WASHINGTON'S BIRTHDAY ADDRESS

Delivered By

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It is a pleasure to visit this old College named after General Washington with his consent—one of two colleges in the land endowed by him with that privilege.

It is always a pleasure to address the youth of this country, for they are this country; they are its future and as they may elect, its prosperity or its destruction. With especial emphasis does this thought come to my mind when the address is to be made on Washington's birthday to the youth of the old College, toward the building of which he made a contribution of fifty guineas, a very liberal contribution in those days, when the wealth of those who seemed to their neighbors well-to-do, was in fact very small indeed.

The time may come, as it came to Washington, when the event shall knock upon the door of any one of you, to find within a staff on which America can lean. The time will come for every one of you when, daily, the future of this free country will be influenced, to the greater or the less degree, for either good or ill, by you who are preparing to accept the duties of citizenship. If then the suggestions contained in this address fall short of the standard which you would attain, the duty which accompanies the privilege of addressing you will have been neglected.

To consider the life and character of such an one we meet to-day; one who, among these esteemed to have been both just and great, is also the one who had during his life, and has had since, greater influence with his fellow Americans than any other.

That on the recurring anniversaries of his birth we who owe so much as well to his effort as his example should turn aside from daily avocations, books, industries and pursuits, to commemorate the man and testify to our continued admiration for his character is but to justify that prediction of Jefferson in saying of him:

"His memory will be adored while liberty shall have votaries. His name will triumph over time, and will in future ages assume its just station among the most celebrated worthies of the world."

Nor need we blindly accept the estimate. The man and his character lie open to us in history and his writings,—this man of whom Jefferson speaks in these terms.

We can readily ascertain that the praise was justified. It is borne out by contemporaneous tribute, it has endured the test of time. Justly we can concede to him this place in our minds; readily in the history of his life shall we find the explanation.

To learn that the judgment of the time in which he lived did not differ from our present conception, needs no extended research. Conclusive, even dramatic, incident,—incident almost unparalleled in known history, lies at hand.

That locally, or even nationally, one accomplishing so much of direct visible result for our country should be honored on his departure with signs of public mourning would be hardly to be wondered at. It is to others, rather than to his kinsmen, his State and his Nation, that we would look for testimony—to those affected, if anything, unfavorably by the material benefits which he had conferred upon his own land.

He had headed against England a great Rebellion. For upwards of eight continuous years he had held the field against her armies. Yet on hearing of his death the English Channel Fleet, without awaiting orders, set its colors at halfmast.

His last public activities had been in organizing as Commander-in-Chief the forces of the United States to repel an anticipated French invasion. Yet when he died Napoleon's army draped its eagles in mourning.

It is said that he lost more battles than he gained. Yet masters of strategy still approve his generalship. His incumbency of the Presidential office brought no startling territorial accessions to our domain. Yet chancelleries of great nations still admire his statecraft. Once the people of England denounced him as a rebel, but in 1914 some of the great public men of that country bought Sulgrave Manor—for generations the home of George Washington's ancestors—to make of it a place of pilgrimage for both Americans and British for all time to come.

During his life time the world at large respected and admired his character as it still respects and admires it, and in more special sense the American nation has at all times, how great soever its numbers and progress, revered his personality.

The verdict of history upon him, the tribute of the historian to him, without dissentient voice, is Praise.

If, in passing, we note his English yeoman ancestry; the advancement of his family in this country; it is but to recall that he enjoyed substantially no advantages to which all within the sound of my voice cannot attain if the intent be present. Wisely, as a youth, he sought rather than neglected such opportunities as lay at hand to improve himself by association with the cultured and worthy of the community. He was no dreamer, but an earnest worker; a diligent, persistent, careful, accurate man who deemed no moment lost, devoted to the performance of present duty with painstaking care. Through these traits came constant opportunity—for opportunity awaits us all. The demand for those who can perform is constant. Do well the duty which lies at hand and another, further, larger, duty will be thrust upon you. If we recall his early empolyment as surveyor and his relations to Governor Dinwiddie, Bryan Fairfax, and others, it is but to remind ourselves of this truth. Duty well performed led to his first diplomatic mission, the expedition among the French and Indians accompanied by John Davison. So well was this performed that Braddock's Campaign found him on that general's staff. His conduct and bearing therein brought in a month thereafter appointment as Commander of all the Virginia forces, and led to the remarkable, prophetic utterance of that Princeton Divine, that it would appear as though his preservation in the disaster was an indication that Providence in its wisdom had reserved him for great measures.

Such formative experiences acting on such material produced as result, his being regarded by thoughtful observers as the most valuable member of the Continental Congress in its early stages; and when argument was exhausted and the refuge was arms, no voice was raised against placing the defense, aye the creation, of the liberty of the land in his hands. Six years before he had written that when it came to maintaining liberty no men should scruple to use arms in defense of so valuable a blessing, but only as the last resource, and his acceptance of the commission to free that which is now more than one hundred millions of people is warrant of his belief that all other expedient was exhausted. Sincerity of character and steadfastness of purpose had marked him through his life, and to the day of his death sincerity and steadfastness abode with him. It is not too much to say that, that which he achieved is attributable to the sincerity which was his leading trait. If one must as to Washington rest upon a salient point, a single quality, as of all powerful influence upon his career, can we doubt that that quality was sincerity. So brief a word, so wide a vista! Describe his life, his deeds, his influence in what terms you please, all is referable to the great underlying fact that this man was sincere. Thence arose the confidence in turn of friends, associates, fellow-legislators, the army and the whole people. Thence arose in him simplicity, clear judgment, firmness, and the ability to lay aside place and preferment—to embrace as his highest aspiration the opportunity of showing that to possess power is to acquire the right to sacrifice inclination for the general good.

Nor does his prominence gain adventitious aid through any paucity of background or surrounding. He lived amid events which tried men's characters as seldom since or before; when, reverently be it spoken, it seems as though the Lord was winnowing out men's hearts. His contemporaries were among the ablest men produced by any period in history. It is difficult to compare situations at varying times in different countries, and something must be allowed for the tendencies of national pride, yet we may confidently believe that at any time, in any land, the characters and careers of those whom we term the great men of the Revolution would have commanded large attention and justified great praise. He stands before us, then, not an isolated figure, but one among a number of great men—statesmen of recognized abilities, in several instances of superior education and larger literary ability,—Jefferson, of whom we have already thought, a master of polemics; Hamilton, clear-minded, limpid of thought and speech; Morris, of almost epigrammatic eloquence in written thought; the orator, Patrick Henry; Samuel Adams, the eloquent; and, though mentioned last, by no means least, the shrewd, kindly and able Franklin. Yet even on their own ground when under pressure of great event or spurred by great situation, Washington lacks not equality. One might even wonder whether Jefferson may not have found inspiration for the framework of that masterpiece, the Declaration of Independence, in these words of Washington:

"If every man was of my mind, the ministers of Great Britain should know, in a few words, upon what issue the cause should be put. I would not be deceived by artful declarations nor specious pretenses; nor would I be amused by unmeaning propositions; but in open, undisguised, and manly terms proclaim our wrongs, and our resolution to be redressed. I would tell them that we had borne much, that we had long and ardently sought for reconciliation upon honorable terms, that it had been denied us, that all our attempts after peace had proved abortive, and had been grossly misrepresented, that we had done everything which could be expected from the best of subjects, that the spirit of freedom beat too high in us to submit to slavery, and that, if nothing else could satisfy a tyrant and his diabolical ministry, we are determined to shake off all connections with a state so unjust and unnatural. This I would tell them, not under covert, but in words as clear as the sun in its meridian brightness."

With simplicity, modesty always walked hand in hand with Washington. Thus, we find the crowning victory of the Revolution reported by him to the President of Congress (aside from his mention of matters of detail) in these words:

"I have the honor to inform Congress that a reduction of the British Army under the command of Lord Cornwallis is most happily effected. The unremitted ardor which actuated every officer and soldier in the combined army on this occasion has principally led to this important event at an earlier period than my most sanguine hopes had induced me to expect."

The crossing of the Delaware and the victory of Trenton, he states except for the praise of the troops and the bare recital of the events, in his letter to the same official, in these words:

"I have the pleasure of congratulating you upon the success of an enterprise which I had formed against a detachment of the enemy lying in Trenton and which was executed yesterday morning."

So also the strategy which turned the perilous position that arose after the Trenton victory into the successful battle at Princeton, calls forth as general comment only the statement that, that "piece of good fortune was counterbalanced by the loss" of certain brave and worthy officers whose names he mentions.

May we not join in the sentiment expressed by the Speaker of the House of Burgesses in 1758 when its newest member in attempting to respond to its thanks for his services in the expedition across the mountains under General Forbes, blushing and stammering found himself unable to utter a single word. "Sit down, Mr. Washington," said the smiling speaker, "your modesty is equal to your valor."

Nor was he, as is popularly believed, a man devoid of humor. Indeed it makes one smile to find our great modern humorist, Mark Twain, anticipated more than a hundred years, in what has been deemed one of his most humorous flights of fancy. I quote from Washington's letter to his brother, written from Fort Cumberland, immediately after Braddock's defeat:

"As I have heard, since my arrival at this place, a circumstantial account of my death and dying speech, I take this early opportunity of contradicting the first and of assuring you that I have not as yet composed the latter."

And his venturing (as he says), "to hazard an opinion" during the Revolution on the subject of the army's distress and want, that the view of the public was that the army had so far contracted the habit of existing without money that it would be injurious to it to introduce different customs, may be regarded as humor or bitter sarcasm as you will.

Time does not permit reviewing his military services, nor tracing the formation of stable government under his Presidency. One can but suggest and trust to arousing an interest which may lead to independent study.

He has left us three great papers, his Letter to the Governors, his Address to the Officers and The Farewell Address. We can no more than glance at the two earlier of these and give a but brief consideration to the third, for indeed many hours might be spent upon it without exhausting its inspirations.

His letter addressed to the Governors of all the states on the disbanding of the army was a foreshadow of The Farewell Address. Its timeliness and its importance as an element tending to create our Constitutional Unity cannot be minimized. Four things he deems essential to our national existence. An indissoluble union, a sacred regrad to public justice, a proper peace establishment and the cultivation of a friendly disposition among our people to the end that local prejudice be forgotten, and that those mutual concessions and sacrifices requisite to general prosperity may be made. It should be read with care as an introduction to The Farewell Address. Its effect was as salutary as immediate. The occurrences upon its receipt in Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts and New York, give vivid evidence of its intrinsic strength and the justness of its views, while the Continental Congress directed its forwarding to our diplomatic representatives as evidencing the inimitable character of its author.

The address to the officers at Newburg in March, 1783, is a paper which no thoughtful American can read without profound emotion. Washington was a soldier, a commander of an army. He had toiled and suffered with that army for eight years. He had seen it starving and beaten, unpaid and lacking every necessity. He had seen the sacrifice, by many of those who had followed him to an ultimate, unexampled success, of substantially all their worldly advantages, and they stood before him about to suffer from that ingratitude of republics which is the byword of history. Others of less nobility of resolution than himself had circulated adroit and specious addresses, and had called a general meeting to consider what steps they might take (as one might almost say) for their own preservation. Treason, if you will, but possibly not to be wondered at—and it is to be remarked that there was more anxiety and distress, more solemnity and oppression of mind in Congress, at the knowledge of the situation which had arisen at Newburg, than there had been at any period during the actual continuance of the war.

Picture the situation, read the address, and say if reverent admiration be misplaced tribute.

I approach with diffidence the last of the three great papers—Washington's political testament—The Farewell Address:

Its very first phrase arrests our attention—in a breath he gives us the true conception of the scope of the office of the President of a Republic; of the rights, duties and limitations of the Presidency. May we never forget that a Presidential Election is, in his words, the "election of a citizen to administer the Executive Government of the United States," a "designating the person who is to be clothed with that important trust."

That the citizen so elected is a person to whom is delegated the trust of administering the Executive Government of this country and nothing other or beyond is a fact which should at all times be present in the thought of all our citizens.

The remainder of the first portion of the address is a setting forth of the natural sentiments which would inspire such a man on such an occasion. Of their dignity and justice as found therein too much cannot be said. To the portrayal therein of the debt owing by the citizen to his country we may recommend all actuated by patriotic motive. The evidence found therein of the lack of desire for self-aggrandizement on the part of the writer all must respect. The prayer for his countrymen's welfare appeals to every generous heart. The lesson of pure patriotism therein taught may well be treasured among the valued heritages of mankind.

The second major division of the Farewell Address concerns itself with what its author himself describes as the "disinterested warnings of a parting friend." That they are such enables him justly to claim the right to speak with the greater freedom.

Can we doubt the absolute truth with which he makes reference to his solicitude for the welfare of this country, appealing thereto, to justify his anxious apprehensions; giving him the right, as he says, to offer to our solemn contemplation and frequent review such results of his long experience as seem to him to embrace the points which he describes as being all-important to the permanency of our felicity as a people?

Let us not feel that the words which follow in this most remarkable, indeed unique, State paper can be disregarded on any claim that the times have changed, that our circumstances have altered. Changes in the times, alterations in our circumstances are all foreseen therein, and the warnings of his experience are offered as specifically applicable thereto.

It has of late been too greatly the practice to excuse departure from the safe guide of past experience—disregard of historic analogy—coupled with adoption of what are termed timely or modern policies, by the assertion that attendant conditions have so greatly varied in the past hundred years or more, by reason of what is known as modern progress, that the wisdom of those who preceded is but the folly of to-day.

But consider for a moment along what lines this modern progress of ours has proceeded: Have there been any new inventions in ethics? Have the underlying principles of morality altered? Has logic adopted new rules? Have human beings changed their passions? Have the laws of nature ceased to work? Are not fundamental conditions the same for all times and all peoples? Is not this modern progress of which we speak practically wholly along the line of material matters—appliances for greater comfort, for greater rapidity of inter-communication and progress in similar directions—rather than in the line of any change in the eternal principles which sway the destinies of man?

The human voice today may speak in the ear of a distant listener, but is the thought thereby portrayed to the auditor's mind, though it may be applied to a different subject, different in essence from human thought before?

Was the luxury which constituted the major peril of the Roman Republic any the less gratification of the senses than the possibly more refined luxury of to-day? Were the internecine wars of the Greek Republics (that had no unity) different in anything but the subjects over which they arose from the internecine wars which would arise among forty-eight different republics within these United States but for our Union? In Greece they resulted in bringing in the Persian and the Mede. Is Washington's voice against the same danger to be disregarded because the Median archer's bow is broken and the Immortals no longer head the host of Xerxes?

The words of this man in his Farewell Address speak to us with living force as though written yesterday when he warns us that designing men may endeavor to excite a belief of a difference among us in interests and views by appealing to geographical distinctions, Atlantic and Western, Southern and Northern; when he points out that it is but a familiar expedient to misrepresent to one district the opinions and aims of another; when he cautions us to guard against the jealousies and heart burnings springing therefrom whereby we should be rendered alien the one to the other, we who, as he says, should be bound together by fraternal affection. When he exhorts us to rely upon the Union to which we owe every advantage which we possess, should we say that it is all applicable to the past and with no bearing on the future?

Again, when he points out that we shall find in the united result of the combination of all the parts a greater strength, greater resource and greater security, can we deny that we have found it so in our past, which was his future, and can we doubt that we shall find it so, in that, which to us, is still the future?

And before leaving this branch of the address our attention should at least for a moment turn toward one great good which Washington finds for us in that strength which comes from union; that through the exemption from local wars and the less frequent interruption of our peace by foreign foe, we shall be able to avoid the major peril to all free governments great military establishments. Inauspicious he calls them to liberty; hostile he finds them to republican forms of government in every particular, and it is in the ability thereby attained to avoid standing armies and great navies that Washington deems the Union to be one of the great factors making for our liberty.

We cannot fail to note how strikingly the strength which he believed would come from Union, has been demonstrated in the century and a quarter succeeding the address. It finds the United States, at the time of the address, so poor and distressed, the richest nation in all the world and fully prepared to take its part as it did in ending a world war, as it should have been ended, by defeating the promoters of that war. The outcome of that event found a leadership here, in a search for an organization looking towards the peace of the world—an organization into which all of the States of the world entered, except Russia, Mexico, Germany and the United States.

Personally, I believed then and still do, that the United States should have entered the League also. But be that as it may, the great power of this Union of States which Washington could foresee, working for good, has but recently been demonstrated anew. We cannot fail to be proud of the fact that upon the invitation of the President of these United States, four great nations sent their delegations here to confer with our delegation upon problems in which the people of the whole world are interested. Nor can we fail to rejoice over the outcome which is in fact the second step promoted by Presidents of this country looking toward that hoped-for day, when the differences between nations shall be settled as simply as are those of individuals in civilized countries, and too, when no nation shall prepare to seize the territory of another nation because if its people so willed, they dare not.

Again, on that most important of subjects, our Federal Constitution, he speaks words which should sink deep. There are certain affirmative duties which appertain to citizenship in contradistinction to those which appertain to the position of a subject, and those duties for us may be briefly summarized as the maintaining of the liberties and Constitution of these United States.

The very term society imports a mutual renunciation of some rights and an individual acceptance of some duties. This is as true of the smallest social organization, the family, as of the largest social aggregation, whether republic, kingdom or other.

In all aggregations of human beings, under what is known as a Republican form of government, there is cast upon each individual the affirmative duty of maintaining and preserving such liberties as are reserved to the individual by the framework of the society of which he forms part—by the fundamental law of the nation of which he is a member.

Remember, we do not enjoy all liberty. The enjoyment of all liberty is the cessation of all social organization of every name and nature.

Remember, further, that it is not for me, and equally not for any one of you as an individual, to say of our own proper strength that the liberties which we enjoy at any given time under the Constitution are either too great or too small. They are what we are entitled to by the common consent of each of us and our fellows. They are so much and so great as at the moment it is believed we can be safely entrusted with. And whatever restriction of liberty is placed upon us by the Constitution we must accept to avoid the danger of the loss which would follow the destruction of the social fabric. As Washington well says: "The Constitution which at any time exists, till changed by an explicit and authentic act of the whole people, is sacredly obligatory on all."

At all times there are in this world men whose mentality is such that they do not appreciate the value in itself to the society in which they dwell of settled conditions; who believe that the attainment of a particular good for an individual, or a part of the community or the whole community, outweighs any possible danger to arise to every individual member of the community, and thus to the whole community, from a setting aside of what we call constitutional methods.

Moreover, there are others in this world and many, aye, too many of them in the United States, whose aims are still more vicious in character. Some of them are citizens of this country, but the vast majority of them are not. They want everything we have, excet our Constitution, our statutes, our common law, our courts, our religion, our schools and our colleges. The lands we have cleared of forests or drained and then by the hard work of industrious country-loving and God-fearing men and women have made to blossom as the rose, together with all the other property we have created by generations of labor, they wish to take from the owners and divide among themselves, as the Soviets of Russia have done, with results that shock all decent-minded people. While such persons as I have mentioned are to be found in every State of the Union, the great majority of them are in our cities and especially in the larger cities of the country. They are known principally as Anarchists, Russian Reds and I. W. Ws. They openly advocate the overthrow of our government. Their poisonous propaganda is being used with very considerable effect in these times of readjustment, due principally to the world war which finds several millions of men unemployed in this country. Very late, but let us hope not too late, we have awakened to the importance of keeping those who are not desirable as citizens from coming here to help in the ambition of Radicals to overthrow this government by the use of the lives and the bullets of assassins. The Government of Russia has not hestitated until very lately to openly avow its ambitions in that direction. Our foodstuff needed by the many millions of the starving people of Russia has stilled for a little while this clamor for the overthrow of the best government on earth,—a government under which every boy and girl possessed with health, character and brains has a chance to achieve his or her ambition. Rockefeller, Judge Gary and Schwab were the sons of poor parents, but, nevertheless, they worked their way to the very top of big business in this country. It is the rule, not the exception, that the heads of the great business interests and corporations of all kinds in this country were once like them, poor boys. The same is true of the vast majority of the men who in public life have helped to make our wonderful nation one of which every healthful-minded person is justly proud.

That the method of the administration of the government of this country should be matter of deep concern to Washington cannot be source of wonder. Nor can you wonder that he should seek to inculcate the utmost of conservatism. On this subject we find him again going back to the primary underlying element in all human affairs; a man's habit of thought. He warns us that in a free country, even above all others, one should acquire habits of thought which should inspire caution in those entrusted with its government; that they may thereby confine themselves within their respective constitutional spheres.

He sees the dangers of the grasping of powers which belong to one of these three great distributives by another, whence in the end freedom shall be lost and despotism shall reign in its stead. He does not deem it necessary to illustrate the reasons why this ultimate result will flow from what might seem but an inconsiderable invasion of the set rue; but refers each of us to his own innate knowledge arising from a consideration of his personal imperfections, of the fact that love of power and the abuse of power walk hand in hand in every human heart.

He does indeed appeal to history and to then current experience to justify his firm belief in the necessity of the division of the powers of government and of their independent exercise, and with simple directness he calls to your and my attention the patent fact that the preservation of this distribution of governmental powers is full as necessary as its original creation.

And urged by that anxious dread for our welfare, which is the keynote of the entire address, he demands that any modification of the distribution of the constitutional powers should be obtained only by constitutional methods.

What I have taken many words to say, he says in two brief sentences:

"But let there be no change by usurpation, for though this in one instance may be the instrument of good, it is the customary weapon by which free governments are destroyed—the precedent must always greatly overbalance in permanent evil any partial or transient benefit which the use can at any time yield."

The subjects upon which he touches with such great compression that one may well marvel that so much can be said in so few words throng on the attention. When he bids us observe not alone good faith, but justice in our relations with foreign countries; exhorts us to cultivate peace and harmony with all nations; points out to us that we shall shortly become a great nation, and that it behooves us to give to mankind what he designates as the magnanimous and too novel example of a people guided as well by benevolence as justice, thoughts come crowding to the mind.

It would not do on this occasion to deal in controversy, but here arises the contrast of our treatment of Cuba and our treatment of the Philippine Islanders. It seems as though forgetting these words of counsel and advice we have been swayed, not by those high precepts, which he besought us to be governed by, but by self-interest, producing in the two cases the dissimilar results. If so, be assured that there will come for us a day of reckoning, and that we shall have occasion to regret our non-appreciation of the force and truth with which he concludes the paragraph to which I have last referred.

"Who can doubt that in the course of time and things the fruits of such a plan would richly repay any temporary advantages which might be lost by a steady adherence to it? Can it be that Providence has not connected the permanent felicity of a nation with its virtue? The experiment at least is recommended by every sentiment which ennobles human nature—alas, is it rendered impossible by its vices?"

Finally, we need not doubt that a man of Washington's character and experience should have been deeply imbued with a sense of the importance of and close relation between religion and morality; and we find almost necessarily this sense of the dependence of morality and virtue upon a religious belief as their surest foundation pervading the entire address and at places attaining to the prominence which is its due in any consideration of human affairs. It may seem strange to the ears of many modern politicians, but to his mind religion and morality are indispensable to political prosperity. He denies patriotism to any man who shall attempt the subversion of "these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens." He denies the possibility of the existence of national morality in exclusion of recogntion of religious principle, and points out that "the mere politician equally with the pious man ought to respect and to cherish them."

But the limits of your indulgence should be no longer pressed upon. If what has been said leads, on your part, to more extended study of that great human message and the history of its author, my reward is attained.

I close, as I began, with words from the mouth of Jefferson, most apt, most fit, most illuminate—just tribute to the Father of His Country:

"Our first and greatest Revolutionary character, whose pre-eminent services have entitled him to the first place in his country's love, and destined for him the fairest page in the volume of faithful history."

"Washington's fame will go on increasing until the brightest constellation in yonder heavens shall be called by his name."

"The moderation of his desires and the strength of his judgment enabled him to calculate correctly that the right to that glory, which never dies, is to use power for the support of the laws and liberties of our country, not for its destruction, and his glory will accordingly survive the wreck of everything now living."

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