

ORATION,

PRONOUNCED

THE FOURTH OF JULY, 1808,

BEFORE A COMPANY OF

YOUNG AND MIDDLE AGED CITIZENS OF PORTSMOUTH,

ON BOARD SLOOP WILLIAM,

OFF PORTSMOUTH HARBOR.

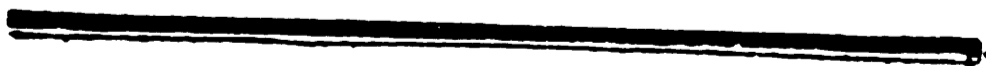


BY JOHN BILLINGS.



WHERE LIBERTY DWELLS THERE IS MY COUNTRY.

FRANKLIN.



Portsmouth.

S, SEWALL, PRINTER, COURT-STREET.

1808.

ORATION.

FELLOW CITIZENS AND FREEMEN,

YOU, my friends, being solicitous for the commemoration of the anniversary of our national independence, and that it should not be passed over in silence, even on a *water excursion*, have chosen me, as a suitable person to pronounce an oration ; but for which I am sufficiently aware of my inadequacy to the task. The few cursory remarks which may be offered, I am persuaded can by no means be suitable to rank with the able productions in which the subject has been treated by men of refined abilities ; therefore shall only recur to a few particulars as applied to that liberty by which you all appear to be animated. Any thing of a very conspicuous nature can by no means reasonably be expected from me, therefore, for the better illustration of our Independence shall make some references to the productions of men, who have by education and experience written on the subject ; and likewise shall make some few comments on other matters which appear to accord with the present circumstances of our country. As respects you, my friends, I feel sensible that these my feeble efforts will be received in the best manner, and meeting with *your* approbation, my feelings cannot be injured by the animadversions of any one.

To revert to that state of dark despondency "which tried men's souls" would be a pleasing theme ; but the necessary contraction I must observe, obliges me to forbear.

We convene, Americans, to commemorate an eventual, an all important day—A DAY—which emancipated more than three millions of human beings!—That great event is at this time, and will be in future ages—commemorated, not only by the happy subjects of its benefits; but by the great and good in all countries; by the philanthropist of every nation. Where is the man, who does not feel ennobled at a display of human energies? Where the friend of humanity, who does not triumph at the success of those exertions, which tend to the enlargement, and the happiness of his species? Alas! there are men, insensible to the charms of Liberty! While we, the sons of freedom, hail this auspicious era, as the dawn of that morning, which gave hope to the oppressed of the earth;—There are many, the votaries of ambition; the minions of power; Tyrants—and Slaves!—who rejoice *not*, at beholding their fellow men, independent and happy.

To Show that human nature is debased, I need only to point your attention to the pages of history; or, to direct your view to the present state of the world. The histories of those nations, which have long since been swept away by the changes of time, furnish us with sufficient evidence of the ambition of man. And the face of Europe, of Asia, and of Africa at the present day, exhibit the distorted features of rapine, cruelty and wrong.

If we pursue the comparison further, of the European quarter of the globe, we shall feel a still stronger attachment to *our* domestic policy. Surrounded by monuments of ancient splendor, the oppressed subjects are universally benighted amid the darkness of civil and ecclesiastical tyranny. Where once *Freedom* flourished; where once the *Arts* and *Sciences* received the highest culture, and the human mind exerted its last effort in the various walks of *Policy* and *Literature*: we now be-

♦
....

hold an *abject multitude, reduced to the lowest rank in the scale of moral and political degradation!*

We have great reason to rejoice, my Countrymen; that our nation is exempted at present, from the moral depravity, and calamities which assail the nations of the old world.

And now, Fellow Citizens, this year, the year 1808, which abolishes the Slave Trade presents itself to our admiration. A people who immersed in the darksome thralldom of superstition and ignorance who were wont to follow their own rural callings, until foreign invaders ingratiated themselves among them, not from motives of Philanthropy and humanity which would have impelled them to ameliorate their dejected situation in life by introducing among them necessary occupations, good government, congenial religion, and schools of education, but to the shame of profligate man, they excited them to opposite religious rancour, which when stirred up in hatred to each other, always is of the most cruel and convulsive nature; in addition to which they practised offering paltry sums for prisoners taken by the overbearing party in their execrable warfares. Hence appears the sordid, avaricious, and depraved state of selfish man, who by the means of artful and clandestine stratagems effected a traffic with the human species for menial services which now through the means of a wise, moral, beneficent and humane government, we can join with the well disposed part of mankind that feel the emotions of an ardent desire to extricate man from misery, and place him in an interesting and informed situation of life; which may Heaven shine propitiously upon.

But to return—We must acknowledge, that a disposition to evil has appeared among ourselves. Else, wherefore have arisen the sounds of contention? Why, has party spirit broken in upon the harmony of social life? Is it, that a difference in

opinion on political questions, necessarily implies personal hatred? or, cannot an investigation of principles, and an examination of conduct take place, without descending to such odious invective, as awakens in the public mind unfriendly emotions?

The freedom of enquiry, and the right of election, which are so happily secured to us; naturally give rise to a difference in opinion on the subject of government: but those very privileges, do also furnish the means of correcting errors in practice, and of rewarding those persons, who are worthy of public confidence.

Error is the infirmity of human nature; but truth is superior to all things and must prevail: and wherever a people possess the means of information, and can exercise the right of suffrage, the arts of sophistry will not long avail, to conceal the designs of the ambitious; or the deceptions of the disorganizer. A calm investigation of principles would enable us to determine their correctness;—and a dispassionate observance of the conduct of men, would lead us to distinguish between empty professions, and real patriotism.

Fellow Citizens, The sun of Liberty has arisen to its meridian: Tyranny hides her head! Nature rejoices! America is FREE! And if all were united (as I hope and trust we are this day) America might defy the most powerful nations of Europe, from George the Third, to the overbearing Corsican. And, my friends, why are we divided? Why are we opposed to our own Government? is it not a government chosen by the people? Why then do we wish to overturn it? Remember the words of our great and illustrious Washington, “United we stand, divided we fall!”

Let us then rally round the standard of our Liberty, (that liberty, which our forefathers purchased with their blood and treasure) and fight, even *die*;

in its defence, and transmit it to our posterity, free and independent as it was received.

Enjoying then, in so superior a manner the blessings of Heaven, it may be interesting for us to investigate the *dangers* to which our social institutions are exposed.

Let us survey the Republics of Antiquity—and seek for the causes which led to their dissolution. A long course of prosperity introduced among them every species of luxury, and this bane of Freedom gradually effeminated the hardihood of their measures and sapped the foundation of public morality. As a consequence, *licentiousness*, like an overwhelming torrent, burst in upon them, destroying every barrier which *virtue* had conserved, and desolating the temples erected to liberty. The voice of patriotism was soon lulled to rest. The general good became bartered for the private interests of individuals, and corruption like a subtle poison, forced its way through every member of the body politic. And if ever the period should arrive in this happy Country (*which may God avert!*) when the public mind shall be led astray by the allurements of vicious pursuits, and the great mass of our citizens shall cease to be solicitous for the purity of our manners and social policy; we shall then *follow the fate* of the Republics, which have preceded us, and regret too late the destruction of our inestimable institutions.

In order to obviate the occurrence of so deplorable an event, suffer me to recommend *virtue* and *morality*, as the vital principles of all Free Governments. And it is incumbent on those of you, who, like myself, are just entering on the theatre of life, to guard with sacred vigilance, the privileges bestowed upon us. Our fathers, who stood out the storm of a revolutionary warfare, to secure to their Posterity the rights of self Government, are fast declining to the vale of years. But a short period

more, in all human probability, and they will universally have paid the last debt of nature. Rouse then Fellow Citizens! and perform a duty which has devolved upon us, and endeavour perseveringly to maintain the inheritance we have received. And let us, with the same elevation of sentiment, which inspired them in the heat of the conflict, *solemnly unite* to defend the sacred boon, not only from the violence of *foreign aggression*, but the more probable danger of *internal discord*.

The affair of the Chesapeake must doubtless, be fresh in your memory, as also the satisfaction given by the British Government; which was, insult to injury. The British Officers, who were most forward in that horrid transaction were recalled; for what purpose? To be reprimanded? No! but to be *promoted*, for their true and faithful fulfilment of their Gracious Master's orders. Glorious punishment for murderers.

Next appears to our view the Upstart Corsican, who, on the wings of ambition wishes to cover the whole earth; but should he dare attempt *our* happy shores, yankee pills will meet him in front, and the bayonet in the rear. Therefore Americans be united, and we *shall* conquer.

The conquest of nations, the birth of princes, and the downfall of tyrants, have in their turn become the subject of celebration. If then, subjects like *those* command the respect of a people, is it not a *duty*, a sacred duty, incumbent on all Americans, to commemorate the Birth, the Establishment, and Independence of their Nation.

Happy Americans! The exuberant fancy of man, even when most prolific, could not devise a state, even an *imaginary* state, where citizens could be possessed of so many transcendent blessings, as are guaranteed to you by your Constitution, and wise administration of Government. To your Country you can look for repose; How cheering, how en-

nobling, how satisfying the prospect! Peace is maintained in your borders, the people shout the song of joy: The husbandman is heard in the field, there is none to make him afraid.

Much has been said respecting the late acts of our General Government; more particularly the Embargo. It has been asserted, there is no alternative, but an Embargo, or war; if so, is not peace our policy from wisdom, from humanity, and from choice? If ever we go to war, it must be *from necessity*; and it will be *defensive*; but in such a crisis, when all that is dear or sacred to freemen, would be put at issue. Why, then we will defend our Country be the invaders Englishmen, or Frenchmen, and emulating those gallant and disinterested spirits, who first asserted and triumphantly established our Independence, *We will swear to preserve it, or incorporate our blood and bones with the soil.*

Fellow Citizens—are you sensible to the blessings you now possess? Will you prefer to rank with nations, who recognize in supreme power the sum of political right? or will you maintain to yourselves, distinct systems, laws congenial to freedom, and an independent suffrage? Will you teach your sons to bow the neck to despots, and to kiss the hand of the murderer drenched in the blood of their children? or, will you *detest* all systems founded on that odious doctrine, which declares mankind unequal to the power of governing themselves?

Compare your situation as a *nation*: is there any other upon earth whose circumstances are so favourable? separated by the Atlantic, from the contentious states of Europe, you have but little to fear, from their intrigues, or their armies. On your frontiers, you behold the remains of the aboriginal tribes (a few only who are bribed by English gold excepted) smoking the calumet of peace:

In your councils, wisdom presides as the head; and justice, judgment, and truth, are her support. In your cities, your towns, your villages, the churches of the living God are established; and your religion is the devotion of the *heart*. Nurtured in the genial soil of Liberty, genius springs forth in her energies; the temples of science arise; the arts are encouraged; labour meets its sweet reward, and humanity, with all her gentle offices covers *the land!*

Finally, my Fellow Citizens, what more do we wish for? I answer, contentment, and unanimity among ourselves, therefore let party spirit be driven from our land; and, let me conjure you to adhere to the *Constitution* as the ark of safety to all our political blessings. Let not the rash hand of daring innovation impair its beauty, or distort its symmetry; but if real defects it possess, for no human system is perfect, let the excellent provision it contains for amendments, be put in operation with prudence and circumspection. Let us cultivate the social affections, and banish from our bosoms, the asperities of party spirit. So shall we increase in happiness and prosperity; our *civil institutions*, the only remaining hope of the *friend of Freedom*, will remain undisturbed to the latest posterity; and those sacred privileges, for which our *Fathers bled*, shall continue unimpaired till **TIME AND EARTH ARE LOST IN ETERNITY.**

