

AN
ADDRESS
DELIVERED
BEFORE THE
Corps of Cadets
OF THE
UNITED STATES MILITARY ACADEMY,
AT
WEST-POINT,
ON THE
FIFTY-THIRD ANNIVERSARY
OF
American Independence.

BY CADET JOSEPH BITNER.

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1829.

CAMP WORTH, JULY 6, 1829.

SIR—

We have been appointed by our classmates a Committee, to request for publication a copy of the eloquent Oration delivered by you before the Corps of Cadets on the 4th of July.

With sentiments of the highest respect and esteem, we are your obedient servants,

WM. N. PENDLETON,
X FRANCIS VINTON,
W. E. BASINGER,
Committee of the First Class.

To Cadet RITNER.

CAMP WORTH, JULY 7, 1829.

GENTLEMEN—

I have received your flattering note of the 6th inst. In complying with the request which it contains, I must be allowed to express myself grateful to my classmates, and to our corps generally, for the favourable and indulgent light in which they have viewed my address.

Accept, gentlemen, for yourselves, and have the goodness to convey to our classmates, the assurances of my high consideration.

JOSEPH RITNER, JUN. X

Cadets WM. N. PENDLETON,
FRANCIS VINTON,
WM. E. BASINGER,
Committee.

ADDRESS.

FELLOW-CADETS.

IN performing the duty which has been assigned me, I cannot but congratulate myself that the occasion is attended by circumstances so peculiarly favourable. I am not obliged to have recourse to the Orator's art, to rouse and bind the attention of those whom I address. No ingenious and elaborate exordium is here requisite, to make every one feel and act as becomes a freeman and an American; the minds and affections of all are ready—all will give due weight and influence to whatever can, with propriety, be said on an occasion so deeply interesting to each one of us. Indeed how could it be otherwise? Independently of the motives for that generous enthusiasm which on this day pervades every section of this wide spreading territory, which rends the very heavens with the roar of artillery, and sends on each breeze the echo of the anthem of liberty, there is in our peculiar situation, that which should greatly add to the ardour which glows in the breast of every American. . . We can rejoice in common with the grateful citizens of this happy republic, that it was our fathers who nobly and successfully met, undaunted, the colossal power of kingly oppression—who hurled the grim monster from his usurped

throne, and dared to say that they were free. None can be more truly gratified than we, that it was their glorious destiny to present to the view of the philanthropist the noblest picture which he ever beheld ; to base on the immoveable foundation of justice, liberty, and equality, those institutions which emphatically secure and protect the rights of man, and which point out to him his own pre-eminent destiny. And when we look at the happy exemption from the miseries and vices of the old world, which our separation has insured, when we look at the hapless millions who there groan under the iron rod of despotism, who have to labor with diligence to support the inordinate cupidity and licentiousness of a haughty nobility, for whom the wars of their sovereigns are clothed in all their horrors, but divested of all their glories,—do not all equally rejoice that our own happy country is beyond the reach of those evils? Yes, we can sit basking in the sunshine of peace and security, and feel only the sympathies of the good for the sufferings of the human race, whilst the storm of war rages and fulminates in a distant horizon. We can preserve the dignity of republican simplicity, untainted by the infectious, corrupt examples of Europe's poisoned sons.

These are considerations equally glorious to ourselves as individuals, and to the country which we adore and serve. But besides these motives for indulging the emotions most grateful to the patriot's heart, there are others peculiar to our situation, and which cannot but act with great power on the young, generous and patriotic son of Columbia. Our pursuits, our habits, our most brilliant hopes, most glorious prospects, our very lives, are most intimately connected with the events of the day we celebrate. Our fathers, by their devotion to liberty, by that courage and magnanimity which they on all occasions displayed, which was the origin, and which effected the triumphant and glorious consummation of our revolutionary struggle, gain-

ed our liberties by the sword: and to us particularly, together with those with whom we are associated in the military profession, is, in a great measure, assigned the duty of preserving untarnished and unfading, the laurels which they have entwined in such profusion around the military reputation of their country. How glorious our destiny! to be entrusted with the honor of that flag, which, wherever it has waved, has waved in triumph and glory! and with the fame of those arms, before whose unrivalled prowess the slaves of empires trembled, and before whom the haughty invincibles of Europe bowed submissive! And with pride we can further say, that their honor has never been sullied by acts of wanton or relentless cruelty: their glory has been gained in the great cause of human liberty, and not in forging chains for the hapless victims of their superior power. Such proud thoughts should be among those which we ever indulge with the most fervent enthusiasm, and should place the illustrious authors of that sacred instrument which has just been read, first in our affections. Nor need we fear that, though sacred the charge, though awful the responsibility, there is in our situation that which can diminish its claims to our attachment. Though fatigue and danger are its constant attendants, yet for such as deserve to be enrolled amongst its votaries, these are but additional charms. Wherever glory is to be won, there must responsibility be incurred—there must danger and toil be sought and encountered. Let the idle votary of ignoble and indolent pleasures, revel amid his degrading indulgences; let the son of avarice seek his enjoyment in heaps of gold—our profession proclaims our contempt for them: it assumes as its high prerogative, that

"Glory is the soldier's prize,
The soldier's wealth is honor."

He braves with fearless intrepidity the dangers of the field, when he reflects that his memory will be hallowed by the plau-

dit of a grateful country, and that the cheek of beauty will be bedewed with a tear, when he sleeps *the sleep of the brave*.

When we look at the rank and character which the military profession has always held, and more especially since skill and science have rendered its attainment the object of the noblest faculties of man's nature,—and when we look too, at the peculiarly happy circumstances which attend our situation in that profession, we cannot but be flattered at the result. To it has been awarded all that is dignified in science, all that is glorious in chivalry, all that is heroic in martyrdom : indeed all that is commanding in genius, or venerable in acquirements. It embraces the highest application of the most profound and exalted departments of human knowledge, as well as places in the most conspicuous light all that is magnanimous and admirable in the human character. And when we cast our eyes upon the page of our country's infant history, when we look at her struggle when in childhood, when oppressed by disadvantages which might have appalled the most courageous, she dared to try her might with that of the most formidable power on earth ; and when we read too, of the glorious issue of that struggle, when we see that the gallantry and devotion of her sons, though unskilled and undisciplined, supported her as well against the demands of nature as amid the horrors of war—who can despair for the future ? and when we contrast the present state of our country with that which then existed, do we not find every reason to believe that our country has only to be called to the field, to add to the lustre of her military fame ?

The next signal which calls the sons of Columbia to the field, will bring all the patriotism and devotion of any former period, supported by all the light which science and discipline have shed upon the art of war. And but support by skill and discipline, an army animated by the souls of freemen, and the venal

minions of regal power will as little withstand it, as the frail rush opposes the angry impetuosity of the torrent.

But while we congratulate ourselves in having made choice of that profession which now engages our attention, let no one object that this same profession has been prostituted to the vilest purposes. Let no one urge to its prejudice, that Sylla deluged his country with blood, or that Cæsar usurped the liberties of Rome. However true the remark, its application to the profession, as embraced by us, can never be made. We can make the true distinction between him who risks his all in a holy, isolated devotion to his country, and him who braves the storm of battle through personal ambition. Yes, which of us would not meet the arrogant man who would seek to wave the standard of military usurpation over the grave of his country's liberty, with the same ardent, uncompromising, ceaseless efforts, with which he would meet the insolent invader of her territory? Yes, that education and those relations which render love of country so peculiarly our privilege and duty, and which graves it each succeeding day more deeply on the tablet of our affections, teaches us to live or die with the liberties of that country which has cherished us, and which looks to us for support. And have we not shown our unqualified admiration of those pure, patriotic virtues, before which the mere splendor of military achievements, unconnected with a cause so holy, is eclipsed immeasurably? Why rises the monumental pile on those mouldering battlements, to remind us of the virtues, the services, and the fate of Kosciuzko? Not because his arms carried terror and desolation over a mighty portion of the habitable globe—not because numberless widows mourned their partners, and orphans wept to lose their sires—not because strife and bloodshed were his favorite elements, or because kings and empires trembled at his power. No: it was for his generous, disinterested patriotism; for those high, unquestionable evi-

dences of a pure, holy devotion to the cause of liberty and his country, which it has been the enviable lot of but few to exhibit—that stern, high-minded patriotism which led him to forget himself in the all-absorbing solicitude which he felt for his country, and could make him content with serving her, though he sacrificed himself. Such is the conduct which we will ever admire; and with feelings of the most profound veneration, and sincere affection, will we ever bear in mind the character and services of Poland's chief. Though his efforts were unavailing for his country, and though he fell the hapless victim of the ruthless Muscovite; yet, venerated man! his labors were not vain. The blaze of glory which surrounds his name and deeds, will illumine the path of liberty's votary, though its sun be darkened, and horizon enveloped in the gloom of reckless despotism!

And the same feelings are indulged whilst we pause to drop a tear at the fate of gallant, unfortunate Poland. What heart of sensibility does not bleed to contemplate that "bloodiest picture!" Sarmatia fell! but the sympathies of Americans soothed her in the tomb; and the memory of her chief must ever remain embalmed in the affections of her citizens. But, besides those relations towards our country, which should make us hail with ineffable joy the return of our jubilee, and on which we have already dwelt, there are others which must tend to render the impression still more vivid. Who can look with indifference on the mouldering walls of these once impregnable fortresses—those venerable battlements, which at one time stood almost the one remaining hope of desponding America? Almost every foot of ground too, on which we tread in our daily duties, is hallowed by the dust of some one who died for his country! These tangible relics of former days are more eloquent than words: they remind us more strongly than the hymnings of the loftiest poetry, of the times and scenes that "tried men's souls." And the impression must

be rendered, if possible, yet more powerful, when from these contemplations we turn to reflect on the mighty change which has taken place since those dark days! The very spot on which our present residence is fixed, was once invested by an insolent and powerful foe. Those same scenes which then beheld the angel of a disastrous warfare, robed in the majesty of his terrors, frowning into gloom even nature's loveliest scenery, now behold the genius of learning, dispensing her blessings with a prodigal hand, and rewarding her votaries with the wreath of imperishable fame!

From this view of our situation, and our relations to the country which looks for our service, it is natural and proper for us to call to mind the duties which these relations impose—and undoubtedly duties are required of us. Yes, and we are ready and willing that such requisitions should be made. To the peculiar duties which our profession assigns, we have already adverted. It is easy to see, that from our education and inclinations, our desire, above all things, would be to be called to that service which is at once the most honorable and glorious in which man can be engaged. But let it be necessity which shall unsheath the sword. For such an event we will ever be in readiness; and until then, may our country rest in that peace which now blesses her.

But, in common with the citizens of our great republic, we have committed to us a most sacred and solemn charge. This government, which has so long stood firm and unmoved, in despite of the interested cavils of monarchists and aristocrats, which has stood as a beacon to the friends of human rights, in all parts of the world, and which has shed such unparalleled blessings on the people who recognize its authority, must be preserved and strengthened. Our invaluable institutions, which have contributed so powerfully to the dissemination of liberal principles, and which have taught the monarchs of Europe that

their thrones were not too strong to be shaken, are committed to the present generation, whose paramount duty it is to hand them down to posterity, pure and unsullied. Perhaps never was a trust of more momentous importance to the human race confided to the care of man. Aware of its mighty consequence to the liberties of the human family, the virtue and intelligence of the people of the United States will lead them to treat it with the circumspection and reverence which it deserves.

But in the government of mankind we have done much. The superiority of the systems formed by the sages of '76, has been demonstrated by those practical tests to which they have been submitted. It remains for us, however, to do justice to our national character, in that literature and science which so essentially contribute to the honor, the dignity, and power of a state. Though a general mass of intelligence, the equal of which no nation under heaven can boast, renders our country the most civilized and enlightened on the globe, yet mathematical and natural science, especially, those great parents of all mental discipline, have unfortunately been too much neglected. But we hope that the day has at length dawned, which will see the paths of learning illumined by the lights of American genius. Necessaries must be provided, before we can expect luxuries in the intellectual as well as in the physical world; and it is not wonderful that we should as yet be behind nations whose antiquity and advantages alone placed them above us. No object can be more dear to the man of real patriotism, than that of rendering eminent the scientific reputation of his country. Of all the objects to which the mind of man can direct its attention, pursuits having such a tendency are the most truly ennobling. They lead him beyond the narrow sphere to which he was once confined, transport him to the most distant boundaries of creation, and teach all that is given for man to know of the mysteries of Nature's Divine and Almighty Architect. In these

pursuits, to be sure, we can name our Franklin, to whose genius the lightning of heaven bowed: and we could name many others who hold a proud rank among the votaries of wisdom. Yet they rather exist to make us hope that the day is not far distant when American learning shall stand pre-eminent, than to satisfy us with the achievements of our countrymen. Our literature too, has been discouraged for want of that patronage which, in the nature of things, it was impossible to afford it. Yes, and it has received all the opposition too, which it has been in the power of British insolence to direct against it. Our writers have been depreciated in the world's estimation, so far as the influence of British criticism, guided by the most malevolent and unprincipled licentiousness, could effect it. We dare hope that that mental bondage, which remained long after the chains of earthly power ceased to bind us, will exist no longer. Attention is now paid to domestic merit; and ere long we shall have a population sufficiently extended, opulent and enlightened, to support and encourage native genius. Then will our literature be as independent of the insolent cavils of British reviewers, or itinerant slanderers, as is our government free from hers in the policy which it adopts. The obstacle which the dispersion of the results of our efforts has opposed, and which sectional feelings and divisions have piled in the way of improvement, must be removed. From the filial affection which we owe our country, from that community of feeling and opinion, and from that love of learning which our situation and pursuits is so much calculated to produce; and combining at the same time as we do the feelings and opinions of the most widely remote regions of our country, it is to be hoped that the concentration of our efforts, might assist in building up a national literature, and establishing for our country a scientific reputation, which shall be revered so long as learning and wisdom have their votaries among men. To advance such a state of

things, should be the ardent, sincere desire of every true lover of his country.

In those arts and improvements which subject uncultivated nature to the will of man, we have progressed with a rapidity that has astonished the world, and which is unequalled in the annals of time. Let the future historian, when he records the deeds of former ages, say that we were not idle while those honorable exertions were making: and when our empire shall stretch from ocean to ocean, when the towering summits of the Rocky Mountains shall look down upon happy and enlightened millions, pursuing the calls of freemen around their bases, when cities shall shoot their lofty spires, and raise their golden domes, where as yet the foot of white man has never pressed the soil,—let that historian say, that whenever, and wherever our services were needed, then and *there* were we found ready. In the field let us ever be anxious never to disappoint her expectations; and whilst we look at that column* which rises in honor of him who was once as we are, and who laid down his life for her service, let us ever be prepared, ready and willing, “*to go and do likewise.*” And in those duties which we owe in common with the citizens of our country, let us remember that those narrow views of policy which might be more excusable in others, would ill become us. We are the children of the Union; and whatever tends to promote the interest of the whole, should receive our ardent and unqualified support: all our energies and affections should be merged and concentrated in that one great object—the glory, honor, and happiness of the country which gave us birth, and which placed us in the ranks of her defenders. Thus in preserving inviolate the sacred institutions of our fathers, let us strive to calm those agitations and convulsions, against the effects of which the voice of all history warns us to provide. And let us hope, that through the general dissemination of

*Col. Wood's monument.

knowledge, our countrymen will continue to value the blessings bequeathed to them by their fathers : and that when the kings and dynasties of our day shall only live in the tale of tradition, when the deeds of present greatness shall only be heard through the voice of song, when the nations of the old world shall be as Palmyra and Persepolis now are,—that then our mighty republic, standing on a basis durable as eternity, shall not yet have reached even the meridian of her glory ! Let us hope that her majestic, resistless career, will fully demonstrate that indeed " Time's noblest empire is the last."

And should ever faction raise the fire-brand of sedition, and spread conflagration, turmoil and confusion through our devoted land, then let it also be recorded, that from her army, at least, our country received a firm, devoted support ; and let it too, be said of that army, that it never survived the wreck of its country's happiness !