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BY WILLIAM WIRT.

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M D C C C.

ORATION &c.

THE presence of an assembly so numerous and so respectable—the grandeur of the event which we have met to celebrate—the expectation displayed in every face, and which I feel that I am just about to disappoint, are considerations which cover me with embarrassment and confusion. I regret that my fellow-citizens have called me to this task; or that being called, I was unable to resist their invitation. The mind which has been narrowed by pursuits merely professional, is but poorly calculated to do justice to this day. The very sound of the 4th of July, gives rise to a train of thought and feeling so interesting to mankind—opens a survey so vast, so diversified, so august as might strike into silent astonishment the most sublime genius which the world ever knew. The subject affects not America only, but the Universe. Nor does it merely embrace the present posture of human affairs, it points the mind back to

an immense retrospect covered with darkness and horror ; and presents in perspective, unless our hopes deceive us, an elysian prospect crowned with eternal light and beauty and joy. Lost in the contemplation of a theme so unbounded I sink with conscious weakness under it—but let me not despair ; although I am feeble the day itself is eloquent. It speaks to the heart in strains heavenly and enchanting. The feelings which belong to it shall supply my defects. And when I barely mention *the anniversary of American independence*, every bosom here will throb with emotions as strong as if my lips were touched with the hallowed fire of eloquence.

The sentiment is correct that the happiness of man is known only by contrast. In order therefore to have a just relish for our present felicity ; in order to give to this festival all the advantages which belong to it, we should recall the situation of our country prior to the revolution. There is a kind of mournful pleasure in the recollection of distresses from which we have escaped. The peaceful shade of his vine becomes sweeter to the husbandman, when he remembers the arm of war which lately desolated his fields and fired his cottage ; and if a con-

sciousness of our mortal existence shall follow us into futurity, the extacy of the saint in the bosom of his God, will receive a fresh impulse when he looks back upon the storm of life from which he is delivered.

It is impossible to take this retrospective view of the American history without being struck by the meekness, the patience and long-suffering which mark the national character. This trait was displayed by the first emigrants from Great Britain to North-America. There was no obligation on these suffering Christians to recognize the authority of the British monarch. The ideal compact between the sovereign and the subject had been dissolved by the violation of it on his part. He had refused them that protection which alone gave him the only shadow of claim to their allegiance. He had surrendered them into the merciless fangs of Christian bigotry. By oppression the most direful, because it was the oppression of reason and conscience, he had permitted them to be forced from his coasts; from their native land; their relations; their friends and all the tender connexions which bind man to life. Innocent and unoffending as they were, he had exposed them to a punishment which the most atro-

cious guilt only could justify ; to encounter
 the storm of winter, on seas unknown ; to
 seek an asylum in a strange land—in the
 boundless forests of America ringing with
 the terrific howl of beasts of prey, or echo-
 ing the still more frightful yell of savage
 man. Yet after all their cruel sufferings,
 after scenes of terror and dismay which re-
 semble more the dreams of a distempered
 fancy than the actual experience of human
 beings, this handful of tempest-beaten
 wanderers voluntarily erect themselves in-
 to a colony, and with a fidelity, amiable
 even in mistake, plant amid the wilds of
 North-America the standard of that govern-
 ment from whose scourge they were yet
 bleeding. Generous souls!—what was
 their reward? Oppression—plunder—
 massacre—inflicted on their posterity by
 that nation which should have strained eve-
 ry nerve that belonged to it, to atone for its
 original cruelty. Yes ; a British parlia-
 ment, in which the voice of America was
 not heard, authorize a corrupt ministry,
 under the pretext of taxes at which the
 world blushed, to plunge their rapacious
 hands into the pockets of Americans. How
 did America conduct herself under this new
 specimen of British barbarity? Did she at

once spring to arms to avenge the outrage? No: her national character again develops itself—she is all meek and patient—she complains indeed, but it is in the mild tone of gentle remonstrance and humble supplication—This is the period of our history to which every American turns with transport. The most unexampled, but the most portentous moderation had been manifested on the part of America—Addresses to the British throne, the parliament and the people, addresses breathing the spirit of injured innocence, fortified by arguments that were impregnable, and graced with an eloquence the most manly and pathetic, had been answered by silent disdain and fresh outrage—the prophetic voice of Barre and the heaven-directed tongue of Chatham, had been lifted in vain against the usurpation—The streets of Boston had been stained with the innocent blood of our citizens—Warren had fallen serene and smiling even in death—and the soul of Montgomery had taken its flight from the plains of Abraham, when America hazarded a step by the side of which, the exploits of an Alexander and a Cæsar sink into contempt and detestation. This was the declaration of independence—that immortal monument of the energy and

magnanimity of the American mind. By this measure the door of compromise was shut for ever—By this measure America in her infancy, without arms, without an army, without finances, threw herself upon the theatre of war, against a nation grown old in military enterprize, and armed at all points for the conflict. America knew that Great Britain considered this as a war against rebels; that, therefore it would be waged against her with unrelenting severity, and that she was not to expect from her antagonist any of the usual rights of war. She knew that Great Britain would now offer no alternatives but ~~subject~~ submission or extermination; and that in the event of a final defeat, the gibbet or chains and slavery would be her portion. Yet undaunted by the prospect of consequences and relying solely on the justice of heaven, she took the decisive step. The nations of the earth were astonished at the grandeur of the movement, and stood in fearful expectation of the issue. The great questions were, whether Great Britain, which had so long held the preponderance in the police of Europe, was now to be dismembered of the most valuable part of her dominion? Whether a new power was to be erected in

the western world which was sure to grow up soon into immense consequence and produce the most important effect on all the concerns of the eastern? But a still more interesting question was, whether a new era was about to take place in the history of government itself, & America to exhibit to the world the novel spectacle of a people mildly swaying themselves under forms so perfect as to ensure their felicity? These were the great points in controversy. The British cabinet were amused with the chimerical project, and laughed at the idea of a conflict between the unfledged eagle of America, and the far famed British lion. Shallow politicians! They did not know what wonders the magic name of liberty could work! They did not know that it poured heroism into the heart of the coward; that it braced the feeble arm and lent to it a spring and a force as irresistible as the bolt of heaven. This was a lesson which they were yet to learn in the American school—They did learn it and their smile of contempt was changed into the distortion of terror. The storm began. For seven long years the clouds of war hung upon our land. Amid the silence of night the thunder of battle was heard to burst, and

domestic repose fled far away—The gentle bosoms of the neighbouring fair were chilled with dismay. A father, a brother, a husband, or some object dear to their hearts might have been the victims of the explosion which they had just heard; & even then might be rolling on the plain in the last agonies of dissolution. The thought was horror and distraction. The morning comes at last, and a scene more afflicting presents itself—All around our infant towns and villages and hamlets smoking in ruins—the mangled bodies of our citizens prostrate in the dust—pouring out the stream of life on the face of their beloved country—even in the last moment, lifting from the blood-stained field their dying arms towards heaven—invoking success on the holy cause in which they had fallen—calling down Victory on their surviving brethren—and then—in all the sweet serenity of virtue, breathing back their souls to their God. Dear, ever dear, shall ye be to our hearts, ye martyrs in your country's cause. We call you to witness the grateful fervor in which we are dissolving, while we cast our eyes over the field in which ye were sleeping in death—pale—silent—placid—while the guardian genius of America hovered above you, and

her tear of pity started through the smile of triumph. Long—long shall your memory fire the bosoms of your descendants, and teach the pulse of glory to beat quick thro' the American heart. From your ashes the Phoenix Liberty has sprung. Not the frantic demon of Athens with furious eye and gorgon locks, brandishing aloft the torch of discord and faction and pestilence—nor the fourous pretender of Venice, tricked off in the meretricious tinsel of aristocracy, lifting one scale of human beings to heaven and sinking the other to perdition. But Liberty, genuine Liberty herself, pure, serene, sublime—holding the balance level and steady before her, diffusing her smiles equally throughout society, and cheering the heart of the cottager as well as of the man of wealth. Such ye fallen heroes, such is the inestimable boon which we owe to you and which we are now enjoying, but from which—ye were torn. Were ye not our fathers, brothers, sons, friends and favours? Entwined with our souls by every natural tie—by every noble affection?—Well, then, may we retire from the transports of the day to hang over your graves, and while our hearts swell in tumults at the remembrance of your sufferings to drop, on the

sacred sod which covers you, the tear of mingled gratitude and love.

Yet let us not give way to unmanly grief—their death was glorious—and they are happy.

It were needless to dwell on the particular incidents of the revolutionary war. They are known to us all. We all know how cruel were the sufferings of our citizens, how deep the groans of our country! But the God of hosts was on our side and Washington—was his apostle. Who can ever forget how with his little band of brothers—destitute of every comfort and convenience of life—without food or raiment—worn down by incessant action—marking with the blood of their feet the frozen ground over which they urged their sleepless march, he watched the holy flame of liberty, and kept it from expiring? Who has forgotten how, when wants, and difficulties, and dangers indescribable pressed thick around him; when the earth below him trembled under the shock of battle, and death presented itself in a thousand forms, his great mind rose superior to confusion—like the sun-gilt summit of some lofty mountain, around whose base the little storm wastes itself in vain. If the ancient senti-

ment be just ~~that~~ the most pleasing spectacle to the ruler of the universe is a brave man greatly struggling in the tempest of fate, then the fortitude, the perseverance, the calmness, the magnanimity of General Washington were such as angels might have stooped from heaven to witness with rapture—But he is gone to join them, and from the bowers of eternal beatitude he smiles upon the prospect of his country.

And have we not reason to be happy too my fellow-citizens? Has not our great continent emerged from its shameful dependence upon a petty island, and is she not rising rapidly to her proper grade in the scale of nations? Have we not gained the grand object of the revolution, *the right of the people to govern themselves*? Was not this the polar star which guided us through the hurricane of war? Was it not to secure this blessing to the people that the blood and treasure of America were poured out? Do we not enjoy it, ~~and~~ shall we not transmit it without diminution? Why should we ever abandon this right of selfrule? Have we not proven the fallacy of that gothic position that the people of a nation are unable to rule themselves—a position which degrades the favorite creature

of God, and drags him down to a level with the beasts that perish—a position founded on the total prostration of the human mind and the human heart. Yes, our experience has evinced that the reverse of this position is true—it has evinced that the people of an enlightened nation are competent to their own government, and *that* amid the smiles of peace and tranquility. America has held up to the world this new, this brilliant spectacle—and does it not reflect new lustre upon the dignity of man? For my own part I am proud to declare that upon this system I stand fast as upon the rock of ages. I believe in the practicability of a republican form of government; the experience of America justifies that belief. The system is dear to my heart—because it is that for which our fathers fought and bled and died—and because I believe it to be the only one which is compatible with the dignity and happiness of man. Yet if there be among my countrymen any who hold a different doctrine—who think a government of orders—who think a king, lords and commons material to the happiness of a nation—be it so—they have the same right to their opinion which we have to ours. Has the God

who made me given me the privilege of controuling the judgment of others? He made me man—but he made my brothers who differ from me—he gave me certain rights as a human being, but he gave to every other human being the same rights. Shall I then presume to arrogate to myself the pre-eminence, & in the proud language of insolent reproach to say to my neighbour, you are wrong—I am right—renounce your opinion and adopt mine, or you want principle—No—heaven forbid! Ever dear to my heart shall be the honest American, whatever may be the complexion of his speculative opinions: And in the right of opinion, however widely it may differ from my own, my voice and arm, such as they are, shall be ever raised to defend him. I will meet him indeed with the weapons of reason and argument—*truth disdains all others*—but I will meet him in the spirit of a brother; not in that of a foe: and to whatever conclusion his judgment shall conduct him, that conclusion shall be held sacred and inviolable by me. All who have ever reflected on this subject, have discovered that no man can controul *his own* opinions—that in the formation of them, his mind plays the perfect tyrant—that it

acts upon the evidence before it, and in spite of his wishes, draws its conclusions irresistibly. . . Shall I then, or shall any other man require from his fellow creatures impossibilities? Shall we demand of him to think as we do—when from the original constitution of his nature he is obliged to think as his judgment directs? No—no—illiberality does not become an American. Political and religious intolerance are twin-demons of darkness—hatched long ago during the night of the mind, they started at once into gigantic stature, and with a frenzy the most wild and terrific, spread havoc and consternation thro' the world of man. Let them not prophane by their presence the region of light—let them not touch with unhallowed foot the consecrated shores of that country, in which freedom has fixed her residence. They are the certain harbingers of civil discord and distraction—blood and carnage and famine are in their train—let us unite to repel them—they do not belong to our climate.

Peace, meekness, liberality, forbearance, brotherly love—these form the splendid retinue of liberty—these let us cultivate—they adorn and dignify humanity, and happiness will forever brighten through the

land in which they flourish. It is important to the world that America should put the last touch of perfection to that example which she has set them, and which they are beginning to imitate. Yes—this work of imitation has begun, nor shall its inauspicious commencement extinguish in my bosom the hope of a happy issue.

I turn my eyes towards France with emotions that sicken me. For fourteen centuries were the people of that devoted country buried in Egyptian darkness and Egyptian bondage. For fourteen centuries had a series of enterprising monarchs, supported by an immense nobility and a priesthood still more immense, better disciplined and invincible in all its operations as the phalanx of Sparta—for fourteen centuries had this tremendous combination of political and religious tyrants been forging chains for the people of France! The effort to get loose was desperate and threatened to convulse the world. But the nation had caught from America a glimpse of Liberty—they were enraptured by her charms, and determined to put every thing to the hazard to win her. We all know the consequences—they were dreadful—yet let us not impute them to any deformity in Liberty herself—

No, she is all innocence and beauty and loveliness—No—it was the external force which acted upon France, and which attempted to arrest the career of her revolution—it was this which produced those frightful shocks which we heard with horror—but for this, the nation might, after the first explosion have settled peaceably on her foundation. But treason, insurrection, and riot flourished under the long-protracted cover of foreign invasion and foreign war : and little does it become the coalition to lay at the door of liberty, those mischiefs, of which they are themselves the real authors. But they trembled at the name of Liberty—they perceived that she was advancing to draw aside the curtain, and expose their abominations to the world—they fancied they heard the ancient basilisk of despotism cracking in ruins about their ears—they exerted their invention to render Liberty hateful to the world—they endeavoured to resist her course—they might as well have attempted to stop the splendid flight of the impetuous comet, or bid the immense planets roll back in their spheres. Yes—she shall go forth arrayed in all the grace and dignity of beauty—the nations of the earth shall kindle under the beam of her eye

—Tyranny, with all his horrid apparatus of chains and racks and tortures, shall leap affrighted from his throne at her approach—shrink from the sublimity of her mien, and hide his detestable head forever. From pole to pole the white altar of liberty shall be seen displayed—Under the benign influence of her dominion, the character of man shall tower to its Zenith—the faculties of his mind shall expand and bloom in all the richness of luxuriance—the rougher passions of his nature shall be softened down—around his heart shall beam the ever-living radiance of virtue—the narrow & crooked policy of the globe shall yield to universal confidence—prejudice and distinction and hostility shall be lost in unbounded affection, and the man of the eastern hemisphere shall rush with transport into the bosom of his brother of the west. O! what a transition will this be from the present state of affairs! Will it not be as magnificent as when at the fiat of God, the earth sprang from chaotic darkness into a flood of light, and all its beauties burst at once upon the sight of its maker! I look on to the glorious prospect in speechless extacy!