

ORATION

PREPARED AT THE REQUEST

OF THE

COMMITTEE OF ARRANGEMENT,

APPOINTED

BY THE COMMON COUNCIL

OF THE

CITY OF ALBANY,

FOR CELEBRATING

The 37th Anniversary

OF

AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE.

BY P. VAN VECHTEN, ESQ.

Published at the request of the Common Council.

PRINTED

AT ALBANY, JULY 12, 1813.

At a Common Council, held at the Capitol, in the City of Albany, the 6th day of July, 1813.

WHEREAS, the Common Council did, according to ancient custom, appoint a committee to make arrangements for celebrating the late anniversary of American Independence.

AND WHEREAS, the said committee, on behalf of this Board, did request PHILIP VAN VECHTEN, Esq. to deliver an Oration on the said day.

AND WHEREAS, while Mr. Van Vechten was delivering the said Oration, certain ill disposed persons did interrupt the same, by hissing and other riotous conduct—Therefore,

RESOLVED, That the Common Council view the conduct of such persons as highly indecorous, as tending to excite tumult and disorder dangerous to the public peace, and as a flagrant violation of the liberty of speech.

RESOLVED FURTHER, That Mr. Van Vechten be requested to furnish the board with a copy of his Oration for publication.

A Copy,

S. VISSCHER, *Dep. Clerk.*



MR. VAN VECHTEN'S

REPLY TO THE ABOVE RESOLUTIONS.

Gentlemen,

I feel myself honored by the Resolution of the Common Council of this morning; and agreeably to their request, inclose you a copy of my hasty Address, prepared by your desire, for yesterday's cele-

bration of the anniversary of our independence. The short time allowed me for the preparation, must be my apology for its numerous imperfections.

UNDER any other circumstances than those in which I am placed, I should have deemed it proper to decline giving a copy of the address for publication. But knowing that the sentiments which it contains, have been distorted by some, and may be misrepresented by others, without having seen or heard them; and believing that they do not go beyond a free and warrantable expression of honest opinions, concerning the unfortunate situation of our country, I hold myself bound to submit it, with all its imperfections, to your disposal.

I am, Gentlemen,

With very great respect,

Your ob't. servant.

PHILIP VAN VECHTEN.

To the Committee of Arrangements, &c.

July 5, 1813.



NOTE.

[Mr. Van Vechten was appointed the Orator on the 3d of July—consequently, had but a few hours notice. The publication is to be imputed solely to the peculiar circumstances disclosed in the Resolution of the Common Council.]

ORATION, &c.

FELLOW-CITIZENS,

WE are assembled to celebrate our National Birth-Day under fearful circumstances. The interest which the occasion is in itself calculated to excite is increased to intenseness by our situation. If the Sun of our Prosperity has not altogether set, yet darkness, thick and awful darkness, overshadows us. Heretofore, on the return of this Anniversary, we sincerely rejoiced, but now we can only mourn. In the contrast of what we are, with what we were, the Pride of Patriotism is humbled, and the recollections which formerly, in the commemoration of our Independence, gave keenness to pleasure, now add poignancy to pain. The Spirit of Seventy-Six has departed from our Rulers—the courage which upheld, the wisdom which guided, and the pure love of Country which animated our National Councils throughout the Revolution, the adoption of the Constitution and the organization of the Government, have fled. Our He-

roes, Sages, and Patriots have ascended; but they have not left their mantles to their successors. The consequences of these deprivations have been most disastrous. The war in which we are engaged combines, in one dreadful result, the effects of that timidity, that incapacity, and those improper feelings, which have so long swayed our political destinies. Let us consider some of the prominent features of that war.

It is a war of neither honor nor interest. Great-Britain has repealed her Orders in Council,* and we are now fighting to protect British subjects against the claims of their natural allegiance. It is a war with a people from whom most of us have derived our language, and many of us, our descent—a people from whom we have received our learning and arts, our civil and religious institutions—a people with whom we carried on the fairest portion of our commerce—a people, who alone with ourselves, enjoy civil liberty—a people forming the bulwark of the world against universal subjugation, and necessarily requiring, in their tremendous struggle, the services of every subject. It is a war carried on against the most earnest remonstrances and prayers of that section of the union, for the vindication of whose rights and the protection of whose interests it was professedly declared. It is a war, the principal calamities of which, as respects the enemy, must fall not on Great-Britain, but on her inoffensive and unoffending Colonists. It is a war com-

* At this part of the Oration, *the hissing, &c.* commenced. The Orator, after viewing the persons that hissed, with a look of ineffable contempt left the stage with a dignity and composure honorable to his character and his feelings.

nenced without revenue and without the organization of any system to raise one—with but few, and those inadequate, fortifications on our sea-coast and frontiers—without an Army, without a Navy, without munitions, against a nation surpassingly more formidable to us than any other in the world, by the nature, extent and variety of her means of annoyance.

AT such a war, so deformed and so unnatural, Patriotism weeps and Humanity shudders. Not less cruel has it been in its effects, than it is odious in its character. The time once was, when our canvass whitened every sea and our flag visited every port—when the enterprize of our merchants supplied the wants of every other country and enriched our own—when our cities presented the most animated exhibitions of bustling industry—when ample profits rewarded the toil of the farmer, and abundance of employment solicited the laborer and artisan—when the internal improvements of the old States were rapidly progressing, and the wildernesses of the new, were fast yielding to the vigorous advances of civilization. But now, how sad is the reverse! Our foreign commerce, nay even our coasting trade, is destroyed. Our ships are dismantled and rotting in our harbors—the warehouses of our merchants are closed. The stillness of desolation reigns in our cities, save only, when disturbed by the din of war. Except as to some articles, or in the neighborhood of a camp, the farmer seeks in vain for a market for his produce. Laborers and artisans are compelled by necessity to have recourse for relief to the ranks of the army. The improvements of the old States are arrested, and the western frontier is dispeopled and laid waste by the ruthless savage.

THE sufferings produced by the war are not in the least degree compensated by military honors acquired in its progress. Whatever of military reputation we possessed, would be destroyed, but for the exploits of that glorious embryo of a Navy...our Country's boast and the world's wonder. It beams a radiance on our name which all the disgraces of the Army cannot obscure.

THE foregoing remarks naturally call to mind those principles of our great Political Father, which laid the foundation of our former prosperity, and the dereliction of which has brought upon us our present heavy adversity. An exposition of them at this time appears to me to be particularly seasonable. They involve the means both for the cure and prevention of our political maladies—and suffering disposes men to listen and to learn.

A LEADING principle of Washington was, the diffusion amongst the people of correct and useful information, and the cultivation of sound and stable morals. In countries where despotism has long prevailed, the ignorance and vices of the subjects contribute to their peace and safety. Their condition is such that nothing but the strong arm of despotism can curb their ferocity—and their ignorance and vices nerve that arm. The first, renders them in a great degree unconscious of their chains, and the latter, unable to shake them off. If their ignorance made them slaves, and serves in a measure to keep them so, their vices keep them so effectually. Should Turkey suddenly acquire freedom, the Turks would become demons, and Turkey itself a Pandemonium. But in a free country,

the permanency of the government, with which is incorporated the security of its freedom, depends on the intelligence and virtue of the people. The forms of the Constitution give no power to the administration, independent of popular sentiment : That is the spring which gives to the government its motion, and the sword which gives to the laws their operative force. Law-givers may enact laws, but if popular sentiment is decidedly hostile to them, they must become dead letters, or if enforced, they must be enforced by the destruction of freedom. Popular sentiment thus, the Soul of the Government, ought to be correct ; and to render it correct, it must be well informed and inflexibly honest.

ANOTHER principle of Washington was, that his duty as a ruler must be discharged at all hazards. He considered himself as the guardian of the people, to protect their interests, and not as their servant to obey their orders. Popularity, indeed, followed, but it was not the motive to his official conduct ; of course he made use of no artifices to entrap applause, nor did he attempt to shield himself from odium by any improper secrecy—Neither himself nor his ministers descended to the meanness of becoming electioneers. Important public affairs were not, unless the public welfare most imperiously required it, transacted in conclave. Information, indispensable to enlighten and direct public opinion, was not kept locked in the impenetrable cabinet of the Secretary of State. Washington would not let the fury of misguided popular zeal influence him to give his countenance to the violation of public faith. He would not permit that zeal to prevent his using his constitutional

power to compel the observance of neutrality, nor to submit to violations of our sovereignty, and insults to our government, by a foreign minister. He would not, to gratify popular indignation, precipitate us into a war, when the causes of war could be honorably removed by negotiation. Claiming no more than his just power as Executive, he never failed, when necessary, to assert it; nor did he ever seek to escape the responsibility of his station, by devolving the discharge of its duties upon either the Legislature or Judiciary.

It was also one of his principles, that the Constitution should never be touched, but with the most profound reverence and fear; that it would be better to bear with any imperfections which it contained, than to hazard its stability by alterations; that temporary passions and interests were not adequate causes for altering it; that it was formed under such favorable circumstances for making it as perfect as any human work can be, as will never, in all probability, again occur: and that if destroyed, it will draw after it the destruction of our liberties. Of the Constitution, therefore, he was a faithful, firm and vigilant Centinel.

A FOURTH of Washington's principles was, that the Government should be administered *for the People*, and in no act of his administration did he recognise amongst them the distinction of party. Favoritism he viewed as both injustice and corruption, and for that reason, and without regard to parties, he selected from amongst the whole mass of our citizens the worthiest to fill offices, and never removed any officer but for

demerit. His agency and control, so far as they extended, were exerted to render all the measures of government equal, protecting alike the rights and interests of every portion of the community.

A FIFTH of his principles was, a strict impartiality towards all nations with whom our relations were the same. Washington regarded the existence of foreign partialities in the administration, whether they arose from foreign intrigue, or the unassisted direction of popular feeling, or the feelings of our rulers, as highly deleterious. He thought that such partialities would urge us into the vortex of the policy of that nation to which they were pointed, however hostile that policy might be to the course which we ought to pursue. He considered that the giving assistance to, and conferring favors upon, one of two nations engaged in war, which should be refused to the other, would be to take a part directly as a belligerent, and would justify the treating us as such. His sentiments as to foreign partialities went still farther—He abhorred them as preparing the way for a foreign domination over us—He conceived that there could be no reason even to excuse them, for he believed that nations never render each other good offices unless through policy or fear; that they have no heart for either benevolence or gratitude, but that themselves bestowing benefits from interest only—Interest, also, will cause them to overlook the benefits they receive. During the whole of his administration, his conduct was marked by the strictest impartiality towards foreign nations. Neither of the European belligerents could either frighten or flatter him to swerve from neutrality; neither could persuade him into an entangling alliance. Towards

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all alike, so long as they treated us as our state of neutrality required, he extended offices of amity ; and when they insulted or injured us, he equally as to all, and with promptness and resolution, adopted measures to secure atonement.

A SIXTH principle was, that a defenceless nation would always be insulted and injured ; that there was no safety for our honor or our rights, but in our readiness to defend them ; and that a state of peace is, therefore, the season to prepare for war.

THE history of Washington's administration declares and illustrates these principles, and furnishes the most conclusive proof of their *thorough* excellence. The time when he entered upon the office of President was immediately after the adoption of the Constitution—a time of distress and peril, of doubt, anxiety and uncertainty. The feuds generated by the Revolution were still in full vigor—the conflict of opinion, produced by the work of adopting the Constitution, yet raged—the government was to be put into operation, and if in that any material mistake had been made, the newly-raised fabric would have crumbled to pieces. We owed large debts, the demands for which were pressing, nay even threatening, and we had no revenue. We had but little agriculture, and scarcely any commerce, and with distraction at home, we were without confidence or respect abroad. Before the conclusion of his administration, the picture of our condition was wonderfully changed—a system of finance was organized, which quieted the clamors of the distressed claimants on government, and built up public credit on a firm foundation. Agriculture was

revived—commerce flourished—the government was firmly established ; and although dissensions were not healed, they were no longer formidable. Foreign nations respected us and sought our friendship. We exhibited a spectacle altogether new in the experience of mankind—the spectacle of a people passing at once from political infancy to political manhood. Indeed we were urged into a career of prosperity, which both in its commencement and progress, forms a striking wonder in this age of wonders. So great was the impulse we received in that career, that twelve years of flagrant mis-rule have scarcely been able to check it. When Washington resigned the command of the army, it was thought that the measure of his honor was full ; but his administration shewed, that at his resignation he had gathered but half his laurels. When he retired from the government, he had proved by his administration that he was also first in peace, as he had by his military conduct before proved that he was first in war—And he retired, the glory of his Country and the admiration of the World.

IF, improving the lessons our misfortunes have taught us, we restore to the government the disciples of Washington, we shall again become the most prosperous, as we are the most favored by heaven, of any people on earth. But if, disregarding experience, we continue his enemies in power, ours will be the fate which has hitherto attended all free states. Evils will accumulate until they either bring us under the domination of a foreign master, or terminate in a revolution, which will assuredly subject us to a domestic tyrant.