

AN
ORATION,

IN HONOR OF THE MEMORY OF

GEORGE CLINTON,

Late Vice-President of the United States

DELIVERED MAY 19, 1812.

BY THE HON GOVERNEUR MORRIS

AT THE REQUEST OF THE COMMON COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF
NEW-YORK.

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1812.

IN COMMON COUNCIL.

May 19th, 1812.

RESOLVED, That the thanks of the Common Council be presented to the Hon. GOVERNIEUR MORRIS, for the Eloquent Oration this day delivered by him, at their request, in honor of the memory of GEORGE CLINTON, late Vice-President of the United States, and that he be requested to favor the Common Council with a copy of the same for publication.

Resolved also, That the thanks of the Common Council be presented to the Rev. DR. ROMERYN, for his pious and eloquent discharge of the religious services, at the funeral honors paid this day, to the memory of the late Vice-President of the United States.

By order of the Common Council.

J. MORTON, Clerk Com. Council.

AN ORATION,

&c.

Fellow Citizens,

ANOTHER soldier of the revolution is gone. The few that now remain will soon have been; and even while they linger may envy, perhaps, his earlier exit. For surely the view of public affairs may well inspire a doubt, whether those who loved the late Vice President, should consider his death as a source of sorrow, or a subject of congratulation. He loved his country, he had contributed to her triumph and enjoyed her glory in the prime of youth and strength of manhood; but, although, bending beneath the weight of age, he was doomed to behold her in a wretched condition which he could not amend, which he could not but deplore.

Pardon a sentiment thus torn from my bosom. We are not met to sacrifice on the altar of party spirit, but rather to sacrifice that spirit on a patriot's tomb. In his long and active life, having conciliated many friends, he must (for such is our lot) have had some enemies.

Those of honorable temper will bury their resentment in his grave, and listen without partiality to the narrative of his life. It shall be simple and plain : for a Patriot's History must be his best panegyric.

GEORGE CLINTON, was born of a respectable family, in Orange, then Ulster County, the 26th of July, 1739. His father at the head of a provincial regiment, under the orders of General Bradstreet, assisted in taking Fort Frontinac, at the mouth of Lake Ontario, in the year '58. His son George, then a lieutenant in the same service, descended the St. Laurence, in the year '60, under the orders of General Amherst. Thus his early education to arms prepared him, like the great Virginian, for the scenes in which they were destined to act.

The war in America terminated that year by the conquest of Canada ; and young Clinton laying by his sword, applied to the study of law, under the direction of William Smith, one of the ablest advocates that ever yet adorned the Bar of New-York. He then settled in his native county, where the Royal Governor, George Clinton, acknowledging a remote consanguinity, had given him a life estate in the Clerkship. He practised with reputation, and was chosen a representative to the

Colonial Assembly, of which he continued to be an active and able member, steadily opposing every attempt to seduce or overawe that body into a compliance with the views of the British Government hostile to the liberty of America.

Thus, before the controversy grew up into a war, he had studied mankind, not in books, but in the world ; not in the closet, but in the camp ; and practically knew what reliance is to be placed on reason, what resource can be derived from hope and fear. But in reading the sacred volumes of our law, he had nourished his soul with the principles of liberty ; and learnt to estimate, at their just value, those rights, on the defence of which we staked our all. For it must be remembered that the war (on our part) was wholly defensive. It was not undertaken to acquire any new or splendid privilege, founded on specious metaphysical disquisition. No, we took up arms to defend the plain practical rights of our forefathers. The rights of Englishmen. The spontaneous disposal of our property, the security of our persons, the trial by our peers. We reasoned on principles of common sense. We fought for the benefits of common law. Neither did we (until compelled to it) cast off allegiance to the king.

We merely refused submission to his subjects.

In the beginning, opposition to their claims was general. But when it appeared that British tyranny would be enforced by British power, the patriot ranks were thinned ; fair weather friends wavered. The zeal which depends on profit and loss grew cold. Minds enfeebled by the love of ease, and hearts which shrink from approaching peril, abandoned the cause, or confined their exertion to the circle of an empty wish. Let them not be condemned. There was matter to appal the brave. Britain was then in the zenith of glory. Her youthful king had closed a war of conquest, and dictated the conditions of peace. The wealth of India heaped up during ages of accumulation, was laid open to his subjects, and through every channel of mercantile speculation, of military plunder was poured round his throne. An army inured to war, and, from habits of danger, insensible to fear ; a fleet, beneath whose thunder the deep caves of ocean shook ; these were the ready instruments of his will. And what could we oppose to such vast wealth and power ? We, feeble colonies, thinly scattered over a wide expanse, without revenue, without arms, almost without the common

mechanic arts ; no union, no general government, no common sentiment, except, indeed, the sense of that injustice which had marked us victims to satiate and glut an avaricious prodigality ?

In circumstances of this sort, cunning calculating politicians, might well believe what they did believe, and say what they did say ; that resistance was impossible, and therefore absurd. That the claim of the British Commons to give and grant the money of American colonists, to accumulate our burdens in like grade and measure, as they diminished their own, and to feed their waste from our wretchedness, however unjust, would nevertheless bear down, when aided by the energies of royal authority, our feeble opposition. That we should be crushed like worms beneath the wheels of his triumphal car. But we knew that over this king, sat high enthroned above all heights, the King of kings. We felt our cause to be just, and we placed it in the hands of Omnipotence. Such was the firm resolve of that first Congress, whose memory will be sacred and immortal. Such too the persevering determination of their successors, among whom, on the 15th day of May, '75, George Clinton took his seat. On the eighth

of July the members then present signed their last petition to his Britannic Majesty. Governor Penn, who delivered it, on the first of September, to a secretary of state, was told that no answer would be given. Such haughty silence would not surprise those whose humble petition to his majesty of the preceding year, had been answered at Lexington, from the mouths of his soldiers' muskets. But it was a silence more expressive than the voice of thunder. It cried out havock, hope farewell, farewell union, harmony and love. It was the creative voice that bade this western empire into being.

Clinton attended but little in Congress. He had an aversion to councils, because (to use his own words) the duty of looking out for danger makes men cowards. His temper and earliest habits trained him to the field. He was appointed a brigadier of militia, and served in that rank until the 25th of March '77, when the state having recommended to Congress, that a commandant should be named to the forts in the Highlands, that post of high trust and confidence was given to him, with the rank of brigadier in the Continental army. How well he deserved it was evinced by his gallant defence, when in the beginning of the next October, those

unfinished fortresses were stormed by the British general, Sir Henry Clinton. Had the works been complete, or the garrison sufficient to occupy commanding positions in the rear, the assailants must have failed. As it was, the defence was such as to raise the apprehension of having their retreat cut off, should they remain in the upper Hudson long enough to make an useful diversion in favor of Burgoyne. That vaunting chief was therefore left to his fate. And thus the obstacles opposed in the Highlands, shed a propitious influence on that northern campaign, whose brilliant issue at Saratoga, arrayed in our defence the heads and armies of France and Spain.

The situation of this state during the war, required every power of the mind, every energy of the heart. The ravages and miseries which occasionally visited other parts of the Union, had here their permanent abode.—More than one half of our territory was in possession of, or laid open to the enemy, whose immediate policy it was to acquire the remainder, and a large proportion of those who dwelt in it was favorable to his views. The few therefore who continued faithful were called out at every moment, in every direction, to resist invasion, repel incursion, or quell in-

surrection. The cannon's roar and the savage yell were borne on every breeze. Uncultivated fields, abandoned shops, the ruin of conflagrated dwellings wounded the eye of pity, and filled the sympathetic bosom with anguish, horror, and indignation. The patriotic few, assailed by danger and pinched by want, were hourly tempted by the enemy with insidious offers of protection and abundance. These were the circumstances under which the convention closed its labors, by publishing the constitution in April, seventy-seven; and under these circumstances was Clinton chosen, in the succeeding month of June, to be both Governor and Lieut. Governor: for such was the confidence reposed in him, a confidence unshaken during eighteen years, and attested by six general elections.

Between the second and the third, Independence was acknowledged, and the weary soldiers were permitted to repose in the arms of peace. But who shall tell, what, during the interim, were his exertions to quench the sparks of conspiracy, to control the struggles of faction, to resist the inroads of invasion, to repel the ravages of plundering foes, to squeeze, from the indigence of an exhausted people, supplies for that starving continental army, whose paper resources were but as

chaff; matter for the sport of winds, not for the support of war. This cannot be done in the compass of a discourse, nor in the page of history. A diary would be required and almost the hourly note of events. Speak then, ye, who were the companions of his labor, the witnesses of his zeal, the participators of his care: speak ye, who yet remain of that generous legislature whose eye, fixed on freedom, followed him firmly through the rugged road of virtue with gallant emulation, and the proud disdain of danger.

At the close of November, '82, provisional articles of peace were signed at Paris, and in the autumn of the succeeding year, this city was evacuated by the British troops. Amid the general joy of those who returned from exile, the remembrance of privation, loss, injury and insult, was not wholly extinguished; some who adhered to the enemy threw themselves at his departure on the mercy of their fellow citizens. Those, therefore, who had abandoned their property, had quitted their abode, and for seven long years had fought and suffered in the cause of their country, returning now cloathed in honorable rags, and scarred with honorable wounds, met with men who in '75 were bawling patriots, but now (after picking up the crumbs from lordly tables

of commissaries, quarter masters and contractors) were trickt out in the gorgeous livery of British opulence: such objects could not fail to excite sentiments of indignation.— These were infectious. They caught, from breast to breast, and endangered the public tranquillity. Had the wrathful fire burst forth into outrage, it would have scorched the fairest plume of our fame. And yet how could such feelings be wholly repress? That to control them was a duty which every citizen owed both to himself and to his country, and that public faith pledged, should be honorably redeemed, are truths which we need not be told. These are truths which will be readily admitted by all in the cool moments of contemplation. But let that self sufficiency, which in such moments proudly condemns a sentiment inseparable from our nature, let it step from its solitary chair into the crowded street; let it be one of the throng, and it shall feel (from its impotence of self restraint) the necessity of legal control; it shall reluctantly acknowledge the magistrates authority to be indispensable. But the magistrate himself is subject to like feelings with his fellow-men; his taste of passion is as theirs, but far greater his task; he must not merely repress his own emotions, he must restrain theirs. This duty

the virtuous magistrate will perform. Cloathed in the majesty of the laws he will treat their enemy as his own: but if in the croud he perceives a friend, then comes the trial; then throbs the heart; it is then that stern and awful justice must nerve his soul; his eye must be turned away from his friend.— But how if it discovers none but friends, dear friends, about to avenge their common injury on the common foe? Now speak, ye who boast importurable calmness of the mind, when yet no ruffling tempest of passion, nor even a breeze of desire blows; say, if (under such circumstances) pity should melt down the magistrate into a man; will you yet condemn? It was in this condition—it was under these circumstances, that Gov. Clinton had to perform the severe duty of his office; nor was it only for a moment nor a single occasion. Constant watchfulness, steady control, unbending determination marked his conduct, and justified, and renewed, and corroborated the confidence of his country.

Then, too, began a contest of another sort. In the moment of danger office becomes an object of desire to men of honorable mind. In the sunshine of tranquillity it is sought after for the sake of emolument, or to procure that consideration which incapacity cannot

otherwise acquire. Office hunting, therefore, of which (during the war) few or no symptoms had been perceived, became (at the peace) an endemial disease. The constitution had provided a check on appointments. So long as the governor became, by his nomination, responsible for the character he should select, and the council was confined to approve or disapprove ; so long the people had, in them, a security against the effects of misinformation, the partialities of affection, and the abuses of intrigue. But soon after the peace an attempt at nomination was made by members of the council: to this the opposition of Clinton was characteristically firm ; he had the honorable pride to defend the rights of his office, and hold his share of constitutional responsibility.

As to the general course of his administration, it appears to have been directed by a conviction that the foundations of society repose on the rights of property : a sacred regard to which can alone secure all others. His sound understanding, mellowed by reflection and experience, knew that, from the moment property becomes insecure, the incentives to industry are removed, and the principles of temperance and frugality destroyed : then rapine supplies the waste of prodigality : then

the simple charms of virtue no longer respected: vanity (to supply the cravings of profusion: throws itself into the arms of vice: all then is venal; and if, in the general auction, liberty be not set up to sale, it is because bidders would be wanting: for how, in the riot of licentiousness, can that be worth the purchase, which may be violated with impunity, but which can no longer exist than while secure from violation?

In the year 1804, George Clinton took his seat, as Vice-President, in the Senate of the United States. From that period, until confined to the bed of death, he performed faithfully the duties of his high station. To share in the measures of administration was not his part. To influence them was not in his power. His sense of duty and his self command, induced him to be silent, or else to speak of them without censure, as without applause. Sometimes, however, for who can be always wise, his disapprobation broke forth. If he was wrong not cordially to approve our councils, charity will excuse something to the bias of early education, something to the habit of military life. Is it not pardonable in a soldier to believe the sword more powerful than the pen? May it not be permitted, that a brave

man should dislike threats ; that a man accustomed to command, should be too proud to complain ? Must it be imputed as a crime, that he, who during eighteen years governed a commercial country, who saw (during one third of that period) the people suffer severely, from the want of trade, and (during the other two thirds) a full tide of wealth pour in through the wide deep channels of commerce, that he should question the policy of shutting those channels up, or diverting them to another shore ? In a word, will you blame (fellow citizens) an old man, for preferring measures, sanctioned by experience, to projects, however wise, which have seldom been tried, and, when tried, have failed of their proposed object ? If so, accompany me to the tomb where his head is laid low : look on those hairs, grown grey in your service. Pardon, oh, pardon the weakness of age, and shed one grateful tear on the ashes of a friend, whom you shall see no more.

FINIS.