

An Oration to the Society of the Cincinnati

AN ORATION

DELIVERED BY MR. JOEL BARLOW, AT
HARTFORD, CONN., TO THE SOCIETY OF
THE CINCINNATI, July 4. 1787.

*Mr. President, Gentlemen of the Society,
and Fellow-citizens,*

On the anniversary of so great an event as the birth of the empire in which we live, none will question the propriety of passing a few moments in contemplating the various objects suggested to the mind by the important occasion.

But, at the present period, while the blessings, claimed by the sword of victory, and promised in the voice of peace, remain to be confirmed by our future exertions-while the nourishment, the growth, and even the existence of our empire depend upon the united efforts of an extensive and divided people-the duties of this day ascend from amusement and. congratulation to a serious-patriotic employment.

We are assembled. my friends, not to boast, but to realize-not to inflate our national vanity by a pompous relation of past achievements in the council, or in the field ; but, from a modest retrospect of the truly dignified part already acted by our countrymen-from an accurate view of our present situation-and from an anticipation of the scenes that remain to be unfolded-to discern and familiarize the duties that still await us, as citizens. as soldiers, and as men.

Revolutions in other countries have been effected by accident. The faculties of human reason and the rights of human nature have been the sport of chance and the prey of ambition. And when indignation has burst the bands of slavery, to the destruction of one tyrant, it was only to impose the manacles of another.

This arose from the imperfection of that early stage of society, which necessarily occasioned the foundation of empires on the eastern continent to be laid in ignorance, and which induced a total inability of foreseeing the improvements of civilization, or of adapting the government to a state of social refinement.

I shall but repeat a common observation, when I remark, that on the western continent, the scene was entirely different, and a new task, totally unknown to the legislators of other nations, was imposed upon the fathers of the American empire.

Here was a people thinly scattered over an extensive territory, lords of the soil on which they trode, commanding a prodigious length of coast and an equal breadth of frontier-a people habituated to liberty. professing a mild and benevolent religion, and highly advanced in science and civilization. To conduct such a people in a revolution, the address must be made to reason, as well as to the passions. And to

reason, to the clear understanding of these variously affected colonies, the solemn address was made. A people thus enlightened, and capable of discerning the connection of causes with their remotest effects, waited not the experience of oppression in their own persons ; which they well knew would render them less able to conduct a regular opposition. But in the moment of their greatest prosperity, when every heart expanded with the increasing opulence of the British American dominions, and every tongue united in the praises of the parent state and her patriot king, when many circumstances concurred, which would have rendered an ignorant people secure and inattentive to their future interest- at this moment the eyes of the American Argus were open to the first and most plausible invasion of the colonial rights.

In vain were we told, and perhaps with the greatest truth and sincerity, that the moneys levied in America were all to be expended within the country, and for our benefit; equally idle was the policy of Great Britain, in commencing her new system by a small and almost imperceptible duty, and that upon very few articles.

It was not the quantity of the tax. it was not the mode of appropriation, but it was the right of the demand, which was called in question. Upon this the people deliberated : this they discussed in a cool and dispassionate manner : and this they opposed, in every shape that an artful and systematic ministry could devise, for more than ten years, before they assumed the sword.

This single circumstance, aside from the magnitude of the object, or the event of the contest, will stamp a peculiar glory on the American revolution, and mark it as a distinguished era in the history of mankind ; that sober reason and reflection have done the work of enthusiasm, and performed the miracles of Gods. In what other age or nation has a laborious and agricultural people, at ease upon their own farms, secure and distant from the approach of fleets and armies, tide-waiters, and stamp-masters, reasoned before they had felt, and, from the dictates of duty and conscience, encountered dangers, distress, and poverty, for the sake of securing to posterity a government of independence and peace ? The toils of ages and the fate of millions were to be sustained by a few hands. The voice of unborn nations called upon them for safety; but it was a still small voice, the voice of rational reflection.

Here was no Cromwell to inflame the people with bigotry and zeal, no Caesar to reward his followers with the spoils of vanquished foes, and no territory to acquire by conquest. Ambition, superstition, and avarice, those universal torches of war, never illumined an American field of battle : But the permanent principles of sober policy spread through the colonies, roused the people to assert their rights, and conducted the revolution.

It would be wandering from the objects which ought to occupy our present attention, again to recount the numerous acts of the British parliament which composed that system of tyranny designed for the subjugation of America : neither can we indulge in the detail of those memorable events, which marked our various stages of resistance, from the glooms of unsuccessful supplication, to the splendor of victory and acknowledged sovereignty. The former were the theme of senatorial eloquence, producing miracles of union and exertion in every part of the continent, till we find them preserved for everlasting remembrance in that declaratory act of independence, which gave being to an empire, and dignified the day we now commemorate ; the latter are fresh in the memory of every person of the least information. It would be impertinence, if not a breach of delicacy, to attempt a recital of those glorious achievements, especially before an audience, part of whom have been distinguished actors in the scene, others the anxious and applauding spectators. To the faithful historian we resign the task- the historian, whom it is

hoped the present age will deem it their duty, as well as their interest, to furnish, encourage, and support. Whatever praise is due for the task already performed, it is certain that much remains to be done. The revolution is but half completed. Independence and government were the two objects contended for : and but one is yet obtained. To the glory of the present age, and the admiration of the future, our severance from the British empire was conducted upon principles as noble, as they were new and unprecedented in the history of human actions. Could the same generous principles, the same wisdom and unanimity be exerted in effecting the establishment of a permanent federal system, what an additional lustre would it pour upon the present age ! a lustre hitherto unequalled; a display of magnanimity for which mankind may never behold another opportunity. Without an efficient government, our independence will cease to be a blessing. Shall that glow of patriotism and unshaken perseverance, which has been so long conspicuous in the American character, desert us at our utmost need ? Shall we lose sight of our own happiness, because it has grown familiar by a near approach? Shall thy labors, O Washington, have been bestowed in vain ? Hast thou conducted us to independence and peace, and shall we not receive the blessings at thy hands ? Where are the shades of our fallen friends ? and what is their language on this occasion? Warren, Montgomery. Mercer, Wooster, Scammel, and Laurens, all ye hosts of departed heroes I rich is the treasure you have lavished in the cause, and prevalent the price you have paid for our freedom. Shall the purchase be neglected ? the fair inheritance lie without improvement, exposed to every daring invader? Forbid it, honor; forbid it, gratitude; and oh, may Heaven avert the impending evil. In contemplating the price of our independence, it will never be forgotten, that it was not entirely the work of our own hands; nor could it probably have been established, in the same term of time, by all the blood and treasure that America, unassisted, was able to furnish for the contest. Much of the merit is due, and our warmest acknowledgments shall ever flow to that illustrious monarch, the father of nations and friend of the distressed-the monarch who, by his early assistance. taught us not to despair ; and who, when we had given a sufficient proof of our military virtue and perseverance, joined us in alliance, upon terms of equality; gave us a rank and credit among the maritime nations of Europe; and furnished fleets and armies, money and military stores, to put a splendid period to the important conflict. Where shall we find language to express a nation's gratitude for such unexampled goodness and magnanimity ? my friends, it is not to be done with language. Our sense of obligation for favors received from Heaven, is best expressed by a wise improvement. Does Louis ask for more ? and can duty be satisfied with less? Unite in a permanent federal government: put your commerce upon a respectable footing .; your arts and manufactures, your population, your wealth and glory will increase ;and when a hundred millions of people are comprised within your territory, and made happy by your sway, then shall it be known, that the hand of that monarch assisted in planting the vine, from which so great a harvest is produced. His generous heart shall exult in the prospect : his royal descendants, fired by the great example, shall imitate his virtues :and the world shall unite in his praise. Here shall that pride of the military character, the gallant FAYETTE, find his compensation for a life of disinterested service ; whose toils have not ceased with the termination of the war ; and whose successful endeavors to promote our interest, in commercial and political arrangements, can only be equalled by his achievements in the field. How will the posterity of that nobleman, and that of the other brave officers of his nation, who have fought by your sides. on reviewing the American history, rejoice in the fame of their fathers ; nor even regret the fate of those who bled in so glorious a field! An acknowledgment of the merits of Rochambeau and Chastellux, D'Estaing, De Grasse, De Barras, and the other heroes of the

French army and navy-affection to the memory of our brethren and companions who have bled in our battles-reverence to the advice of our illustrious commander in chief, and of all those sages and patriots who have composed our councils, from the time of the first congress to the present moment-honor to our worthy creditors in Europe-a regard to the conduct of the imperial sovereigns of Russia and Germany, who evince to the world that they revere the cause of liberty and human happiness, in which we drew the sword-a respect to the memory of the venerable Frederic of Prussia, whose dying hand put the signature to a treaty of commerce with the United States, upon the most liberal principles that ever originated in a diplomatic council-a sacred regard to ourselves and to all posterity-and, above all, a religious gratitude to our Heavenly Benefactor, who hath hitherto smiled upon our endeavors -call upon us, in the language of a thousand tongues, for firmness, unanimity, and perseverance, in completing the revolution, and establishing the empire.

The present is justly considered an alarming crisis : perhaps the most alarming that America e-er saw. We have contended with the most powerful nation, and subdued the bravest and best appointed armies: but now we have to contend with ourselves, and encounter passions and prejudices, more powerful than armies, and more dangerous to our peace. It is not for glory, it is for existence. that we contend. Much is expected from the federal convention now sitting at Philadelphia : and it is a happy circumstance that so general a confidence from all parts of the country is centred in that respectable body. Their former services, a5 individuals, command it, and our situation requires it. But although much is expected from them, yet more is demanded from our!! elves.

The first great object is to convince the people of the importance of their present situation : for the majority of a great people, on a subject which they understand, will never act wrong. If ever there was a time, in any age or nation, when the fate of millions depended on the voice of one, it is the present period in these states. Every free citizen of the American empire ought now to consider himself as the legislator of half mankind. When he views the amazing extent of territory, settled and to be settled under the operation of his laws when, like a wise politician, he contemplates the population of future ages-the changes to be wrought by the possible progress of arts, in agriculture, commerce, and manufactures the increasing connection and intercourse of nations, and the effect of one rational political system upon the general happiness of mankind-his mind, dilated with the great idea, will realize a liberality of feeling which leads to a rectitude of conduct. He will see that the system to be established by his suffrage, is calculated for the great benevolent purposes of extending peace, happiness, and progressive improvement to a large proportion of his fellow creatures. As there is a probability that the system to be proposed by the convention may answer this description, there is some reason to hope it will be viewed by the people with that candor and dispassionate respect which is due to the importance of the subject. While the anxiety of the feeling heart is breathing the perpetual sigh for the attainment of so great an object, it becomes the strongest duty of the social connection, to enlighten and harmonize the minds of our fellow-citizens, and point them to a knowledge of their interests, as an extensive federal people, and fathers of increasing nations. The price put into their hands is great, beyond all comparison ; and, as they improve it, they will entail happiness or misery upon a larger proportion of human beings, than could be the conduct of all the nations of Europe united.

Those who are possessed of abilities or information in any degree above the common rank of their fellow-citizens, are called upon by every principle of humanity, to diffuse a spirit of candor and rational inquiry upon these important subjects.

Adams, to his immortal honor and the timely assistance of his country, has set the great example. His treatise in defence of the constitutions, though confined to the state republics, is calculated to do infinite service, by correcting thousands of erroneous sentiments arising from our inexperience; sentiments which, if uncorrected in this early stage of our political existence, will be the source of calamities without measure and without end. Should that venerable philosopher and statesman be induced to continue his inquiries, by tracing the history of confederacies, and with his usual energy and perspicuity, delineate and defend a system adapted to the circumstances of the United States-! will not say he could deserve more from his distressed country, but he would crown a life of patriotic labors, and render an essential additional service to the world.

While America enjoys the peculiar felicity of seeing those who have conducted her councils and her battles, retire, like Cincinnatus, to the humble labors of the plow, it must be remembered that she there expects a continuance of their patriotic exertions. The society of the Cincinnati, established upon the most benevolent principles, will never lose sight of their duty, in rendering every possible aid, as citizens, to that community which they have defended as soldiers. They will rejoice, that, although independence was the result of force, yet government is the child of reason. As they are themselves an example of the noblest effort of human nature, the conquest of self, in obeying the voice of their country, and exchanging the habits, the splendor, and importance of military life, for domestic labor and poverty-they will readily inculcate on others the propriety of sacrificing private and territorial advantages, to the good of the great majority, the salvation of the United States. Slaves to no party, but servants of the whole, they have wielded the sword of every state in the union, and bled by the side of her sons. Their attachments are as extensive as their labors. Friendship and charity, the great pillars of their institution, will find their proper objects, through the extended territory, and . seek the happiness of all.

While we contemplate the endearing objects of our association-and indulge in the gloomy pleasure of recollecting that variety of suffering which prompted the sympathetic soldier to institute the memorial of his friendship-fraternal affection recalls the scene of parting, and inquires with solicitude the fate of our beloved companions.

Since the last anniversary, the death of general Howe has diminished the number of our brethren, and called for the tribute of a tear. With some of the foibles, incident to human nature, he possessed many valuable accomplishments. His moral good understanding he had embellished with considerable attention to polite literature. As a soldier, he was brave-as an officer, attentive to discipline; he commanded with dignity and obeyed with alacrity ; and whatever talents he possessed, were uniformly and cheerfully devoted to the service of his country.

But a few weeks previous to that period, the much lamented deaths of Tilghman and M'Dougall were successively announced, and the tidings received with a peculiar poignancy of grief. What citizen of the American empire does not join the general voice of gratitude, when contemplating the merits of those distinguished officers, and swell the tide of sympathy, with his bereaved country, when deprived of their future assistance? They were ornaments to the states in which they lived, as well as to the profession in which they acquired their glory.

Amiable and heroic Tilghman ! short was the career of thy fame : but much hast thou performed for thy country. or thee shall it ever be remembered, that no social virtue was a stranger to thy breast, and no military achievement too daring for thy sword. While we condole with thy afflicted father for the loss of so dear a son. permit the tear of friendship to flow for its own bereavement : and as oft as the anniversary of

this day shall assemble the companions of thy life, to rejoice in the freedom of their country ; they shall mingle a sigh to thy lasting memory, and bewail thy untimely fate.

Untimely also was the death of the brave and patriotic M'Dougall!. Though many years were worn away in his unremitting labors for the public safety-though his early and decided exertions against the claims of Great Britain had an essential influence in determining the conduct of the province in which he resided though he was the nerve of war, the wisdom of council and one of our principal supporters in the conquest of independence-yet these but shew us the necessity of such characters in establishing the blessings of the acquisition. While it shall require the same wisdom and unshaken fortitude, the same patience and perseverance, to rear the fabric of our empire, as it did to lay the foundation-patriotism and valor, in sympathetic affection, will bemoan the loss of M'Dougall.

Happy would it be for America, thrice happy for the feelings of sorrowing friendship, could the list of our deceased companions be closed even with the names of those worthy heroes. But Heaven had bestowed too much glory upon the life of the favorite Greene, to allow it a long duration.

My affectionate auditory will anticipate more than can be uttered, in the melancholy duty of contemplating his distinguished excellence. To any assembly that could be collected in America. vain would be the attempt to illustrate his character, or embellish the scene of his exploits. It is a subject to be felt, but not to be described. To posterity, indeed, it may be told, as an incentive to the most exalted virtue and astonishing enterprise, that the man, who carried in his native genius all the resources of war, and the balance of every extreme of fortune-who knew the advantages to be derived from defeat, the vigilance of military arrangement, the rapidity and happy moment of assault, the deliberate activity of battle, and the various important uses of victory-that the man who possessed every conceivable quality of a warrior, was, in his public and private character, without a foible or a fault; that all the amiable as well as the heroic virtues were assembled in his soul: and that it was the love, of a rational and enlightened age, and not the stupid stare of barbarity, that expressed his praiseThe map of America may designate the vast extent of conquered country recovered by his sword : the future traveller in the southern states, may be pointed, by the peasant, to the various regions containing monuments of his valor and his skill ; where, amid marches and counter-marches, his studied retreats and his rapid approaches, every advantage, given to the enemy, was resumed with ten-fold utility and certain conquest. The historic muse, as a legacy to future ages, may transmit with heroic dignity the feats of her favorite chief: but who shall transmit the feelings of the heart-or give the more interesting representation of his worth ? the hero will remain ; but the man must be lost.

The grief of his bereaved consort, aggravated by the universal testimony of his merit, we hope will receive some alleviation from the ardent sympathy of thousands, whose hearts were penetrated with his virtues, and whose tears would have flowed upon his hearse. But we will not open afresh the wounds which we cannot close. The best eulogium of the good and great is expressed by an emulation of their virtues. As those of the illustrious Greene were equally useful in every department, in which human society can call a man to act, every friend to America must feel the want of his assistance, in the duties that remain to be performed. Yet, as these duties are of the rational and pacific kind, the performance is more attainable, and emulation the better encouraged. In military operations, none but the soldier can be distinguished, nor any but the fortunate are sure of rendering service : but here is a theatre of action for every citizen of a great country : in which the smallest circumstance will have its weight, and on which infinite consequences will depend. The present is an age of philosophy, and America the empire of

reason. Here, neither the pageantry of courts, nor the glooms of superstition, have dazzled or beclouded the mind. Our duty calls us to act worthy of the age and the country that gave us birth. Though inexperience may have betrayed us into errors-yet they have not been fatal : and our own discernment will point us to their proper remedy.

However defective the present confederated system may appear-yet a due consideration of the circumstances, under which it was framed, will teach us rather to admire its wisdom, than to murmur at its faults. The same political abilities, which were displayed in that institution, united with the experience we have had of its operation, will doubtless produce a system, which will stand the test o(ages, in forming a powerful and happy people. Elevated with the extensive prospect, we may consider present inconveniences as unworthy of regret. At the close of the war, an uncommon plenty of circulating specie, and a universal passion for trade, tempted many individuals to involve themselves in ruin, and injure the credit of their country. But these are evils which work their own remedy. The paroxysm is already over. Industry is increasing faster than ever it declined ; and, with some exceptions, where legislative authority has sanctioned fraud, the people are honestly discharging their private debts, and increasing the resources of their wealth.

Every possible encouragement for great and generous exertions, is now presented before us. Under the idea of a permanent and happy government, every point of view, in which the future situation of America can be placed, fills the mind with peculiar dignity, and opens an unbounded field of thought. The natural resources of the country are inconceivably various and great. The enterprising genius of the people promises a most rapid improvement in all the arts that embellish human nature. The blessings of a rational government will invite emigrations from the rest of the world, and fill the empire with the worthiest and happiest of mankind ; while the example of political wisdom and felicity, here to be displayed, will excite emulation through the kingdoms of the earth, and meliorate the condition of the human race. In the pleasing contemplation of such glorious events, and comparing the scenes of action that adorn the western hemisphere, with what has taken place in the east, may we not apply to our country the language of the prophet of Israel, though spoken on a different occasion- “The glory of this latter house shall be greater than the former, saith the Lord of Hosts: and in this place will I give peace, saith the Lord of Hosts :”-peace to any disorders that may at present subsist among us-peace to the contending passions of nations-peace to this empire, to future ages, and through the extended world !