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Perikles, the creator of the reputation of Classical Athens was an enigmatic figure. This book traces Perikles' development from a somewhat hesitant, though left-leaning politician, to a mature statesman fully committed to expanding Athens' maritime empire and using the material benefits of that empire to improve the ordinary lives of Athenian citizens.

Podlecki examines Perikles' actions and interactions with a large and varied circle of friends, acquaintances, and political adversaries and shows how his circle of friends advised and influenced his development as a leader. Perikles, the 'first citizen', as Thucydides termed him, was a man characterised by a subtle versatility and tenacity of purpose. Of paramount importance was that Athenians be made to appreciate their superiority, and also develop a willingness to assert it, even if that meant war with the Spartans and their allies. Podlecki examines the wealth of sources and documentation on Perikles to provide a lucid account of the achievements of the man, which is both comprehensive and eminently readable.