

AN
ORATION

IN

COMMEMORATION

OF

AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE,

DELIVERED AT

BREWSTER, JULY 4, 1811,

AT THE REQUEST OF THE INHABITANTS.

BY JOHN SIMPKINS, A. M.

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ORATION.

AN unwillingness to refuse the request of parishioners and friends, whom it is my happiness to gratify, induces me at a short notice to address you at this time ; and the motive must operate as an apology, if the well meant endeavour fail of success.

I rise, fellow citizens, to congratulate you, not on the anniversary of a tyrant's birth-day, nor on the anniversary of a tyrant's son. But the day which we now assemble to commemorate with festivity and joy, and we would hope with pious gratitude, is the birth day of American freedom. It is the anniversary of a day which delivered us from the thralldom of colonial servitude—the day of our emancipation from British tyranny ; a day which converted a people who had been a mere appendage to an European monarchy, into a distinct and independant nation, and bid them rank with honour among the nations of the earth, as a free people. Born to be free, let us resolve never to be slaves. Let us especially guard against being enslaved by the arti-

lice and intrigue of those who cannot subjugate us by force. And let us cherish on this occasion sentiments worthy of the dignified character of freemen.

With more pleasure might I address you, with more pleasure might you greet each other on the return of this joyous anniversary, were there nought but subjects of congratulation in the situation of our country. But though thick clouds darken our political hemisphere, yet it may not be unprofitable to assemble this day at the festive board to commemorate the proud era which gave birth to our country as an independent nation. By seeing what was then the conduct of Americans, we may be led to contemplate more attentively our own duties as citizens, and consider with advantage what we should be.

What are the sensations we should experience, what the sentiments we should cherish, when we look back to the perilous season, when the liberties of our country were in danger, and the friends of liberty both in Europe and America trembled for the ark of our national safety? When, like the stripping of Israel, America dared to meet in hostile array the gigantic power of the parent country; well might the old and the new world, like the armies of Israel and the Philistines, gaze with astonishment at the combat. Even of our own citizens there were some, whose attachment to the cause of liberty was real, but whose timidity led them to shrink from

a contest so unequal ; who apprehended that a rencounter betwixt forces so vastly disproportionate must be desperate for their country, that opposition to the parent must bring certain destruction upon the child. Indeed what but the patronage of the God of Heaven could have caused the lighter scale to preponderate ? What but the sovereign mandate of the Lord God of the armies of Israel could have commanded victory to perch on the American eagle ?

Few can form an adequate idea of the unusual disadvantages of our situation at that hazardous moment. Few are sensible of the almost insuperable difficulties our illustrious chieftain was then called to encounter. Placed at the head of a brave but undisciplined militia, who were unaccustomed to the necessary subordination of a military life, with scanty resources and a very trifling quantity of warlike stores, he had to cope with veteran troops, regularly bred to the science of war, renowned for their military prowess, well fed, well clothed, and amply supplied with the implements of warfare. Add to all this, the enemy had already got footing upon our shores, and were seated in the bosom of our metropolis.

Fathers, point the attention of your children to the annals of history, then record the transactions of this memorable crisis. “ Tell ye your children of it, and
 “ let your children tell their children, and their chil-

“dren another generation,” that from age to age they may adore the wonder-working hand of God in displaying divine strength amid human weakness.

Ought not the recollection of those times, “which tried men’s souls,” to awaken in our bosoms sentiments of pious gratitude to the Arbiter of the universe, who controls with equal facility the destinies of nations and individuals? “If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, if it had not been the Lord who was on our side, when men rose up against us: then they had swallowed us up quick, when their wrath was kindled against us.”

Will not the review of former days remind us of the talents and virtues of those who, in the cabinet and field, struggled for the salvation of their country, and under God struggled with success? Never on this occasion should we forget those who fought, who bled, who conquered, that America might be free.

Ought not the recollection of this eventful season to excite our admiration of the heroic spirit which swelled the bosoms of our fathers, and inspired them with the noble resolution to conquer or die? Can we contemplate without profiting thereby, the pure flame of patriotism which warmed their hearts, and consumed in its generous blaze those mercenary views and feelings, which would blast the soul of generous enterprize? Behold them like a band of brothers, pledging their lives, their fortunes, and

their sacred honour to defend their country ; and let us learn the same lesson.

When we call to mind the worthies of the American revolution, we will not surely forget him who was deservedly styled first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen. Beloved WASHINGTON, thou great and good ! whose eminent abilities, united with virtues equally conspicuous, justly entitled thee to this decided pre-eminence ! Long shall thy name be pronounced with delightful eulogy on each annual return of this thy country's natal day. And our praise of thee shall testify that we are not unmindful of thy companions in renown ; nor would we withhold from them the richly deserved meed of applause ! Highly favoured mortal ! Faction recoiled at thy presence, and hid its head in infamy ; the tongue of calumny was silenced, and the venom of party spirit fell harmless at thy feet ! Ah ! how do we need thy presence and thine influence in this day of division, when hearts which should be knit together are become strangely alienated, and the sword may be directed against each other which should be pointed against the common foe ! May generations to come copy thy bright example ! May future magistrates inherit thy wisdom, cherish thy piety, and possess thine enlightened, unwavering patriotism !

But not merely to the admiration of the valour and noble achievements of our countrymen, nor to

the exercise of gratitude for the precious fruits of their conquests, would we confine our attention. With praise to the Most High for the precious gift, let us consider, how the blessings we enjoy may be perpetuated to posterity.

The speaker wishes not to infringe upon the rights of others, and is unwilling to surrender his own. It is my design to address you with frankness, and it will also be my aim, that frankness be connected with moderation. And I shall confide in your candour, to hear with patience, and judge with impartiality.

On many political topics there may be different opinions embraced by persons, who equally wish well to their country. It is said to be a good rule which works both ways, that is, which operates fairly and impartially, whoever may be in power or authority. And in considering the means of perpetuating the blessings of a free government to ourselves, and our descendents, it is proposed to lay down such principles as may apply to every party, and ought to regulate the proceedings of all.

It is surely expedient, that such principles or maxims be deliberately considered, under a government which essentially depends on the breath of popular opinion.

The remarks now made lead me to assign as important means for preserving our freedom, the liberty of speech, and of the press. The free and proper use of the tongue and the pen has caused tyrants to

tremble on their thrones, and has shaken the crown from their heads. These powerful agents in the procurement of liberty are to be regarded as useful auxiliaries in preserving it.

But this great palladium of civil liberty may be subverted; the important privilege of thinking, speaking and writing with freedom upon political subjects may either degenerate into licentiousness, or may be disregarded. Would we long exist a free people, our citizens must individually cherish a free, manly, independent spirit of inquiry into the character of public men, and public measures. They must dare to read, hear, and judge for themselves; and stand aloof from that hardihood of inveterate prejudice which will not credit even official documents, unless found in their own favourite prints.

With regard to the degree of confidence to be placed in our rulers, there are extremes equally to be avoided. A just obedience to the laws, a becoming deference, a manly support to our rulers, we most cordially approve. But God forbid that the American nation should ever repose that unlimited confidence in man, or manifest that blind submission, which would change their rulers into masters. Had such a disposition prevailed in the times of our fathers, the American revolution could not have taken place.

There is a clear distinction betwixt the government and the administration. Men who approve

the former may sometimes reprobate the latter ; and for this very reason, because the administration may be hostile to the constitution, or subversive of the public good. If this distinction be not admitted, those who have been most clamorous against preceding administrations, do in fact stigmatize themselves with the very odium they would cast upon others, of being enemies to the constitution. Will it be pretended, that every one who approves not the policy of administration is unfriendly to the constitution, and an enemy to his country ? If this be the case, those who are now its professed admirers, were once its deadliest foes.

The recollection, that although the government be good the administration may be corrupt, very strongly suggests to our minds the vast, indiscriminate importance of a due attention to the right of suffrage. This is the great lever by which our national respectability may be elevated or depressed. The punctual and faithful exercise of this right is of pre-eminent utility in promoting a just administration of the government under which we live. It is by the operation of this right that the voice of the people is heard, and also obeyed. By the proper use of this inestimable privilege, how richly may our country be benefitted ; by the neglect or abuse of it, how unspeakably injured ! If the Roman emperor who suffered a day to pass without any instance of doing good had reason to exclaim, “ I have lost a day,”

they who neglect the right of suffrage in the election of officers to legislate over them in the commonwealth, have reason to exclaim, I have lost a year.

Let it ever be considered as of primary importance in preserving the immunities of our citizens, that they scrupulously guard against any infringement of the rights of suffrage, and exercise vigilance in selecting for every important office the most suitable characters. Passing by the noisy seeker after office, who obtrudes himself upon their notice, they should constantly fix their eyes “on the faithful of the land.”

The ignorant and profligate should never be considered as candidates for election. For ignorance and vice should be denounced as total disqualifications for responsibility and trust. They are in their very nature inimical to the pure spirit of patriotism. A people in order long to be free must be enlightened and virtuous; and it is unnatural to suppose, that such a people will make choice of unenlightened, unprincipled men.

To give additional weight and efficacy to these remarks, let us hear the opinion of the illustrious WASHINGTON, than whom no one better deserves the title of father of his country. “It is substantially true, (says this great and good man) that virtue is a necessary spring of popular government. Who that is a sincere friend to it can look with in-

difference upon attempts to shake the foundations of the fabric ?” So long as the Almighty beareth rule in the universe, and controlleth the destinies of nations, so long it will remain a sound maxim, that “knowledge, morality and piety, diffused through a nation, are a sure pledge of its welfare ; while ignorance, profaneness and impiety, forebode their destruction.” It is a maxim which should be engraved in letters of brass, that without public virtue no republic can long exist. If we listen to the faithful voice of history, and carefully observe the aspect of our country, we shall perceive that there are three evils which eminently threaten our liberties, and against which it becomes us sedulously to guard, viz. the *corruption of morals*, *party spirit*, and *foreign influence*.

It may be appropriate to the present occasion to touch upon each of these points.

As to the *corruption of morals*, I shall add no more to what I have already offered but to observe, that if the fountain be corrupt, the streams that issue from it will of course be impure. Let purity of election, and purity of morals, ever possess an high rank among the means of perpetuating the liberties of our country.

To these means must be added a salutary caution against the violence of *party spirit*. Through its destructive influence, governments have been overthrown, and the liberties of a nation subverted by

blind but hot-headed zealots, who fondly imagined they were supporting them. It has estranged the hearts of those who were pursuing, by different paths, the same object, the liberties and best interests of their country. It has sometimes pronounced the sentence of condemnation on her most considerate and judicious friends; and has driven to the shades of retirement the most meritorious citizens of which the commonwealth could boast.

Most desirable it certainly is, that good and moderate men would unite their influence to control that *blind spirit of party* which tramples on the rules of propriety, and transports its deluded followers beyond the boundaries of justice; which to carry its own points would separate friends, and alienate the affections of those who feel an equal attachment to the land in which we live.

Let not party names deafen our ears to the voice of justice, nor prevent the adoption of any measures promotive of the public good. Although as in duty bound we maintain such political axioms as we deem to be correct, let us not exclude from our candour all who differ. Let dislike to violent partizans be tempered with compassion towards their honest but misguided adherents. Let us bear in mind that the opinions of mankind are influenced by a variety of circumstances, which produce a diversity of sentiment in the minds of those, whose intentions are equally upright. Would to God that

firmness, tempered with moderation, might frustrate the machinations of evil-minded men, who seek their own aggrandizement instead of the public good !

Good men on both sides of a question deprecate party spirit, that bane of the commonwealth. But how is party spirit to be suppressed ? By coercion ?—Surely not. The free-born mind will revolt at the idea. It will nobly dare to resist all influence, but the influence of argument. And freemen should condemn the use of other weapons. In this land of liberty the freedom of thought cannot be suppressed. And is not the freedom of speech, and of the press, guaranteed by the constitution ? They ought indeed to be used with decorum, and regulated by the dictates of truth.

Let not the dominant party (whichever it may be) presume to wield the arm of arbitrary power. For it is an incontestible truth, “that oppression will make a wise man mad.”

Would we not encourage intestine commotions, we must mutually cultivate a spirit of candour, and preserve the mind open to conviction. Why not be willing to *read*, and *hear*, and patiently canvass what may be offered for consideration ? When the great aim is to *carry a point*, be it right or wrong, the public good must fall a sacrifice ; and bitter animosities, and severe recriminations, will be engendered.

The maxim, that power gives right is detestable. It forms the ground work of despotism. For thus reasons the despot, I have power, and I will use it as I please.

This leads me to offer an additional remark respecting the *majority* and the *minority* under a free government. The one as well as the other has duties to perform. The majority must rule, but not oppress. The minority have rights which are not to be wrested from them. But both the majority and minority equally forfeit their rights by a violation of their duty.

If the majority at any time manifest a vindictive, exterminating spirit; if they are impatient to remove from office all, whose opinions do not quadrate with their own; in a word, if they treat the minority not as fellow citizens, but as foes, will this treatment obtain confidence and respect? Will it compel men to regard their persecutors as friends? Will such a conduct destroy party spirit? Will it not rather have a tendency to exasperate and inflame it? Will it not widen the breach instead of healing it? And put men further at variance, instead of strengthening the bonds of union?

It is not to be expected that numbers will pass for argument with an inquisitive mind. Infallibility is by no means attached to the majority. While we submit to their authority as the ruling power, we are at liberty to scan their measures; and, if er-

roncous, to point out the errors and remonstrate against them.

Virtue and talents may sometimes be in the minority ; and their cause the cause of truth and justice. Was not this the case in Great Britain when the majority were for putting in force the sanguinary schemes of a haughty minister for the subjugation of America ? Did not a virtuous minority in the British parliament nobly protest against the measures which were inimical to us, and powerfully plead our cause ? And do *we* not think that although in the minority they had right on their side ?

A division of the states is justly reprobated. But how is this evil to be prevented ? By mutual forbearance and friendship ; and by justly distributing the public burdens and privileges. If those states who possess the greatest weight in the union, should at any time endeavour to bear down and crush the others by an oppressive influence, it would surely hasten the dreadful catastrophe of national ruin.

It should ever be remembered that the federal constitution, which binds the states together, was the result of mutual concession ; and by the same spirit of conciliation it can alone be preserved.

What were the principles which led to the American revolution ? Was it not the unconquerable love of liberty which could not brook the fetters of slavery, and revolted at the preparations to forge

them? And ought not the same spirit still to be cherished?

In the mean time if we would successfully guard against the bitterness of party spirit, let us beware of indulging *unbecoming partiality* towards *any* foreign nation; which naturally engenders a spirit of division at home. To bear, without resistance, every insult from one nation, whom we choose to place in the catalogue of friends, and to resent to the extreme every offence whether intentional or unintentional from another, which we are determined to call our foe, would savour of such puerile partiality towards one, and such childish antipathy against the other, as ill becomes a free and enlightened people.

On this topic let the paternal advice of our departed chief, in his farewell address, still sound in our ears: “Excessive partiality for one nation, and excessive dislike of another, cause those whom they actuate, to see danger only on one side, and serve to veil and even second the arts of influence on the other. Real patriots who may resist the intrigues of the favourite, are liable to become suspected and odious; while its tools and dupes usurp the applause and confidence of the people to surrender their interests.”

Can we feel satisfied then, when the most notorious insults from one of the parties are thrown into the back ground, and every ostensible offence committed by the other is presented to the public eye in strong and glaring colours?

How easily are prejudices formed and fostered, which blind even good minds, and affect honest hearts ! It might be easy to show, how such prejudices are formed in regard to the colossal powers of the European world. This would be indeed to tread on delicate ground ; and I would not wound a single nerve of sensibility on this joyous occasion.

Will it however be amiss to inquire, as Frenchmen fought by our side in defence of our liberties, is it not natural to entertain a predilection in their favour ? But should not such prejudices be overthrown by the reflection, that “ our great and good ally ” is no more, and that another king, rather emperor, rather despot, has arisen, that “ knows not Joseph.” As Englishmen attempted to wrest from us those liberties for which we contended, burnt our towns, and murdered our citizens, how easy is it to revive that animosity which such scenes excited, and sharpen afresh the spirit of revenge ? But what saith our declaration of independence ? It nobly declares, “ we will hold them as the rest of the world, enemies in war, in peace friends.”

If we dwell upon past wrongs, should we forget, that even Frenchmen once cruelly surrounded the frontiers of our infant country, and aided by savage barbarity inhumanly burnt our dwellings, and murdered defenceless women and children, while British blood freely flowed with American in resisting these calamities ? If Britain hath in any instance

restricted our commerce, or impressed our seamen, should we be unmindful, that the very nation who fought with us the battles of independence, has since burnt our ships, and imprisoned our men, in the face of existing treaties ; and that their insatiate conqueror still holds in his possession millions of our property ? Think ye the tyrant of Europe, who tramples on all republics within his reach, has any real affection for America ? As much as the crocodile when it sheds tears over its prey.

I forbear to enlarge.

BRETHREN,

Is it not time for party spirit to be absorbed in a sense of common danger ? Let us be neither Frenchmen nor Englishmen, but Americans. With frank and honest hearts let us greet each other as fellow countrymen. Let not party spirit nor foreign influence mar the festivities of this day. Let us unite heart and hand to rejoice in our country's good. Let us unite heart and hand to promote it.

For my brethren and companions' sake I would pray, peace be within thee.

I close with a sentiment in which I trust every good mind will unite :

May the American standard never be unfurled in an unrighteous cause ! Then may we safely wish and pray, that the swords of our countrymen may never be unsheathed in vain !