

**AN ORATION ADDRESSED TO THE  
CITIZENS OF THE TOWN OF QUINCY, ON  
THE FOURTH OF JULY,  
1831, THE FIFTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY OF  
THE INDEPENDENCE OF THE UNITED  
STATES OF AMERICA**

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An oration addressed to the citizens of the town of Quincy, on the fourth of July, 1831, the fifty-fifth anniversary of the independence of the United States of America by John Quincy Adams

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*B. Thomas*

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UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

BY JOHN QUINCY ADAMS.

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ORATION  
UNIV. OF  
— CALIFORNIA

FRIENDS, COUNTRYMEN, AND FELLOW CITIZENS—

THE celebrations of this anniversary have been so frequent and multiplied throughout the Union, for a period now largely stretching upon a second half century, that a speaker, far more competent to borrow for support in his flight the wings of imagination, than he who now addresses you, might well open his discourse, by entreating your indulgence, and deprecating your censure. Even the powers of speech, the special prerogative of man, as a member of the animal creation, are not unlimited. The discourse of reason, though looking before and after, is bounded in its vision by an horizon; and Eloquence herself perhaps best performs her appropriate office by silence upon exhausted topics.

The independence of the North American Union is, however, susceptible of being considered under a great variety of points of view. The contemplation of its causes must indeed ever remain the same; but that of its consequences varies from year to year. A speaker, on the first anniversary after the Declaration, in the midst of the terrific conflict to maintain it, and while its expediency, if not its justice, was yet pending upon the issues of war, had

a far different theme from him who now, after the lapse of nearly two generations of men, is called to review the progress of principles then proclaimed, as their influence has expanded upon the mind of civilized man. The test of all principle is time; and that which when first announced as truth, may be treated by the almost unanimous voice of mankind as pernicious paradox or hateful heresy, when scrutinized by long observation, and felt in practical results, may become an axiom of knowledge, or an article of uncontroverted faith. The astronomer, who in his nightly visitation of the heavens perceives a ray of light before unobserved, discovers no new phenomenon in nature. He is only the first to discern the beam which has glowed from the creation of the world. After-observation and the calculations of science, will disclose whether it proceeded from a star fixed in the firmament from the birth of time, from a planet revolving around the central luminary of our own system, or from a comet, "shaking from its horrid hair, pestilence and war."

The Declaration of Independence was a manifesto issued to the world, by the delegates of thirteen distinct, but UNITED colonies of Great Britain, in the name and behalf of their people. It was a united declaration. Their union preceded their independence; nor was their independence, nor has it ever since, been separable from their union. Their language is, "We the Representatives of the *United States of America*, in General Congress assembled, do, in the name and by the authority of the good PEOPLE of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare that these *United Colonies*, are, and of right



ought to be, free and independent States." It was the act of one people. The Colonies are not named; their number is not designated; nor in the original Declaration, does it appear from which of the Colonies any one of the fifty-six Delegates by whom it was signed, had been deputed. They announced their constituents to the world as one people, and unitedly declared the Colonies to which they respectively belonged, united, free and independent states. The Declaration of Independence, therefore, was a proclamation to the world, not merely that the United Colonies had ceased to be dependencies of Great Britain, but that their people had bound themselves, before God, to a primitive social compact of union, freedom and independence.

The parties to this compact were the people of thirteen Colonies of Great Britain, located upon the continent of North America, occupying territories contiguous to each other, and holding a political existence founded upon charters derived from successive sovereigns of that island. These charters were of various import, nor was there any link of union, or even of connexion between them; but in all, the rights of British subjects had been solemnly secured to the settlers under them, and among the first of those rights, was that of freedom from arbitrary taxation. The first of the charters had been granted by James the First of England and Sixth of Scotland, the first British monarch of the House of Stuart. The most recent of them had emanated from George II., of the House of Hanover, a family, which, by a revolution in the maternal island, had supplant-

ed that of the Stuarts on the British throne. That revolution itself had been the result of a long and sanguinary conflict between the primary principles of human authority and of human freedom. In the preceding ages, England had been, for nearly one hundred years, the theatre of desolating civil wars upon a question in the theory of government, as insignificant to the people of the realm, as if it had been upon the merits of the badges respectively assumed by the parties to the strife.

If an historian or an orator should affirm, that one of the most spirited and intelligent nations upon earth had inflicted upon itself, for a term little short of a century, all the horrors and desolations of a civil war, to ascertain and settle which, of a White Rose or a Red Rose, breathes the sweetest fragrance—the assertion might not be literally, but it would be more than figuratively true. The question between the Houses of York and Lancaster, was, whether upon the death of a King of England, childless, the right to his crown devolved upon the son of a brother, previously deceased, but who had been next to himself by birth, or to his own surviving younger brother. This is a question which could not possibly arise under any government, other than a hereditary monarchy, and in which the people who were the victims of the controversy, had, abstracted from the respective personal qualities of the pretenders to the crown, no more interest than in the dissensions in the kingdom of Lilliput on the question whether an egg should be broken at the big or at the little end. But the civil wars of the British nation in the seventeenth century were of a very different character. The question then was,

not who had the right *to* the throne, but what were the rights *of* the throne; not, upon whose head the polished perturbation and golden care of the crown should descend, but what was the lawful extent of power in him who wore it; what the extent of obligation upon the people to yield obedience to him; what their right and duty to defend themselves against his encroachments; and what their just and lawful remedy against the abuses of his authority. It was the question between right and might, between liberty and power;—a question the most solemn and momentous of any that can be agitated among men;—a question upon the issues of which war becomes the most imperious of human obligations, and the field of battle the sublimest theatre of heroic martyrdom and patriotic achievement.

In the progress of this controversy, the British nation had been twice brought to the decision, that the individual at the head of their government, had, by his usurpations and oppressions, forfeited his right to the crown; and in the first of these instances, his life. In the exasperation of feelings, stimulated by a long and cruel civil war, they had tinged the scaffold with the blood of their king; and then, by one of those reactions of popular sensibility, which never fail to follow the violation of the laws of humanity, they had passed from one extreme to another, and worshipped as a saint and martyr him whom they had beheaded as a tyrant. Proceeding in the second instance with more caution, they had suffered the offender to escape, and then construed his flight for life, as a voluntary abdication of his power. This they declared he had done, *by breaking the ori-*