

AN
ORATION,

DELIVERED

IN THE

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

AT

MORRIS-TOWN,

July 4, 1806.

BY HENRY FORD, A. B.

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Advertisement.

SEVERAL of my friends have expressed a curiosity to see my Oration in print. They have represented to me that my character was concerned—that my sentiments would be misrepresented. The first is a motive with me to give it to the public ; but as to the latter, I confess, it is no motive. The subject I have chosen is immensely interesting. In handling it, I have aimed at sober discussion, and at faithful representation. I have not railed ; but have *attempted* to reason : and, therefore, if the discussion is at all worthy of my subject, I deserve a candid hearing. Possibly some sentiments may be deemed anti-republican. I think they are friendly to *rational, lasting* liberty. But names, when attached to party, signify nothing ; and the fear of being taxed as a democrat or a federalist should never hinder a man, when opportunity offers, of declaring what he deems interesting to his country.

But still, I have not the honorable Committee's signature.— To those who think this indispensable, I give full liberty to ascribe the publication to *some* patriotism, mixed with a large portion of vanity to be seen in print.

HENRY FORD.

AN
ORATION, &c.

THIS day commences the 30th year of our independence. We are assembled to celebrate that interesting event. Happy should I be, could I offer any thing worthy of so great an occasion, and of so respectable an auditory. I will, however, make no apology for either matter or manner. For the first, I claim that indulgence which, as republicans, we profess to grant to freedom of discussion, provided it be conducted with decorum, remembering that "*error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it.*" As to the second, I should but insult your good sense by a vain endeavor to gild over a feeble performance by silly apology.

You had last year pointed out to you our comparative felicity with that of other nations. We here experience all the happiness to be derived from internal quiet and external security—from increasing wealth—the advancement of art and science—the most absolute religious toleration, and from these being all secured to us by an equal administration of good laws. Whereas, the best that can be said of the governments of the world, ancient or modern, is that they have in some measure kept it from being a scene of universal butchery. The fruits of industry have only offer-

ed a lure to systematic, legalized rapacity, or lawless violence. Men have become rich, only to be plundered, and deserving, but to be betrayed by the worthless confidants of a more worthless prince. But of ours it may be said, that, in itself considered, it is calculated to combine all the blessings belonging to a state of civil society. It secures to us life, liberty, and the fruits of industry, (the great objects of civil combination) as far as is in the power of a government to do it. There is a wider opening for honest enterprise, whether it be directed to the pursuits of wealth or fame, in ours, than in any other country.

But how to maintain so happy a state, ought to engage our most serious attention. As more is committed to the people in ours, than in most other forms of government, more prudence is required in the use of their powers. Ours must flourish or decay in proportion to the virtue of the body of the community. Our danger arises from our seeming prosperity.— Wealth, ease, luxury, or rivalship in show, abandonment of principle in private dealing, a lust after preferment at the expense of true honor, and a willingness to sacrifice public good to selfish ends, is the natural result of such unbounded affluence;—a miserable succession!...which, notwithstanding we fancy our mountain stands so strong, we must one day or other witness. It depends upon individual virtue to retard that destruction to which ours, in common with all human institutions, is liable.

We must possess virtue as men....we must possess virtue as citizens. I will speak of the latter, and par-

ticularly of the right of election. I will first consider the qualifications of electors, and, secondly, of those to be elected.

In a representative government, as ours, the only public character in which the mass of the people is recognized, is as electors : and that which distinguishes freemen from slaves, is the right of choosing their rulers. In this point, if any, our liberties must be assailed. To the prudent use of this right we must owe the continuance of our government : and as invaluable as this privilege is, and how secure soever we may think ourselves of it, it is not invulnerable.

It is by intrigue,..by debauching the public mind,..by making election a business of trick and finesse, rather than the sober expression of the people's will, that our constitution must be eventually overthrown. To guard against this—to keep elections pure and those who elect faithful to their trust, our attention should be chiefly directed. Such men, therefore, ought to elect as can estimate the value of the right...as feel an interest in defending it, and as are independent.

For the attainment of this end, legislators have almost universally made the possession of some quantity of property a requisite qualification for voters : and I think with the greatest justice,

For, first, our laws are almost exclusively taken up in regulating property. Perhaps not a hundredth part of them is criminal. It is only in commercial countries that legislative interference between man and man is common and becomes an object of much attention. It is there only where the distribution of

justice is made a science, and the study and explanation of its principles, a profession ; and where a body of men is established to make laws suiting the perpetually varying face of commercial affairs. On the contrary, among a people not commercial, where the amassing of wealth is not a common object of exertion, but where military atchievement is the only ground of distinction, differences about property seldom occur ; and when they do, must be settled by an appeal to strength, or to experienced countrymen.— The laws of such a people must be very simple, and rather the maxims of good sense, applied in particular cases, than a regular digest, whose parts are suited to, and depend upon each other.

As property, therefore, gives rise to legislation, and is almost the only object of it, it is not unjust to deprive him who has none from a voice in elections.— Why is this more unjust than to prohibit the man not holding stock from voting in a turnpike or banking company ?

But it is replied, life and liberty are as dear to one man as to another, and by far the most interesting objects of defence to all. But I answer, these are not the less secure to a man than if he had the privilege in question, in its fullest extent. In this particular, he is on a level with his fellow-citizens. His life and liberty are protected, and he is bound to yield obedience to government.

Further, in spite of the decisions of sober speculation, in every commercial country, wealth is the measure of respectability, and the foundation for that spir-

it of independence absolutely essential to unbiassed elections. The rich estimate it so : so do the poor. All so consider it. Indeed, as far as wealth is the fruit of industry, we justly measure wealth thereby.— So far as indigence is the result of idleness, extravagance, and debauchery, it is justly despised. Say what we will, the first will lead—the last will be led. Riches will inspire the possessor with self consequence, and an idea of a right to direct ; poverty will inspire servility, dependence, and political insignificance. So that at an election the chief contest becomes, who shall marshal the most dependants.

Therefore, supposing riches to make men haughty, overbearing, corrupt, is it politic to add to their pernicious influence an engine only calculated to increase it? The man of property will be above the frowns and the flatteries of the demagogue ; he will feel that responsibility to character, which is a powerful incitement to the faithful discharge of duty.

Again, property makes the man of reflection feel not only the respect he owes himself, but his own interest to be deeply concerned in the choice he makes ; —that to the stability of government he must owe the security of his wealth. He feels his own happiness.... all the ties of kindred....of father, husband, brother, friend....his present enjoyments, and future hopes, all embarked with his country's fortunes, and to sink or swim with them. Such views will guide him to a prudent, cautious, unbiassed choice.

Do not suppose these sentiments to be only in the mind of the orator, and serve merely to decorate his

speech. I hope many an honest patriot is actuated by them.—If not, it is a bad omen, and presages a short duration to liberty. Whereas, such as have nothing to lose, will either feel indifferent, or would rejoice to see a confusion of affairs, that could not injure them, but might be their exaltation.

Thus I think it both just and politic to make the possession of property a requisite for a voter: but to secure the advantages I have mentioned, it ought to be landed property. It is the only test by which we can ascertain citizenship: all other persons are transients: they are sometimes here and sometimes there: they belong no where. Landed property alone has responsibility: it is fixed and immoveable, and must suffer all the vicissitudes of internal conflict and foreign aggression. The mere merchant (and the depriving this class of the right of citizenship is the greatest objection to my doctrine) is but one degree more permanent than the sailor; and, like him, makes that his home where trade is most flourishing, and where he can fastest amass property. It matters not to him whether he is subject to king, pope, or president: he is an East-Indian, an Englishman, or an American: he is equally attached to either country, and feels an equal interest in the prosperity of each: and when he sees a storm gathering, he sets his property afloat...seeks more quiet quarters, and leaves the country to defend itself.

But, what is worth a thousand arguments besides, is, that a specified amount of personal property can never be ascertained. I need only appeal to our own ex-

perience in this state. Our *constitution* requires a voter to be possessed of 50*l*. The prevailing *theory* is, that taxation and representation should go together : but our *practice* outstrips them both, in its liberality, and makes no invidious exceptions. It admits to the pole people of all sexes, colors, tongues, characters, and conditions : it admits Ethiopians, and Medes, and Elamites, and dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judea, and Cappadocia, and Pamphylia, and Egypt, and Cretes and Arabians, Jews and proselytes. In our unbounded generosity, we would admit to a participation of our choicest rights, the lame, and the halt, and the blind...the worthless and the penniless ;—as motley a groupe as the day of Pentecost or the pool of Bethesda ever witnessed.

I am sensible that, by adopting my doctrine, much worth will be obscured, and that many bad men must unavoidably be admitted to share our privileges.—Three classes of men will be excluded :—merchants, who have no landed property—industrious, though poor young men—and the idle and profligate, who have no property, nor ever care to have any, while it is to be obtained at the expense of labor and economy.

Of the first I have already spoken :—of the second I will make one or two observations. It is not here as in Europe. There land cannot be bought, and the reward of labour is such that the utmost calculation of the laborer is, to keep alive, by incessant toil and severe economy, his increasing family. To become opulent or influential exceeds his most sanguine hopes.

But no country but this ever witnessed, as the steady course of things, such rapid rises in fortune, by the sober pursuit of gain, and industry as uniformly producing wealth as any other cause its accustomed effect: so that it is no uncommon occurrence that a man setting out in life without a second shirt, has, in twenty-five years, fitted his son for filling the first offices of the union. The price of land is low—that of labor very high, and the requisite qualifications are quite accessible to all men.

But make the right of franchise an honorable badge of distinction—the reward only of industry, and it will become a stimulus to it, and well worth the obtaining. Let us set it upon high and honorable ground, and make it an object worthy of exertion, and of a nature too sacred to be trifled with.

As to the last mentioned class, no wise and good man will regret the loss of their influence on society. Those men who want such tools to fabricate their mischievous machinations, may. Industry, economy, and a desire to acquire wealth, are virtues, and will always be attended with a true and rational patriotism; but idleness, prodigality, and an indifference to the honest pursuit of gain, are vices, and will be always accompanied with indifference to the country's welfare. Such men have no rights they value, and ought not to be allowed to trifle with the dearest interests of the community: they are fit tools for ambition: their only consequence arises from their ability to disturb the quiet of their country.

II. I will now consider what ought to be the qualifications of public officers. They should be men of abilities and integrity.

If we take a view of the contending interests—the jealousies and local prejudices of our extensive country—its increasing wealth and population—its commerce with every corner of the world, and of the revenue necessary to supply our annual expenditures; and when, in addition to this, we consider our liability to be involved in European politics—and consequently, the address, wisdom, and firmness necessary to keep us disentangled from foreign intrigue, we shall not form a low opinion of the talents requisite for such mighty concerns. The able American civilian must have read much, and thought much—must be a historian, acquainted with governments ancient and modern, and with the present state of Europe...of enlarged and liberal views...having a thorough knowledge of man...able in council and debate, and possessing a perspicacity to see, and a boldness to seize advantages which our own country, or the posture of European politics, should offer.

Who, then, is sufficient for these things? I will tell you who is not: he that possesses a mere party-flippancy—whose reading and whose meditations have been confined to the learned disquisitions of a newspaper—whose acquaintance with men has only extended to those of his own parish—and the utmost of whose strength has been put forth in an unmeaning Fourth of July Declamation. It is not in the shambles of a butcher's stall, or over a blacksmith's anvil,

that the wisdom is to be acquired which is to guide the councils of our nation, or concert plans of safety and glory to our country. Doubtless there are men of sterling worth in these and every honest profession ; but to a man whose opportunities have not fitted him for it, it is no disparagement to say he is not qualified for the office of an assembly-man or a congressman.

I acknowledge, and I exult to reflect, that some of our wisest statesmen have been called out of walks of life where political wisdom was not to be expected. They have been wise in spite of untoward circumstances ; they have possessed all the wisdom I mentioned : but let it be remembered it did not come by instinct ; they took the requisite means to obtain it.

But knowledge, alone, is not sufficient. If enlisted on the side of vice, wisdom becomes cunning : experience only fits the possessor the better to betray, and political address serves but to fit a man the more perfectly for all the arts of intrigue. An officer must be honest : all will agree with me in this. The question is, What constitutes integrity—how are we to judge of it ? This ought to be our criterion :—He that, in private life, is corrupt, either in principle or in practice, or in both, is unworthy of public confidence. He is unfit to be trusted with the management of his country's interests, who considers oaths as state tricks ...the good end as sanctifying the worst means...the fear of God, superstition...and who has renounced his hopes and fears of a judgment to come—who, in short, as far as the promulgation of wicked principles will do

it, has broken all the bonds that hold society together—which make life, liberty, and property safe.

It matters not, that a man does not act according to such sentiments. Vice, at heart, is the foundation of them. A wicked propensity gives them birth. The man who has a relish for what is in itself amiable, and salutary to society, will detest them.

Neither is it an extenuation, that a man does not believe them—that they are adopted only from a love of singularity: No; I do not think any man can, in truth, believe such doctrines. Though it is difficult to say to what length depravity, with its constant attendant, stupidity, will go. But he who can make them his habitual system of faith, must possess both in no common degree.

But let us beware of considering a man as better than his professions. He, who, in theory, makes unhallowed passions the measure of right and wrong, will not hesitate, upon occasion, to exhibit them in practice. No, my friends, he only who has the fear of God before his eyes, will be found faithful to his country's interest, in the time of temptation.

But if bad principles ought to disqualify a man for office, much more ought vicious practises. He who can oppress, and defraud in private life—who can seduce his neighbor's wife or daughter—who can murder his friend upon a principle of honor, has a heart, the seat of abominations...the receptacle of every unclean thing, and estranged from the fine feelings of fervent patriotism. He will not hesitate to betray

his country's best interests to gratify a vicious appetite.

“ For where was public virtue to be found
 Where private was not ? Can he love the whole
 Who loves no part ?.... He be a nation's friend,
 Who is, in truth, the friend of no man there ?
 Can he be strenuous in a country's cause,
 Who slights the charities, for whose dear sake,
 That country, if at all, must be belov'd ? ”

This, then, ought to be the principle, Is he capable ? is he honest ? by which we are guided in choosing our public officers. And this ought to be the only principle.

As a community, we cannot act rationally upon any other : every man of common sense can judge whether a candidate for office is an honest man—whether he loves his country. We judge here by his whole walk. If he has exhibited, in his whole conduct, a character upright in dealing, sympathetic towards affliction, public spirited, and disposed to be useful upon a small sphere, he deserves the confidence of his fellow-citizens.

The question, as to a man's abilities, though more difficult to decide, is not beyond reach of public examination. To decide it aright we need no great literary apparatus. Though we cannot determine certainly as to the comparative abilities of two great men, we may be certain they both deserve that title ; and are, in this respect, fitted for public office. It is true we may sometimes be deceived, by an imposing boldness, or party flippancy, that looks very like wisdom ; but where sterling talents do appear, (party prejudice

apart,) we can recognize them. If not, we are not qualified in the first and greatest essential for voters. If we cannot do this, much less can we judge of the wisdom or weakness of a man's political conduct;—much less still can we judge of the uprightness of his motives. Common sense, therefore, is sufficient to guide us in determining upon a man's honesty and ability.

But, without the opportunity for it, we cannot get the necessary information; and without this, we cannot justly determine whether a man's political conduct has been weak, or wicked, or both, or neither. It may have been weak without being wicked: it may prove, in the result, to have been unfortunate, though neither weak nor wicked—and to have anticipated all the consequences that, from the existing circumstances, could have been anticipated. To judge here, we must have a view of the whole ground;—we must stand on a commanding eminence; and one to which the whole community cannot be supposed to have access. In deciding, therefore, upon public *measures*, we must, as a community, be guided by such as have better means of information than ourselves; and in choosing men to concert them, we ought to enquire, *Are they honest? ... are they faithful to the Constitution? ... are they capable?—*And never, *are they of this or that party?*

If party politics are to be made a test, how are we to apply it? Who has marked out the precise tenets which are to be esteemed orthodox or heretical?.... What are they? Is it to vilify *John Adams* or *Thom-*

as Jefferson? Is it to declaim unmeaningly for the cause of liberty, and to rail against kings, priests, and popes? Is it the empty declaration, that my days are spent in toil, and my nights in watching for the good of my country, that will constitute me a patriot? Will my republicanism be tested by the strength of my hatred to standing-army and navy establishments?—Nothing is more easy than to make such professions, and to be noisy in doing it; and when the politics of the day, a mere bubble blown about by every breeze, shall change, it is no sacrifice to him who has repudiated principle, to change with them.

By making party politics a test of fitness for office, we shall almost universally admit bad men, and exclude good. This is the only distinction upon which base men can think to rise in a free state. It annihilates the difference between virtue and vice: it is not merely an additional qualification to those of ability and honesty: it destroys them both. By pursuing this mischievous principle, ignorance will preside in our courts of justice—weak and wicked men will be our legislators. It is a mantle that will cover any degree of turpitude or want of capacity. The chief article in barter now for place becomes gross, and what ought to be offensive, adulation of the people on the one hand, and scurrilous abuse of those in power, on the other.

And what is the impropriety of flattering the people? They have rights, and why not tell them of it? Yes, we have rights—invaluable rights. From the people flow all power, honor, dignity, and trust; and

their happiness ought to be the object of every governmental act. I allow it; I glory in it. Neither can we be too much cautioned against ambitious men, who would sap the foundations of our liberties. But who are they? By what signs shall we know them?

They are not (and we cannot remember it too often) bold and avowed enemies, who aim, as by formal declaration of war, at our best interests. We have nothing to fear from the promulgators of alien and sedition laws to check public scrutiny, or from the creators of enemies to back them. If enactors of such laws have any designs against the constitution, I hesitate not to say their procedures are most impolitic. The reason is plain: if a measure is meant to stop public enquiry, and free discussion, it must be wisely planned indeed, to succeed where these are as habitual as breathing, and where there are the best means of making such discussions, (I do not say of coming to legitimate conclusions) possessed by any people on earth. Such an attack would not be made upon a constitution as yet unknown but on paper. It must conflict with habit long established and endeared to us by the most powerful passions...an instinctive love of speaking what we think, and acting as we choose—to the cultivation of which we want no incitements. Such open attacks do not corrupt us; and we can never be enslaved until we become corrupt.

But they are men who appeal to our passions, our avarice, or our love of flattery. A just and wise appropriation of public money is termed prodigality...a necessary tax is represented as affording tyranny the

means of riveting her chains upon us...and the bestowment of such salaries as will command worth and talents, will be considered as creating a body of hirelings, to prey upon the vitals of the community, and to support measures at war with our liberties. All this is very grateful, and can hardly help prejudicing their fellow-citizens in their favor. Thus do they show their zeal.

But they go on to offer that incense to popular vanity, which cannot fail to intoxicate all but those whose brains are strong in no common degree. The voice of the people is the voice of GOD...their will the unerring rule of right...and their decisions those of infallible wisdom. But surely it does not show that good sense on which these men so lavishly bestow their plaudits, that it is received with complacence, and rewarded with trust. We have great means of becoming enlightened; and we are so to a considerable degree. But such representatives as these have nothing to do with the preservation of our rights. Have nothing, did I say? Yes, they have but too much to do with it: they are the direct, the only means of destroying them. We do not need such artificial means of remembering our privileges. It is impossible that the motive offering them can be good,

Accordingly, the flaming patriot cannot close his *zealous eulogy*, until he recommends himself to our confidence. We had been wondering at the disinterestedness of men whom we had not thought capable of such emotions. But this is a clue to the whole mystery;—yet, (though the imposition is as old as the

history of men,) few nations have cared to unravel it. When they have thus gained their point, the cry against enormous salaries is over; and the deluded people fancy that they have gained a triumph over their oppressors, and gotten the reins of government fast in their own hands. But the struggle then succeeds who shall enjoy the places of profit. Each champion now sets up for himself, and, as opportunity offers, draws off parties after him;—each alternately bemoans and reprobates the apostacies of his former political brethren...protests his own patriotism, and appeals to the spirit of ancient days to gain credence to his asseveration.

To conclude this scene of degradation, the much boasted right of suffrage becomes a mere nullity. Its only use is to confirm the dictate of some petty tyrant: having stolen the garb of patriotism, and assumed the distinction of friend of the people, no obstacle offers to his executing the most sinister calculations. Now an election turns according to the edict of a midnight caucus. There all honors are portioned; and there it is determined who shall be proscribed.

In all this the people must be guided by him whom they have chanced, (for it is a mere chance,) to support. Now is it not far safer to trust to the honest, open, bold conduct of men, whose private characters are unspotted, than to empty professions of men, whose private lives are stained with every crime—whose first essays to gain confidence have been suspicious—and whose after-deportment shows them to

have been seeking their own and not their country's good? Is the man who, upon system, has thrown off the fear of God, to be trusted before him who appears, in his whole conduct, to be regulated thereby? Are professions to be preferred to long and tried services in an hour of real danger? Shall the news-paper fopling gain the ascendancy over hoary headed experience?

In any country where demerit thus tramples on worth, the people are already in a humiliating condition, and are fast verging towards a state of absolute subjection. No wise man will ever exult at the triumph of a party, as such. The country which is governed by party, is governed by intrigue; and influence is the reward of low cunning. One set of wicked men will be displaced but to make way for another; and the people will love to have it so. Lovers of their country will look on and mourn, but will never contend with vile weapons, or use base means to get themselves into power. The still small voice of reason will not be heard amidst the bawlings of selfish patriots; or, if it is heard, will not be regarded by an infatuated people, too far debauched to relish lessons of wisdom. Power will become the glittering prize of the most successful candidate, and the cry, *long live the republic*, will never be so loud as when the silly multitude are stabbing at its vitals.

Let Athens...let Rome...let France testify to the truth of the representation. Their debauchery was a lure to ambition...their licentious yokeace courted tyranny.

The making party politics a test of fitness for office—the receiving the witness of bad men against tried and faithful servants, is the only avenue of such men to power in a free government. It is a principal cause of the destruction of republics; and it deserves the most serious consideration of every well-wisher to his country, whether it may not eventually prove *our* destruction.

It depends upon that God, who, in an almost miraculous manner, kept our councils united and firm, when our existence as a nation depended upon union, and when there were so powerful causes of disunion; and who has still preserved us from those convulsions which have shook the powers of the eastern world, and still continue to shake them to their bases, to uphold us...to transmit our privileges to unborn generations. He who can most feelingly realize his goodness—receives his blessings the most as God meant they shall be received—takes most enjoyment from them, is the most truly wise man; and, through his thanksgiving and prayer, we may hope for a continuance of mercies. He who is wise to observe these things, shall understand the loving kindness of the Lord.

