

# Karel Hujer: Athens and Sparta, 1976

"We practice no periodical deportations, nor do we prevent our visitors from observing or discovering what an enemy might usefully apply to his own purposes. . . . We are alone among mankind in doing men benefits, not on calculations of self-interest, but in the fearless confidence of freedom. . . ." This excerpt from the famous oration of Pericles, the great leader of Athenian democracy twenty-four centuries ago, might well be considered a recent statement of an American Bicentennial address. It was given on the occasion of a funeral oration commemorating the first victims in the war with totalitarian Sparta, with the entire population of the city state gathered. In our chronology the year was 430 B.C. It was half a century after Sparta and Athens side by side had staved off an avalanche of Persian invasion. Carefree Athens and its empire then experienced the unparalleled glory of a golden age of highly developed art and philosophy, when the best literature, art, sciences and philosophy flourished, which still nourishes the thought of today. Think of the galaxy of incomparable minds including Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and many others who belonged to that period.

Pericles' oration, delivered perhaps from the traditional Aeropagus at the foot of Acropolis, in the second of the 20 years of fratricidal war of Athens with Sparta, is considered by Sir Richard Livingstone the greatest speech in the history of Western civilization. This statement of Athenian democracy, aeons ago, contrasted the Athenian ideal with Spartan dictatorial oligarchy. Who was this man whose address survived these many centuries and was recorded by his contemporary Thucydides?

This statesman, Pericles, was a friend of the great rational philosopher, Anaxagoras, and sculptor, Phidias, and he displayed the highest gift of a democratic politician—courage. He led the people instead of being led by

them. He never sought power by improper means nor did he flatter the masses. Rather, he could afford to anger them by contradiction.

Once again we follow the pathetic aspect of our present election campaigns, unsobered by the precarious state of the world, and we ponder over the extremely rare ancient leadership of Pericles. Where can we seek these qualities in recent decades, at various election campaigns? Why are we not truly united in an awareness of the ominous state of encroaching Soviet Communist imperialism which, like a monstrous octopus, sneaks into various global recesses under the enticing slogan of liberating the proletarians of the world? The fact of so many candidates reminds us of the position of the ancient carefree and prosperous mercantile republic of Athens against stringent, cruel, totalitarian Sparta. When Athens lost the leadership of Pericles by his premature death during the plague in the early stage of the tragic war, inability to reach an agreement in the swarm of power-seeking politicians, the 20 years of Peloponnesian war ended with Athens prostrate in ruins.

The conflict between what we today would call two little towns, Athens and Sparta, the then city states, separated by a distance smaller than Washington is from New York, is a provincial incident as contrasted with our present globe-encircling diplomatic intrigues. The Peloponnesian war was described by Thucydides in the scientific spirit of the 20th Century. Into the Thucydides exposition of the ancient tragedy within a very small area between the Ionian and Aegean seas we can now read the global menace encroaching upon our carefree democracy and its unparalleled prosperity. The role of Sparta is now taken by the titan, the Soviet Union, standing like ancient Sparta with its system on a constant war footing, as against today's American open society, the small city state of Athens.

In his third and final volume of Gulag Archipelago Solzhenitsyn warns the open society of the West that in "the Soviet system the entire regime rests on brutal force and thus it recognizes only force. There has never been on this entire planet and all of history a regime more cruel, more bloody and at the same time more diabolically clever." It appears that our Jeffersonian and Lincolnian republic can, under these circumstances in this Bicentennial period, expect only another shadow of Valley Forge.

The period from 480 to 400 B.C. in all ways belongs to the greatest ages in the history of civilization but it headed toward decay by its own hand. So are we in a similar position today since the end of the century of peace, 1815-1914. The guilt of both world wars has disrupted the political balance, and in a most strenuous way we will reap the Nemesis of the crime against humanity.

Even if Soviet imperialism, with its pretension of proletarian liberation, for a time overtakes the pleasure seeking, open Western society, it, in turn, like the victorious allies of both world wars, will not solve the inevitable ills of our technological over-organized greenhouse civilization. Perhaps it is fitting to remind ourselves of Walter Lippman's significant statement: "To the debacle of liberal science can be traced the moral schism of the modern world which so tragically divides enlightened men." Thus, those who will still remain on the shambles and ruins of decrepit humanity will be bound to seek, truly and honestly in face of God, the application of those divine qualities that represent the only cement of society, of men ready to sacrifice everything for enduring peace and understanding.

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