

ORATION

DELIVERED

IN GEORGE TOWN, COLUMBIA,

ON

THE FOURTH DAY OF JULY,

1807;

~~BY ROBERT POLK.~~
BY ROBERT POLK.
~~BY ROBERT POLK.~~

Th' untainted voice, that no disease
That fears no frown, and seeks no blind applause,
Shall tell the bliss that Freedom sheds abroad,
The rights of nature and the gift of God.

BARLOW.

~~WASHINGTON CITY:~~
WASHINGTON CITY:

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.....
1809.

FROM THE WASHINGTON FEDERALIST.

The following Oration on the anniversary of American Independence is published at the request of the "Columbian Juvenile Society, Georgetown." It was composed by Robert Polk, aged 18 years, and delivered in the Presbyterian Church, on the 4th instant.

Editor.

ORATION.

TO commemorate the day which proclaimed deliverance from oppression; that, in eternal characters, ascertained the sacred rights of man, and bade America assume a distinguished rank among the nations of the earth, is the object of your present attention, and will continue to engage your patriotic regard. This has been the theme of eloquence, and of the poet's inspiration. All that sublimity of conception, dignity of thought, or elegance of diction can bestow, have been lavished on it, and genius itself can scarcely

consider it in a new aspect, or accumulate further subjects of congratulation and enquiry. What then must be expected, but a trial of your indulgence, from a youth whom the society of which he is a member have chosen to address you on this occasion, and whose years, and circumscribed information, are inadequate to a complete discussion of the numerous and important subjects connected with this memorable event?

To attempt an historical deduction of the causes which led to a separation of these United States from the mother country, would occupy too much of your time; and besides, the knowledge of them is familiar to you. The Declaration of Independence, one of the most eloquent productions of the human mind, fully explains the nature of our grievances, and the reasons of a renunciation of allegiance to Great Britain. It would be equally superfluous to enter into a narration of the occurrences of the revolutionary war, which terminated in the complete emancipation of these colonies from the British yoke. Let us consider in what condition we might have been at this time, had the efforts of our fore-fathers proved ineffectual to obtain their freedom. The recollection of past dangers always heightens our pleasure, as the weary mariner exults when he has escaped the pe-

rills of the stormy deep, and reposes securely in the wished for haven.

The oppressions under which these colonies labored would have multiplied, and finally reduced us to the lowest state of political slavery. Those rights of conscience and of civil liberty, for the enjoyment of which our ancestors forsook their native shores, and sought an asylum in the howling wilderness, would have been totally disregarded, and the Americans exposed to all the intolerance of religious bigotry, and of lawless despotism. When they took up arms to prevent a repetition or continuance of injuries and aggressions, and to secure the right of self-government, they had every thing to fear in the event of failure in their undertaking. They opposed a nation the most powerful on the globe, whose flag waved in triumph o'er the bosom of the ocean, and which could command the wealth of the Indies, and the resources of the West. No well grounded hope existed as to the duration or issue of the contest. Liberty and life depended on their exertions, and the inevitable consequence of their defeat was slavery or death. How exultingly was it declared by many in Great Britain, that the Americans could, by a single victory over them, be reduced to unconditional submission!

Surely our fore-fathers derived little encouragement from a view of their internal resources ; but a sense of the injuries they had already received, a dread of future and aggravated sufferings, and a conviction of the justice of their cause, impelled them to the contest. Had their power proved unequal to the accomplishment of their designs, would not the rulers of Britain have satiated their vengeance in a ten-fold degree ? That noose which it was attempted to throw over the necks of our fore-fathers, would have been drawn with invincible force, and the coercion increased by their fruitless struggles. Exasperated by the resistance they had experienced, and by their loss of blood and treasure, the British must have exacted a reparation from us commensurate with their resentment : they would have continued and increased their abuses and usurpations, and daily invented or practised others equally grievous. These colonies, instead of being united in interest and strength, might now be divided in principle, and discordant in the administration of their government ; they would be exposed to invasion from without, and to disturbances within. Each state might adopt regulations subservient to her own interest, but perhaps unjust and disadvantageous to her neighbors ; or the omnipotence of parlia-

ment would prescribe the rule of our conduct ; define and limit, or nearly abolish our civil and religious rights, and assume the supreme legislation in every respect. Then the doctrine of taxation without representation would flourish, and be carried into full effect ; then should we feel greater evils than are experienced by other British subjects ; then would we be engaged and made a party in every war carried on by Great Britain against other nations ; and then, under the pressure of these sufferings, we would cease to venerate the genius of Columbus, who discovered this new hemisphere ; we would cease to pity the distress and respect the wisdom of our ancestors, who, to avoid less persecution than we ourselves endure, passed the Atlantic and peopled this western world.

It would be improper not to pause for a moment, and reflect on the services of those heroes and statesmen who saved us from this deplorable condition, and erected the lofty fabric of national freedom. The American revolution drew forth the talents of many, and will hand down their names with honor to posterity, who would else have slumbered in oblivion, and died unknown. — Considered in this view, it affords cause of triumph to every patriotic bosom, as it exalts our

national character in the eyes of the world, and rescues us from the imputation of imbecility of genius, and deficiency of talents. In the various departments of war, legislation, and philosophy, no æra in any nation, has exhibited more eminent characters. Their united wisdom directed the public councils, and insured success to the operations of our fore-fathers. To recount the services or merits of *all* the American patriots would be an endless task; and to mention those of a few individuals might seem injustice to the rest. Let it be sufficient to exhibit their illustrious example for the applause and imitation of posterity; and may the youth of present and of future times emulate their wisdom in the council, and their valour in the field! The safety of a community chiefly depends on the integrity of principle, and the illumination of science, which pervade the minds of its members. To these they owe deliverance from ruin or oppression, and preservation in a state of security and peace. To these were the Americans indebted for the assertion and vindication of their rights; and although the nature and effects of the rigorous measures observed towards them, were understood and felt by every class of citizens—although all were prepared to resist aggression, and to cast off the shackles of illegal

power ; yet they stood in need of men who could first oppose such encroachments, who could suitably proclaim the extent of their sufferings, and justify to the world the necessity of no longer submitting to acts of unwarranted domination, of renouncing allegiance, and of dissolving all political connection with the British empire. They stood in need of men who, after every other means had failed, and an appeal to arms ensued, could conduct them to the field of battle. When occasion required such characters, it was happy for America, that, in ability and disposition, numbers could be found. Yes! the people had the sagacity to chuse individuals who possessed the patriotism to accept this dangerous office, to direct the public councils, or guide the storm of battle “ in times which tried men’s souls. ” And no circumstance will reflect more lustre upon the actions of patriots in those days, or afford a more honorable testimony of their merit to future ages, than the proscription of Hancock and Adams for their exertions in the sacred cause of freedom.— While we look up with admiration to such eminent characters, let us duly appreciate that *wisdom* which discovered to them the illegality and evil tendency of the conduct of the British government, that *resolution* which enabled them to take

decisive measures to resist the arm of tyranny, and that *fortitude* which supported them in the long and dreadful struggle with numerous and disciplined armies, and with fleets accustomed to victory and triumph. Their magnanimity and undaunted firmness amidst such scenes, well deserve this application from the poet.

“ Si fractus illabatur orbis,

“ Impavidum ferient ruinae.”

“ Tho’ the whole frame of nature round him break,

“ In ruin and confusion hurl’d,

“ He unconcerned shall hear the mighty crack,

“ And stand secure amid a falling world.”

The recollection of their conduct ought to excite in us the same sentiments and persuasives to action, when similar occasions call for the exercise of manly principles on our part. If, when the gigantic arm of tyranny was extended to prostrate our rights, the Americans, undismayed, met and opposed its terrific power; the repetition *now* of insults, injuries and infractions of the law of nations, by British subjects, must require similar energy in our conduct. Is there an American present who does not feel indignant at the unparalleled instance of outrage and insult, which has just occurred within sight of our shores? Can he suppress his patriotic feelings on hearing, that without provocation, and in defiance of every

principle of justice and honor; a British ship of war has dared to attack, and nearly destroy; one of our national vessels, and to shed the blood of our unoffending fellow citizens? The patience and submission of the American people have long been tried by a series of insults and acts of wanton abuse on the part of Britain, but this unexampled scene of piratical aggression completes the climax of iniquity, and has wrought up the public feelings to a state which can scarcely be endured! Spirit of the departed worthies of '76, descend and kindle the patriotic flame within our minds; and may the influence of those sentiments which impelled our fore-fathers to action, animate every bosom and throb in every vein!

It is difficult to subdue, or for a moment suppress, the impassioned feelings of the soul on such an occasion, and to turn our reflections towards the great object of celebration—the prosperous condition of these states. Let me direct your attention to this subject, which will afford new sources of pleasure in proportion to the progress of improvement.

The American revolution, considered in whatever light as to its nature and effects, is one of the most glorious and remarkable events in the history of man. Its benefits will descend to the latest

posterity, and millions yet unborn shall rejoice on their account. What more sublime spectacle has ever been exhibited to human view, than that of a people just rescued from the chains of despotism, voluntarily assembling and deliberating on the principles and form of their future government? or than that of several states having but one interest, and submitting to the same code of laws? Can the annals of any nation furnish a similar example? No, it was reserved for *Americans* to show on what principles government should be instituted, and how the equal and sacred rights of men ought to be ascertained and secured! All other governments were founded in fraud or force; but the Constitution of the United States is the expression of the people's will; that instrument which defines the duties and powers of our rulers, and guards us from usurpation or oppression.— But the *Union* is the grand pillar of safety, on *this* all our happiness depends; for the interest of one state is now indented with that of the rest, and they mutually support each other. Under the auspices of this association, we have obtained all the blessings which we now enjoy. Hence our commerce has extended to the utmost regions of the globe, and the fruits of our industry are conveyed to other climes. The unrivalled fertili-

ty of our soil enables us, after supplying necessary wants, to exchange its superabundance for those comforts and elegancies of life which the industry of other nations has produced. The perseverance of our merchants has caused the American flag to wave in the remotest harbors of the east; nor have those regions which are bound in the icy chains of winter, or those on which the sun darts his fervid unremitting ray, been left unexplored or unfrequented by the hardy children of commercial enterprise. Nor has the progress in supplying our wants by *domestic manufactures* been either slow or circumscribed. These are rapidly advancing in importance, and allow an expectation that in a short time, the United States will become independent of other nations, and obtain within themselves all that shall be essential for their use.

Among the advantages of the revolution, may be enumerated that intercourse which has been established between our government and the tribes of Indians spread through this vast extent of country, and the benefits resulting from that connection. Previous to the formation of the present government, the Indians had no reason to rejoice at the settlement of this country by the Europeans, or to consider that event as unpro-

ductive of evil to themselves. But the nature of our government and the disposition of our rulers have produced an advantageous change in their condition, on which it is proper to offer a few reflections.

The Indian title to vacant western lands has been fairly extinguished by purchase or mutual agreements. Treaties have been made with them in which the United States stipulate to grant them protection, assistance, and presents, for the performance of certain conditions on their part. Trading houses have been established among the Indians, in order that they may exchange their peltries for useful implements of husbandry, for suitable clothing, and for the supply of various necessary wants. And the aim of an humane and enlightened administration is, to cultivate a friendly correspondence with the Indians, and to engage their attachment to the principles and institutions of civilized society. They have accordingly been diverted from the laborious and uncertain mode of subsistence by *hunting*, to the easy and unfailing one of deriving support from the cultivation of the soil. The arts of social life are introduced among them; they are habituated to the manners of their white neighbors; they are made acquainted with the comforts derived from

civilized society, and instructed in the means of their acquisition ; and the light of knowledge and of the true religion is diffused among them. In short, they are rapidly advancing to a state of assimilation to ourselves, and this must surely yield pleasure to every intelligent and virtuous mind. The progress of improvement among the Creek and Chickasaw Indians, on the southern frontiers of the United States, exemplifies in a conspicuous and pleasing manner, the truth of these observations.

The acquisition of Louisiana, as a means of insuring our future peace, is also an object of great importance. The present inhabitants of the borders of the Mississippi will become united with us in interest ; they will partake of all the advantages resulting from our government and laws ; they will duly appreciate the benefits of such a connection with us, and entertain sentiments of friendship and regard towards their rulers and fellow citizens ; and this vast region will afford ample room for the excess of population among us, and thousands and tens of thousands will fix their residence there, who are of the same family, who use the same language, and are governed by the same laws. Thus the blessings of the revolution, the republican nature of our government, our insti-

tutions, manners and improvements, shall be bounded only by the vast oceans which wash the eastern and western extremities of the continent.

Having given these topics their proportionate share of attention, let us consider some other benign effects of the revolution. We may then add that hence result the prosperity of our civil institutions, and the means of internal improvement. Hence the light of science is pervading each part of our land. Education, no longer confined to the higher classes, is so generally diffused, that many are raised up to serve and adorn their country. We possess all necessary religious, political and civil freedom. Here are no privileged orders, but the laws secure to every member of society his equal rights. So conspicuous are our advantages, that thousands flock from the shores of Europe, and find security and competence in the United States. "Kindly separated from the rest of the world by a wide ocean," we can enjoy and improve our present blessings, and be exempt from the horrors and calamities of war, with which other nations are daily convulsed. May that bountiful Providence who has so highly favored these states, and to whom we are indebted for our deliverance from oppression, and for all that we now enjoy, preserve us from such dreadful scenes; and may

peace be cherished so long as a sense of national honor will possibly permit. With propriety the language of the poet can be adapted to our present situation ;

" No more shall nation against nation rise,
 " Nor ardent warriors meet with hateful eyes,
 " Nor fields with gleaming steel be covered o'er,
 " The brazen trumpets kindle rage no more ;
 " But useless lances into scythes shall bend,
 " And the broad falchion in a ploughshare end..
 " Then palaces shall rise ; the joyful son
 " Shall finish what his short lived sire begun ;
 " Their vines a shadow to their race shall yield,
 " And the same hand that sowed shall reap the field."

When therefore we consider the beneficial effects of the American revolution, no one will doubt the propriety and duty of celebrating the anniversary of our independence. As each revolving season brings with it an increase of prosperity, it also calls to our recollection the cause of our happy condition, and our consequent obligation to commemorate it. Let it then be our endeavour to perpetuate the remembrance of this day ; to support the Union, as the foundation of all our blessings, and the rock of our salvation ; and to hand down our excellent institutions unimpaired, through successive generations, to the end of time.