

**AN ORATION,
PRONOUNCED BEFORE THE
CITIZENS OF BANGOR: ON
THE FOURTH OF JULY, 1838**

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An Oration, Pronounced Before the Citizens of Bangor: On the Fourth of July, 1838 by Frederic H. Hedge

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FREDERIC H. HEDGE

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THE SIXTY-SECOND ANNIVERSARY OF AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE.

BY
FRÉDÉRIC H. HEDGE.

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1838.

ORATION.

FELLOW CITIZENS:—I congratulate you on the sixty-second anniversary of American Independence. In discharging the duty assigned to me on this occasion, I am happy to meet an assembly like this, convened on the broad ground of American citizenship. Other grounds and other interests have been made too prominent, of late years, in the celebration of this day. The day belongs not to any partial interest or single cause, however sacred in itself. It belongs to the American citizen—a name, an interest which includes all others and transcends all others. The day is national, and strictly national should our celebration of it be. Other interests shall have their due. Education, Temperance—the whole year shall be theirs; but on this day we will know only our country, we will consider only those great principles of national polity which have made our country what it is; and through which alone we can hope to maintain what we are and have.

The anniversary of American Independence is distinguished from most festivals of secular

origin, by its moral character. Other days have been set apart for the commemoration of individuals or events. But this commemorates an act—an act, not of violence but of deliberation, not of the sword but of the pen—an act whose significance is strictly and purely moral. It may be regarded as characteristic of this age and people, that while the most striking events of the Revolution, its battles and its triumphs, pass unnoticed; while Yorktown and Saratoga, so loud in their day, are voiceless now; the quiet act of that provincial Congress which gave birth to the Declaration you have just heard, is proclaimed to us year after year, from the cannon's mouth, in volleys that sweep the coast from St. John's to Cape Sable—

“ And thence, perhaps, rebounding may
Echo beyond the Mexique bay.”

I consider this fact as one instance among many, of that growing ascendancy of the intellectual over the physical in man, which marks and measures the progress of society. As mankind advances, mind gradually prevails over matter. Force is displaced by thought. In the field, it is no longer animal vigor but scientific calculation that carries the day. In civil affairs, moral power preponderates more and more over brute strength. It is no longer the tallest, but, theoretically at least, the wisest that governs. The very symbols of government assume a more and more ideal character. Instead of the *fascēs* and the sceptre,

and the grosser ensigns of ancient dominion, we have written constitutions which define the power they represent, showing that mankind are governed by ideas and not by force — a fact equally certain though not equally apparent, in all ages and governments; in despotic Asia as in republican America; in the ninth century, under Charlemagne and imperial edicts, as in the nineteenth, under citizen kings and popular assemblies.

Mankind, I say, are governed by ideas and not by force. By these ideas I do not mean abstract speculations — I do not mean conclusions which have been obtained by any conscious process of the understanding, but those views and principles which a people imbibes with its earliest instruction, which it sees reflected from all its institutions, and which it reflects back again in all its habits and associations. These constitute the only true sources of human authority. These give to governments a validity which mere external force could never impart. No external force can hold a nation in subjection any longer than it finds support in the popular idea. We wonder at the passive obedience which the subjects of despotic governments yield to unjust and oppressive enactments. What hinders this people that they rebel not against their rulers? It is not the fear of armed force that keeps them down, but those hereditary ideas of subjection which centuries of misrule have fixed in their minds and linked with all their associations and ways of life. Until these associations can be broken up, the

condition of that people admits of no permanent improvement. To them revolt itself brings no deliverance. They may conspire and slay their rulers. But what then? No enlargement of privilege, no solid advantage accrues from such violence. To-day a tyrant is deposed, to-morrow a new one has assumed the rein, and the people submit because they know only submission; and because the idea of arbitrary rule is ever uppermost in their minds.

In the position to which I have now been led, we have a standpoint from which to interpret the whole philosophy of civil history and civil institutions. Every nation is governed by its prevalent ideas or habits of mind. These determine all its movements and shape all its laws. Hence the peculiar character of our revolution and its result in our present condition as a people. When we contrast that movement in American history with similar movements in the history of other nations, and particularly with the subsequent revolution in France, we are struck with what I will venture to call its naturalness. I mean its reason and necessity in the nature of the people, and the comparative ease with which its objects were accomplished, so far as their accomplishment depended on the popular will. It was not so much a revolution as an evolution. It was not an act of desperation, to which the nation were impelled by extreme pressure. We did not wait till stung by actual suffering. It was not here as in revolutionary France, where there existed no

provision for liberty in popular sentiment, no introduction to equal rights, in long-cherished habits and traditions, but where the people, wronged and overburdened, lay still and patient until they felt the griping of hunger in their bowels and the prick of outrage upon their backs. We revolted at the faint shadow of a distant force, attenuated and enfeebled by protecting seas. They rebelled against present want and the fear of death—against wrongs that had lashed into foaming fury whatever is foulest and fellest in unbridled souls. We owed every thing to the character and habits of the people—they owed every thing to the cogency of circumstances. With us it was the honoured of the land—our Adamses, our Otis, our Hancock and our Quincy—that headed the righteous cause; there, ragged *sans culottes*, trained in Bakers' *queues*, and the mothers of Saint Antoine, with ribald tongues and streaming hair, rushing into National Assemblies, led the van in the march of crime. Our revolution, in short, was the healthy offspring of a healthy parent; of theirs it might be said—

“Thy mother felt more than a mother's pain,
 And yet brought forth less than a mother's hope;
 To wit, an indigest, deformed lump,
 Unlike the fruit of such a goodly tree.
 Teeth hadst thou in thy head when thou wast born,
 To signify—thou can'st to bite the world.”

Whoever will study the condition of these colonies during their dependence on the mother country will find there already developed, in all

the distinctness and force with which they were afterwards asserted, those ideas of liberty and principles of government embodied in our constitution. British aggression was only the precipitating impulse which gave polarity and form to tendencies and attractions long held in solution. The causes which led to our separation would hardly have been deemed sufficient to warrant that step by any people less ripe for independence than we were. The stamp act, which the stern resistance of our fathers forced the British government to repeal before it could fairly take effect, however odious in its principle, was by no means so threatening in its consequences, that the citizens of Boston and of Portsmouth should have ushered it in with ominous ringing of bells and funeral orations to departed Liberty. The additional expense of three-pence a pound in the article of tea, could hardly be regarded as a national calamity. And even the Boston Port Bill, by far the most portentous attack on American liberty, mitigated as it was by sympathy and aid from other towns and States, did not, perhaps, impose a heavier burthen than the country has sustained, with more or less patience, during the last year of republican administration. Had not the people of these States been already free and independent in every habit and feeling of their natures, there would have been no difficulty in collecting that revenue. Peace would have seemed more desirable than the assertion of an abstract right by hopeless op-