν οἶεται βλάψειν, μέλειν δέ τινι καὶ ἄλλῳ ὑπὲρ ἑαυτοῦ τι προϊδεῖν, ὥστε τῷ αὐτῷ ὑπὸ ἀπάντων ἰδίᾳ δοξάσματι λανθάνειν τὸ κοινὸν ἀθρόον φθειρόμενον.

[142] Μέγιστον δέ, τῇ τῶν χρημάτων σπάνει κωλύσονται, ὅταν σχολῇ αὐτὰ ποριζόμενοι

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decisive action in their combined assembly: each member of their league has an equal vote and, because it is made up of various peoples, they all have their own agendas to pursue. This is why, as a general rule, they get nothing done. Some of them want most of all to exact vengeance on some enemy or other, while the last thing others want is to see their resources depleted. They rarely meet and when they do they spend very little time on matters of general concern and most of it maneuvering on behalf of their individual interests. Each member thinks that no harm will come from his own indifference, that vigilance is someone else's responsibility. And because that is the approach they all quietly adopt, nobody realizes that the group's common interests are being left to crumble.

[I42] Most importantly, however, they will be hindered by lack of money so long as they

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διαμέλλωσιν· τοῦ δὲ πολέμου οἱ καιροὶ οὐ μενετοί.
Καὶ μὴν οὐδ' ἡ ἐπιτείχισις οὐδὲ τὸ ναυτικὸν
αὐτῶν ἄξιον φοβηθῆναι. τὴν μὲν γὰρ χαλεπὸν καὶ
ἐν εἰρήνῃ πόλιν ἀντίπαλον κατασκευάσασθαι, ἢ
που δὴ ἐν πολεμίᾳ τε καὶ οὐχ ἦσσαν ἐκείνοις
ἡμῶν ἀντεπιτετειχισμένων· φρούριον δ' εἰ
ποιήσονται, τῆς μὲν γῆς βλάπτοιεν ἂν τι μέρος
καταδρομαῖς καὶ αὐτομολίαις, οὐ μέντοι ἰκανόν
γε ἔσται ἐπιτειχίζειν τε κωλύειν ἡμᾶς πλεύσαντας
ἐν τῇ ἐκείνων καί, ἢ περ ἰσχύομεν, ταῖς ναυσὶν
ἀμύνεσθαι.

Πλέον γὰρ ὅμως ἡμεῖς ἔχομεν τοῦ κατὰ
γῆν ἐκ τοῦ ναυτικοῦ ἐμπειρίας ἢ 'κεῖνοι ἐκ τοῦ
κατ' ἡπειρον ἐς τὰ ναυτικά. τὸ δὲ τῆς θαλάσσης
ἐπιστήμονας γενέσθαι οὐ ῥαδίως αὐτοῖς
προσγενήσεται. οὐδὲ γὰρ ὑμεῖς, μελετῶντες αὐτὸ
εὐθύς ἀπὸ τῶν Μηδικῶν, ἐξείργασθέ πω· πῶς δὴ
ἄνδρες γεωργοὶ καὶ οὐ θαλάσσιοι, καὶ προσέτι
οὐδὲ μελετήσαι. ἐασόμενοι διὰ τὸ ὑφ' ἡμῶν
πολλαῖς ναυσὶν αἰεὶ ἐφορμείσθαι, ἄξιον ἂν τι

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are slow to levy it—and the hour of war waits for no man. Neither their effort to fortify our territory nor their naval fleet is worth fearing. Even in peacetime it is no easy task to build fortifications in a hostile city-state and it is certainly no easier in war, especially when you have a formidable enemy also establishing bases within your own borders. If they really are going to set up a garrison here, the incursions and consequent slave desertions might well damage some of our land. That will not, however, be sufficient to prevent us from building our own fortifications in their territory; nor will it keep us from sailing our ships against them, which is our strong suit.

Furthermore, our naval experience is more applicable to land than their land experience is to naval matters, and it will be no easy thing for them to gain mastery over the sea. You yourselves have been striving at that ever since the

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δρῶεν; πρὸς μὲν γὰρ ὀλίγας ἐφορμούσας κἄν
διακινδυνεύσειαν πλήθει τὴν ἀμαθίαν
θρασύνοντες, πολλαῖς δὲ εἰργόμενοι ἡσυχάσουσι,
καὶ ἐν τῷ μὴ μελετῶντι ἀξυνετώτεροι ἔσονται καὶ
δι' αὐτὸ καὶ ὀκνηρότεροι. τὸ δὲ ναυτικὸν τέχνης
ἐστίν, ὥσπερ καὶ ἄλλο τι, καὶ οὐκ ἐνδέχεται, ὅταν
τύχη, ἐκ παρέργου μελετᾶσθαι, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον
μηδὲν ἐκείνῳ πάρεργον ἄλλο γίγνεσθαι.

[143] Εἴ τε καὶ κινήσαντες τῶν Ὀλυμπίασιν ἢ
Δελφοῖς χρημάτων μισθῷ μείζονι πειρῶντο ἡμῶν
ὑπολαβεῖν τοὺς ξένους τῶν ναυτῶν, μὴ ὄντων μὲν

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Persian Wars and have not managed it yet, so how will men who are farmers, not seamen, and who never get any practice at sea because we keep ships stationed against them, be able to accomplish anything of note on that front? Even if they make some desperate attempt against a few moored ships and are foolish enough to take heart at the thought of their superior numbers, the moment they encounter an entire fleet they will be blockaded and unable to maneuver and lack of experience will make them more inept and therefore hesitant. Seamanship is an art, just like anything else, and you cannot merely practice it “on the side” whenever you feel like it. To the contrary, it leaves you no room for side pursuits.

[143] Suppose, moreover, that they were to get their hands on the treasuries of Olympia and Delphi and attempt to poach our mercenary

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ἡμῶν ἀντιπάλων ἐσβάντων αὐτῶν τε καὶ τῶν
μετοίκων δεινὸν ἂν ᾦν· νῦν δὲ τόδε τε ὑπάρχει
καί, ὅπερ κράτιστον, κυβερνήτας ἔχομεν πολίτας
καὶ τὴν ἄλλην ὑπηρεσίαν πλείους καὶ ἀμείνους ἢ
ἅπασα ἢ ἄλλη Ἑλλάς. καὶ ἐπὶ τῷ κινδύνῳ οὐδεὶς
ἂν δέξαιτο τῶν ξένων τὴν τε αὐτοῦ φεύγειν καὶ
μετὰ τῆς ἥσσανος ἅμα ἐλπίδος ὀλίγων ἡμερῶν
ἔνεκα μεγάλου μισθοῦ δόσεως ἐκείνοις
ξυναγωνίζεσθαι.

Καὶ τὰ μὲν Πελοποννησίων ἔμοιγε τοιαῦτα καὶ
παραπλήσια δοκεῖ εἶναι, τὰ δὲ ἡμέτερα τούτων
τε ὦνπερ ἐκείνοις ἐμεμφάμην ἀπηλλάχθαι καὶ
ἄλλα οὐκ ἀπὸ τοῦ ἴσου μεγάλα ἔχειν. ἦν τε ἐπὶ
τὴν χώραν ἡμῶν πεζῆ ἴωσιν, ἡμεῖς ἐπὶ τὴν
ἐκείνων πλευρούμεθα, καὶ οὐκέτι ἐκ τοῦ ὁμοίου
ἔσται Πελοποννήσου τε μέρος τι τμηθῆναι καὶ
τὴν Ἀττικὴν ἅπασαν· οἱ μὲν γὰρ οὐχ ἔξουσιν
ἄλλην ἀντιλαβεῖν ἀμαχεί, ἡμῖν δ' ἔστι γῆ πολλή
καὶ ἐν νήσοις καὶ κατ' ἠπειρον· μέγα γὰρ τὸ τῆς
θαλάσσης κράτος.

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sailors with the prospect of better pay. That strategy would only work if we were unworthy adversaries for lack of citizens and residents to man our ships. But we are in fact strong in that respect, and, most importantly, we can boast more and better qualified native helmsmen and crews than the rest of Greece put together. In any case, none of our mercenaries would, at such a high risk, be willing to abandon his country to fight on the side with worse odds of winning just for a few days' worth of good pay.

That is more or less how I see the Peloponnesians' situation. Our own position, by contrast, seems free of the weaknesses that I have outlined in theirs and has unique advantages besides. If they invade our country on foot, we will invade theirs by sea. It would be worse for them to see even a part of the Peloponnese ravished than for us to have all Attica destroyed.

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Σκέψασθε δέ· εἰ γὰρ ἦμεν νησιῶται, τίνες ἂν ἀληπτότεροι ἦσαν; καὶ νῦν χρὴ ὅτι ἐγγύτατα τούτου διανοηθέντας τὴν μὲν γῆν καὶ οἰκίας ἀφείναι, τῆς δὲ θαλάσσης καὶ ἰπόλεως φυλακὴν ἔχειν, καὶ Πελοποννησίοις ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν ὀργισθέντας πολλῶ πλέοσι μὴ διαμάχεσθαι (κρατήσαντές τε γὰρ αὐθις οὐκ ἐλάσσοσι μαχοῦμεθα καὶ ἦν σφαλῶμεν, τὰ τῶν ξυμμάχων, ὅθεν ἰσχύομεν, προσαπόλλυται· οὐ γὰρ ἡσυχάσουσι μὴ ἰκανῶν ἡμῶν ὄντων ἐπ' αὐτοὺς στρατεύειν), τὴν τε ὀλόφυρσιν μὴ οἰκιῶν καὶ γῆς ποιεῖσθαι, ἀλλὰ τῶν σωματῶν· οὐ γὰρ τάδε τοὺς ἄνδρας, ἀλλ' οἱ ἄνδρες ταῦτα κτῶνται. καὶ εἰ ὥμην πείσειν ὑμᾶς, αὐτοὺς ἂν ἐξελθόντας ἐκέλευον αὐτὰ δηῶσαι καὶ δεῖξαι Πελοποννησίοις ὅτι τούτων γε ἕνεκα οὐχ ὑπακούσεσθε.

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They would be left with no other land except what they might win in battle, while we have plenty more territory on the islands and the mainland. Command of the sea is a powerful thing.

Just think: if we were islanders, it would be nearly impossible to catch us! From here on out that is the mindset that we need to adopt. Forget your land and your houses; think only of guarding sea and city. You must not enter into a fight on land with the Peloponnesians, who greatly outnumber us, out of anger at losing your possessions. If we engage them on land and win, we will have to fight just as many of them again; if we lose we will also lose our allies. They are the source of our strength but will also give us no peace if we are powerless to march against them. Weep not for the loss of homes and property but only for the loss of lives. Homes and property, after all, do not

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[144] Πολλά δὲ καὶ ἄλλα ἔχω ἐς ἐλπίδα τοῦ περιέσεσθαι, ἣν ἐθέλητε ἀρχὴν τε μὴ ἐπικτᾶσθαι ἅμα πολεμοῦντες καὶ κινδύνους αὐθαιρέτους μὴ προστίθεσθαι· μᾶλλον γὰρ πεφόβημαι τὰς οἰκείας ἡμῶν ἀμαρτίας ἢ τὰς τῶν ἐναντίων διανοίας. ἀλλ' ἐκεῖνα μὲν καὶ ἐν ἄλλῳ λόγῳ ἅμα τοῖς ἔργοις δηλωθήσεται· νῦν δὲ τούτοις ἀποκρινάμενοι ἀποπέμψωμεν, Μεγαρέας μὲν ὅτι ἔασο μεν ἀγορᾶ καὶ λιμέσι χρῆσθαι, ἣν καὶ Λακεδαιμόνιοι ξηνηλασίας μὴ ποιῶσι μήτε ἡμῶν μήτε τῶν ἡμετέρων ξυμμάχων (οὔτε γὰρ ἐκεῖνο κωλύει ἐν ταῖς σπονδαῖς οὔτε τόδε), τὰς δὲ πόλεις ὅτι αὐτονόμους ἀφήσομεν, εἰ καὶ αὐτονόμους ἔχοντες

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acquire people; people acquire them. In fact, if I thought that I could persuade you, I would urge you to go out and destroy all of those things yourselves if only to show the Peloponnesians that you will not relent merely out of concern for what you own.

[I44] I have many other reasons to be hopeful that we will prevail, provided that you do not mix war with attempts to expand the empire or contrive additional dangers for yourselves: I fear our own mistakes more than the enemy's schemes. Those are points that I will discuss in another speech when the time is right. For now, we must send the emissaries away with the following message: we will restore access to our markets and harbors to Megara only when the Spartans have ended their alien acts and quit expelling our citizens and allies (nothing in the treaty precludes any of these things).

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ἐσπεισάμεθα καὶ ὅταν κάκεινοι ταῖς ἑαυτῶν
ἀποδώσι πόλεσι μὴ σφίσιν τοῖς Λακεδαιμονίοις
ἐπιτηδεῖως αὐτονομεῖσθαι, ἀλλ' αὐτοῖς ἐκάστοις
ὡς βούλονται· δίκας τε ὅτι ἐθέλομεν δοῦναι
κατὰ τὰς ξυνηθείας, πολέμου δὲ οὐκ ἄρξομεν,
ἀρχομένους δὲ ἀμυνόμεθα. ταῦτα γὰρ δίκαια
καὶ πρέποντα ἅμα τῆδε τῇ πόλει ἀποκρίνασθαι.

Εἰδέναι δὲ χρὴ ὅτι ἀνάγκη πολεμεῖν (ἦν δὲ
ἐκούσιοι μᾶλλον δεχόμεθα, ἤσσον ἐγκεισομένους
τοὺς ἐναντίους ἔξομεν), ἔκ τε τῶν μεγίστων
κινδύνων ὅτι καὶ πόλει καὶ ἰδιώτῃ μέγιστα τιμαὶ
περιγίγνονται. οἱ γοῦν πατέρες ἡμῶν ὑποστάντες
Μήδους καὶ οὐκ ἀπὸ τοσῶνδε ὀρμώμενοι, ἀλλὰ
καὶ τὰ ὑπάρχοντα ἐκλιπόντες, γνώμη τε πλέονι ἢ
τύχῃ καὶ τόλμῃ μείζονι ἢ δυνάμει τόν τε βάρβαρον

ON JUSTIFYING A WAR

And we will let the Greek city-states be independent, provided that they were independent when we swore the treaty, once the Spartans have restored independence to their own cities and allowed them to ally with whomever they wish. Tell them we are happy to follow the procedures outlined in the agreement and will not start a war but will indeed fight if they initiate one. This is a just and fitting answer for our city to make.

We need to accept that war is necessary, and if we are willing to face that fact then we will find our enemies less resolute. We should further acknowledge that, for cities and individuals alike, the reward of immense danger is immense honor. Our fathers, as you know, set out to resist the Persians not only with lesser resources but even once those resources had been exhausted. It was with acumen rather than luck,

ON JUSTIFYING A WAR

ἀπεώσαντο καὶ ἐς τάδε προήγαγον αὐτά· ὦν οὐ
χρὴ λείπεσθαι, ἀλλὰ τοὺς τε ἐχθροὺς παντὶ τρόπῳ
ἀμύνεσθαι καὶ τοῖς ἐπιγιγνομένοις πειράσθαι
αὐτὰ μὴ ἐλάσσω παραδοῦναι.

ON JUSTIFYING A WAR

by daring rather than strength, that they drove back the barbarian force and established the state that we have today. We must not fail to live up to their example but make every attempt to defeat our enemies and leave no lesser a country to our own descendants.