### The Inner Athena

One day toward the end of the year 432 BC, the citizens of Athens received some very disturbing news: representatives from the city-state of Sparta had arrived in town and presented to the Athenian governing council new terms of peace. If Athens did not agree to these terms, then Sparta would declare war. Sparta was Athens’s archenemy and in many ways its polar opposite. Athens led a league of democratic states in the region, while Sparta led a confederation of oligarchies, known as the Peloponnesians. Athens depended on its navy and on its wealth—it was the preeminent commercial power in the Mediterranean. Sparta depended on its army. It was a total military state. Up until then, the two powers had largely avoided a direct war because the consequences could be devastating—not only could the defeated side lose its influence in the region, but its whole way of life could be put in jeopardy—certainly for Athens its democracy and its wealth. Now, however, war seemed inevitable and a sense of impending doom quickly settled on the city.

A few days later, the Athenian Assembly met on the Pnyx Hill overlooking the Acropolis to debate the Spartan ultimatum and decide what to do. The Assembly was open to all male citizens, and on that day close to ten thousand of them crowded on the hill to participate in the debate. The hawks among them were in a state of great agitation— Athens should seize the initiative and attack Sparta first, they said.

Others reminded them that in a land battle the Spartan forces were nearly unbeatable. Attacking Sparta in this way would play straight into their hands. The doves were all in favor of accepting the peace terms, but as many pointed out, that would only show fear and embolden the Spartans. It would only give them more time to enlarge their army. Back and forth went the debate, with emotions getting heated, people shouting, and no satisfactory solution in sight.

Then toward the end of the afternoon, the crowd suddenly grew quiet as a familiar figure stepped forward to address the Assembly. This was Pericles, the elder statesman of Athenian politics, now over sixty years old. Pericles was beloved, and his opinion would matter more than anyone’s, but despite the Athenians’ respect for him, they found him a very peculiar leader—more of a philosopher than a politician. To those old enough to remember the start of his career, it was truly surprising how powerful and successful he had become. He did nothing the usual way.

In the earliest years of their democracy, before Pericles had appeared on the scene, the Athenians had preferred a certain personality type in their leaders—men who could give an inspiring, persuasive speech and had a flair for drama. On the battlefield these men were risk takers; they often pushed for military campaigns that they could lead, giving them a chance to gain glory and attention. They advanced their careers by representing some faction in the Assembly— landowners, soldiers, aristocrats—and doing everything they could to further its interests. This led to highly divisive politics. Leaders would rise and fall in cycles of a few years, but the Athenians were fine with this; they mistrusted anyone who lasted long in power.

Then Pericles entered public life around 463 BC, and Athenian politics would never be the same. His first move was the most unusual of all. Although he came from an illustrious aristocratic family, he allied himself with the growing lower and middle classes of the city— farmers, oarsmen in the navy, the craftsmen who were the pride of Athens. He worked to increase their voice in the Assembly and give them greater power in the democracy. This was not some small faction he now led but the majority of Athenian citizens. It would seem impossible to control such a large, unruly mob of men, with their varied interests, but he was so fervent in increasing their power that he slowly gained their trust and backing.

As his influence grew, he started to assert himself in the Assembly and alter its policies. He argued against expanding Athens’s democratic empire. He feared the Athenians would overreach and lose control. He worked to consolidate the empire and strengthen existing alliances. When it came to war and to serving as a general, he strove to limit campaigns and to win through maneuvers, with minimal loss of lives. To many this seemed unheroic, but as these policies took effect, the city entered a period of unprecedented prosperity. There were no more needless wars to drain the coffers, and the empire was functioning more smoothly than ever.

What Pericles did with the growing surplus of money startled and amazed the citizenry: instead of using it to buy political favors, he initiated a massive public building project in Athens. He commissioned temples, theaters, and concert halls, putting all of the Athenian craftsmen to work. Everywhere one looked, the city was becoming more sublimely beautiful. He favored a form of architecture that reflected his personal aesthetics—ordered, highly geometric, monumental yet soothing to the eye. His greatest commission was that of the Parthenon, with its enormous forty-foot statue of Athena.

Athena was the guiding spirit of Athens, the goddess of wisdom and practical intelligence. She represented all of the values Pericles wanted to promote. Singlehandedly Pericles had transformed the look and spirit of Athens, and it entered a golden age in all of the arts and sciences.

What was perhaps the strangest quality of Pericles was his speaking style—restrained and dignified. He did not go in for the usual flights of rhetoric. Instead, he worked to convince an audience through airtight

arguments. This would make people listen closely, as they followed the interesting course of his logic. The style was compelling and calming.

Unlike any of the other leaders, Pericles remained in power year after year, decade after decade, putting his total stamp on the city in his quiet, unobtrusive way. He had his enemies. This was inevitable. He had stayed in power so long that many accused him of being a secret dictator. He was suspected of being an atheist, a man who scoffed at all traditions. That would explain why he was so peculiar. But nobody could argue against the results of his leadership.

And so now, as he began to address the Assembly that afternoon, his opinion on war with Sparta would carry the most weight, and a hush came over the crowd as they anxiously waited to hear his argument.

“Athenians,” he began, “my views are the same as ever: I am against making any concessions to the Peloponnesians, even though I am aware that the enthusiastic state of mind in which people are persuaded to enter upon a war is not retained when it comes to action, and that people’s minds are altered by the course of events.” Differences between Athens and Sparta were supposed to be settled through neutral arbitrators, he reminded them. It would set a dangerous precedent if they gave in to the Spartans’ unilateral demands. Where would it end? Yes, a direct land battle with Sparta would be suicide. What he proposed instead was a completely novel form of warfare—limited and defensive.

He would bring within the walls of Athens all those living in the area. Let the Spartans come and try to lure us into fighting, he said; let them lay waste to our lands. We will not take the bait; we will not fight them on land. With our access to the sea we will keep the city supplied. We will use our navy to raid their coastal towns. As time goes on, they will grow frustrated by the lack of battle. Having to feed and supply their standing army, they will run out of money. Their allies will bicker among themselves. The war party within Sparta will be discredited and a real lasting peace will be agreed upon, all with minimal expenditure of lives and money on our part.

“I could give you many other reasons,” he concluded, “why you should feel confident in ultimate victory, if only you will make up your minds not to add to the empire while the war is in progress, and not to go out of your way to involve yourselves in new perils. What I fear is not the enemy’s strategy but our own mistakes.” The novelty of what he was proposing aroused great debate. Neither hawks nor doves were satisfied with his plan, but in the end, his reputation for wisdom carried the day and his strategy was approved. Several months later the fateful war began.

In the beginning, all did not proceed as Pericles had envisioned. The Spartans and their allies did not grow frustrated as the war dragged on, but only bolder. The Athenians were the ones to become discouraged, seeing their lands destroyed without retaliation. But Pericles believed his plan could not fail as long as the Athenians remained patient. Then, in the second year of the war, an unexpected disaster upended everything: a powerful plague entered the city; with so many people packed within the walls it spread quickly, killing over one third of the citizenry and decimating the ranks of the army. Pericles himself caught the disease, and as he lay dying he witnessed the ultimate nightmare: all that he had done for Athens over so many decades seemed to unravel at once, the people descending into group delirium until it was every man for himself. If he had survived, he almost certainly would have found a way to calm the Athenians down and broker an acceptable peace with Sparta, or adjust his defensive strategy, but now it was too late.

Strangely enough, the Athenians did not mourn for their leader.

They blamed him for the plague and railed at the ineffectiveness of his strategy. They were not in a mood anymore for patience or restraint.

He had outlived his time, and his ideas were now seen as the tired reactions of an old man. Their love of Pericles had turned to hate. With him no longer there, the factions returned with a vengeance. The war party became popular. The party fed off the people’s growing bitterness toward the Spartans, who had used the plague to advance their positions. The hawks promised they would regain the initiative and crush the Spartans with an offensive strategy. For many Athenians, such words came as a great relief, a release of pent-up emotions.

As the city slowly recovered from the plague, the Athenians managed to gain the upper hand, and the Spartans sued for peace. Wanting to completely defeat their enemy, the Athenians pressed their advantage, only to find the Spartans recover and turn the tables. Back and forth it went, year after year. The violence and bitterness on both sides increased. At one point Athens attacked the island of Melos, a Spartan ally, and when the Melians surrendered, the Athenians voted

to kill all of their men and sell the women and children into slavery. Nothing remotely like this had ever happened under Pericles.

Then, after so many years of a war without end, in 415 BC several Athenian leaders had an interesting idea about how to deliver the fatal blow. The city-state of Syracuse was the rising power on the island of Sicily. Syracuse was a critical ally of the Spartans, supplying them with much-needed resources. If the Athenians, with their great navy, could launch an expedition and take control of Syracuse, they would gain two advantages: it would add to their empire, and it would deprive Sparta of the resources it needed to continue the war. The Assembly voted to send sixty ships with an appropriate-sized army on board to accomplish this goal.

One of the commanders assigned to this expedition, Nicias, had great doubts as to the wisdom of this plan. He feared the Athenians were underestimating the strength of Syracuse. He laid out all of the possible negative scenarios; only a much larger expedition could ensure victory. He wanted to squelch the plan, but his argument had the opposite effect. If a larger expedition was necessary, then that was what they would send—one hundred ships and double the number of soldiers. The Athenians smelled victory in this strategy and nothing would deter them.

In the ensuing days, Athenians of all ages could be seen in the streets drawing maps of Sicily, dreaming of the riches that would pour into Athens and the final humiliation of the Spartans. The day of the launching of the ships turned into a great holiday and the most awe- inspiring spectacle they had ever seen—an enormous armada filling the harbor as far as the eye could see, the ships beautifully decorated, the soldiers, glistening in their armor, crowding the decks. It was a dazzling display of the wealth and power of Athens.

As the months went by, the Athenians desperately sought news of the expedition. At one point, through the sheer size of the force, it seemed that Athens had gained the advantage and had laid siege to Syracuse. But at the last moment, reinforcements arrived from Sparta, and now the Athenians were on the defensive. Nicias sent off a letter to the Assembly describing this negative turn of events. He recommended either giving up and returning to Athens, or the sending of reinforcements right away. Unwilling to believe in the possibility of defeat, the Athenians voted to send reinforcements—a second armada

of ships almost as large as the first. In the months after this, the Athenians’ anxiety reached new heights—for now the stakes had been doubled and Athens could not afford to lose.

One day a barber in Athens’s port town of Piraeus heard a rumor from a customer that the Athenian expedition, every ship and almost every man, had been wiped out in battle. The rumor quickly spread to Athens. It was hard to believe, but slowly panic set in. A week later the rumor was confirmed and Athens seemed doomed, drained of money, ships, and men.

Miraculously, the Athenians managed to hold on. But over the next few years, severely imbalanced by the losses in Sicily, they staggered from one reeling blow to another, until finally in 405 BC Athens suffered its final loss and was forced to agree to the harsh terms of peace imposed by Sparta. Their years of glory, their great democratic empire, the Periclean golden age were now and forever over. The man who had curbed their most dangerous emotions—aggression, greed, hubris, selfishness—had been gone from the scene for too long, his wisdom long forgotten.