

The Peloponnesian Wars Between 431 BCE and 404 BCE, Athens, Sparta and the whole of the Greek world fought a kind of civilization-wide “Greek World War.” Pericles himself led Athens into the first of a series of disastrous wars against Sparta in 431 BCE. At the start of the First Peloponnesian War, Athens had the largest navy in Greece, and large annual revenues of silver from the tribute payments from her empire and from silver mines in Attica. The city had already built up a huge reserve of gold and silver. Athens seemed to have all the advantages, and Pericles was convinced that the war could be won in a couple of years; Sparta would quickly give up. But it did not turn out that way. The Peloponnesian Wars dragged on for almost 30 years. Two years after it began, a devastating plague hit Athens, killing thousands of people, including Pericles himself. Our main historical source for the long and devastating Peloponnesian Wars is the historian Thucydides, an Athenian aristocrat like Pericles himself. Thucydides survived the plague and even served as a general against Sparta. After Athens lost a battle under his leadership, Thucydides was exiled from his homeland and then traveled around Greece gathering sources for his great account of the war which, he said, was the most important event of his lifetime. Thucydides lived to see the end of the second Peloponnesian war in 404 BCE, but was not able to complete his history before his death. After thirty years of war, Athens was devastated, humbled and defeated. It had lost its empire. Thucydides’ history of the war was a form of ancient “journalism” or “current affairs” page-turner. But he also saw the war as a kind of “morality play.” Athens was guilty of hubris or “arrogance,” and pride led to her fall. And who was ultimately was to blame for all this? According to Thucydides it was not the wise and noble Pericles who had led the Athenians into the war— but democracy itself! Demagogues and Anti-Democrats According to Thucydides, it was only Pericles who managed to keep the destructive power of the people at bay. Under his leadership, the mob was controlled and guided. After his death, the popular mob in the assembly was misled by demagogues. The term Demagogue means “leader of the people,” but in this case demos meant mob. Demagogues were rabble rousers who brought out the worst instincts of the poor masses. They whipped up the worst prejudices of an angry mob with disastrous results. According to the aristocrats, it was these demagogues, and the stupid masses of the common people through the democratic system that brought Athens to its knees. In the later stages of the Peloponnesian War and in the years following it, there were a series of political revolutions in which democracy was repeatedly overthrown, suppressed by Sparta and then restored on a number of occasions. 35 The Athenian populace suffered from horrible political violence as competing factions killed hundreds of their political enemies. Severe economic hardship and political uncertainty wrecked havoc on the war-weary population. Ultimately, democracy was restored but there was much bitterness on both sides. According to the aristocrats, including a prominent group of philosophers and intellectuals led by the aristocratic thinker Plato, democracy itself was the chief cause of Athens’ problems. Plato was also bitter over the death of his beloved mentor the philosopher Socrates. Socrates was a commoner and a loyal citizen of Athens, but his tendency to question everything and everyone in Athens as a self-appointed intellectual gadfly did not sit well with an Athenian population in a dark mood after the Peloponnesian war, the loss of its Empire, and the political upheavals of recent years. Socrates was brought up on charges for corrupting the youth of Athens and for not believing in the city’s gods. A jury of citizens found him guilty and he was condemned

to death by drinking poison. Plato blamed Socrates' death on the people of Athens and democracy itself. The Legacy of Athenian Democracy Democracy in Athens lasted for less than 200 years. In 336 BCE, all of Greece came under the dominion of king Alexander the Great of Macedon. For the next 2000 years, the birthplace of democracy was ruled by a series of foreign kings and emperors: The Macedonians, Romans, Byzantines, and Ottoman Turks. As late as the 1970s CE, when Greece had achieved independence as a modern nation not ruled by foreigners, it was still not a democracy. Finally, in 1975, Greece, with Athens as its capital once again became a democracy. Outside of Greece, democracy is also a relatively recent phenomenon. The first modern democracies did not begin to appear until the late 1700s CE. The Founding Fathers of the United States did not look to Athenian democracy but the aristocratic and oligarchic Roman Republic for inspiration. Like Thucydides and Plato, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and Benjamin Franklin feared and distrusted the rule of the common people: "A democracy is nothing more than mob rule, where 51% of the people may take away the rights of the other 49%." – Thomas Jefferson "Democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. There was never a democracy yet that did not commit suicide." – John Adams Modern democracies in the western nations like the United States, Great Britain and France evolved gradually during the 1800s and 1900s. When the United States Constitution was ratified in 1789, along with the Bill of Rights, it guaranteed legal equality and political representation only to free white men. Slavery existed until the end of the Civil War in 1865. Women only gained the universal right to vote after the adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment to the 36 Constitution in 1920. Full legal equality for African Americans was not achieved until the 1960s. Around the world today, democracy has only made great headway in the past twenty years. In 1972, only 40 nations on earth could be considered true democracies. Today 123 countries are democracies, and the number continues to increase. Yet dozens of nations are highly undemocratic. Some nations are also "illiberal democracies." These partial or pseudo-democracies are not fully or truly democratic. In some countries, democracy has been on the retreat in recent years as authoritarian rulers systematically roll back political rights and freedoms. In these sham democracies, popularly elected dictators hold true power and basic constitutional rights and the rule of law are absent. This form of pseudodemocracy has been described as "one man, one vote, one time." Despite such limitations and setbacks, modern .democracy has expanded beyond the wildest dreams of the ancient Athenians