

AN
ORATION,

DELIVERED AT

MONT VERNON, NEW-HAMPSHIRE,

JULY 4, 1808 ;

BEING THE

THIRTY-SECOND ANNIVERSARY

OF

AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE.

BY ROGERS SMITH.

“ Why quit our own, to stand upon foreign ground ? ”

WASHINGTON'S LEGACY.

AMHERST, N. H.

PRINTED BY JOSEPH CUSHING.

1808.

MONT VERNON, JULY 4, 1808.

SIR,

We are appointed a Committee to wait on you, and present you with the thanks of the Committee of Arrangements, for the ingenious and patriotic Oration this day delivered by you, and request the favor of a copy for the Press.

WILLIAM BRADFORD,
JOHN CARLETON,
ZEPHANIAH KITTERIDGE.

Dr. ROGERS SMITH.



JULY 5, 1808.

GENTLEMEN,

I herewith submit the copy requested, with all its imperfections, to your disposal, and to the candor of the public. Permit me to express the high sense I feel of the honor done me by the Committee of Arrangements, and of the flattering terms in which you have been pleased to communicate their request.

I am, Gentlemen,
most respectfully,
your sincere friend,
and obliged humble
servant,

R. SMITH.

Maj. WM. BRADFORD,
JOHN CARLETON, Esq.
Dr. ZEPHANIAH KITTERIDGE.

ORATION.

*HONORED FATHERS, AND
RESPECTED FELLOW CITIZENS,*

IT has been the practice of all nations, in every period of the world, to devote certain days to public festivity and rejoicing. The events intended to be celebrated upon these occasions have been various, as the manners, customs and habits of mankind. Those important occurrences however, in the economy of providence, more immediately connected with their religious or political concerns, have chiefly been the objects of national commemoration. In those countries where monarchical governments are established, and hereditary succession in the rulers is the law of the land, the birth-day of a prince or nobleman, whether a wise man or a fool, is hailed by the thoughtless multitude as a sure presage of the aggrandizement and felicity of their country, and the dawn of a golden age. Though they are almost always disappointed in these sanguine expectations, they still continue to rejoice at each returning anniversary of the day. And when the military despot, bloated with savage ferocity, has waded through seas of innocent blood, and stalked over fields of horrid carnage and devastation to victory and law-

less empire, the hapless wretches, subjected to his sway, are compelled to celebrate his conquest with hypocritical expressions of gladness.

But the sublime spectacle of a brave and free people celebrating the era of their emancipation from the deadly grasp of tyranny, is a precious novelty reserved for the free-born sons of Columbia alone. To devote this anniversary to festive hilarity and joyful recollection, is highly commendable and useful. When the expression of our pleasurable sensations is restrained within the bounds of decency and good order, it serves to inspire the mind with gratitude to the Supreme Ruler of the universe for the rich blessings we enjoy, while it animates us with a noble enthusiasm to emulate those deeds of heroic valor, through the instrumentality of which we inherit liberty, the boon so justly prized.

We are assembled, Fellow Citizens, to commemorate the most glorious political event recorded in the annals of time. Thirty-two years ago this day, the then British Colonies in America, animated beyond all former example by the unconquerable spirit of liberty, and in defiance of the colossal power of the mother country, dared to pronounce in the face of heaven and the audience of a wondering world, the solemn declaration, that these "United States were, and of right ought to be, free, sovereign and independent."

But how shall I, unused as I am to public declamation, and too young to recollect the important events we this day celebrate, lead your reflections upon the joyous occasion? Will you go back with me, in retrospect, to the migration of our pious and venerable forefathers to the inhospitable shores of America?

But let us first turn our attention for a moment, to the nature, design, and end of civil government.

“That all men are born free and equal,” agreeably to the declaration of Independence which has just been read, is, beyond all rational controversy, a self-evident truth. It will not, it is presumed, at this day, be openly denied by any in this enlightened country. All men therefore are equally interested in the institutions of civil society. Government originates in the weakness and depravity of individuals. In a state of nature every man retains all his natural rights, and must unaided protect them all, against the unrestrained encroachments of all his fellow creatures, and the numerous dangers that surround him, or suffer them to be wrested from him by violence, or lost by accident. But this he is unable to do, and therefore when he enters into society he exchanges a part of his natural rights for civil rights. These last consist chiefly in his claims upon the united strength of all the individuals of the community to which he belongs, to protect and secure the rights he retains, and his right, in common with his fellow citizens, of being invested with the authority of civil government. Hence it is apparent, that when man enters into the social compact, the sum total of his rights is not diminished, but that he only relinquishes a part, and receives a new kind of rights as an equivalent. Hence also it appears, as was before observed, that government is founded in individual impotence and depravity, “and has for its” only legitimate “end, the strength and equal security of all.”

I am aware that this doctrine of the equal rights of man is unpalatable to some. But the conclusion from hence, that it is not well founded, is by no means just. On the contrary, it is founded in the majestic simplicity of nature, the eternal law of nature's God, and the unchangeable reason of things. Some have attempted to maintain, that a few are born with the natural right to govern, than which a greater absurdity never entered the disturbed imagination of a bedlamite. From this ridiculous notion originated the folly of hereditary succession, the divine right of kings, governmental infallibility, and the whole Pandora's box of political evils with which the world has ever been afflicted.

As government is thus founded on the ceded rights of the individuals constituting the community over which it is established, and as its design is to afford protection and security to their retained rights, it clearly follows, that whenever such protection and security are withholden, those ceded rights revert of course to the original possessor, and there is an end of the just authority of government. Hence the sovereignty, which in all governments must reside somewhere, is in the people. When they no longer experience those benefits and advantages which government was designed to impart, they have an indisputable right to depose it, and institute another on its ruins. Hence of all the different forms of government that have existed in the world, the elective representative form is undoubtedly by far the best, as it is best calculated to secure the governed against oppressive encroachments of power, to maintain and support their unalienable rights, and to confirm and perpetuate to them all the invaluable blessings and enjoyments incident to the social state.

The foregoing observations are made, from no design to weary your patience with theoretical speculations, but from an honest conviction, that such principles ought always to be recognized upon occasions like the present. But we will advert to other themes.

About two centuries have passed away, since the first settlers of this country, driven almost to desperation by the coercive policy of the old despotic governments under which they lived, sought an asylum in the wilderness of this western world. They were not only oppressed themselves in their native land, beyond human forbearance, but they anticipated with painful presage, more dreadful oppression in reserve for their offspring. Deeply impressed, therefore, with the love of liberty, and “tremblingly alive” with solicitude to bequeath to their children a blessing they knew so well how to appreciate by the want of it, they became voluntary exiles from the land of their nativity—traversed the stormy Atlantic subjected to all the fatigues and perils of the seas, and at length arrived on these shores. But here they found not a quiet retreat. They had landed on a wild, uncultivated coast, which yielded them no supplies for their subsistence. Savage beasts of prey, and the more savage and barbarous Indians, were here to assail them. Sicknes and want attacked them in their most frightful shapes, and death, in these circumstances rather a friendly messenger to his victims, was commissioned among them to lessen their inconsiderable numbers. In short, the multiplied and indescribable difficulties, hardships, and dangers they encountered, were equalled only by the steady fortitude, persevering resolution, and unrepining patience with which they endured them. Supported by an unwavering confidence in the guardian care of heaven, and animated by the cheering prof-

pect of effecting a peaceful settlement, where themselves and their descendants to the latest generation, might enjoy unmolested the sweets of civil and religious freedom, they surmounted with incredible magnanimity, all obstacles in the way, till at length their exertions were crowned with success.

Scarcely had these infant colonies emerged from a barbarous and bloody Indian war, and smiling peace again visited them, when the endless collisions of Great Britain and France had matured another conflict in which they were destined to act a conspicuous part. Their population had now extended, and their resources so far increased, as to render them essentially serviceable to the mother country in the war with her hated rival. Accordingly large forces were levied in the colonies to act in subordination to, and in concert with, those from England, against the French possessions in Canada and the eastern provinces. And although the laurels achieved at Louisburgh, Quebec, and the western frontiers, were surreptitiously borne away to adorn the brow of royal minions at home, yet they were chiefly won by the hardy valor of colonial troops.

At the close of this war Great Britain, though ultimately victorious, found herself embarrassed with a load of debt. And being jealous of the rising greatness of her colonies, she conceived the base and treacherous idea of reducing them to the condition of slaves. She began her attempts by imposing upon them taxes without their consent. This right she affected to claim as a recompense for the maternal care with which she had watched over their infancy, and for the protection she pretended to have recently afforded them in the war. Pitiful and vain pretence ! Its injustice was only equalled by its folly and extravagance. Every rational and

discerning politician has long since ceased to doubt that Great Britain originally designed to annex her colonies to the crown as a conquered country. The present line of kings in England derived their power originally from conquest, and therefore the idea of extending their territory in this way could not be strange. This opinion was further corroborated by her obstinate perseverance in those coercive measures, so evidently in direct violation of those colonial charters, by which government had solemnly pledged itself to guarantee to them all the liberties, privileges and immunities of British subjects at home. Against such outrageous proceedings the colonists remonstrated and petitioned again and again, in the most respectful and loyal terms, but they remonstrated, they petitioned in vain. The royal ear was rendered deaf (if indeed it were not naturally deaf to the cries of the oppressed) to the just and reasonable complaints of his dutiful subjects in America, by the overbearing influence of a corrupt and bigoted ministry. Nothing short of absolute conquest and unconditional submission, would satiate the gigantic cravings of royal ambition. Hence when they became apprehensive, from the cool and determined opposition of the colonists to their illegal system of taxation, that their measures were premature, they were induced from motives of selfish policy, to remove the grievances complained of in part, and restrain themselves a little in their mad career of oppression. But still they adhered to their principle, and by a solemn act of the Legislature declared, that they had a right to "bind the colonies in all cases whatsoever."

To this unlimited extent of domination the colonies could not submit. Indeed submission would have justly merited the chains that were preparing to be fastened upon them and their posterity forever.

Finding at length that all peaceable means of resistance were unavailing, they nobly resolved to defend their rights with the sword, or perish in the magnanimous attempt. Heaven heard with complacency the solemn asseveration of the oppressed to live free or die, and the sacred oath was recorded in indelible characters in the archives of eternity! Royal troops had been sent to Boston to overawe the inhabitants, to support their pretensions to a right of taxation, and to enforce the collection of those taxes. These troops commenced the dreadful attack, and the peaceful plains of Lexington first drank the blood of those heroes who fell martyrs to the glorious cause of liberty and the rights of man. The well fought action at Bunker's hill soon followed, where fell the brave Warren, his country's first hope, all covered with glory.

But time would fail me to recount all the deeds of valor performed by our countrymen in the martial field. Nor is it necessary. Some of you, Fellow Citizens, were actors in those sanguinary scenes. The recollection of such cannot be in any degree enlivened by the feeble efforts of the speaker to whom your candor is now listening. Suffice it to remark, that under the unrivalled military skill of the immortal WASHINGTON, and his brave compeers, by whose unwearied exertions a regular and effective army was soon made out of raw, undisciplined yeomanry, our country was safely conducted, through difficulties which none but freemen could endure, to the desired haven of independence and peace.

The unequal contest is now ended, and our haughty foes retire deeply impressed with conviction how vain and idle a thing it is to contend with a people determined to be free.

On the part of Britain the revolution was marked, in many instances, with the most inhuman and savage barbarity ; but on the part of the United States, uniformly with a calm and dispassionate deliberation, mild energy, and praise-worthy moderation, before unknown in the history of revolutions.

Our Independence thus atchieved, returning peace found us not in a condition to insure its long continuance. We had indeed won the goddess Liberty to our shores, but could offer her little encouragement to make this her permanent abode. The old confederation being found inadequate to the purposes of government, it became indispensably necessary to establish some other in its stead. To effect this important purpose, the delegated wisdom of the nation was convened with the hero and sage of Mount Vernon, the saviour of his country, at their head, the result of whose deliberations was the present constitution of government. It was laid before the several states for their acceptance, and, after mature deliberation and full discussion, adopted by them, and thus became the supreme law of the land. The organization of government under it soon took place, and now for almost twenty years, during which it has been administered, for the most part, in faithful conformity to constitutional principles, the United States have been increasing in wealth, in population, in respectability and happiness, with a rapidity which has astonished the world, and of which all former ages afford no parallel.

Let us consider a moment the nature of this constitution and government which have been the prolific source of so many blessings. Combining all that is excellent in the forms, principles, and precedents, of all other governments in the world, it is happily free from almost all their imperfections. It is built upon the only just foundation, the sove-

reignty of the people, as its chief corner stone. Should it be asked, by what name it ought to be designated? We reply it may justly be denominated a representative democracy. The power resides in the people, and is exercised solely for their benefit by delegation or proxy. A pure unmixed democracy, like that of the ancient Greeks and Romans, is incompatible with the modern state of society, especially in an extensive country. The concerns of a great nation cannot be regulated, and laws for the protection of life, liberty and property, cannot be made by the whole community assembled in a body, without great confusion and inconvenience.

A few therefore are selected by the people, and invested with power to do these things for them. But still the principle is the same. Democracy then is not that vile thing, that hideous monster it is so industriously represented to be. Since it is the vital principle of that constitution and government, which have rendered the United States so great, so prosperous and happy, what opinion can we rationally entertain of the conduct of those who have taken such unwearied pains to bring it into contempt?

We are indeed told, that although our government is excellent in theory, it is not so in practice; that it is not sufficiently energetic to endure the storms of faction, and cannot be long maintained. But who tells us this alarming story? The very persons who compose this faction, and who are secretly plotting to destroy the government. Here is sage discernment indeed!—The malicious incendiary praises the spaciousness, elegance and convenience of your house, but at the same time takes care to warn you that it cannot stand long, while he is the very wretch who is meditating the fulfilment of his own prophecy, by feloniously burning it to ashes!

It is a serious truth, which shall not be concealed upon this occasion, that there exists in our country a faction who cherish the most bitter enmity to the fundamental principles of our constitution. This party have pursued their favorite object, which is the total overthrow and destruction of our free and happy government, with a zeal and perseverance worthy of a better cause. No art, no sophistry has been left untried ; no calumny, no slanderous epithet, nor vile misrepresentation has been spared to accomplish their iniquitous purpose.

When by sly insinuations, cloaked with hypocritical professions of attachment to that very constitution they were laboring to destroy, nothing has been gained, they have in some instances resorted to open attacks. Of this description are certain resolves for amendment of the constitution, introduced by a Connecticut Senator, who undoubtedly ranks high as a leader of this faction, at the last session of Congress. Let these resolves be once passed by Congress, and accepted by the States, and it requires little sagacity to see, that the constitution is gone, and by a bold stroke the object of its enemies at once obtained.

But whence originated this faction ? It originated from what is called the Essex Junto. From this source, as from a polluted fountain, have issued those torrents of corruption which have almost overwhelmed our land. Hence have proceeded that keenness of party animosity, and those civil dissensions, which have at some periods nearly annihilated our internal peace and tranquillity. The great political question which has been so much agitated in our country, when stripped of its appendages, and reduced to its naked simplicity, is this ; Shall we support our constitution, or shall we not ? There is then no difficulty in deciding, if these observations be true, to

whose account ought to be charged the unhappiness resulting from this political contest.

But whence came the Essex Junto? It originated in the opposition to our glorious struggle for Independence. Although republicans can readily forgive, it cannot be forgotten, that there was a large number of royalists in our country in the revolutionary war, who exerted all their force to prevent the acquisition of the inestimable boon for which the United States were so nobly contending. This Junto was the rallying point, the focus, the centre of attraction of this base and unprincipled opposition. It still exists under the imposing characteristic of federalism, and still continues to breathe out the same malignant anathemas against our government and all those who are honestly disposed to support it.

The present administration have sustained, with dignified calmness and fortitude, a very large share of this grovelling abuse and scurrilous opposition. To recite but a small part of the fulsome stories, groundless conjectures, and pert inuendoes, which have been lavished in boundless profusion upon the public and private character of President Jefferson, and attempted to be palmed upon the public as facts, would be an insult upon the patience and dignity of a rational audience.

Intrenched behind no sedition law to parry these assaults, he has borne them with heroic patience for almost eight years, sensible that his administration must be approved or condemned according to its more intrinsic merit or demerit. Full of days and honor, and animated with the cheering reflection that he has devoted a long life to the faithful service of his beloved country, the good old man is about to retire from the busy scenes of public life, to the tranquil shades of do-

ness of domestic felicity. And may the blessing of his affectionate fellow citizens accompany him to his retreat, and abide with him there, till his "mortal shall put on immortality," and he shall be translated to the "abodes of more than mortal freedom!"

In the course of his administration new and extraordinary difficulties have occurred. The situation of our foreign relations has been critical and alarming. The principal belligerents of Europe, England and France, have vied with each other in making inroads upon the established law of nations, and trampling upon the maritime rights of neutrals. Against these unjustifiable encroachments, as extended to the United States, our government has persevered in remonstrating in a firm and dignified tone. These remonstrances have been uniformly disregarded.

At length the cruisers of Britain boldly enter our waters, and without provocation, within the sanctuary of our own harbors, wantonly murder the unoffending citizens of a sovereign and independent state. The outrage committed on the Chesapeake, excited the just resentment of the American people to a high degree.—This resentment at first seemed to be universal, and promised to absorb all party distinctions; till it was announced from the head quarters of federalism that G. Britain can do no wrong, and therefore that she must be justifiable in this affair.—At once the opposition to the firm and dignified measures of defence adopted by our government at this perilous juncture, spread with the rapidity of lightning through the well disciplined ranks of British partisans in every corner of the United States, and they doubled their diligence in advocating the royal cause, as if to atone for a momentary forgetfulness of their sworn allegiance to the crown.

Much has been said against the Embargo, and many slanderous misrepresentations circulated respecting it, with a view to disaffect the people towards the administration. It is true this measure bears hard upon us all: There is not a man in the United States but feels individually in a greater or less degree the disadvantages resulting from it. But shall it therefore be reprobated as foolish and impolitic? Have the descendants of the heroic assertors of our Independence become so degenerated, that they can bear no privations? Has the rage for commercial enterprise, and the sordid love of gain, predominated over their love of country? We trust not; but still believe, that a large majority of our citizens are animated with a spark of that celestial flame, which inspired the heroes of the revolution with courage to endure all privations. Ask the opposers of the embargo seriously, what measure they would have substituted, and they can give no answer but what is pregnant with inconsistency.

The truth is, the opposition to this measure in particular, as well as all the measures of our government in general, originates from an unjustifiable partiality to the interests of Great Britain. This is evinced by the consideration, that from her insular situation, and her dependence upon commerce for support, these measures operate more injuriously upon her than upon any of the other belligerent powers; and by the avowed attachment these oppositionists have uniformly manifested to her prosperity and welfare.

Attempts have been made by our government, in the true spirit of amity, for more than four years past, to adjust our differences with Great Britain by negotiation. Every proposition consistent with our national honor and Independence has been made to obtain the desirable accommodation,

But let the history of the chicanery practised upon our ministers at the court of St. James', and the Quixotic and farcical adventure of Mr. Rose to negotiate in the United States, announce the result. There exists not a tittle of evidence to inspire a belief, that ever the British government sincerely wished to adjust the dispute upon terms of reciprocal advantage. We are told indeed that these difficulties might have been settled long before this time. No doubt; but we must have purchased a treaty at the dearest possible rate, the sacrifice of a portion of our Independence.

What will be the final result of these disputes remains a secret in the impenetrable gloom of futurity.

Lowering clouds, portentous of the direful calamity of war, seem hovering on the verge of our political horizon. Whether they will be dissipated by the sunshine of peace, or gather to a tempest which shall burst on our heads, is a dreadful uncertainty, which a few months in all probability will remove.

Americans! It nearly concerns us to be prepared for either event. Our Independence is threatened, Great Britain views it with an envious eye, and France perhaps would filch it away by artifice. Let us nobly resolve then, in imitation of those patriots who sacrificed their lives for its achievement, that we will defend the invaluable jewel at every hazard. Believe me, no price is too dear, no sacrifice too great, for its defence and preservation. It is our political all. Relinquish the least imaginable portion of this treasure, and it is a gone case with our country.

Cherish religion and morality, as the only sure foundation of national or individual happiness. Countervail the predominance of those vicious habits and practices, which are the bane of civil society. Banish all partiality for any country but our own, and love only America. Firmly adhere to the constitution as the anchor of our hope, and the sacred palladium of our dearest rights.

Approach it for amendments with the utmost caution, always bearing in mind, that under this specious pretext, it may in time be exchanged for another and quite different instrument.

View with patriotic jealousy all disorganizers, and those who would effect a division of the States, under whatever plausible disguise they may lurk.— Finally, promote a general diffusion of knowledge, and cherish brotherly love and unanimity upon the pure and unadulterated principles of genuine Republicanism. So shall we secure and perpetuate those dear-bought liberties and inestimable privileges which distinguish us so widely from all other nations in the world. And may the God of heaven grant, who controls the destinies of empires, and whose alone is the rightful sovereignty of the universe, that these blessings may be transmitted inviolate to posterity from generation to generation, till closing time shall shift this mortal scene, and boundless eternity absorb the transitory monuments of human wisdom.

FINIS.
