

From "An Oration on the Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence"

Noah Webster, New Haven, 1802

### AN ORATION

The history of the first English settlements in America, and of the measures which prepared the way for a revolution in the colonies, is too interesting not to be well understood by men of common curiosity and reading in this State. That history unfolds a series of great events, evidently suited to accomplish important purposes in the economy of Divine Providence . . . events which every American of expanded views must contemplate with admiration; and every Christian, with delight. To recapitulate even the most remarkable of those events, however amusing and instructive the recital, would require more time than the appropriate business of this anniversary would afford. The day we are assembled to commemorate, summons the attention of American citizens to the history and the real objects of the revolution; to the national rights vindicated; to the dignity of character attached to the new sovereignty; to the duties imposed on the citizens, by their new rank and station among nations; to the errors which have been committed in framing the constitutions of the States and the federal compact; and especially to the means of preserving and perpetuating the benefits of Independence.

In the lapse of twenty six years, since the date of our sovereignty, a large proportion of the inhabitants of the United States have been changed. Most of the civil and military characters, conspicuous in the revolution, are now in their graves; and a new generation has arisen to guide the public councils, and to guard the blessings which their fathers have purchased. The experience of the same period of time, has drawn in question some opinions respecting the superior excellence of a republican government; and clouded the brilliant prospect which animated the hopes of the revolutionary patriots. Numerous unexpected difficulties in the management of this species of government, and multifarious disappointments, under the best administrations have arisen in thick succession, to confound the wisdom, and blast the hopes, of the most discerning friends of their country. To trace the causes of these disappointments, is to prevent a repetition of them, or prepare ourselves to meet them with advantage.

It is worthy of observation, that nations sometimes begin their political existence, as young men begin the world, with more courage than foresight,

and more enthusiasm than correct judgment. Unacquainted with the perils that await their progress, or disdainful of the maxims of experience, and confident of their own powers, they expect to attain to supereminent greatness and prosperity, by means which other nations have found ineffectual, and bid defiance to calamities by which others have been overwhelmed . . . Nations, like individuals, may be misled by an ardent enthusiasm, which allures them from the standard of practical wisdom, and commits them to the guidance of visionary projectors. By fondly cherishing the opinion that they enjoy some superior advantages of knowledge, or local situation, the rulers of a state may lose the benefit of history and observation, the surest guides in political affairs; and delude themselves with the belief, that they have wisdom to elude or power to surmount the obstacles which have baffled the exertions of their predecessors.

Such are the mistakes of reformers; and such have been the illusions of the enthusiastic friends of the revolution. Their imagination has been warmed with the belief, that the sequestered position of America, would exempt her citizens from the troubles which harass Europe; that a general diffusion of knowledge, and superior attainments in policy, would enable them to form constitutions of government, less defective than any which have preceded them; and that their public virtue would secure a faithful, uncorrupt, and impartial administration. Whenever a doubt has been suggested, respecting the duration of a free republic, it has been repelled by one general answer, that the system of representation, supposed to be a modern improvement in free constitutions, is calculated effectually to obviate the evils which other states have experienced, from legislatures consisting of popular assemblies.

But does the wide ocean that rolls between the two continents, detach our citizens from a deep interest in the affairs of Europe? Will our commerce, a productive source of our wealth, permit a separation of interests? And will not our prejudices and our wants, in spite of reason and patriotism, continue, for a long period, to link us to the policy, the opinions, and the interest of European nations?

But if we had the power to insulate our country, our interest, and our hearts, can we assure ourselves that our citizens' supereminent wisdom, to frame systems of government, which shall be proof against the insidious advances of corruption, and the bold assaults of faction? What has prevented the enlightened sages of antiquity, from viewing man in all his attitudes; and learning all the possible modes, by which the human passions operate on society and government? After the experience of four or five thousand years, and numberless forms of government, how should it happen to be reserved for the Americans to discover

the great secret, which has eluded all former inquiry, of infusing into a political constitution, the quality of imperishable durability? Is not the pretension to such superior light and wisdom in our citizens, rather an evidence of pride, self-sufficiency, and *want of wisdom*? If Moses, with an uncommon portion of talents, seconded by divine aid, could not secure his institutions from neglect and corruption, what right have we to expect, that the labors of our lawgivers will be more successful?

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