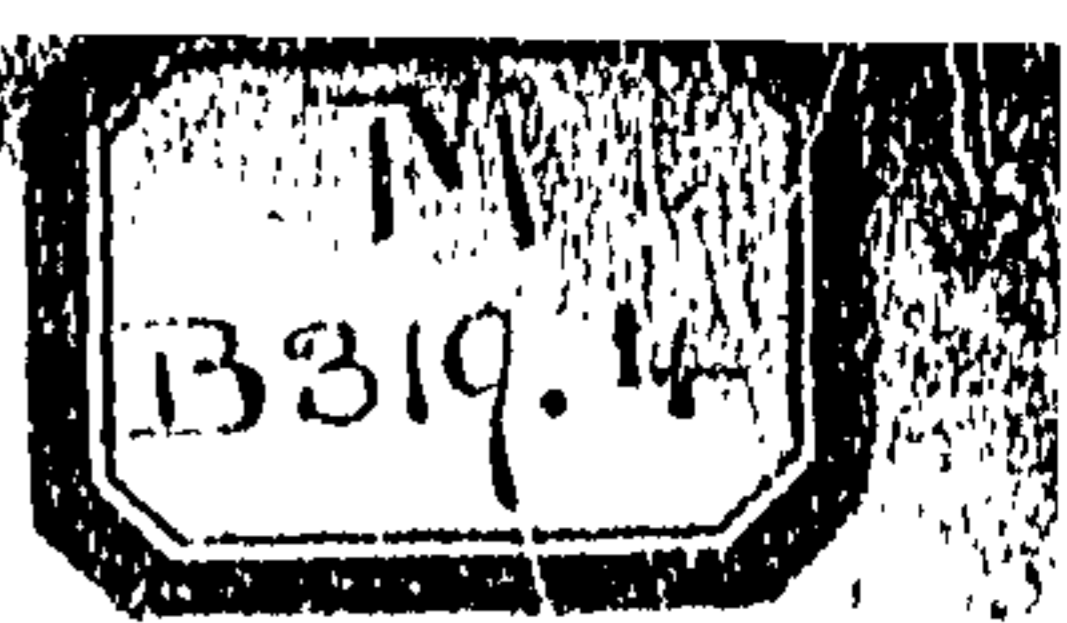


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Henry J. Beckwith
July 29, 1878



AN

ORATION,

DELIVERED

ON MONDAY, THE FIFTH OF JULY, 1824, IN COMMEMORATION

OF

American Independence,

BEFORE THE

SUPREME EXECUTIVE OF THE COMMONWEALTH,

AND THE

CITY COUNCIL AND INHABITANTS

OF

THE CITY OF BOSTON.

By FRANCIS BASSETT.

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An Oration.

THE general tranquillity which now prevails in the political world, has given rise to a more full discussion of the principles of free government. In no country are these principles better understood than in our own, and in no country is civil and religious liberty so extensively enjoyed. In the midst of public prosperity it is not less a duty, than a pleasure, on this occasion, to recur to the origin of our nation, and to trace the causes to which, under Providence, we are indebted for such distinguished blessings. Other nations have had their governments imposed upon them by force, and they are willing to resort to fable and romance to conceal their origin. Not so with our Republic, whose origin is as illustrious as her subsequent progress has been unrivalled; whose history is as pure as her institutions are free and enlightened.

The principles which governed our ancestors in their progress to Independence, were the principles

of freemen, who knew how to estimate their rights and who were determined to maintain them. They had no visionary notions of liberty unrestrained by law; they never opposed constitutional authority, but justly considered all legitimate government to be founded upon the true principle of reciprocal obedience and protection. The first settlers of this country were a bold, enterprising, and religious people, who seemed to be born to think and act for themselves. They had witnessed in their own country the beginning of those violent contests between right and arbitrary power, when the flame of liberty, struggling to burst forth, shook from the British constitution some of the relics of feudal despotism. Oppressed by religious persecution, they fled to these western shores, then a wilderness, and brought with them just notions of their political rights, which they carefully transmitted to their posterity.

During those angry contentions between the colonists and the mother country, which for several years preceded the commencement of hostilities, our ancestors never denied their allegiance to Britain; nor did they renounce it, until they were actually compelled by force to choose between the alter-

natives of freedom and subjugation. They claimed the right of regulating their internal concerns through the medium of Provincial Assemblies, conformably to the spirit of the British constitution; and as they were not represented in Parliament, they denied the right of Parliament to tax them without their consent. This was a question about which they never doubted, and upon which the greatest statesmen in England were divided in opinion. The eloquence of Burke was exerted in Parliament in defence of American rights, and fortunate would it have been for his country if she had listened to his warning voice. But against the madness of ambition and the lust of dominion, the voice of reason was raised in vain. The fatal blow was struck, and after a series of victories and defeats, and hardships incredible on our side, the termination of the contest in '83 was an acknowledgment of the Independence which we this day celebrate.

At the close of our revolution, the aspect of public affairs was indeed gloomy and discouraging. A general debility naturally followed the high excitement which had been kept up during the war. The nation was drained of its resources, and oppressed by a heavy debt. Industry and enterprise had long been diverted from their accustomed channels.

The confederation, formed at a critical period and under a sense of common danger, proved to be greatly defective; and jealousies which had begun to appear in many of the states were kept alive and inflamed by ambitious demagogues who were opposed to a national government in any shape. Under so many discouraging circumstances, to form a system of government which would be adapted to a numerous and increasing population, scattered over a wide extent of territory; a system, which in its operation would reconcile the conflicting interests of the several states, and preserve the union of the whole, was a work which required all the ability, intelligence and patriotism, for which the leading statesmen of this country were so preeminently distinguished. It has been well observed, "that it was left for the people of these United States, to decide by their conduct and example the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice." Fortunate for this nation, and the cause of political liberty, the labours of Hamilton, of Madison, and of Jay, were crowned with success. To their invaluable writings, perhaps, more than to any other cause, is to be attributed the final adoption of the Federal Constitution.

The excellence of this new system was soon perceived in the rapid growth and prosperity of our country. Order and harmony were restored; public credit revived; treaties and commercial regulations were made and adjusted with foreign powers; and under a most wise and prudent administration, this republic, in the course of a few years, exhibited a spectacle of youthful vigour and grandeur, unparalleled in the history of nations.

The political events which followed the administration of Washington have been too often the theme of declamation on these occasions to be now repeated. They have become materials for history; and when the prejudices and animosities of party feeling shall be forgotten, the impartial historian will delineate in true colours the actions and motives of public men. Some variation in the general scope of policy which has been pursued by successive rulers, since our government first went into operation, there undoubtedly has been. Something may fairly be attributed to changes which time has effected in the internal condition of our nation, by acquisition of territory, by increase of population, by the augmentation and new modification of states; something too must be imputed to the visionary experiments of the great movers of the machine; but in

all the changes of men and of parties, our government has maintained its original republican character; and in all the variety of peace and war, the great fundamental principles of the constitution, that citadel of our liberties, have been adhered to; and, it may now be truly said, that these United States present the interesting spectacle of a nation, prosperous at home, and respected abroad.

No government could have been more congenial to the feelings, manners and principles of our ancestors, or was better adapted to the constitution of society, which in a great measure grew out of those feelings and principles, and which now exists in this country, than a representative system. Our government is emphatically a free government. It originated with the people, was founded upon their consent, and depends upon the will of the people for its continuance. The principle of personal equality is the pervading spirit which animates the whole system. In this country there are no hereditary distinctions, no privileged orders, no feudal restrictions. All men have equal rights to acquire, possess and dispose of their property; equal rights to obtain the honours and rewards of office. Talent, virtue and enterprise ought to be the only true passports to distinction. The honours of the nation, like the naviga-

tion of those majestic rivers which serve to connect together and facilitate the intercourse between the several parts of this country, are open and free to all, and no individual or state has any exclusive privilege. The sovereignty of the nation is founded upon the rights of the people, and the electoral franchise which each citizen enjoys, convinces him that he forms a part of it. It is this power of electing magistrates and disposing of rewards and honours, that gives to our government its greatest advantages. This is the vivifying principle which preserves and invigorates our political institutions. Every citizen feels a pride and conscious satisfaction in supporting a government in which he has so visible an interest. The system of representation which runs through all the states, increases the number of candidates for distinction; and affords greater encouragement by multiplying the chances of success. From the highest office in the nation, through all the subordinate stations in the several departments of the state and federal governments, there is a wide field for exertion; and while no office is above the reach of virtue and talent, it is the peculiar excellence of our representative system, that no office in the administration of government is beneath a laudable ambition.

Nor is the abstract form of our government less wonderful than its practical operation has proved to be useful. The principle by which a balance of power is preserved in a government entirely popular, is both original and ingenious. To divide the political power into several departments so that each may act independently of the other, and, at the same time, in relation to one common whole, so as to maintain a complete balance in the system, was a secret hidden from the wisdom of the ancients, and left for the statesmen of America to discover. In our government, the executive, legislative and judicial departments are so regulated as not to interfere with each other. The legislative branch is divided into two parts so as to form a check upon each other, while the independence of the judiciary, that palladium of our rights, is well calculated to keep the other departments within their constitutional limits. Of what importance to the rights and liberties of this nation is an independent judiciary, and how powerfully it will hereafter operate to maintain the order and harmony of the several states, the impartiality and ability which have been displayed in the decision of some of the most interesting questions in which the rights of the states and the nation were involved,

most clearly demonstrate. To this tribunal there is a safe appeal; they are the chosen guardians and expounders of the constitution, and to their decision the spirit of the constitution commands obedience.

What effect the increase of territory and population will have upon the internal operation of our federal system, is perhaps beyond the reach of political foresight to determine. Whether the augmentation of states will have a tendency to strengthen or weaken the arm of government; to prolong or shorten the duration of the union, is a question too much involved in speculation to admit of a satisfactory solution. Experience has shown, that the general government in its operation has increased in power, while the influence of the states is relatively diminished. This tendency, though contrary to the fears of the framers of the constitution, may prove its greatest security. As each state possesses some of the attributes of sovereignty which it partially retains in one branch of the national legislature, and in this particular the small and the large states are upon an equality, the common interest which they have, and especially the small states, in the preservation of the union, must increase in proportion as their relative influence is diminished by an augmentation of number. It is in the union

that the security of the small states consists ; and the greater the number is, to a certain extent, will be the majority who will be interested in its continuance. In this way the danger to be apprehended from the ambitious views of a large and powerful state is lessened, and those factions and divisions which are too apt to grow out of sectional prejudices, will be in some degree counteracted.

The importance of maintaining the rights of the states by a judicious exercise of the powers of the national government and of those of the states respectively, cannot be too highly estimated. Upon the proper management of these different forces depends the harmony of the whole system. Each state possesses the right of regulating its internal concerns, by the enactment of its laws and the administration of its government, upon republican principles ; and it is the excellence of our confederacy that the several states which compose it, have surrendered their powers to the general government no farther than was necessary to preserve the sovereignty, independence and safety of the nation. It is by means of these local governments that our representative system is so well adapted to this extensive territory ; for without these subordinate

authorities, it must have been confined to much narrower limits.

The utility of state laws in protecting the rights of person and property; the prompt and efficient administration of justice by magistrates and judges selected from among ourselves, are some of the greatest privileges; while the benefits which the people derive from their civil and religious institutions, will always secure to them a ready and liberal support. Nor are these advantages confined to the state where they are more immediately enjoyed. In a confederacy like ours, a laudable emulation is excited among all, without any of the dangers of competition; and by freely introducing the improvements which are made in one state into others, the advancement of each is made to contribute to the welfare of the whole. History informs us how powerfully the force of example, which was set by Massachusetts in the commencement of the struggle of our revolution, was felt in other parts of this nation; and how much she has done since the establishment of our independence, is best seen in the spirit and extent of her commerce; in the increase of her manufactures; in her numerous charitable and benevolent institutions, and, particularly, in

her schools and seminaries of learning. And what nation is there, which, in so short a time, has done so much, as the single state of New York has accomplished in the construction of her immense canal; an undertaking, which, for boldness of design and extent of usefulness, has never been equalled in this country.

The preservation of state rights is indeed intimately connected with the prosperity and even the existence of this nation. It is in the states that our sympathies act with the most force; it is here that our attachments are strongly fixed; here are our homes, our fire-sides, and all the endearing charities of life; and, if in the course of events this Republic, like the empires which have gone before us, is doomed to fall, the last agonizing struggles will be seen in the dissolution of the state governments.

Political discussions which relate to future prospects must in their nature be speculative, and are useful, so far only, as they have a tendency to enkindle a more ardent love of country and to elevate the tone of public feeling. Our Republic now assumes a high rank among the nations of the earth, and is destined to act a distinguished part in the great political dramas which are hereafter to be performed. In this enlightened age, when public

opinion almost throughout the civilized world, is beginning to act most powerfully in favour of the rights of the people, the moral force of this nation will be felt in other countries, and will have an influence in some degree proportioned to its effects upon our own growth and prosperity. Already has our example done much to extend liberal principles into those countries, where it is the policy of government to prohibit free enquiry; where rulers and subjects form distinct classes of beings, and the former are supposed to have all power and the latter no political rights. A doctrine so degrading to human nature, so repugnant to all principles of freedom, can be maintained only by keeping the people in ignorance. Despotism, indeed, sometimes hides its deformities and swells into magnificence and grandeur through the mists that surround it. It is by the diffusion of knowledge that these mists are to be dissipated, and in proportion as political information is extended among a people, will the foundations of arbitrary power be weakened and undermined.

The time is past when it was thought derogatory to monarchical power to adopt a measure or pursue a plan because it originated in a republic. The ex-

example which was first set by this nation in the abolition of the slave trade has been followed by other nations; and the law which was passed by our government, declaring it piracy to be engaged in that abominable traffick, has been met by Great Britain in a spirit which does honour to that nation.— An arrangement has accordingly been made with this country to cooperate in the destruction of all Englishmen and Americans who shall be found engaged in that wicked and horrible traffick. In this instance, at least, Great Britain has admitted that the example of a leading republic is worthy the imitation of a powerful monarchy.

There is much ground to believe that the relations of amity and peace which now subsist between Great Britain and this country will be of long continuance. Time and circumstances have in a great measure removed those bitter prejudices which grew out of the American revolution, and which subsequent political events have too long kept alive to the mutual injury of both nations. A more generous feeling and a more liberal policy have of late prevailed in England with reference to this country, founded not less upon a more accurate knowledge of the character and power of this nation, than upon

those general principles of political expediency which the present state of the world so peculiarly enforces. There is besides a kindred feeling which arises from a common language, similar laws, and a common ancestry. This is a natural, elevated and laudable feeling. It ever has existed in some degree, and though weakened, and, at times, counteracted by uncontrollable events, it will contribute much to break down the force of prejudice. What intelligent American can read the works of the most celebrated British poets, orators and historians, and not feel a pleasure in the reflection that their thoughts and sentiments were first clothed in his native language, and with that are destined to live or be forgotten? And where is the nation, besides England, that has in the existence of another, an imperishable record of her own language; and from which is reflected the light of her laws and her literature? Indulging a sentiment like this, a writer of that nation observes—"Where the children of England dwell, and where her language is spoken, the sun never sets; and from her loins has sprung the nation which has, of all that history records, employed the shortest time to rise to the greatest power and freedom."

It cannot be denied that the friendship of nations, in order to be lasting, must be founded upon the solid basis of a mutual interest; and, upon this principle, the prospect of a durable and harmonious intercourse between the two countries is not diminished. Local situation, and the immense distance which separates us, will prevent those jealousies and interfering interests which are so apt to disturb the tranquillity of neighbouring nations. The great commercial relations of the two countries are mutual, and must produce, as they always have produced, a rivalry; but will not the dangers which arise from competition be in some measure counteracted by the advantages which both will always derive from the wide market which this country opens to the manufactures of Great Britain? And with respect to foreign powers there is at present a strong sympathy between England and these United States, founded upon a common interest. Equally renowned for national valour, which is nurtured by a spirit of freedom, the two nations, forgetting former animosities, may ere long be found to cooperate in maintaining the cause of civil liberty throughout the world.

I am aware that cordial sentiments, expressed on this occasion, towards England would once have been

thought to partake of foreign partialities ; but such sentiments are fast spreading in this country, and are consistent with a genuine American feeling. We have become too powerful, as a nation, to feel the timidity of an inferior, and too magnanimous not to indulge the liberal feeling of an equal. What Great Britain has been for centuries acquiring, this nation, by force of circumstances, has in some measure attained in the short life of man. Such a comparison, then, reflects the highest honour upon our growing greatness, and is calculated to increase that national valour and spirit by which we have commanded the respect of foreign powers, and by which alone we can hope to maintain it.

Our future rank as a nation will depend upon ourselves ; upon the manner in which our government is administered. Experience has unfolded the true policy which ought to be pursued. The example of Washington is the polar star which ought to be the guide of future rulers. His conduct towards foreign nations was founded upon principles of justice, impartiality and firmness. Ever vigilant to protect our national rights ; prompt to repel an injury, and willing to redress a wrong, he maintained amidst the most threatening dangers a strict neutrality with

the nations of the world, "entangling alliances with none." In the administration of our internal affairs, his policy was liberal and magnanimous. No narrow system of favouritism was adopted by him. He selected men of talents and virtues wherever they could be found, without distinction of party, to fill the offices of government. In short, he regarded the nation as a whole, and his enlarged policy embraced all its various interests.

Party divisions existed in the ancient Republics; they have prevailed in our own, and the experience of ages fully proves that they are in some degree inseparable from free government. In a country like this, where the form of government is free and popular; the laws just, mild and equal; where the security of property is so perfect, and the means of acquiring it so great; there will be some whose wealth will make them insolent, some whose poverty will make them turbulent, some who will be dissatisfied with public liberty, and many who are ambitious, and who will resort to unworthy arts to gratify their ambition. But the excess of party virulence is here checked by the very freedom which sometimes produces it. The corrective is in the good sense of the people; in the principles of our ances-

tors ; in the example of our most virtuous and most enlightened statesmen ; but above all, in the deep interest which a majority of the people will always feel in the support of a government which has for its object the good of the whole. All men in office are responsible to the people, and their conduct will be more or less influenced by a regard to their opinion. No particular interest can long prevail which is at variance with the public good. The vigilance of the people will detect the evil tendency of measures, and, as they have the power in their own hands, when dissatisfied with their rulers they will apply the constitutional remedy by selecting other agents to administer the affairs of government. This responsibility to the people is a principle of our government which is perfect in theory, and, though sometimes abused, is powerfully operative in practice. No man, be his elevation ever so high, or his talents ever so great, dares set at defiance public opinion ; and his deference for the people will always bear some proportion to the virtue and intelligence which they possess. “ The best interests of a country require, that its talent and energy should be employed in the enactment of its laws and in the administration of its government, and that these should be conformable to the general opinion of its inhabitants. It is

the great virtue of a representative government that it answers this object; while the universal responsibility of its functionaries, and the favour with which all colourable accusations against them are always received, seems to secure as much purity in their actual conduct as the infirmities of human nature will ever allow us to expect."

In considering the advantages of our free government, the mind is irresistibly turned towards a nation, now struggling for that Independence which the wisdom and courage of our fathers achieved for us, and which this occasion recalls to our grateful remembrance. The name of Greece excites the most exalted and patriotic feelings, mingled indeed with a melancholy sympathy for the sufferings which that once renowned people have been, for ages, doomed to endure. It was in the ancient republics of Greece that philosophy, eloquence, poetry and the arts were carried to the highest perfection; and the descendants of that nation, the glory and splendour of whose institutions we see through the medium of history, are now looking upon the political institutions of this country, with an ardent, patriotic desire, to enjoy the blessings of a government like ours. In the commencement of their present contest, this oppressed people turned their eager eyes towards this country,

and implored our assistance to encourage them in their arduous struggle. They have awakened a general sympathy and interest throughout the nation. Our encouragement is best afforded in the example of those heroes and patriots who took an active part in the war of our revolution, and whose counsels and directions, followed up and carried into effect by a brave and united people, were crowned with success. They have our sentiments expressed in that instrument "which will last through all time," the declaration of our Independence, wherein it is written "all men are created equal, and are endowed with certain unalienable rights; and among them, are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." The speeches of our orators and statesmen in our public assemblies breathe a generous sympathy for their sufferings; and, in an American Congress, the Greeks have found an advocate whose eloquence "may give them courage and spirit, teach them that they are not wholly forgotten by the civilized world and inspire them with constancy in the pursuit of their great end."

Whether Greece again become an independent nation will probably depend upon their own united and persevering efforts, unaided by foreign powers. Neutrality, from present appearances, is all she can expect from the continent of Europe. Between

arbitrary power and political freedom there can be no sympathy. Most of the European monarchies adhere to the doctrine, that the best forms of government are those in which the people can have no influence or control. It is in this land of freedom that more enlightened and liberal sentiments prevail; a doctrine more worthy of human nature, more consistent with the rights of man, is here inculcated. It was reserved for the people of these United States to decide the all interesting question, whether a free people are capable of governing themselves. The experiment has been fairly made. Time has shown with what fidelity they have thus far discharged the high trust committed to them. We have existed as a nation for a period little short of half a century, bound together by the strong ties of a common sympathy, similar privileges, a common interest, and equal protection. If this bond strengthen with our strength; if an ardent love of country and a veneration for our civil and religious institutions, and above all, if a pure and enlightened public sentiment pervade the nation, then indeed may we hope, that this Republic, which has been rising higher and higher above the political horizon, will continue to shine with increasing lustre for ages to come.
