


ELIAS BOUDINOT

 ELIAS BOUDINOT, an American statesman and philanthropist, and president of the Continental Congress in 1782, was descended from a French Huguenot family, his great-grandfather having fled to this country after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. He was born at Philadelphia, May 2, 1740, and, after receiving a good general education and studying for the bar, was admitted to the practice of law in New Jersey in 1760. He took an active interest in political affairs, and, supporting the popular cause in the Revolution, sat in the Continental Congress, and was commissary-general of prisoners, 1777-79. In November, 1782, he was chosen president of Congress and in that capacity signed the treaty of peace in the following year. He was a member of the first three Congresses of the United States, and was director of the Philadelphia Mint for a period of ten years. He retired from public life in 1805 and resided at Burlington, N. J., until his death, which took place there, Oct. 24, 1821. Boudinot was active in benevolent and educational enterprises throughout his long and honorable career and is remembered as the first president of the American Bible Society, and founder of the American Board of Foreign Missions. His chief writings include "The Ages of Revelation," a reply to Thomas Paine (1790); and a work on the "Second Advent of the Messiah" (1815).

ORATION BEFORE THE CINCINNATI

[This oration was delivered by Mr. Boudinot at Elizabethtown, N. J., agreeably to a resolution of the State Society of the Cincinnati, on the Fourth of July, 1793.]

GENTLEMEN, BRETHREN, AND FELLOW CITIZENS,—Having devoutly paid the sacrifice of prayer and praise to that Almighty Being by whose favor and mercy this day is peculiarly dedicated to the commemoration of events which fill our minds with joy and gladness, it becomes me, in obedience to the resolutions of our Society, to aim at a further improvement of this festival by leading your reflections to the contemplation of those special privileges which attend the happy and important situation you now enjoy among the nations of the earth.

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Is there any necessity, fellow citizens, to spend your time in attempting to convince you of the policy and propriety of setting apart this anniversary for the purpose of remembering with gratitude the unexampled event of our political salvation?

The cordial testimony you have borne to this institution for seventeen years past supersedes the necessity of an attempt of this kind; and, indeed, if this had been the first instance of our commemorating the day, the practice of all nations and of all ages would have given a sanction to the measure.

The history of the world, as well sacred as profane, bears witness to the use and importance of setting apart a day as a memorial of great events, whether of a religious or political nature.

No sooner had the great Creator of the heavens and the earth finished his almighty work and pronounced all very good, but he set apart (not an anniversary, or one day in a year, but) one day in seven for the commemoration of his inimitable power in producing all things out of nothing.

The deliverance of the children of Israel from a state of bondage to an unreasonable tyrant was perpetuated by the eating of the Paschal Lamb and enjoining it to their posterity as an annual festival forever, with a "remember this day, in which ye came out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."

The resurrection of the Saviour of mankind is commemorated by keeping the first day of the week, not only as a certain memorial of his first coming in a state of humiliation, but the positive evidence of his future coming in glory.

Let us then, my friends and fellow citizens, unite all our endeavors this day to remember, with reverential gratitude to our supreme Benefactor, all the wonderful things he has done for us in a miraculous deliverance from a second Egypt —

another house of bondage. "And thou shalt show thy son on this day, saying this day is kept as a day of joy and gladness, because of the great things the Lord has done for us, when we were delivered from the threatening power of an invading foe. And it shall be a sign unto thee, upon thine hand, and for a memorial between thine eyes, that the law of the Lord may be in thy mouth, for with a strong hand hast thou been delivered from thine enemies: Thou shalt therefore keep this ordinance in its season, from year to year, forever."

When great events are to be produced in this our world, great exertions generally become necessary; men are therefore usually raised up, with talents and powers peculiarly adapted to the purposes intended by Providence, who often by their disinterested services and extreme sufferings become the wonder as well as the examples of their generation.

The obligations of mankind to these worthy characters increase in proportion to the importance of the blessings purchased by their labors.

It is not then an unreasonable expectation which, I well know, generally prevails, that this day should be usually devoted to the perpetuating and respectfully remembering the dignified characters of those great men with whom it has been our honor to claim the intimate connection of fellow citizens,—men who have purchased our present joyful circumstances at the invaluable price of their blood.

But you must also acknowledge with me that this subject has been so fully considered and so ably handled by those eloquent and enlightened men who have gone before me in this honorable path, that had their superior abilities fallen to my lot I could do but little more than repeat the substance of their observations and vary their language.

Forgive me, ye spirits of my worthy, departed fellow citi-

zens!—patriots of the first magnitude, whose integrity no subtle arts of bribery and corruption could successfully assail; and whose fortitude and perseverance no difficulties or dangers could intimidate, whose labors and sufferings in the common cause of our country; whose exploits in the field and wisdom in the cabinet, I have often been witness to during a cruel and distressing war! Forgive, O Warren, Montgomery! and all the nameless heroes of your illustrious group! Forgive, that I omit on the present occasion to follow the steps of those compatriots who have preceded me, but had rather spend this sacred hour in contemplating those great purposes which animated your souls in the severe conflict, and for which you fought and bled!

Were you present to direct this day's meditations, would you not point to your scarred limbs and bleeding breasts, and loudly call upon us to reward your toils and sufferings by forcibly inculcating and improving those patriotic principles and practices which led you to those noble achievements that secured the blessings we now enjoy?

Yes, ye martyrs to liberty! ye band of heroes! ye once worthy compatriots and fellow citizens! We will obey your friendly suggestion, and greatly prize that freedom and independence, purchased by your united exertions, as the most invaluable gem of our earthly crown!

The late revolution, my respected audience, in which we this day rejoice, is big with events that are daily unfolding themselves and pressing in thick succession, to the astonishment of a wondering world!

It has been marked with the certain characteristic of a divine overruling hand, in that it was brought about and perfected against all human reasoning, and apparently against all human hope; and that in the very moment of time when all

Europe seemed ready to be plunged into commotion and distress.

Divine Providence, throughout the government of this world, appears to have impressed many great events with the undoubted evidence of his own almighty arm. He putteth down kingdoms and he setteth up whom he pleaseth, and it has been literally verified in us that "no king prevaieth by the power of his own strength."

The first great principle established and secured by our revolution, and which since seems to be pervading all the nations of the earth, and which should be most zealously and carefully improved and gloried in by us, is the rational equality and rights of men as men and citizens.

I do not mean to hold up the absurd idea charged upon us by the enemies of this valuable principle, and which contains in it inevitable destruction to every government, "that all men are equal as to acquired or adventitious rights." Men must and do continually differ in their genius, knowledge, industry, integrity, and activity.

Their natural and moral characters — their virtues and vices — their abilities, natural and acquired — together with favorable opportunities for exertion, will always make men different among themselves, and of course create a pre-eminency and superiority one over another. But the equality and rights of men here contemplated are natural, essential, and inalienable, such as the security of life, liberty, and property. These should be the firm foundation of every good government, as they will apply to all nations at all times and may properly be called a universal law. It is apparent that every man is born with the same right to improve the talent committed to him, for the use and benefit of society, and to be respected accordingly.

We are all the workmanship of the same divine hand. With our Creator, abstractly considered, there are neither kings nor subjects, masters nor servants, otherwise than stewards of his appointment, to serve each other according to our different opportunities and abilities, and of course accountable for the manner in which we perform our duty. He is no respecter of persons; he beholds all with an equal eye; and although "order is heaven's first law," and he has made it essential to every good government, and necessary for the welfare of every community, that there should be distinctions among members of the same society, yet this difference is originally designed for the service, benefit, and best good of the whole, and not for their oppression or destruction.

It is our duty then, as a people, acting on principles of universal application, to convince mankind of the truth and practicability of them by carrying them into actual exercise for the happiness of our fellow men, without suffering to be perverted to oppression or licentiousness.

The eyes of the nations of the earth are fast opening, and the inhabitants of this globe, notwithstanding it is 3,000 years since the promulgation of that invaluable precept, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," are but just beginning to discover their brotherhood to each other, and that all men, however different with regard to nation or color, have an essential interest in each other's welfare.

Let it then be our peculiar, constant care and vigilant attention to inculcate this sacred principle, and to hand it down to posterity improved by every generous and liberal practice, that while we are rejoicing in our own political and religious privileges we may with pleasure contemplate the happy period when all the nations of the earth shall join in the triumph of this day, and one universal anthem of praise

shall arise to the universal Creator in return for the general joy.

Another essential ingredient in the happiness we enjoy as a nation, and which arises from the principles of the revolution, is the right that every people have to govern themselves in such manner as they judge best calculated for the common benefit.

It is a principle interwoven with our constitution, and not one of the least blessings purchased by that glorious struggle, to the commemoration of which this day is specially devoted, that every man has a natural right to be governed by laws of his own making, either in person or by his representative; and that no authority ought justly to be exercised over him that is not derived from the people, of whom he is one.

This, fellow citizens, is a most important, practical principle, first carried into complete execution by the United States of America.

I tremble for the event, while I glory in the subject.

To you, ye citizens of America! do the inhabitants of the earth look with eager attention for the success of a measure on which their happiness and prosperity so manifestly depend.

To use the words of a famous foreigner, "You are become the hope of human nature and ought to become its great example. The asylum opened in your land for the oppressed of all nations must console the earth."

On your virtue, patriotism, integrity, and submission to the laws of your own making and the government of your own choice do the hopes of men rest with prayers and supplications for a happy issue.

Be not, therefore, careless, indolent, or inattentive in the exercise of any right of citizenship. Let no duty, however small or seemingly of little importance, be neglected by you.

Ever keep in mind that it is parts that form the whole, and fractions constitute the unit. Good government generally begins in the family, and if the moral character of a people once degenerates their political character must soon follow.

A friendly consideration of our fellow citizens who by our free choice become the public servants and manage the affairs of our common country is but a reasonable return for their diligence and care in our service.

The most enlightened and zealous of our public servants can do little without the exertions of private citizens to perfect what they do but form as it were in embryo. The highest officers of our government are but the first servants of the people and always in their power: they have, therefore, a just claim to a fair and candid experiment of the plans they form and the laws they enact for the public weal. Too much should not be expected from them; they are but men and of like passions and of like infirmities with ourselves; they are liable to err, though exercising the purest motives and best abilities required for the purpose.

Times and circumstances may change and accidents intervene to disappoint the wisest measures. Mistaken and wicked men (who cannot live but in troubled waters) are often laboring with indefatigable zeal, which sometimes proves but too successful, to sour our minds and derange the best-formed systems. Plausible pretensions and censorious insinuations are always at hand to transfer the deadly poison of jealousy by which the best citizens may for a time be deceived.

These considerations should lead to an attentive solicitude to keep the pure, unadulterated principles of our constitution always in view; to be religiously careful in our choice of public officers; and as they are again in our power at very

short periods lend not too easily a patient ear to every invidious insinuation or improbable story, but prudently mark the effects of their public measures and judge of the tree by its fruits.

I do not wish to discourage a constant and lively attention to the conduct of our rulers. A prudent suspicion of public measures is a great security to a republican government; but a line should be drawn between a careful and critical examination into the principles and effects of regular systems after a fair and candid trial, and a captious, discontented, and censorious temper, which leads to find fault with every proposition in which we have not an immediate hand, and raise obstacles to rational plans of government without waiting a fair experiment. It is generally characteristic of this disposition to find fault without proposing a better plan for consideration.

We should not forget that our country is large, and our fellow citizens of different manners, interests and habits; that our laws, to be right, must be equal and general. Of course the differing interests must be combined, and brotherly conciliation and forbearance continually exercised, if we will judge with propriety of those measures that respect a nation at large.

While we thus enjoy as a community the blessings of the social compact in its purity, and are all endeavoring to secure the invaluable privileges purchased by the blood of thousands of our brethren who fell in the dreadful conflict, let us also be careful to encourage and promote a liberality and benevolence of mind toward those whom they have left behind, and whose unhappy fate it has been to bear a heavier proportion of the expensive purchase in the loss of husbands, parents, or children, perhaps their only support and hope in life.

Mankind, considered as brethren, should be dear to each

other; but, fellow citizens, who have together braved the common danger,—who have fought side by side,—who have mingled their blood together, as it were in one rich stream,—who have labored and toiled with united efforts to accomplish the same glorious end, must surely be more than brethren—it is a union cemented by blood.

I can no longer deny myself the felicity, my beloved friends and fellow citizens, members of a Society founded on these humane and benevolent principles, of addressing myself more particularly to you on a day which in so peculiar a manner shines with increasing lustre on you, refreshing and brightening your hard-earned laurels, by renewing the honorable reward of your laborious services in the gratitude of your rejoicing fellow citizens.

Methinks I behold you on the victorious banks of the Hudson, bowed down with the fatigues of an active campaign and the sufferings of an inclement winter, receiving the welcome news of approaching peace and your country's political salvation with all that joy of heart and serenity of mind, that become citizens who flew to their arms, merely at their country's call, in a time of common danger.

The war-worn soldiers, reduced to the calamities of a seven years' arduous service, now solemnly pause and reflect on the peculiarity of their critical situation. The ravages of war had been extended through a country dearer to them than life, and thereby prevented that ample provision in service, or reasonable recompense on their return to private life, that prudence required and gratitude powerfully dictated.

They thought that the distresses of the army had before been brought to a point; "that they had borne all that men could bear; their property expended; their private resources at an end; their friends wearied out and disgusted with inces-