The citizens of Athens, Greece, held the first funeral for those who died in the Peloponnesian War. Pericles has been elected to speak. After the appropriate burial customs have been completed, Pericles addresses the crowd of Athenians. This event was recorded by Thucydides.

Directions  Read the selection below and answer the questions that follow. Use another sheet of paper if necessary.

from Pericles’ Funeral Oration
By Thucydides

... “M”ost of those who have stood in this place before me have commended the institution of this closing address. It is good, they have felt, that solemn words should be spoken over our fallen soldiers. I do not share this feeling. Acts deserve acts, not words, in their honor, and to me a burial at the State’s charges, such as you see before you, would have appeared sufficient. . . .

“My first words shall be for our ancestors; for it is both just to them and seemly that on occasion such as this our tribute of memory should be paid them. For, dwelling always in this country, generation after generation in unchanging and unbroken succession, they have handed it down to us free by their exertions. So they are worthy of our praises; and still more so are our fathers. For they enlarged the ancestral patrimony [inheritance] by the Empire which we hold today . . .

“For our government is not copied from those of our neighbors: we are an example to them rather than they to us. Our constitution is named a democracy, because it is in the hands not of the few but of the many. But our laws secure equal justice for all in their private disputes, and our public opinion welcomes and honors talent in every branch of achievement, not for any sectional reason but on grounds of excellence alone. . . .

“Yet ours is no work-a-day city only. No other provides so many recreations for the spirit—contests and sacrifices all the year round, and beauty in our public buildings to cheer the heart and delight the eye day by day. Moreover, the city is so large and powerful that all the wealth of all the world flows into her. . . .

“Our military training is too different from our opponents’. The gates of our city are flung open to the world. 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. For our trust is not in the devices of material equipment, but in our own good spirits for battle . . .

"We are lovers of beauty without extravagance, and lovers of wisdom without unmanliness. Wealth to us is not mere material for vainglory but an opportunity for achievement; and poverty we think it no disgrace to acknowledge but a real degradation to make no effort to overcome . . .

"In a word I claim that our city as a whole is an education to Greece, and that her members yield to none, man by man, for independence of spirit, many-sidedness of attainment, and complete self-reliance in limbs and brain."


Understanding the Literature

1. Pericles states the dead do not deserve words in their honor. What does he say would be more appropriate?

2. What does Pericles say about ancestors?

3. Critical Thinking What does Pericles mean when he says "...our city as a whole is an education to Greece..."?