

# ORATION

DELIVERED

AT WASHINGTON, JULY FOURTH,

1809;

AT THE REQUEST OF THE DEMOCRATIC CITIZENS

OF THE

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.

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*BY JOEL BARLOW.*

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# ORATION.

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FRIENDS AND FELLOW CITIZENS:

THE day we now commemorate will never cease to excite in us the most exhilarating reflections and mutual gratulations. Minds of sensibility, accustomed to range over the field of contemplation that the birth of our empire spreads before them, must expand on this occasion to great ideas, and invigorate their patriotic sentiments.

The thirty three years of national existence which have brought us to our present condition, are crowded indeed with instructive facts, and comprise an interesting portion of history. But they have only prepared this gigantic infant of a nation to begin its own development. They are only the prelude to the greater events that seem to unfold themselves before us, and call for the highest wisdom to give them their proper direction.

It appears to have been the practice of the public speakers, called to give utterance to the feelings of their fellow citizens on the anniversary of this day, to dwell chiefly upon those memorable transactions which necessitated, and those which afterwards supported, the act of Independence that gives name to the present festival. Such were the oppressions of Britain and our effectual resistance to those oppressions. Transactions so eventful are doubtless worthy to be held in perpetual remembrance. And as they ought never to be forgotten, they should frequently be recalled to the notice of our younger brethren, who can know them only from their elders. But those conflicting scenes are now become every where matters of record. They are detailed so copiously in our annals and so often by our orators, as to render the repetition of their story at this moment, far less important than to turn our attention to other subjects growing out of the interests of our blessed country.

Our departed heroes and statesmen have not gone without their fame. Our tears have mingled with the ashes of those fallen in our battles, and those who have descended in peace



to a later tomb. Our gratitude attends the precious few who remain to us of that list of worthies; the illustrious relics of so many fields of danger, and so many years of labor; who led us in all our darings, when resistance to tyrants, as well in the forum as in the field, was deemed rebellion and threatened with death. Their whitened locks that still wave among us are titles to our veneration; they command and they will obtain it, while the virtues they have taught us to practice shall continue to warm our hearts.

But our respect for the memory and the persons of all our leaders will be best evinced by the pious culture we bestow on the rich heritage they have secured and are handing over to our possession. The present race is likewise passing away; but the nation remains and rises with its years. While we, the present race, are able to call ourselves the nation, we should be sensible of the greatness of the charge that has devolved upon us. We have duties to posterity as well as to ourselves. We must gather up our strength and encounter those duties. Yes, my friends, we are now the nation. As such we have arrived at that epoch when, instead of looking back with wonder upon our infancy, we may look forward with solicitude to a state of adolescence, with confidence to a state of manhood. Though as a nation we are yet in the morning of life, we have already attained an elevation which enables us to discern our course to its meridian splendor; to contemplate the height we have to climb, and the commanding station we must gain, in order to fulfil the destinies to which we are called, and perform the duties that the cause of human happiness requires at our hands.

To prepare the United States to act the distinguished part that providence has assigned them, it is necessary to convince them that the means are within their power. A familiar knowledge of the means will teach us how to employ them in the attainment of the end. Knowledge will lead to wisdom; and wisdom in no small degree is requisite in the conduct of affairs so momentous and so new. For our situation is in many respects not only new to us, but new also to the world.

The form of government we have chosen, the geographical position we occupy as relative to the most turbulent powers of Europe, whose political maxims are widely different from ours; the vast extent of continent that is or must be comprised within our limits, containing not less than sixteen hundred millions



of acres, and susceptible of a population of two hundred millions of human beings; our habits of industry and peace instead of violence and war,—all these are circumstances which render our situation as novel as it is important. It requires new theories; it has forced upon us new and bold, and in some cases, doubtful experiments; it calls for deep reflection on the propensities of human nature, an accurate acquaintance with the history of human actions; and what is perhaps the most difficult to attain, a wise discrimination among the maxims of wisdom, or what are such in other times and nations, to determine which of them are applicable and which would be detrimental to the end we have in view. I would by no means insinuate that we should reject the councils of antiquity in mass; or turn a deaf ear to the voice of modern experience because it is not our own. So far as the policy of other nations is founded on the real relations of social man, on his moral nature undisguised, it may doubtless be worthy of imitation; but so far as it is drawn from his moral nature disguised by habits materially different from ours, such policy is to be suspected, it is to be scrutinized, and brought to the test, not perhaps of our experience, for that may in certain cases be wanting, but the test of the general principles of our institutions, and the habits and maxims, that arise out of them.

There has been no nation either ancient or modern that could have presented human nature in the same character as ours does and will present it; because there has existed no nation whose government has resembled ours. A representative democracy on a large scale, with a fixt constitution, had never before been attempted, and has no where else succeeded. A federal government on democratical principles is equally unprecedented, and exhibits a still greater innovation on all received ideas of statesmen and lawgivers. Nor has any theorist in political science, any among those powerless potentates of reason, the philosophers who have taught us so many valuable things, ever framed a system or conceived a combination of principles producing such a result.

Circumstances beyond our control had thrown in our way the materials for this wonderful institution. Our first merit lay in not rejecting them. But when our sages began to discern the use that might be made of materials then so unpromising, they discovered great talents and patriotism in combining them into the system we now find in operation. It is



indeed a stupendous fabric; the greatest political phenomenon, and probably will be considered as the greatest advancement in the science of government that all modern ages have produced.

This is not the moment to go into a dissertation on the peculiar character of our political constitutions. The subject being well understood by so respectable a portion of this assembly, and the time allotted to this part of the exercises of the day being necessarily short, I should hardly expect to obtain your indulgence if I were even capable of doing justice to so great a theme. Otherwise the whole compass of human affairs does not admit of a more profitable inquiry. Every citizen should make it his favorite study, and consider it as an indispensable part of the education of his children.

But nations are educated like individual infants. They are what they are taught to be. They become whatever their tutors desire and invite and prepare and force them to become. They may be taught to reason correctly; they may be taught to reason perversely; they may be taught not to reason at all. The last is the case of despotism; the second, where they reason perversely, is the case of a nation with an unsettled and unprincipled government, by whatever technical name it may be distinguished; for a democracy without a constitution, though generally and justly called the school of disorder and perversity, is no more liable to these calamities than a monarchy ill defined and without a known principle of action, and where the arm of power has not that steady tension which would render it completely despotic. The first, the case in which they reason correctly, if it ever existed or ever is to exist, must be ours. Our nation must, it can, its legislators ought to say it *shall*, be taught to reason correctly, to act justly, to pursue its own interest upon so large a scale as not to interfere with the interest or at least with the rights of other nations. For the moment it should interfere with theirs, it could no longer be said to be pursuing its own.

What then are the interests of this nation which it becomes us as private citizens (without any mission but the autocratical right of individuals) to recommend to the great body of the American people on this auspicious occasion? The most obvious and I believe the most important are comprised in two words; and to them I shall confine my observa-



tions: *public improvements* and *public instruction*. These two objects, though distinct in the organization which they will require, are so similar in their effects, that most of the arguments that will apply to one, will apply equally to both. They are both necessary to the preservation of our principles of government; they are both necessary to the support of the system into which those principles are wrought, the system we now enjoy; they are each of them essential, perhaps in an equal degree, to the perfecting of that system, to our perceiving and preparing the ameliorations of which it is susceptible. I shall dwell exclusively on these two objects, not because they are the only ones that might be pointed out, but because their importance, their immediate and pressing importance, seems to have been less attended to and probably less understood than it ought to have been among the general concerns of the Union.

Public improvements, such as roads, bridges and canals, are usually considered only in a commercial and economical point of light; they ought likewise to be regarded in a moral and political light. Cast your eyes over the surface of our dominion, with a view to its vast extent; with a view to its present and approaching state of population; with a view to the different habits, manners, languages, origin, morals, maxims of the people; with a view to the nature of those ties, those political, artificial ties, which hold them together as one people, and which are to be relied upon, to continue to hold them together as one people when their number shall rise to hundreds of millions of freemen possessing the spirit of independence that becomes their station. What anxiety, what solicitude, what painful apprehensions must naturally crowd upon the mind for the continuance of such a government, stretching its thin texture over such a country, and in the hands of such a people! The prospect is awful; the object, if attainable, is magnificent beyond comparison; but the difficulty of attaining it and the danger of losing it, are sufficient to cloud the prospect in the eyes of many respectable citizens, and force them to despair. Despair in this case, to an ardent spirit devoted to the best good of his country, is a distressing state indeed. To despair of preserving the federal union of these republics, for an indefinite length of time without a dismemberment, is to lose the highest hopes of human society, the greatest promise of bettering its condition that the ef-



forts of all generations have produced. The man of sensibility who can contemplate without horror the dismemberment of this empire, has not well considered its effects. And yet I scarcely mingle in society for a day without hearing it predicted, and the prediction uttered with a levity bordering on indifference; and that too by well disposed men of every political party. Hence I conclude that the subject has not been examined with the attention it deserves.

I am not yet so unhappy as to believe in this prediction. But I should be forced to believe in it if I did not anticipate the use of other means than those we have yet employed to perpetuate the union of the States. They must not be coercive means. Such ones in most cases would produce effects directly the reverse of what would be intended. Our policy does not admit of standing armies; and if it did, we could not maintain them sufficiently numerous to restrain great bodies of freemen with arms in their hands, blinded by ignorance, heated by zeal and led by factious chiefs; and if we could maintain them strong enough for that purpose, we all know they would very soon overturn the government they were intended to support.

With as little prospect of success could we rely upon legislative means; that is, upon laws against treason and misdemeanor, or any other chapter of the criminal code. Such laws may sometimes intimidate a chief of rebels, or a few unsupported traitors. But a whole geographical district of rebels, a half a nation of traitors would legislate against you. They would throw your laws into one scale and their own into the other, and toss in their bayonets to turn the balance.

No, the means to be relied upon to hold this beneficent union together, must apply directly to the interest and convenience of the people; they must at the same time enable them to discern that interest and be sensible of that convenience. The people must become habituated to enjoy a visible, palpable, incontestible good; a greater good than they could promise themselves from any change. They must have information enough to perceive it, to reason upon it, to know why they enjoy it, whence it flows, how it was attained, how it is to be preserved and how it may be lost. The people of these States must be educated for their station, as members of the great community. They must receive a republican education; be taught the duties and the rights of freemen; that is,



of American freemen ; not the freemen that are so by starts, by frenzy and in mobs ; who would fill the forum at the nod of Clodius, or the prytaneum at that of Cleon ; nor the freemen of one day in seven years who would rush together for sale at the hustings of Brentford, and clamor and bludgeon for a man whose principles and person were to them alike unknown and unregarded.

Each American freeman is an integral member of the sovereignty ; he is a co-estate of the empire, carrying on its government by his delegates. The first right he possesses, after that of breathing the vital air, is the right of being taught the management of the power to which he is born. It is a serious duty of the society towards him, an unquestionable right of the individual from the society.

In a monarchy the education of the prince is justly deemed a concern of the nation. It is done at their expense ; and why is it so ? it is because they are deeply interested in his being well educated ; that he may be able to administer the government well, to conduct the concerns of the nation wisely, on their own constitutional principles. My friends, is it not even more important that our princes, our millions of princes, should be educated for their station, than the single prince of a monarchy ? If a single prince goes wrong, obstinately and incurably wrong, he may be set aside for another, without overturning the state. But if our sovereigns in their multitudinous exercise of power should become obstinate and incurable in wrong, you cannot set them aside. But they will set you aside ; they will set themselves aside ; they will crush the state and convulse the nation. The result is military despotism, dismemberment of the great republic, and, after a sufficient course of devastation by civil wars, the settlement of a few ferocious monarchies, prepared to act over again the same degrading scenes of mutual encroachment and vindictive war, which disgrace modern Europe ; and from which many writers have told us, that mankind are never to be free.

Our habits of thinking and even of reasoning, it must be confessed, are still borrowed from feudal principles and monarchical establishments. As a nation we are not up to our circumstances. Our principles in the abstract, as wrought into our state and federal constitutions, are in general worthy of the highest praise ; they do honor to the human intellect. But the practical tone and tension of our minds do not well cor-



respond with those principles. We are like a person conversing in a foreign language, whose idiom is not yet familiar to him. He thinks in his own native language, and is obliged to translate as he talks ; which gives a stiffness to his discourse and betrays a certain embarrassment which nothing can remove but frequent exercise and long practice. We are accustomed to speak and reason relative to the people's education precisely like the aristocratical subjects of a European monarchy. Some say the people have no need of instruction ; they already know too much ; they cannot all be legislators and judges and generals ; the great mass must work for a living, and they need no other knowledge than what is sufficient for that purpose. Others will tell you it is very well for the people to get as much education as they can ; but it is their own concern, the state has nothing to do with it ; every parent, out of regard to his offspring will give them what he can, and that will be enough.

I will not say how far this manner of treating the subject is proper even in Europe, whence we borrowed it. But I will say that nothing is more preposterous in America. It is directly contrary to the vital principles of our constitutions ; and its inevitable tendency is to destroy them. A universal system of education is so far from being a matter of indifference to the public, under our social compact, that it is incontestably one of the first duties of the government, one of the highest interests of the nation, one of the most sacred rights of the individual, the vital fluid of organized liberty, the precious aliment without which your republic cannot be supported.

I do not mean that our legislators should turn pedagogues ; or send their commissioners forth to discipline every child in this nation. Neither do I mean to betray so much temerity as to speak of the best mode of combining a system of public instruction. But I feel it my duty on this occasion to use the freedom to which I am accustomed, and suggest the propriety of bringing forward some system that shall be adequate to the object. I am clearly of opinion that it is already within the power of our legislative bodies, both federal and provincial ; but if it is not, the people ought to place it there, and see that it is exercised. It is certain that the plan, if properly arranged and wisely conducted, would not be expensive. And there is no doubt of its absolute irresistible ne-



cessity, if we mean to preserve either our representative principle or our federal union.

It is not intended that every citizen should be a judge or a general or a legislator. But every citizen is a voter; it is essential to your institutions that he should be a voter; and if he has not the instruction necessary to enable him to discriminate between the characters of men, to withstand the intrigues of the wicked and to perceive what is right, he immediately becomes a tool for knaves to work with; he becomes both an object and an instrument of corruption; his right of voting becomes an injury to himself and a nuisance to society. It is in this sense that the people are said to be "their own worst enemies." Their freedom itself is found to be an insupportable calamity; and the only consolation (a dreary consolation indeed) is that it cannot last long.

The time is fast approaching, when the United States will be out of debt, if no extraordinary call for money to repel foreign aggression should intervene. Our surplus revenue already affords the means of entering upon the system of public works, and beginning to discharge our duty in this respect. The report of the secretary of the treasury on these works, which is or ought to be in the hands of every citizen, will show their feasibility as to the funds; and it develops a part of the advantages with which the system must be attended. But neither that distinguished statesman nor any other human being could detail and set forth all the advantages that would arise from such a system carried to its proper extent. They are incalculably great and unspeakably various. They would bind the states together in a band of union that every one could perceive, that every one must cherish, and nothing could destroy. This of itself is an advantage so great, if considered in all its consequences, that it seems almost useless to notice any other. It would facilitate the means of instructing the people; it would teach them to cherish the union as the source of their happiness, and to know why it was so; and this is a considerable portion of the education they require. It would greatly increase the value of property and the wealth of individuals, and thereby enable them to augment the public revenue. But what is more, it would itself augment the revenue in a more direct manner by enhancing the value of the public lands; which would thus sell faster and bring a higher price. In this manner the first monies laid out by the go-



vernment on roads and canals would be a reproductive property; it would be constantly sending back more money into the treasury than was taken from it for this purpose. So that all the advantages of every kind, public and private, present and future, commercial and economical, physical, moral and political, would be so much clear gain. There would be nothing destroyed but errors and prejudices, nothing removed but the dangers that now threaten our invaluable institutions.

To do equal justice and give satisfaction to the people in every state in the Union, the sums to be expended in each year should be distributed in the several States according to their population. This is the general understanding among the friends of the system; and the secretary has not neglected to keep it in view in his luminous report

Our present legislators ought to consider how much true glory would redound to them from being the first to arrange and adopt such a system. How different from the false glory commonly acquired by the governments of other countries. Louis XIV toiled and tormented himself and all Europe through a long life to acquire glory. He made unjust wars, obtained many victories, and suffered many defeats. He augmented the standing armies of France from 40,000 to 200,000 men; and thus obliged the other powers of Europe to augment their means of defence in that proportion; means which have drained the public treasuries and oppressed the people of Europe ever since. And what is the glory that now remains to the name of Louis XIV? Only the canal of Languedoc. This indeed is a title to true glory; and it is almost the only subject on which his name is now mentioned in France but with opprobrium and detestation.

The government of England expended one hundred and thirty nine millions sterling in the war undertaken to subjugate the American colonies. This sum, about six hundred millions of dollars, laid out in the construction of canals at twenty thousand dollars a mile, would have made thirty thousand miles of canal; about the same length of way as all the present post roads in the United States and their territories; or a line that would reach once and a quarter round the globe of this earth on the circle of the equator. Or if the same sum could be distributed in a series of progressive improvements, a part in canals and a part in roads, bridges and school esta-



blishments, beginning with two millions a year, according to the proposition of the secretary of the treasury, and increasing as the surplus revenue would increase, to ten or fifteen millions a year, it would make a garden of the United States, and people it with a race of men worthy to enjoy it; a garden extending over a continent; giving a glorious example to mankind of the operation of the true principles of society, the principles recognised in your government. Many persons now in being might live to see this change effected; and most of us might live to enjoy it in anticipation by seeing it begun.

The greatest real embarrassment we labor under at present, arises from our commercial relations; the only point of contact between us and the unjust governments of Europe. By their various and violent aggressions they are constantly disturbing our repose, and causing us considerable expenses. In this case what is to be done? We cannot by compact expect to obtain justice, nor the liberty of the seas from those governments; it is not in the nature of their organisation. Shall we think of overpowering them in their own way, by a navy stronger than theirs; brutal force against brutal force, like the ponderous powers of Europe among themselves? This at present is impossible; and if it were possible, or whenever it should be possible, it would be extremely impolitic; it would be dangerous, if not totally destructive, to all our plans of improvement, and even to the government itself.

Has then a beneficent providence, the God of order and justice, pointed out another mode of defence, by which the resources of this nation may be reserved for works of peace and the advancement of human happiness? Has the genius of science and of art raised up a new Archimedes to guide the fire of heaven against the fleets that may annoy us? I cannot but hope it has; not by the ardent mirror; but by means altogether more certain, less dependent on external circumstances, capable of varying and accommodating their mode of attack and defence to all the variety of positions and movements common to ships of war.

I know not how far I may differ in opinion from those among you who may have turned their attention to the subject to which I now allude; or whether any person present has really investigated it. But I should not feel easy to lose the present occasion (the only one that my retired life renders it

probable I shall ever have of addressing you) to express my private opinion that the means of submarine attack, invented and proposed by one of our citizens, carries in itself the eventual destruction of naval tyranny. I should hope and believe, if it were taken up and adopted by our government, subjected to a rigid and regular course of experiments, open and public, so that its powers might be ascertained and its merits known to the world, it would save this nation from future foreign wars, and deliver it from all apprehension of having its commercial pursuits and its peaceful improvements ever after interrupted. It might rid the seas of all the buccaneers both great and small that now infest them; it might free mankind from the scourge of naval wars, one of the greatest calamities they now suffer, and to which I can see no other end.

These opinions may be thought hazardous. But I beg my fellow citizens to believe that I have examined the subject, or I should not hazard them. Several of the great arts that are now grown familiar in common life were once thought visionary. This fact should render us cautious of making up our judgment against an object like this, in the higher order of mechanical combinations, before we have well considered it. With this observation I drop the subject; or rather I resign it into abler hands; the hands of those who have the power, as well as inclination to pursue the best good of our beloved country.

I should not have introduced it in this place were it not for its immediate connexion with the means of commencing and prosecuting those vast interior improvements which the state of our nation so imperiously demands; which the heroes of our revolution, the sages of our early councils, the genius of civilization, the cause of suffering humanity have placed within our power and confided to our charge.

THE END