

Chapter 8: The Greek Adventure: 8-6 The Peloponnesian War  
Book Title: World Civilizations  
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## 8-6 The Peloponnesian War

The Greeks' victory in the Persian Wars did not lead to harmony among the Greek poleis, however. Athens used its new prestige and growing wealth to form a group of unwilling satellites (the Delian League) among the nearby poleis. The democrats, led by the great orator [Pericles \(\(PAYR-rih-clees\) The Athenian democratic leader and spokesman who died in the midst of the Peloponnesian War in the fifth century B.C.E.\)](#) (PAYR-rih-clees), were now in command and were responsible for bringing Athens into conflict with Corinth, one of Sparta's Peloponnesian allies. Corinth asked Sparta for help, and when the Spartans warned the Athenians to back down, Pericles responded with war. Athens had embarked on an imperial adventure, with the goal of extending its authority over not only Greece but the surrounding coasts as well. It turned out to be a fatal error, although Pericles did not live to realize it.

With its strong navy, Athens believed that it could hold off the land-based Spartans indefinitely while building up its alliances. These allied forces would then be able to challenge the Spartan army on Sparta's home territory.

For most of its duration, the [Peloponnesian War \(\(pehl-luh-puh-NEE-zhan\) The great civil war between Athens and Sparta and their respective allies in ancient Greece; fought between 429 and 404 B.C.E. and eventually won by Sparta.\)](#) (pehl-luh-puh-NEE-zhan; 431–404 B.C.E.) was an intermittently fought deadlock. Neither side was able to deal the other an effective blow, and long truces allowed the combatants to regain their strength. After Pericles died in 429, the Athenian democrats argued among themselves while the antidemocratic forces within the polis gained strength. An ambitious attempt to weaken Sparta by attacking its allies on Sicily went astray and turned into disaster. Finally, in 404, the Spartans obtained effective naval aid (from Persia!) and defeated the Athenians at sea. After that, it was a simple matter for their large army to lay siege to Athens and starve it into surrender.

The Peloponnesian War ended with a technical victory for Sparta, but actually it was a loss for all concerned. The Spartan leadership was not inclined or equipped to lead the squabbling Greeks into an effective central government. Defeated Athens was torn between the discredited democrats and the conservatives favored by Sparta.

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