

with Liberty in the best sense

AN

ORATION

DELIVERED BEFORE THE
WASHINGTON BENEVOLENT SOCIETY,

AT WASHINGTON HALL,

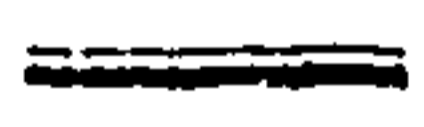
IN THE CITY OF NEW-YORK,

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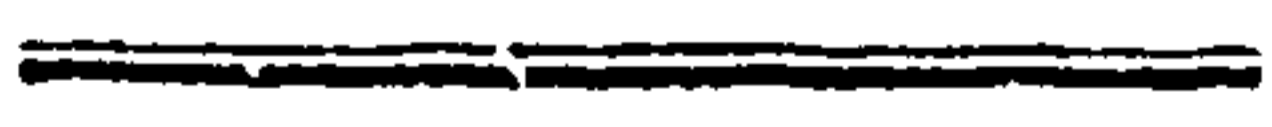
Fourth of July, 1811.



BY ROBERT SEDGWICK, ESQUIRE.



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1811.

ORATION.

AT a time when the moral and political relations of the world are undergoing a revolution, which scarcely leaves behind it, the *elements* of what it destroys,—at a time when that tremendous power, which has swept away, like the visions of a dream, kingdom after kingdom, which before, had only been strengthened by the conflicts of centuries; seems gathering fresh strength to break down the only remaining barriers to its progress; we are convened to celebrate the *independence* of our country.

Yes, while in one of the fairest portions of the earth, millions of beings, who bear the Almighty's image, as well as we, and whose protectors are better hardened for the toils of marches, and the onset of battle, than we are, have bowed their necks to the conqueror, and have said "this world was made for Cæsar;"—While a despotism which the world has neither been able to break or disconcert, has dared to appeal to God, for the proof, that men were *created* to be slaves; and has combined the answer to that appeal, with the * *religion* of the slaves it has made; we

* The following is a translation of a part of the catechism which the minister of religion in France, is compelled to teach the children in his parish.

Q. "What are the duties of christians towards the Princes who govern them, and what in particular are our duties towards Napoleon the first, our Emperor?"

A. "Christians owe to the princes who govern them, and we owe in particular to Napoleon the first, our Emperor, love, respect, obedience, fidelity, *military service, the tributes ordered for the preservation and defence of the Empire, and his throne*; we owe him besides, fervent prayers for his safety, and for the spiritual and temporal prosperity of the state.

have been permitted, and are still permitted, to live in an *independent* land. Permitted, did I say? I trust we are not free by sufferance. Once tenants at will, of this fair domain, and no homage but uncomplaining submission to a tyranny which would not even compliment our servitude, would satisfy the lord of the domain. We hold our liberties by a better tenure than the courtesy, or the magnanimity of a conqueror. Yes; and we hold them by a better truce too, than the love which some of our patriots bear us, whose wayward eloquence, in spite of them, will wander into its appropriate theme,—the praises of their master. Ah,

Q. "Why are we under all these obligations towards our Emperor?"

A. "1st. Because God, who creates empires, and distributes them according to his will, in filling our Emperor with his bounties, whether it be in war, or in peace, has established him our sovereign, and made him the minister of his power, and his image upon the earth. *To honour and serve our Emperor then, is to honour and serve God himself.*

Q. "Are there no particular motives which ought to attach us more firmly to Napoleon the first our Emperor?"

A. "Yes; for it is he, whom God has raised up in difficult circumstances to establish the public culture of the holy religion of our Fathers and to be its protector. He has restored and preserved public order by his profound and active wisdom; he defends the state by his puissant arm; for he has become the anointed of the Lord, by the consecration which he has received from the sovereign pontiff, chief of the universal church.

Q. "What ought we to think of those, who would fail in their duty towards our Emperor?"

A. "According to the Apostle Paul, they would resist the order established by God himself, and would render themselves worthy of eternal damnation.

Q. "Are the duties which we owe our Emperor, equally binding upon us towards his legitimate successors in the order established by the constitution of the Empire?"

A. "Yes; without doubt, for we read in the holy scriptures, that God, the Lord of heaven and of earth, by a disposition of his supreme will, and by his providence, gives empires not only to one person in particular, but also to his family." *Catechism, 2d. part, lesson 7th.*

If Bonaparte thinks those who fail in their duty towards him, guilty of eternal damnation. he must indulge some apprehensions as to his own fate hereafter, unless he imagines that there is more difference between himself and his subjects, than there is between him and his God.

that that patriotism which has had its birth, so long since the charter, by which our independence was proclaimed, was sealed with blood, should so soon attune it's lyre to the praises of him, who while he snuffs up the blood of his enemies, scarcely perceives the incense of praise, offered by those who are to be his future victims.

The independence of our country is a subject on which it becomes us to rejoice. He who can look back upon that day when this nation had its birth, or can survey that awful conflict which procured him his only title to his liberties, without emotions of gratitude and pride; without catching something of that high resolve, and daring purpose, which proclaimed, and made us free; and without feeling himself braced anew, by something like that nerve, which then wielded his country's sword; may wear the semblance, but he has not the spirit of a man. Who would be so degenerate, as to listen to the tale of the valour and heroism of his ancestors, and not at least for the moment, become a *hero* himself. The honours of the father, leave no legacy but *reproach* to the son, whose blood does not course quicker through his veins, when he is pointed to the field, where those honours were won. But there is a spirit in heroic deeds so subtle, and so bouyant, that it will penetrate the hardest bosoms, and lift up the most leaden hearts. That spirit should not be suffered to evaporate. Though the martial fire, which burnt in the bosoms of many of the soldiers of the revolution, is extinguished for ever; yet at their graves, may be lighted up other fires to consume the future enemies of our country.

My countrymen, what a scene does our revolution present? What a display of human character? What interests were wrapped up in it? What consequences hung upon it? Imagine for a single moment that its termination had been the *reverse* of what it was; and if you can, *conceive* the change. Every thing which endears to us the memory of our struggles

and our triumphs vanishes in an instant. The field of battle at once changes its aspect. Defeat succeeds to victory. Happy were the soldiers who poured out their lives in defence of their country and their home; for their country is lost, and their home has become the habitation of strangers. Their *survivors* are the only objects of commiseration, for they survive to be *conquered*. The names of the heroes of that day, instead of being inscribed on our standards, in commemoration of their virtues, are registered on the catalogue of defeated rebels, as an awful monition to future treason. Our independence, the rugged offspring of rugged sires, is crushed at its birth. The fair structure of our liberties, uniting all that is beautiful in proportion, with all that is solid in strength, is transformed into a monument to record our disgrace. We are no longer the sons of freemen, or freemen ourselves. If this picture is too general to excite your interest, select from its scenes of supposed adversity, a single object. Look at the Father of our country: The laurel wreath of victory is at once stripped from his brow, though the diadem of immortal honours remains. See him in his tent, revolving in his great mind, the doubtful issue of a conflict, on which are suspended all his own and his country's hopes. The fate of his children, now triumphant, now scattered and defeated, seems alternately pictured in the warrior's face. The tumultuations of solicitude, of doubt, and of apprehension, subside; and give way to the fixed purpose, and the unalterable will. He resolves on battle. Already is his armour on. The charge is sounded. The god of armies deserts our chief. The mercy of his enemies refuses him an honourable death, and reserves him for the scaffold. . . . Blessed be God, we have been reserved for a better fate; and Washington was permitted to breathe out his prayers for his country, and his life together; amidst the blessings of a peace which he procured, and the benedictions of a country which he saved.

It is our highest delight to follow to the field, that patriot band to whom we owe our liberties—to catch with them, the first inspiration of a cause, which nature approved, which reason sanctioned, and which heaven blessed—to see them tear off the badges of their servitude, and substitute in their place the musket or the sword—to follow them, step by step, along their rugged path—to see them brush away obstacles of the most forbidding aspect, as the wind of heaven prostrates the forest—to rush with them into the hottest of the battle, and join them in the shout of victory.

Many of those men, whose names were the most dear to us, are no more among the living: but I trust the spirit which fired their bosoms has not taken its final flight from the earth. If any of it remains, let it be preserved for a day of awful retribution to the future oppressor of our country, whether he appear as an open enemy, or under the mask of a patriot. To those of my audience who were the companions in arms of the men of whom I have been speaking, this day must be doubly dear. Even upon their *sufferings*, they can now look back, with grateful recollection; and the blessings which they have purchased for themselves, and their country, and which they may hope, notwithstanding, the ill bodings of the times, will be continued to many generations, must inspire emotions, which language cannot name. Though they may now be reminded of wounds which have been laughed at, by the ingratitude they reproach. Although they may pass by a very natural transition from the smiles and applauses which attended them to the camp, and the caresses which hung upon their victories, to the cold neglect and base reproach, which they have since endured; yet the fields which the soldier has won, contain no fewer proofs of his valour, because there are no monuments erected there to his memory; and the glories which thicken upon them, and their com-

panions, as they retrace their steps, are not diminished by being contrasted, with the ill-gotten honours of hypocrisy and fraud.

Let us now leave behind us these scenes, so interesting to every man, who is capable of feeling a pride, or who cherishes an interest in his country's honours, and go forward with the process of events, which will ever distinguish our history. The eventful trial, whether the people of these states were to have a government of their own, or were to be disposed of as the caprice of a monarch, or the haughty ambition, or avaricious policy of his ministers might suggest, was decided for ever. A trial more doubtful, and if possible, more *interesting*, was still to be made; *not*, whether the ardent spirits which had been kindled in war, would endure the composure of peace; *not* whether the soldier who had learnt that the fate of his country had been, and might again be, decided by arms, would resume the peaceful occupation of a citizen; *but*, whether out of the confused elements into which the nation was dissolved, could be reared a well ordered structure of government; and whether the last experiment upon the capacity of a people to govern themselves, would not issue in the reproof of our folly, and in making us the very jest and *byword* of those, whose kindness in endeavouring to suppress our rebellion in its infancy, had been so mortifyingly repaid.

The adoption of the constitution of the United States, forms one of the most prominent features in the history of society. Over this political creation, which had no model for its formation, and which was to be made out of chaos; the master-spirit of Washington, in whose name we are met to celebrate this day; of Washington, the sage, as well as the soldier, was called to preside. "Though the pride, and pomp, and circumstance of glorious war, were over," *occupation*, and that of a better sort, remained for our

chief. The destiny not only of the present generation, but of posterity, hung upon the issue. The trembling apprehensions of patriotism were to be dissipated. The most conflicting interests were to be reconciled—and the wretches who watched with eagerness, every speck in our horizon, with the hope that our sky might again be overcast, and that they might direct the storm which should come on, were to be disconcerted and defeated. Gratitude forbids us to forget, that the way had been well prepared for the completion of this momentous work, by the conjoined labours of Hamilton, of Jay, and of Madison. Pardon my mention of these names together. The apostacy of that fallen angel who now sheds his blighting influence over some of the fairest interests of our country, ought not to rob him of the honours of his first estate. His contributions to the *Federalist*, added not a little to its treasures of intelligence, and patriotism. The mind of Mr. Jay, whose name will be held in affectionate remembrance so long as talent is admired, or incorruptible integrity is revered; poured upon the Constitution, some of the brightest rays of its clear and steady light. Hamilton—how shall I speak of the man whom you all knew and all loved; of him who presented in one of its most ennobled forms, the image which the Almighty has stamped of himself upon man; of him whose very *name* lifts up every faculty of my being. But I dare not trust my fond affection, or ambitious admiration, which would fain bring their richest tributes to his memory, with the attempt to do him justice.—That unparalleled man, whose intellectual vision pierced through the thickest clouds of darkness, with as much ease as it wandered along the regions of light, entered the field of controversy, and the spectres which had been conjured up there, by the imaginations of his antagonists and the darkness by which they were surrounded, fled away together.

But notwithstanding what had been done by the united

efforts of these men, much yet remained to be accomplished. There was much honest, and much *dishonest* opposition still to overcome; but at length every obstacle was surmounted, and the constitution was adopted.

To the adoption of the constitution there succeeded for a series of years, what I hope is not yet to be considered a phenomenon in a republican country, a government administered by *wise* and *honest* men. It is not my intention to attempt to develop the principles of the government as it was then administered, so lofty and so pure; principles, which never lost sight of the *honour* of the nation, in providing for its *interests*; principles, which admitted no compromise between the right and the expedient, where they could not be blended; and which carried their possessors on, in the high road of duty, without a single enquiry whether it was the way to preferment. Then there was a sort of enchantment about the American name. Every man felt that his personal reputation was involved in that of his country, and while a wrong done to the nation, roused the sensibility, which ever attaches to individual injury, his country's honours excited an enthusiasm in his bosom, which told him that those honours were *his own*.

During that period, the sanguinary and rapacious government of France had discovered, that *plunder*, if it could not establish a sinking-fund, upon the new principles of French finance, might at any rate afford to the exigencies of the government, what the tax gatherer, by every inquisitorial torture, could not force the subject to surrender, or compel him to discover. 'France wanted money,' and orders were issued to capture American vessels. They were captured, for Frenchmen then were too good economists to burn, or to sink them. But the rights of this nation were not left to be vindicated at the presses of our editors, or even by the pen of the Secretary of State. That high, and true economy, which acknowledges no price-current, in which the value of national honour may be stated, accord-

ing to the circumstances of the market, in *dollars* and *cents*, proclaimed to the government of France, that we had millions for *defence*, but not a cent for *tribute*. Our cannon were then found to be our best diplomatists; and after they had uttered their arguments of thunder, there was no danger even in leaving to our enemies, the task, of drawing the legitimate *conclusions*. It had not then been discovered by what process, nations who had endeavoured to do us harm, should be summoned before ‘the tribunal of reason,’ or even if they were so courteous as to go there without compulsion, to what authority should be entrusted the execution of the sentence to be obtained.

During the period of which I have been speaking, notwithstanding, as our statesmen say, every government, (*except our own*,) is now, and ever has been actuated by interest, and not by justice, an honourable treaty which was at first so much reviled, but which all have since conspired to applaud, was negotiated with England.

But as the task yet remains to me of taking a slight survey of the present situation of our country, I will not incur the censure of wishing to aggravate the enormous responsibilities, under which our present rulers stand to the people, by contrasting them with the men who have gone before them. He might be suspected of unfairness who should attempt to *magnify*, if I may so speak, the *diminutiveness* and *servility* of the spaniel, by placing him at the side of the lion, or should contrast the owl, whose vision is better calculated for the night than the day, and whose wings were never made for soaring, with ‘the towering eagle whose eye never winks, and whose wing never tires.’ Indeed, we should derive little consolation from a comparison like the latter, if we should attempt to make it, when we recollected that *our* “eagle, towering in his pride of flight, was by a mousing owl, hawked at, and killed.” It is indeed an ungrateful task, to return from the pleasing contemplation of the days that are past, to a survey of our

actual condition. But we must not like little children, shut up our eyes and imagine that the objects of our dread cease to exist. Let me not be considered, after what I am about to say, as having taken a partial view of the evils which afflict or threaten us. It is not my intention to trace back our administration to the first step in their descending progress. Few of us covet the gratification which our pride would derive, even from travelling *upwards*, in the path of wretchedness and ruin; and though we might at last arrive at the summit and command a prospect of the whole ground, the prominent objects on it, have been so often surveyed; that we should be repaid for our labour with little else than disgust. But I cannot avoid calling your attention for a moment to the present situation of our country, distinguished as it is, and that most alarmingly, from any in which it has hitherto been placed. On this subject, I shall speak what I think, whatever censure I may incur. No man ought to shrink from expressing his honest opinions before the whole world, for in times like these, silence is either cowardice, or treachery, or both.

Let the hitherto unparalleled embarrassment of our merchants, which we are told by its authors it is not patriotic to speak of, (by the bye, we would thank them for devising some mode to *conceal it*)—let the general distress which pervades the community;—let the destruction of the sources of individual gain and of national revenue, pass for *nothing*. Shall the loss of national character; shall the debasement of public spirit pass for nothing too? If our administration were this day summoned before the bar of the public, and called upon to answer why they have *thrown away* every title to respect, which we once had among the nations of the earth; do you think they would be so regardless of common decency, as to assert, that they have had a proper regard to their *popularity*, from the beginning and that the still more trembling accents which have escaped their lips upon every *fresh* insult and injury from

abroad, have been but so many *echoes* to the voice of the people?—or would they say that the idea of national honour is completely exploded from the new political creed, as one of the vagaries of more chivalric days?—or would they allege, that the *pomp*, which calls upon a nation to be thankful, because the young king of Rome is not troubled with a windy stomach; but craves the breast with imperial appetite, and which spares no expense in the celebration of such an event; and that the *power* which threatens to reduce the world under the mastery of a single man, no where find such profound admirers, as in the persons of *republicans*? And yet is not this triple answer to our accusation, the precise language, of the public *conduct* of our rulers.

Have we lost our senses? Are we here in bedlam; tormenting ourselves with imaginary evils, or fancying that we might still have retained a character which we never had? or is it true, that after having been for years the subjects of every species of abuse from the French government; abuse for which we have received no apology, but ridicule; and after having adopted measures at an infinite expense, which by some magic or other, were to procure the recognition of our rights and reparation for our injuries; we have at length, without either recompense, or apology; returned to the embraces of the emperor, and that too, while he continues to ‘*burn, sink, and destroy.*’ But we are told that the emperor loves the Americans. If this is the species of courtship by which he woos American liberty to his arms; if this is the gentleness of his love, what are we hereafter to expect from his disgust; or from his wrath? Let us recollect we have been told that we were without just political views, without energy, and without honour. Was it this declaration which made us forget our injuries and prompted the cordiality of returning affection? Was it *this* which substituted the smile of reconciliation for the frown of resentment, or the melancholy of patient suf-

fering? If such a declaration had been made when Washington was president, he would have given it such an answer as would have reduced the imperial conqueror, if royalty does not add dignity to slander, to the level of a blackguard. What answer did it receive through Mr. Smith from Mr. Madison? Why simply this, that it was not deemed *expedient* to make any *animadversions* upon the letter of the Duc de Cadore, because information was daily expected from France by the John Adams; and the president wished to adopt appropriate observations to the actual state of affairs. We had, to be sure, been fillipped in the face, but it was not proper to resent that insult, till we might hear whether it had not been followed by others. We may be told, that the president had reason to believe that the decrees were repealed, when he issued his proclamation of November last. To say nothing of the information on this subject, which has been lately divulged; this plea is precluded by the instructions of Mr. Smith to General Armstrong of the 5th of July last, in which he says that a provision for restoring our property must be combined with a repeal of the decrees, as an indispensable evidence of the just purpose of France towards the United States. No such provision was made. Besides, was it not enough that our treaty with France had been violated?—that our vessels which went there by the *invitation* of the government, had been confiscated, and our citizens imprisoned? That the Duc de Cadore had, in relation to the Rambouillet decree, uttered in the face of the world, the most palpable falsehoods?—that unexampled perfidy had been evinced, in the seizure of our property, by the functionaries of the French government, in Naples, in Spain, and in the north of Europe? Was it *necessary*, that the President should be so *ambitious* to volunteer his confidence in the sincerity of Napoleon, and that too, in relation to the pretended revocation, so suspiciously published, and still more suspiciously framed.

Is there for ever to be in the lowest depth of disgrace, a lower still? And shall we never be able to gratify what little pride we may have left, by the assurance that we are at the bottom, and cannot go lower in this dreadful descent? Patience is not on the list of *national* virtues. It may endure suffering with becoming meekness, but let it not hope to melt the heart, or weary the hand of him who applies the scourge. . . . What does this state of things portend? Depend upon it, there is more than one way of conquering a nation. Break down it's spirit, and you paralyze its arm. Let the bosom cease to beat at the approach of dishonour; and the sword will flee to it's scabbard upon the approach of danger. How far will this French alliance carry us? Let him who can inform us why we have gone thus far, tell us where we shall stop. We are soon to have, at the seat of government, *French* representatives from New-Orleans. Louisiana may furnish many more. Are we to unite with the continent of Europe, in the anticommercial system against England, with the hope that she may fall, and we may be safe? Are we to be terrified into the most abject submission to the mandates of the Emperor? Or are we to purge off the impurities of our republican institutions, by bringing them in contact with the hardihood of French virtue, and under the influence of a cordial and damning union with France, gradually be metamorphosed from Americans into Frenchmen. Let those who smile at anticipations like these, first try their powers of grimace upon what is past; and then, turning towards the future, if they *can*, let them smile, and smile, and smile, and be *patriots* still. . . . Am I called upon for a remedy to these evils? My time would not permit me, if modesty would, to suggest any. But one remark may suffice. Let the feelings of the people be as they should, and there will be found among them, intelligence enough to cherish and protect their best interests. . . . The situation of the country, in the single point of view in which I have been considering it, is enough, to absorb all our thoughts. How far the

wrongs and outrages which England has committed upon us might have been avoided by our assuming a manly and imposing attitude at the outset; or how far the differences subsisting between us and her, might now be adjusted in a spirit of conciliation, by an honourable treaty, I shall not attempt to enquire. The character of our national policy, and the convulsions of the times, have only served to increase the embarrassments of our mutual relations, and I fear the time has been suffered to pass by, when the justice of our claims would have found a reinforcement in the *interests* of Britain.

Though we are now bending to the earth under the pressure of ill advised and wicked measures. Though the warning voice of experience too distinctly presages evils to come, compared with which, those we have endured have been but the gentle monitors of their approach, it is no small consolation, that there yet remains among us, a lofty, an unerring, and an unappalled spirit. . . . We who are associated in the name of Washington, still venerate his memory, and I trust, still *cherish* his principles. While we take pride in the sentiments they inspire, let us never forget the *responsibilities* they impose. Let us combine and embody what we can of the intelligence and virtue of the community, that they may act in concert and with effect. Like our departed chief, let us in the hour of extremest peril, collect fresh strength from our disasters, and like him, compel despair itself to furnish new resources for hope. Let us first guard ourselves if possible, against the farther inroad of principles, which would treacherously surrender the citadel of our liberties, or mutilate and destroy every thing in it worthy of protection; and then, if foreign war assails us, we will breast against its shock, a phalanx, which may be broken and destroyed, but which cannot be *conquered*.

To whatever contest we may be called, let us stand *together*; if we fall, 'heaven and earth shall witness that we are innocent,' and if we triumph, let it be the triumph of *us all*.