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An Oration
by
E. L. ^{Esq.} Robt.



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FORTY FIFTH ANNIVERSARY

OF

AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE,

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

CHARLESTON RIFLEMEN,

AND PUBLISHED AT THEIR REQUEST.



By ROBERT ELFE, Esq.

A Member of the Corps.



"Time overthrows the illusions of opinions,
and establishes the decisions of nature."



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ORATION.

THE lively emotions which swell the bosom of the patriot on the return of this day, are sanctified by the spirit of devotion. We assemble, FELLOW CITIZENS, on no common occasion. The emancipation of a great country from the arm of arbitrary power—the institution of free government—the establishment of equal rights—the impartial administration of laws, form an era in the history of time, distinguished for wisdom, valor and philanthropy. Where shall the historian look for materials to dignify his records—the philosopher for instruction—or the orator find a sphere for his eloquence, if not in the glorious exploits which crowd the recollection on the celebration of this day? Ever sacred be the birth of American Independence! Memorable for the virtues it has displayed—the truths it has developed—the blessings it has diffused—let us cherish it as the favored gift of Heaven. Let the hero who bled—the sage who counselled—the matron who nursed the early efforts of our arms, find acceptable homage in the hearts of posterity.

A review of the history of our country, is calculated to fill the mind with a pleasing assemblage, and graceful variety of images, which warm the soul with delight, and extort the praises and admiration of mankind. The revolution, undertaken with the spirit, and conducted with the bravery of men determined to be free, afforded a field for the display of those virtues which exalt mankind in the sphere of creation, and which had been buried with the rubbish of mind, in the ages which preceded. Our heroes were animated by the models which Plutarch had drawn—and our statesmen spoke in the cause of freedom, inspired with the philosophy and eloquence of Cicero. Hence, the firmness which distinguished our efforts, whether in the cabinet or in the field—in the martial arrangements of the camp, or in the milder negotiations for peace.

But, glorious as may have been the revolution, renowned for the exhibition of all that human nature can boast, there was a paramount achievement which battles could not win, nor ingenuity compass. It was left for truth, and virtue, and knowledge to perform this last act—lasting as the memory which achieved it, and to be forgotten when the pride of honor, and the exaltation of intellect shall cease to dignify mankind. I allude to the union and consolidation of the States, on those principles which alone could secure their safety in peace, and their defence in war.

In contemplating the character and genius of the government of the United States, the mind is struck, no less with the beautiful and harmonious proportion of the parts, than with the spirit which gives life and animation to the whole. The Federal Constitution, planned by an assembly of men, free, virtuous, and intelligent, contains within itself all the requisites of a just and upright government. Exempt from those anomalies and restrictions, interwoven into past systems, the more securely to substantiate and enforce the unjust and barbarous policy of those, who owe their elevation to the combined influence of fraud and power, it presents nothing that is not consistent with natural and civil justice. The advocates of regal dominion may here read the refutation of their favorite absurdity, "that the people cannot govern themselves;" and those who love liberty, yet dread the licentiousness of democracy, have the light of a system, cemented by wisdom, energy and virtue.

In their exertions to secure a form of government, adapted to the sense and feelings of the people, the members of the convention were little aided by experience. The Federal government was entirely the result of foresight and philosophy. None of the governments, from antiquity down, afforded a model which could safely be imitated. Greece, celebrated for the wisdom of her confederacy, was deficient in the promptitude and exactness, necessary

to the successful operation of political bodies. Her Amphyctionic council resembled rather the meeting of an Imperial legation, than an assembly of free, deliberative representatives.

Rome too, distinguished for a boldness and dignity of character, on which the eyes of posterity delight to gaze, never enjoyed an equal balance of power. There was no division of force to counteract the illegal assumptions of authority—disorder prevailed in all the departments of State:—oppressed at one time, by the inordinate ambition and overgrown power of the Patrician Order, and overwhelmed at another, by popular insurrection, she ultimately became the victim of discordant passions and bloody wars, during which, the aspirations of virtue were forgotten and unheard in the desolation and slaughter, which crushed all the glorious achievements of genius and learning, and erected the prison house and the dungeon on the ruins of the temple of LIBERTY.

But if the governments of antiquity could afford us no light in building up the ark of our freedom, there was less to attract attention or invite imitation, in the short-lived republics which grew out of the wreck of empire in modern Europe. In contemplating this period of the world, the historian has scarcely light enough to read the degradation of mankind, and the friend of humanity sees nothing to brighten his prospects of happiness. The vicious

alone held the earth in subjection—power found its advocate with the wealthy and abandoned—the hopes of the good man had ceased to be earthly—they had penetrated the gloom which lies between time and eternity, and were reposing in confidence, until another morn should burst its splendors on his vision, and proclaim a releasement from toil and suffering. Such were the governments of Venice and Genoa, where, in the form of republicanism, a powerful aristocracy directed the public functions to the advancement of individual prosperity, trampling on the exercise of right, and polluting the altars of justice with the maculated offerings of suffering innocence and degraded merit.

How happy the contrast which our country presents! No such imperfections disfigure the character of our constitution. Accommodated to all the purposes of society, it succours the indigent and needy—gives protection to the exiled children of misfortune, and allows the wealthy no privilege beyond the common citizen. Here no haughty spirit of monopolization influences the favor of government to the advancement of noble birth: Our government throws open the doors of preferment, to all who have enterprize and ability to seek the laurels of fame—she enlists the interest of the whole world in her prosperity. Industry is not weighed down with the iron obligation of paying more than it reaps—Religion finds a sanctuary in every heart—

Science bends to the task of facilitating the modes of life—and the whole scenery of nature is blended with the beautiful picture of a community, ardent in the pursuit of all those means which God and their country have given, of obtaining national and individual happiness. Where, on the surface of this globe, appears a scene so interesting and inviting—so glorious to man, and so acceptable to God? Whose bosom is not warmed into admiration—whose tongue is not eloquent with the praises of **LIBERTY**?

The moral condition of a people inevitably results from the form and spirit of their government. Human nature, acted upon by long established forms, becomes confirmed in prejudice and error; more particularly when education, the great means of exalting and refining the mind, is disregarded, and the body politic is pervaded with ignorance. It may happen, under peculiar circumstances, that the government is unable to control the destinies and stamp the condition of a people:—Men, born in freedom, and trained up in the enjoyment of their natural rights, will never submit to an authority which would mould their very being to the base purposes of despotism. But most of the governments which have existed, and do now exist, furnish abundant proof, that man's elevation or depression in society is the effect of good or bad laws. In Europe, where the government is in the hands of the nobles,

and the will of the people is subservient to the will of the monarch, the motives which should prompt to the exercise of the most exalted virtues, are suppressed by the sigh and the tear which speak the bitter tale of slavery, and declare the impotency of the most united exertions. There the spirit of liberty is kept captive! The fine form is bowed with despondency—Nature, in vain, spreads her scenery to the eye, and the heart sickens with the hopelessness of shaking off its burden. In Europe, society and government prove a curse! Legislation is not conducted with the benevolent design of aiding the necessities, and relieving the misfortunes of mankind. How can a single individual, gifted perhaps with no uncommon qualities of head and heart, surrounded by the hirelings of his pleasure, wasted into effeminacy, himself secure from the changes of fortune, and the pressure of want, be able to manage the concerns of a nation? How is he capable of legislation, whose views are circumscribed by the narrow and selfish desire of perpetuating his titles and his possessions to a distant posterity? Does he sympathize with the sufferings of his people? Their cries never reach his ears.—Is he animated with a wish to their welfare? He is deceived by the flattery of his ministers. No supplicating friend, no charitable hand pours upon their sorrows the balm of alleviation. If they petition, redress is impolitic— if they revolt, an armed soldiery rush upon them

with "the artillery of death." Not only have they to groan under the bondage of political tyrants. Priesthood interdicts the privileges of conscience, and declares the imbecility of the unlearned. The ridiculous connexion of religion and laws, exert a power over the country so absolute and unlimited, as renders it impossible that any people should flourish or improve in the arts and elegancies of life.

But their case is not remediless. A voice has gone over the waters, awakening the dormant genius of the land. An impulse pervades society which cannot but eventuate in its benefit. The general illumination of the human mind, the effect of free presses, and the rapid multiplication of books, afford advantages which must produce a change in the political hemisphere. Intellectual glory is the light which illumines the pathway to liberty and happiness. He who is intelligent will always be free. Despotism can exist only in the shade of ignorance and vice. But the Eagle, sacred bird of liberty, basking in the noontide blaze of light and learning, escapes the fetters which would bind him to the earth, and directs his flight unto the stars. America affords the world an example which will be imitated ! Her free institutions, the justice of her policy, the unrivalled splendor of her arms, extend usefulness to every shore where her flag is unfurled. Republicanism will rule the earth. The dissatis-

faction which prevails across the ocean, the fire which burns the bosom of the patriot, can be quenched only by the demolition of thrones. Constitutions must be adopted. Kings must become citizens.

But it were vain for any people to possess freedom, who have not her companion. Virtue is the only safeguard of free laws. Her authority restrains the restless ambition of demagogues, and preserves the state from the poison and infection of licentiousness.

The decay of morals is the chief cause of all the distress which has, through the progress of ages, marked the revolutions and changes of empire. Aspiring and crafty men, never appear in the tranquil reign of social order and good manners; their machinations begin, after the seeds of corruption are sown, and the state is assailed with the engendered evils of discord and civil warfare. That this is the case, I appeal to the oracles of truth and experience.—I appeal to the monumental trophies of ancient grandeur—the wreck and ruin of states and kingdoms, swept from an elevation lofty and commanding, into the dust and ashes of infamy and neglect.—I appeal to the recollections of that country, whose chivalry reclaimed Europe from barbarism, and polished society into gentleness—whose arms rescued from England the conquests of Henry the Fifth—and whose policy under

Louis the Fourteenth, directed and controled half the cabinets of Europe. Yet, who has read the history of the French revolution, and not mourned over the fatal effects of depravity? The struggle of a people, renowned for their bravery, and devoted to liberty, fighting under the deluded hope of emancipation, with commanders whose ambition levelled all the distinctions of society, and crimsoned with the blood which flowed from the guillotine, the verdant laurels of their country's fame. There is the scene of religion despised—of justice defamed—of laws turned into ridicule—and truth into falsehood.

Speaking of France, how readily is the name of Bonaparte associated! This extraordinary man, born for whatever purposes, the object of praise with some, of hatred with others, and of astonishment to all, has in a short period of his life, exhibited the elements of a mind which defy the powers of human calculation, and which place him beyond the orbit of this world's attraction. Commencing his career with the appearance of honesty, and under the sacred professions of patriotism, he soon became the idol of popular infatuation. Military honors called him to the profession of arms—Mars clothed him in the armor of war, and pointed him to the tombs of Alexander, Hannibal and Caesar. But his ambition looked not even at these—his own sufficiency needed not the aid of example; and a

few years saw him elevated, grand and conspicuous, the Emperor of France, and the King of Italy; the Protector of the Confederation of the Rhine, and the Mediator of the Swiss Confederacy.

If Bonaparte was a patriot, why did he usurp the government of his country? Why did he dictate laws to his people, and abolish the liberty of the press? Why did he invade the boundaries of other nations, and establish his authority over them? Had he been a patriot, France at this day might have been a republic, with the benefit of a constitution; her institutions revered, her arms respected, and her glory the illumination of the world.—Had Bonaparte been a patriot, Italy, that land of classic excellence, might again have become the seat of the Muses—Rome, the nurse and mother of heroes, have beheld the disinterestedness of Cincinnatus, and Switzerland, diversified with the beautiful and sublime in nature, been blessed with freedom and happiness.

In adverting to the causes of this day's celebration, the young American will not confine his attention solely to the events of the revolution. America was destined to be free. It was impossible from the nature of the motives which impelled our ancestors across the Atlantic, from the shores of their country and their friends, that they would be reconciled to any form of government which did not originate with themselves, independent of royal

consent or royal protection. Discovered too at a period, when the human mind in Europe, was just emerging from the darkness which succeeded the subversion of the Roman empire ; when mankind, excited by the spirit of improvement, and worn down by the degrading vassalage which had yoked their energies, and cast their faculties into wonderful insensibility, were willing to escape the wretchedness of their own country, and seek comfort and consolation in the bosom of the new world. Once settled here, their desire of freedom was strengthened by the very scenery of the country they had chosen to inhabit. Every thing around them retained the primitive features of nature ; civilization had made no inroads upon the rude grandeur and wild magnificence of the prospect ; rocks and mountains and woods all grew together ; the savage sought his sustenance in the chase, wild himself as the deer he hunted, fettered by no law but his will, and surrounded only by the atmosphere which refreshed and supported his limbs.

From a country so situated, bearing all the characteristics of freedom, uncontaminated by vice ; with a country degraded and enslaved, abounding with all the evils which hereditary turpitude could engender ; from such a contrast, our ancestors derived those impressions, which encouraged their hopes, gave stability to their principles, and produced a nation of freemen eclipsing the models of Greece and Rome.

Had Great Britain, in her conduct towards the colonies, acted upon the well known principles of her own constitution, then the most free and celebrated on earth, (though destined at some period to part), the golden chain of affection might still have bound them together in the bonds of national friendship. Had she allowed them the privileges of British subjects, and regarded with sacredness and respect their right of self government and taxation, the glory of her arms might still have claimed the title of invincibility; and her fleets, honoured with the trident of Neptune, have given laws to the ocean. But overwhelmed with an accumulation of debt, no means were to be neglected, which could advance the resources of her treasury, exhausted and drained in establishing her superiority, over the most formidable powers of the continent. At this period, her ministry *seemed to have misunderstood* the very spirit and essence of political bodies. That government was instituted by the people, for the benefit of the people, was a maxim, which her statesmen and scholars insisted on with a precision and force equal to the dignity of freemen:—the public presses teemed with spirited essays, defining in just terms the powers and capacity of the governed;—yet after all, the hopes and strength of this infantile country, so long and so often the object of savage warfare, were to be crushed and overpowered by a system of subordination,

contrary to every principle of natural justice and English liberty. Bills of restriction and limitation, of taxation and denial, were forced upon Parliament with a warmth and ardor of discussion derogatory to its unequalled pre-eminence, and destructive to colonial prosperity. These proceedings excited the fermentations of parties, at home and abroad ;—the public voice cried aloud for the wrongs of America—the colonies themselves remonstrated. But, their petitions praying redress were disregarded, and their opposition considered as the mere murmur of discontent, that would die away with the breath in which it was uttered.

It was in this situation of affairs, threatening ruin and disgrace to their country, that the orators of Great Britain shone with a splendor, unrivalled since the days of Demosthenes and Cicero. It was here, under the excitement of the noblest feelings, that the sublime eloquence of Chatham, and the immortal genius of Burke, flashed the convictions of truth and experience, deprecating with godlike indignation, the ruinous effects of a pernicious policy ; and urging, with the vehemence of impassioned rhetoric, the justice, the necessity, and the virtue of **RECONCILIATION**.

But power, corrupt and uplifted by the pride of opinion, was not to be abashed by the *mere force of argument*. The insolence of disobedient provinces could not be passed over with impunity—the free

and valiant spirits of New England must be subdued, though it cost the nation a century of blood and treasure.

These, my countrymen, were directly the causes of the revolution—and basely perverted must be that heart, whose attachment to any form of government, would submit to an infringement of those rights, the impairing of which, would destroy the purposes and ends of existence. Our ancestors, though gifted with the spirit of forbearance, did not remain passive spectators of their country's wrongs. Their keen sight penetrated the consequences of an usurpation, which would inflict disgrace on themselves, and rivet chains on their posterity; and with a sublime patriotism and daring courage, they resisted every act of their oppressors, and fortified every pass of their country with the rampart of their bodies.

Now, the standard of war was unfurled, and the tocsin resounded through the land;—the scenes of domestic tranquility were invaded by the tumult of arms;—the tender music of love was hushed into silence;—and the sacred associations of “wife, children and friends,” abandoned for the rude equipments of the camp. The citizen, hitherto the man of business or of pleasure, became the soldier of freedom—all hearts glowed with enthusiasm.—The battle of Lexington roused all America;—the blood of freemen, shed on their own plains, called

loudly for revenge ;—the spirit of **Liberty** in arms led the valiant to the conflict :—**Bunker's Hill** poured destruction on the foe, and reverberated from shore to shore, the magnanimous resolve of **Victory or Death**.

Here was the occasion of our first triumph, the first example of **American** valor. But the smiles of joy are moistened with the tears of regret. Here fell the brave and unfortunate **WARREN**,* distinguished alike for the accomplishments of the gentleman, and the exalted virtues of the patriot. His gallant soul, fearless of danger, and indignant at disgrace, saw no alternative between the glory of conquest, and the grave. He died with the soothing requiem of his country's praise. The green sod covers his ashes. His memory—let it live forever in the hearts of posterity.

The battle of **Lexington** gave an impulse to the war, which permanently united all the **States** in the determination of a vigorous opposition. The congress, assembled, used the most effectual means of providing against the exigencies of invasion. Their firmness increased with the difficulties which surrounded them. A country, wide and extensive, thinly populated, and nearly destitute of the means of warfare, were considerations sufficient to deter the most resolute from a contest so unequalled in

* General Warren was the first officer of distinction, who died in the cause of his country.

numbers and discipline. Their chief reliance was in the justice of their cause. This alone gained them the friendship of the brave and generous. The God of battles called to their assistance the warriors of every clime. France, chivalrous and enthusiastic, united her strength and sympathies with our own—Ireland sent her spirit to cheer us—and Poland, unhappy, ill fated Poland ! destined herself to wear the chains of slavery, landed on our shore the champions of Warsaw.

These were the sources of sorrow and confusion to our enemy, who beheld in the patriotic services of **La Fayette**, the blood of **Montgomery**, and the sacred devotion of **Kosciusko**, the future destination of our country.

But why should I detail the events of the revolution ? Are the illustrious deeds of our ancestors already forgotten by posterity ? Are the names of the countless numbers which crowd into the constellation of American glory, already swept down the stream of oblivion ? Of **FRANKLIN** and **ADAMS**—of **MARION** and **SUMPTER**—of **GREEN** at **Eutaw**—and of **WASHINGTON** at **Yorktown** ? Are they not, the pride and glory of their country, identified with its existence ? Cold as the marble which covers the grave of the warrior, is that bosom which does not love to linger around the memory of departed worth !

It is a question not unworthy of consideration, to know what might have been the situation of these United States, had the war, which terminated in the triumph of the American arms, been favorable on the part of Great Britain. We had sinned beyond the hopes of forgiveness—we had rejected peace when offered, to prosecute our own scheme of government; and had rebelliously taken up arms against a *kind, indulgent, fostering parent*. Now no leniency was to be expected from parental tenderness—the ties of affection once violated, were dissolved, and the existence of former privileges denied. Unfortunate in our efforts, we should have been destined, like the wretched inhabitants of India, the prey of a merciless commerce, and the victims of a rapacious avarice.

But thanks to the Father Almighty, we still live in the land of our choice, blessed with the advantages and rights of Republicanism. We have passed through the storms and tempests of revolution, and escaped the dangers of faction;—we have defended our homes from invasion, and have seen our flag victorious;—the Constitution at sea, has defended the constitution on land, and this day, the forty-fifth anniversary of Independence, unites us in the temple of the Most High, singing the song of **DELIVERANCE**, and **Tyranny O'ER-THROWN**.

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