

**ORATION DELIVERED BEFORE
THE CITY AUTHORITIES OF
BOSTON, ON THE FOURTH
OF JULY, 1863**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649322190

Oration delivered before the City Authorities of Boston, on the Fourth of July, 1863 by Oliver Wendell Holmes

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OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES

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ORATION

DELIVERED BEFORE

THE CITY AUTHORITIES OF BOSTON,

ON THE

FOURTH OF JULY, 1863,

BY

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES.



BOSTON:

J. E. FARWELL & COMPANY, PRINTERS TO THE CITY,

37 CONGRESS STREET.

1863.

CITY OF BOSTON.

In Board of Aldermen, July 6, 1863.

ORDERED: That the thanks of the City Council be, and they are hereby presented, to OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES, M. D., for the highly eloquent and truly loyal Address delivered before the Municipal Authorities of Boston, on the occasion of the celebration of the Eighty-seventh Anniversary of the Declaration of American Independence, and that he be requested to furnish a copy for publication.

Sent down for concurrence.

THOMAS C. AMORY, JR., *Chairman.*

In Common Council, July 9, 1863.

Concurred.

GEORGE S. HALE, *President.*

Approved July 10, 1863.

F. W. LINCOLN, JR., *Mayor.*

ORATION.

MR. MAYOR AND GENTLEMEN OF THE COMMON COUNCIL,
FELLOW-CITIZENS AND FRIENDS :

It is our first impulse, upon this returning day of our Nation's birth, to recall whatever is happiest and noblest in our past history, and to join our voices in celebrating the statesmen and the heroes, the men of thought and the men of action, to whom that history owes its existence. In other years this pleasing office may have been all that was required of the holiday speaker. But to-day, when the very life of the nation is threatened, when clouds are thick about us, and men's hearts are throbbing with passion, or failing with fear, it is the living question of the hour, and not the dead story of the past, which forces itself into all minds, and will find unrebuked debate in all assemblies.

In periods of disturbance like the present, many persons who sincerely love their country and mean to do their duty to her, disappoint the hopes and expectations of those who are actively working in her cause. They seem to have lost whatever moral force they may have once possessed, and to go drifting

about from one profitless discontent to another, at a time when every citizen is called upon for cheerful, ready service. It is because their minds are bewildered, and they are no longer truly themselves. Show them the path of duty, inspire them with hope for the future, lead them upwards from the turbid stream of events to the bright translucent springs of eternal principles, strengthen their trust in humanity, and their faith in God, and you may yet restore them to their manhood and their country.

At all times, and especially on this anniversary of glorious recollections and kindly enthusiasms,^{*} we should try to judge the weak and wavering souls of our brothers fairly and generously. The conditions in which our vast community of peace-loving citizens find themselves, are new and unprovided for. Our quiet burghers and farmers are in the position of river-boats blown from their moorings out upon a vast ocean, where such a typhoon is raging as no mariner who sails its waters ever before looked upon. If their beliefs change with the veering of the blast, if their trust in their fellow-men, and in the course of Divine Providence seems well-nigh shipwrecked, we must remember that they were taken unawares, and without the preparation which could fit them to struggle with these tempestuous elements. In times like these the faith is the man; and they to whom

it is given in larger measure, owe a special duty to those who for want of it are faint at heart, uncertain in speech, feeble in effort, and purposeless in aim.

Assuming without argument a few simple propositions, that self-government is the natural condition of an adult society, as distinguished from the immature state, in which the temporary arrangements of monarchy and oligarchy are tolerated as conveniences; that the end of all social compacts is or ought to be to give every child born into the world the fairest chance to make the most and the best of itself that laws can give it; that Liberty, the one of the two claimants who swears that her babe shall not be split in halves and divided between them, is the true mother of this blessed Union; that the contest in which we are engaged is one of principles overlaid by circumstances; that the longer we fight, and the more we study the movements of events and ideas, the more clearly we find the moral nature of the cause at issue emerging in the field and in the study; that all honest persons with average natural sensibility, with respectable understanding, educated in the school of northern teaching, will have eventually to range themselves in the armed or unarmed host which fights or pleads for freedom, as against every form of tyranny; if not in the front rank now, then in the rear rank by-and-by; assuming these

propositions, as many, perhaps most of us, are ready to do, and believing that the more they are debated before the public, the more they will gain converts, we owe it to the timid and the doubting to keep the great questions of the time in unceasing and untiring agitation. They must be discussed, in all ways consistent with the public welfare, by different classes of thinkers; by priests and laymen; by statesmen and simple voters; by moralists and lawyers; by men of science and uneducated hand-laborers; by men of facts and figures, and by men of theories and aspirations; in the abstract and in the concrete; discussed and rediscussed every month, every week, every day, and almost every hour, as the telegraph tells us of some new upheaval or subsidence of the rocky base of our political order.

Such discussions may not be necessary to strengthen the convictions of the great body of loyal citizens. They may do nothing towards changing the views of those, if such there be, as some profess to believe, who follow politics as a trade. They may have no hold upon that class of persons who are defective in moral sensibility, just as other persons are wanting in an ear for music. But for the honest, vacillating minds, the tender consciences supported by the tremulous knees of an infirm intelligence, the timid compromisers who are always trying to curve the straight

lines and round the sharp angles of eternal law, the continual debate of these living questions is the one offered means of grace and hope of earthly redemption. And thus a true, unhesitating patriot may be willing to listen with patience to arguments which he does not need, to appeals which have no special significance for him, in the hope that some less clear in mind or less courageous in temper may profit by them.

As we look at the condition in which we find ourselves on this fourth day of July, 1863, at the beginning of the Eighty-eighth Year of American independence, we may well ask ourselves what right we have to indulge in public rejoicings. If the war in which we are engaged is an accidental one, which might have been avoided but for our fault; if it is for any ambitious or unworthy purpose on our part; if it is hopeless, and we are madly persisting in it; if it is our duty and in our power to make a safe and honorable peace, and we refuse to do it; if our free institutions are in danger of becoming subverted, and giving place to an irresponsible tyranny; if we are moving in the narrow circles which are to engulf us in national ruin; then we had better sing a dirge and leave this idle assemblage, and hush the noisy cannon which are reverberating through the air, and