

AN  
ORATION

BY THE

REV. SAMUEL WHELPLEY, A. M.

DELIVERED,

IN CONSEQUENCE OF HIS ILLNESS,

BY HIS SON,

MELANCTON P. WHELPLEY,

IN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN MORRIS-TOWN,

— JULY 4, 1809.

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**T**HE DAY on which the foundation of an Empire is laid, forms an important æra, and, in different ages and nations, has been celebrated with songs and festivals. This has often been the case when Empires have been founded in the blood of innocence, and their birth-day darkened with the horrors of guilt and the groans of the miserable. What notice, then, is due to that Day, which gives years, perhaps ages of independence, happiness, and peace to a Nation?

Such, my Countrymen, is the Day we celebrate. It has drawn after it a train of peculiar blessings. Under its influence a generation has been born and acquired maturity—large provinces have been settled and become populous—heroes, statesmen, philosophers and divines have arisen—colleges and universities have been founded—the arts and sciences have flourished, and our country has enjoyed a long period of great prosperity.

With propriety, therefore, do we celebrate this Day; and happy will it be for us, and our children, if these celebrations, while they perpetuate the memory of grand events, and descend to posterity like a broad stream, with unbroken current and increasing magnificence—shall indicate the union of a mighty Empire, and meet with the acceptance and smiles of Heaven.

If I am honored this day by your appointment, I am no less embarrassed by the imposition of an arduous task. To unite novelty with instruction—to inspire confidence—to excite interest, though difficult, is neither the most arduous nor serious part of the duty. Men, who speak on these occasions, are responsible not only to present, but future times—not only to men, but to God. The orator who labors only to gain your applause, merits your severest reproaches; and, if I may use the words of the Prophet, “*If he sow to you the wind, he shall reap the whirlwind.*”

Suffer me to remark, as preparatory to subsequent observations, that *a good form of government, well administered, is the only tenure, under Divine Providence, by which we can hold and enjoy our present privileges.*

The misery of nations which now exist, and the ruin of those which once existed, but are now no more, may be traced up to one source—a bad government. In that vortex mighty nations and proud empires have sunk. From that cause, the fairest portions of the earth have become a wilderness, the most flourishing cities a desert, and the noblest palaces a den of dragons.

Not to waste our time in elaborate encomiums, let us grant that our form of government is the best adapted to our character and principles...to our wants and weaknesses, of any one ever devised by man. To say the least, it is an astonishing fabric of political wisdom. But no mere form of government can render a nation happy. However perfect and splendid in theory, there is a practical part which is intrinsic and essential. There must be virtue in the people—there must be *wisdom* and *virtue* in the rulers, or else all is lost.

Let us, then, for a moment, reflect on the dangers to which we stand exposed as a nation, through possible defects in the form, or probable errors in the administration of our government.

These dangers may be looked for from one of the three following sources:—from unskilful management—from intrigue and ambition—from the policy of Europe. The sources of these evils, though widely different and distant, are still collateral. They will be extremely likely to unite their streams. They have, in a degree, united them already; and though flowing with gentle current, they have given us a shock, which not to have felt and feared, discovers equal blindness, stupidity and insatiation. I shall, however, make no retrospect, especially in the style of recrimination. If names cannot be mentioned but with their faults, let both rest together in silence.

Perhaps unskilful management opens the widest source of danger to every Republic; since, if there were no want of skill, there would be little danger from intestine intrigue or foreign influence. In every free government the people at large have a natural jealousy of men of opulence and talents; and that, it must be confessed, not without considerable reason. Is it true, then, that men of small abilities love power less than men of great talents? Far from it; the desire to govern is common to all men; and the experience of all ages shows, that when weak and ignorant men are clothed with power, they become the most dreadful of all tyrants. Men of talents may, and often do err, through perversity of heart—but when weak men govern, they go wrong through dire necessity; for they perpetually grope in darkness, and if they ever do right, it is by accident. If you suddenly thrust forward weak and inexperienced men into high and responsible stations, and make them your legislators and rulers, with equal temptations to abuse their power, they will utterly want the knowledge of its proper use.

Your government will probably not be destroyed by any one great and flagrant act, either of rulers or people. Its decay will resemble a slow consumption or the effect of latent poison. It will probably receive more stabs from its unskilful friends than from its determined foes; and happy shall we be, if the hand which is stretched forth to steady the ark, do not overturn it.

Never was there a country which opened so wide a field for intrigue as this. Never did country offer such a loose rein to boundless ambition. To flatter and deceive the people will, henceforward, be the sole business of every aspiring man. Office hunters will study popularity with greater diligence and zeal than ever Newton studied astronomy, or Columbus the figure of the earth. The most deadly serpent will practise the most powerful charm; and he, whose love of power is his only motive, will be most noisy about Liberty, and will bow lowest at the feet of the people: whilst the honest man, who dares to raise his hand to unmask the petty tyrant, will be denounced as an enemy to free government.

And when a man of this character is raised to power, he will take care to fill all the offices below him, with men whose integrity and talents he does not fear. In this he will be sure to flatter the people; telling them he is their friend, and, as a proof of it, that he will put none into office but of their number, and of *their friends*. And, my fellow-citizens, I assure you, that men of this description will generally succeed even to the utmost extent of their ambition; for they care not by what means. No expedient is too base....no declarations are too false....no arts too low and degrading, for the man to use, who is burning with the lust of power, and is once drunk with ambition.

The people, in the mean time, innocent and unsuspecting as the infant at its mother's breast, suck in the poison of his perfidious counsels, and fondly think it the milk of sincerity...the cream of patriotism. Thus is every Republic, and thus are we, as a nation, exposed to the fangs of ambition; which, while it promises, soothes, and flatters—while it fawns on you with cringing bows and insidious smiles—while it salutes you with friendly embraces and fraternal kisses, is preparing to bind you in chains of adamant, and to hush your vain expostulations into the silence of despair.

When ambitious men govern a country, it becomes necessary for them to employ in their service, none but the weak and the wicked. They dread integrity and talents worse than they dread the wrath of Heaven; but, luckily for them, the class from which they must choose their instruments, is superabundantly numerous. There are various persons waiting for office, with open mouth and palpitating fears of disappointment, who are weak enough, and wicked enough, in all conscience, to answer any man's purpose : so that the political builder can easily find an assortment of tools and plenty of timber.

When the successful office-hunter begins to ascend the ladder of promotion, he finds himself full of business. First, he has innumerable sentences to learn by heart, which contain the words Whig, Tory, Democracy, Aristocracy, Republicanism, Monarchy, Despotism, and the like. No matter whether he understand the meaning of these words—all he wants is their use, and to pronounce them with a thundering accent. He appears in all companies, talks with vehemence, and vanquishes every adversary—looks, at times, remarkably wise and humble—electioneers with incredible industry, and knows what is doing every where. He reconnoitres the seat of government with a lynx's eye ; and if an office become vacant, it is well if his best horse do not perish in rapid midnight marches to be the first solicitor. With still greater solicitude he waits for the moving of the waters. He steps softly, and listens with anxious eye, and ears erect, to the distant murmurs of the public voice. The motion of a leaf gives him surprise. He knows, but too well, the sudden and capricious fluctuations of popular favor, and, lest some unlucky step should lose him one suffrage, he often starts at his own breath. From the vague rumors which are tossing in the winds, he derives the prognostics of his future success ; and, certainly, no fond lover ever listened so eagerly under the window of his mistress, to catch but a broken accent that may flatter his hopes. But I must leave the

picture half formed, for you, gentlemen, to fill up as opportunity may furnish you with *particular* traits.

I mention not these things with reference to any one party. It is a corruption to which the general mass of society is exposed, and by which, I take it upon me to declare that all free governments have been destroyed. When the higher offices are grasped by the hand of ambition, and the lower ones filled with ignorance and inexperience, the state must inevitably fall. No power can save it—no human effort can ward off its destiny. For in the wide-spread and universal struggle for office, the restless, the aspiring, the unprincipled, will generally succeed. Their rage for power is the keenest, and they will employ the greatest variety of means. A southern member, now, frequently lavishes in treats, dinners, entertainments, largesses and donations, what one of us would think a pretty handsome fortune, and thus carries his election. In the great cities, a factious leader contrives to gather round his standard a huge rabble of foreigners, and thereby secures his election. In a country village, the man of some influence must certainly have a place for his son : perhaps, indeed, the son may want common understanding—but no matter—his father's superior merits, like works of supererogation, make up all deficiencies in all his connexions.

It will then be asked, if men of great talents are ambitious, and not fit to be trusted? If men of small abilities are equally ambitious, without the capacity to govern well, if they were so disposed—what then are the people to do? In the name of wonder, what can they do? It rests with your wisdom to distinguish characters—to penetrate false glosses, and to decide this great question; and you will learn, in time, not to distinguish men by their professions, but their fruits.

A man who has integrity as a man, and talents as a statesman—who has sound principles of government, and a thorough knowledge of his own country and of other nations—whom dan-

ger cannot make rash, elevation proud, nor prosperity vain—who hears with equal indifference the soft whispers of adulation, or the hoarse clamors of popular fury—who is not drunk with new projects, nor soured with invincible prejudices—who is sharp-sighted to discern remote consequences, and bold and persevering to pursue the good of his country:—such an one should be the man of your choice. And such an one, if I know you right, will be the man of your choice.

But governments, alas! are frail machines, since men are selfish creatures. When Solon, the Athenian, asked the Scythian Anacharsis what he thought of his laws;—“Why,” says the barbarian, “your laws, O Solon, are like a spider’s web; they will entangle and catch little flies, but wasps and hornets will break through them when they please.” Constitutions and laws remain in force while a people remain virtuous; but when a people become corrupt and vicious, they are but walls of paper; they are indeed a spider’s web, through which wasps and hornets will break and open the way for flies and all the insect races to follow.

Our country is also exposed to danger from the intrigue, the diplomatic skill of foreign powers. This political science began to take its present form in the beginning of the 16th century, during the reign of those great princes, who were cotemporary with Charles V—was much matured by Lewis XIV, and seems to have been completed under the present government of France. From the Capitol in Paris, a corps of observation spreads abroad and pervades not only France, but all nations. Not a stranger in France escapes observation; nor is there a distinguished character in America or Europe who is not known.

They know perfectly well, the character of every state...the condition of every city and large town...the manners and customs, the passions and prejudices of every district of people, and the nature and tendency of every new publication. They



visit all places, explore all rivers, coasts, harbors, bays, and islands, and make exact returns, from time to time. It is their particular business to investigate the nature of every government...its weak and assailable parts, as well as the passions and foibles of men in power. By this means they have, for many years, nourished a party in the courts of Sweden, Poland, Prussia, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Italy, and even, at times, in England. In England they have, more than once, managed and pensioned both of the great political parties that agitated that kingdom, at one and the same time, under the Stuart reigns.

From their innumerable emissaries, scattered into all nations, vast streams of political intelligence are poured into their cabinet, as one common focus : from whence they issue legations, plenipotentiaries, and envoys both public and secret, equipped, as occasion may require, with various sets of instructions. On this basis they form plans of invasion, conquest and dismemberment. And it has been more by these arts, than by military prowess, that Europe is now prostrated at the feet of France. These arts, indeed, give incredible success to their arms. They allure with smiles, and display the olive-branch of peace ; they procrastinate by negotiations ; they distract by doubtful offers and implicated threats ; and while they half unsheath the glittering sword, they assume all the courteous attitudes of honorable alliance and generous friendship. If their arts of seduction succeed, the nation fares like Holland ; if they fail, like Spain.

By this amazing policy, they have defeated every plan, and every combination formed against them ; so that each power has been compelled to conflict with them alone. We have heard an abundance of noise about coalitions, and yet, in the event, have been surprised to see Germany conflict with them alone, Prussia alone, Russia alone, Spain alone.

And now, nothing but the fleets of England prevent them from establishing an empire more extensive than that of Alexander, more powerful than that of Rome, and more despotic than that of Turkey.

There is danger, fellow-citizens, from that quarter. The fertile fields of America have never been painfully explored by Talleyrand...by Moreau...by the sharpest eyes and most intrepid lect of France, for no purpose. Should any one differ with me in opinion, I am willing to refer the question to be decided by future experience; and I fervently pray to Heaven that my fears may be groundless.

Next to France, Great-Britain takes her rank in diplomatic skill...in the arts of intrigue and secret policy. But she is as inferior to France in these arts, as she is in the power of her land armies; and as her national existence absolutely depends on her supremacy on the sea, the whole strength of her policy will be directed towards the modifications of naval commerce. Her influence among the continental powers has been very great. But, with her, times are now altered. She is now in a struggle for her very being; and to us it is all-important that she should continue, and remain powerful on the sea; although her naval power and importance will from time to time give us trouble.

As the liberties of the world depend on some balance of power, and as there is now none on the land, in Europe, it is, I repeat it, all-important that there should be a naval power which can, at least, limit the modern Alexander to the land.—As for England—as for the virtue of her government any farther than her interest is concerned, I value it not a straw. Depend upon it, she would give us law if she could; and so would France. Nay more, we should give law to France and England if we could. The man who imagines that nations know any law but interest, is a child, and ought not to be trusted out of leading strings. Passion and prejudice, when mingled with national policy, frustrate the noblest purposes, and render every thing insecure. Our course should be directed by general views, and the prospect of probable events.

Your way, Americans, lies between the rock and the whirlpool. You are like the man, who fled from the face of a lion, and a bear met him—and who went into his house, and leaned upon the wall, and a serpent bit him. It is our fortune to exist in the world, at a time when great changes are on the wheel. Events, for ages past, have been ripening for the present grand crisis, which will, doubtless, influence the state of the world for ages to come. How our vessel, so lately embarked on the waves of time, will steer, God only knows. Let it be our care, as individuals, since our all is embarked, that we do not lend our influence to drive it upon shoals and rocks, where mightier nations have long since dashed, and where some are now dashing before our eyes.

Our circumstances, as a people, loudly call for wisdom, and for union. All party distinctions should cease...should be lost and forgotten in the love of our country—a country truly lovely—the only asylum from oppression—the last resort of freedom. If Liberty forsake America, she will be an outcast from the earth...she must return to her native skies, and seek rest in Heaven. The illustrious example of Washington, and his true disciples, should make you patriots. Shall a man who has lived in *his* days, who has seen *his* face, partaken of *his* counsels, and shared his dangers and glories, not wish to catch his falling mantle, and share a double portion of his spirit? Shall we not say of our country, as the Hebrew patriot said of his—“If I prefer thee not, O Jerusalem! above my chief joy let my right hand forget her cunning, and my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth!”

The love of glory and happiness...the desire of fame and honor...the prospect of lasting empire, and the plaudits of unborn millions should make you patriots. The horrors of Europe, and the dangers which threaten you from that field of blood, warn you with mournful voice to love and serve your country. Europe, the most powerful and enlightened quarter of the globe,

is bowed and humbled by one man. In view of the storm which rages there, let us act neither with timidity nor rashness ; but, with collected strength, be prepared for any shock that may come.

The most vigorous preparations for defence is our safest course : and the proper basis of these preparations is *virtue, industry, and enterprise*. The man who eyes commerce with malignity, or manufactures with contempt—who does not fully appreciate the importance of improved agriculture, or of the arts, whether mechanical, military, or naval—who despises the training of our brave militia—and a braver, neither Greece nor Rome could ever boast—or, who opposes the fortifying our ports and harbors—I say, *such a man is unworthy of your confidence*. He cannot see afar off : yet, like the mole under ground, he does not know but he surveys the whole universe.

But I have trespassed too long upon your time. I have pointed out the dangers to which my country is exposed : it has led me through a wide circuit, where many important objects, on either hand, have been passed in silence.

War, is, indeed, among the evils to which the present world is exposed : but there is a better world—a sublimer region of light and joy, where these evils shall never come. Thither let us turn our eyes, when we hope and sigh for eternal peace. In the mean time, as our union in this life is necessary, from the pressure of external danger ; so, let it be cordial and strong, by the increase of brotherly affection. Let it never more be said, that we are a divided people. At the present moment there is scarcely more of a political dispute in this country, than is necessary to the nature of the human mind. If there be any controversy, it is rather who shall govern, than how the country shall be governed.

The auspicious opening of the present administration, has struck an awful silence even to the clamors of party spirit. The war of words is fairly brought to an armistice. Even slander

and defamation, having drunk the blood of thousands of statesmen and heroes, satiated with havoc and devastation, are now nodding over heaps of slain. Let the false traitors be seized, and bound in chains of darkness. Let their tongues be shot through with the lightning of truth, and cut off by the sword of justice. Let *slander* and *defamation* but die, and “we shall all be *Republicans*, we shall all be *Federalists*.” Or, rather, those watch-words, prepared to put *hounds* and *coursers* on the scent of office, shall be lost in the honorable appellation of Americans.

When seated at this solemn political *Passover*, with millions of our brethren, let no sentiment transport us beyond the bounds of reason: let no gloomy jealousy cast a veil over the bright smile of benevolence: let no forebodings diminish our convivial joy.

Our priveleges are too great, not to fill the contemplative mind with rapture. Let us, then, indulge it, mingled with a fervent gratitude to Almighty Providence. Our situation, as a nation, is too peculiar, too strongly marked, to compare with any former period, or with any other country. We stand on conspicuous ground; the old world, like a lion couching for his prey—like a warrior covered with scars, and encrimsoned with blood, views us with ferocious, malignant eye. But the Atlantic ocean rolls between us, and there are *men* on this side, as well as on the other.

While pressed with such dangers; while present and past times afford us the dire prospect of the ruin of all Republics; while yet in full possession of such priveleges as they could never boast, shall we listen to the idle clamors of party spirit? Shall we put all at hazard in the trivial pursuit of private interest? Rather let us support the standard of freedom, which our fathers have raised. Let us, by a grand experiment, show to the universe, that a Republic can preserve its liberties, and be free, powerful, independent and happy.