

Pericles could not ignore the discontent. He evidently needed to head off the growing power of the hawks. So, "because he wanted to cure these ills and also because he wanted to do some harm to the enemy" (Plutarch, *Pericles* 35.1), he himself led an expedition against the Peloponnesus in May of 430 with a fleet of 150 warships as well as transports carrying 4,000 infantry and 300 cavalry. This was a very large force, and its mission was to do more damage than had been inflicted the previous year. "When they arrived at Epidaurus in the Peloponnesus they ravaged most of the land. And when they made an attack on the city they arrived at the hope of taking it, but they were not successful. Leaving Epidaurus, they ravaged most of the land of Troezen, Halieis and Hermione, which are all on the coast of the Peloponnesus. From there they sailed to Prasiae, a coastal town of Laconia; they ravaged its land, took the town, and sacked it. When they had done this they returned home." (Thucydides 2.56.4-6) This campaign was not a change in strategy but was rather intended to speed up the "education" of the Peloponnesians. Nevertheless, Pericles was compelled to this new level of aggression because his strategy was not working.

Even before the expedition left Athens, Archidamus led the Peloponnesian army back into Attica to continue the devastation begun the previous year. This time he was merciless, sparing no part of Attica. He despoiled the great plain before the city of Athens, then moved on to the coastal regions, both east and west. By now he knew there was no point in holding the land of Attica hostage. His hopes for a quick and painless settlement had also faded. The army remained in Attica for forty days, their longest stay of the war, pillaging the whole country and leaving only when their supplies ran out. Instead of becoming more ready to make peace as their strategic expectations were refuted, both sides became more bitter and determined and increased their warlike efforts.

Then disaster struck the Athenians. A plague broke out and raged with unprecedented ferocity during the years 430 and 429 and, after a hiatus, broke out again in 427. Before it had run its course it had killed 4,400 infantrymen, 300 cavalry, and an untold number of men from the lower classes, wiping out perhaps one-third of the

population. Nothing like it had ever been seen or heard of; modern scholars and medical experts continue to debate its identity. It has been called everything from bubonic and pneumonic plague to measles and, most recently, toxic shock syndrome. Whatever it was, with the entire population of Attica crowded into the walled area it was especially deadly. The plague had a crushing effect on Athenian morale, and it severely undermined Pericles' position, popular confidence in his strategy, and the continuation of a war that was blamed on his policy.

The Greeks had always thought of plagues as divine punishments for human actions that angered the gods. Such was the plague sent by Apollo to avenge Agamemnon's insult to his priest at the beginning of Homer's *Iliad*. These punishments were often connected with the failure to heed divine oracles and with acts of religious pollution. With the onset of the plague at Athens, the older men recalled an oracle from the past that said, "A Dorian war will come and a plague with it." (Thucydides 2.54.3) That implicitly cast blame on Pericles, the firmest advocate of war against the Dorian Peloponnesians and a man known for associating with religious skeptics. Many others recalled the answer of the oracle at Delphi when the Spartans had asked whether they should embark on the war against the Athenians. The god replied that "if they made war with all their might they would win, and he himself would help them." (2.54.4) Pericles had ignored the implications of that divine message, and believers now connected his manifest impiety with the Athenian suffering, pointing out that the plague had not entered the Peloponnesus. No doubt many Athenians also remembered the Spartan demand that they drive out the curse, and blamed their misery on the Alcmaeonids connected to their leader.

Political opponents, probably from both sides, lost no time in blaming Pericles for causing the war and for imposing a strategy that had intensified the effects of the plague. They argued that the plague was caused by crowding the people together in unsalubrious conditions in the heat of summer, without work to keep them busy or exercise to keep them healthy. He allowed them to be penned like cattle to fill each other up with corruption, providing no change or rest. (Plutarch, *Pericles* 34.3–4)

At last, the Athenians turned sharply against him and his policies. The withdrawal of the Spartan army ended the immediate military emergency, and, with his popularity eroded, Pericles could no longer prevent the meeting of an assembly. Contrary to his wishes,

the Athenian assembly sent ambassadors to ask for peace. The plague appears to have sapped the power of all those who favored the war, Cleon's "hawks" as well as Pericles. The antiwar faction had come to power and at once tried to negotiate an end to the conflict.

We are not told what terms were discussed, but evidently even those who wanted peace thought them too harsh, for the assembly rejected them and continued the war. The Spartans probably insisted on the terms of their original ultimatum: that Athens should free the Greeks—that is, abandon its empire. Sparta's rebuff struck a blow from which the peace faction at Athens did not recover for almost a decade. Their attempt to negotiate at a time of weakness proved that Pericles had been right in his main point: The Athenians could achieve no satisfactory peace until they had convinced the Spartans that Athens would not yield and could not be defeated. Some appear not to have given up hope of renewing negotiations, but the influence and eloquence of Pericles stood in their way. Frustrated by the failure of their policy, they launched a personal attack on Pericles, and he rose to defend himself in his last reported speech.

At no time since his rise to leadership had his popularity and influence been at a lower ebb; but his problem was simplified by the character of his leadership. He had always told the people the truth, even while pursuing disputed and unpopular policies. No one could claim that he had not presented the issues clearly or honestly or that they had not been fully and freely debated. He may have underrated the fierceness of Sparta's anger and determination, but the people had had the opportunity to dispute his estimate when they voted on his policies. "If you were persuaded by me to go to war because you thought I had the qualities necessary for leadership at least moderately more than other men," he said to them, "it is not right that I should now be blamed for doing wrong." (Thucydides 2.60.7)

Aided by Spartan intrusions, the Athenians were forced to