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AN  
ORATION

ON THE

DEATH OF GEORGE CLINTON,

LATE

VICE PRESIDENT

OF THE

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

GEORGE CLINTON SOCIETY.

On the 20th of May, 1812.

—●—  
By ELBERT HERRING, Esq.  
—●—

NEW-YORK:

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AT a stated meeting of the George Clinton Society, held at Union Hotel, the 21st inst. the following resolutions were unanimously adopted.

*Resolved*, that the thanks of this society be given to Elbert Herring, Esq. for his eloquent and patriotic oration delivered at the request of the society, on the evening of the 20th instant.

*Resolved*, that Walter Osgood, Charles Dickinson, jun. and John M Kensie be a committee to inform him of the preceding resolution.

## AN ORATION.

FELLOW CITIZENS,

BEHOLD us collected to deplore our common bereavement. Private avocations and private grief suspend to bow in deep and general sorrow over the tomb, where rests a father of his Country. That frame is now inanimate, which lately contained a spirit, that courted peril in its Country's cause, and feared its God alone. That arm is nerveless, which bore the sword of victory, when the Enemy furled his Standard, and withdrew from our shores his diminished legions. Bend over the grave where CLINTON lies, ye aged Sires! his prowess gave you safety. Bend over the Hero's grave, ye Youth! he was the Champion of your freedom. Lamented Patriot! a nation mourns thy death, a nation which thou hast benefited by thy counsel and protected by thy valor. Thy memory lives, and when eyes now filled with tears are quenched in death, and hearts now sunk in grief moulder in the dust, thy glory shall survive to inflame future ages with admiration of thy heroic deeds, with emulation of thy exalted virtues.

We have met to testify our respect and our sorrow for departed worth ; an occasion of such general concern as to strike the chord, which connects our individual with our national sympathies. Another star, that presided over the Revolution which gave our Country Freedom, has disappeared from our Hemisphere, drawn to its parent source of light and Glory. A kindred gloom invests our hearts while we observe the space once illumined by its lustre, now wrapt in darkness. But let us bow in submission to the will of Heaven, and chasten our sorrow by the reflection, that the life which has terminated, was spent in usefulness ; and let us sooth our affliction by a recital of the achievements and the virtues which stamped the hero and formed the patriot.

The illustrious man, whose decease has called forth these testimonials of affectionate sorrow, was entitled in an eminent degree to the regard of his fellow-citizens. Undissembling and unassuming, his manners were a transcript of his mind, denoting that genuine simplicity, peculiarly adapted to republican character. More intent on performance than on profession, his words left no impression of dubiousness, but seemed to partake of action as they flowed from his lips, and to give form and body to the subject of discourse. There was nothing evasive, ambiguous, or subtle, in his public or private deportment. His frank-



ness resulted from a love of truth, which was conspicuous in all his actions. His modest deportment proceeded from natural feelings, and was cherished by just perceptions of its suitability. Conversant with affairs of state, and exalted in political station, he retained a courteous and unaffected freedom of demeanor, that made him accessible to all who sought his intercourse, and released from restraint the meanest capacity and the lowest degree. His habits were untainted by voluptuousness, unstained by luxury, and in conjunction with many original traits, caused him strongly to resemble the eminent men in the early period of Roman history, whose pure morals and ardent love of country have procured them the admiration of all succeeding times. The transactions in which he participated, were of a nature peculiarly interesting, and brought his qualities and endowments into broad light and intimate acquaintance, while the conspicuous and important part he bore in them, identified him with the most splendid and beneficent event in the annals of nations—the establishment of a republic founded on the rights of man.

The deceased patriot was a native of the State of New-York, to whose interests he displayed, through the whole course of his life, a devoted attachment; evincing the prevalence of those sympathies which endear birth-place; and whose wel-

fare he cultivated with so much ability and success, as justly to acquire him the title of its political father.

Before the era of our independence, he was a member of the assembly under the colonial government. Severe contests concerning the prerogatives of the crown agitated that popular branch of the legislature, and at that period he stood forth conspicuous as the defender of the rights of the people. In that field of controversy, what could they expect to reap, who opposed the encroachments of power, but the reproach of conforming advocates, the resentment of petty tyrants, and the persecution of profligate ministers? But virtuous minds are not retarded in the performance of duty by calculations of loss, or estimates of exposure; and Clinton, associated with a few others who cherished the holy flame of freedom in their breasts, firmly and boldly contested the claims of kingly authority, detected the insidious purposes of usurpation, and rescued our chartered privileges from the grasp of tyranny. At length a mad experiment of the British parliament, in contempt of justice, and in violation of right, excited by a spirit of domination, regardless of reason as impatient of forms, which put the first principles of civil government at the mercy of treasury acquisitions, and subjected Magna Charta to the jurisdiction of a stamp system, terminated the relations of colony and parent

country, and produced the war of independence. Then first the American eagle expanded its wing and directed its flight towards the sun; then first the genius of freedom consecrated the shores of Columbia, and opened an asylum for persecuted man.

The energies of Clinton now expanded themselves into dimensions proportionate to the sphere of action that opened on their view, and recognized their own power in the perspicacity, which discerned the extent of the trial, and in the ardor which prompted the encounter. The clouds, which had for some time before hovered over the political atmosphere, gloomy and portentous, now burst in thunder, and the menacing indications settled in the tempest's fury. Assure your hearts, Columbia's children! 'tis not a transient storm. The fierce contention of the elements shall endure and try your fortitude with cruel sufferings. Confirm your valor, ye champions of liberty! the contest will be long and bloody, before the swords, that glitter in her cause, shall rest upon her altar. Unnumbered sighs shall virgins heave, unnumbered pangs shall parents feel; widows shall wail and orphans weep, and want shall pinch and desolation spread around, before the star of peace rises from beneath the eastern wave on the chosen land of freedom.

The war of the revolution now commenced, and Clinton, who had vindicated his country's

rights in the senate, flew to arms to protect them in the field. The United States presented at that time a singular, but a glorious spectacle : a people unused to battle, undisciplined and unarmed, opposing their naked breast to veteran legions under the conduct of skilful and experienced generals. Our land had not become, through the medium of military operations, the scene of emprise and the school of war. Military tactics were little understood, because little wanted ; and a firelock and cartridge box were reckoned by the inhabitants, the only requisites of the soldier. History will tell with wonder, and posterity hear with pride, the undismayed spirit and the unsubdued courage of our patriot soldiery ; their patient endurance of hunger and of nakedness amid the inclemency of seasons and the fatigues of service ; their heroic achievements under hardships and sufferings without a parallel. But they fought for their firesides and families, and the God of armies approved their cause and led them to victory.

The colony of New York, having declared itself an independent state, Clinton was elected by the suffrages of his fellow citizens to the chief magistracy, which embraces under our constitution, the supreme investment of its military and civil authority. This station, though honorable and highly illustrative of the confidence reposed in his

abilities and integrity, was subjected by the crisis to peculiar responsibility and peril, and required more than an ordinary exercise of firmness, intelligence and valor. But when duty called, he ever held danger in contempt; and it was a maxim with him, that his country not only had a claim on his services, but a right to life itself in her defence. His was the courage of a mind zealous of right, and disciplined to virtue; that surveyed hazard without dread, and danger without dismay. In the camp and in the cabinet, he equally evinced a composure and self possession, that bespoke a reliance on his own powers to meet occurring exigency, and preparation for any event that might befall. He beheld an incensed monarch proscribing him as a rebel; he beheld hostile armies spreading around, and the territory under his government becoming the theatre of war. With an observing eye, but tranquil spirit, he saw the storm rolling on: he put himself and his country on the protection of heaven, and calmly awaited its approach. Wise as Cato in counsel, brave as Leonidas in battle, but happier than those patriot heroes in destiny, his mind devised the policy adapted to the crisis, and his arm assisted in execution. A system of defence, commensurate to the occasion in the fullest extent of attainable means, was constantly set in motion. His presence inspired confidence; his activity prompted

dispatch, his ingenuity suggested expedients, till all the arduous preparations of conflicting war, embattled troops, munitions and entrenchments started on the sight, and returned the note of proud defiance. Washington viewed with admiration this sudden developement of martial energies, and acknowledged with cordial approbation the benefits conferred by Clinton on the sacred cause which Washington alone could have guided with safety and crowned with success. But sacred as was that cause, and bold and fearless as were the heroes who inscribed their names on its banners, attesting to conquer or die, it was condemned to the probation of peril and disaster. The annals of those days depict in mournful phrase, the encompassed and discomfited state of the American arms. Never was so unequal a contest maintained during a period of gloom, and under insuperable difficulties. Ever green be the sod that covers the mouldering remains of the defenders of his country, who fought her battles with noble constancy, when the green sod alone appeared to be the earnest of her service, and the meed of her requital.

The concerns of civil functions mingled with the cares of the camp, and demanded of Clinton intensesness of application and incessant mental exertion. The executive charge of a state, newly born to independence, invaded by a vengeful

foe, and sustaining within its confines a numerous body devoted to the ancient jurisdiction of kingly authority, was arduous, toilsome and not unfrequently afflicting. It called for the unceasing efforts of wisdom in exploring the untrodden paths of legislation suited to the crisis; for the habitual exercise of discretion, in determining the mean betwixt clemency and vigor, adapted to the wayward habits of warfare; for the constant display of firmness to resuscitate the decaying efficacy of the laws, to infuse a suitable dread of their penalties, grown lax in the commotions of the revolution, and to keep in subjection the spirit of revolt, always restless, always active. How well he acquitted himself in discharging the duties of his station, the tranquil course of his government, unmarked by any stretch of prerogative, untainted by a single instance of abuse of power, admirably manifests. The sovereignty of the laws afforded protection and quiet, and war waved its banners in obedience to the sceptre of justice.

At length the struggle of arms terminated successfully for American freedom, and the genius of Great Britain, deploring the folly and wickedness of its cabinet councils, affixed with a sigh her signet to the treaty, that acknowledged the independence of the United States. Peace resumed her benignant reign, and assured to agriculture the harvest of its labor, and to commerce

the profits of its enterprize. The horn of plenty diffused around the blessings of abundance and of health. As the ploughshare furrowed the fields, where battles had been fought, the husbandman would pause in mournful regard over human bones, mouldering in the earth, victor and vanquished commingling in the clod, then bless the heavens for peace and liberty.

The government of this state, which had been so ably conducted by Clinton during the revolution, was again confided to his administration; and repeated trials of the elective franchise proved him the favorite, as he was the friend of the people. His claims on their esteem did not rest upon shining qualities, that dazzle to blind, nor upon ingenious systems of civil policy, whose fundamental principles, true in the abstract, are fallacious in their application to human affairs. He was the practical statesman, sound in judgment, prompt in execution, determined in purpose. He had not studied the metaphysics of politics, nor did his genius ever expatiate in the subtleties of logic, or the refinements of philosophy: but the morality of politics was as familiar to him, as the debates of the senate, or the conflict of the field. The domestic relations of a government, he well knew, were to be protected by the constitution and the laws; and its foreign relations, he equally well knew, reposed round the sublime base of



national power, accoutred in armor, determined on right.

The adoption of the federal constitution, having connected by a golden chain, the several state sovereignties in an union of interests, of objects, and of power, behold a commonwealth of free states and of free citizens, entering on the career of empire, embarking on the political sea, where ambition and lawless power, the thirst of domination, the cupidity of gain, the desire or the fear of conquest produce unceasing agitation. Such is the condition of this world, that the best intentions of acting rightly are often overruled by the follies or the crimes of others. The American republic has already, in its short experience, encountered this evil in the constitution of things, and finds an appeal to arms necessary to support those rights which its arms had before acquired.

Clinton, venerable in years, though unimpaired in faculties, had administered for several years the second office in the federal government, which gained respect from his name, and lustre from his character. His orb, which still glowed as it declined, seemed to rest as it approached the horizon, and to shine with a mellow and steady light; but it has sunk beneath the verging line of time, and quenched its rays in the illimitable ocean of eternity. Let our sorrows mourn the

illustrious dead. Let gratitude and grief mingle their emotions over the tomb of Clinton!

Greatness of character is to be appreciated by the ability and virtues displayed in conduct; but when the sphere of its action is dignified and ennobled, and the occasions of its exercise are important and illustrious, it then reflects superadded lustre. That perspicuity which taught Clinton to seize the critical moment, and to suit the means to the occasion; that sagacity which explored the range of probable conjunctures, and anticipated their purposes; that fertility of invention, which developed expedients, and drew forth resources from new combinations; that nerve, which produced the firmness of the politician and the valor of the soldier; that natural probity, which invested right with divine sanction; that unconquerable spirit of patriotism, that rushes on danger and death to serve its country; these qualities would have ranked him among the nobility of nature, though the tenant of a hamlet, and these qualities would have enabled him, had he been called to the charge, to guide the destinies of our republic safe amid contending nations, resplendent among empires.

He is dead, and his country wears the habiliments of grief. His race is run, but he had reached the goal, where glory is the prize. His tale is told, but it is one of enduring virtue, of

magnanimity and of heroism, that never remitted: whose excellent moral inculcates the noblest precepts and inspires the finest feelings, teaches disinterested love of country as the best quality of the citizen, and builds true greatness on the devotion of our endowments, and our actions to the service of virtue and the cause of freedom, the genuine and beneficent interests of the human race.

FINIS.









