

ORATION

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Oration by William H. Seward

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WILLIAM H. SEWARD

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BY

WILLIAM H. SEWARD,

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ORATION.

SOCIETY and Government are mutually related and inseparable. The material, intellectual, moral and spiritual conditions of every people, determine, through either a direct exercise of their will or their passive consent, the nature and form of their government. Reasoning from the attributes of the Creator and from the constitution of man, we justly conclude that a high stage of social happiness is attainable, and that beneficent government is therefore ultimately possible. Any different theory makes the hopes which sustain virtue delusive, and the Deity, who inspires them, a demon, equally to be feared and hated. Experience, however, teaches us that the advances of mankind towards such happiness and government are very slow. Poetry, indeed, often presents to us pleasing scenes of national felicity; but these are purely imaginary, while history is an almost unrelieved narrative of political crimes and public dangers and calamities.

We discover, by induction, moral laws as inflexible as the material laws of the universe. We know, therefore, that the tardiness of political progress results from a failure thus far to discover or apply those moral laws. The failure, at first view, excites surprise. Social melioration is apparently an object of general and intense desire. Certainly, the arts which subserve material safety, subsistence and comfort,

have been eminently improved. We construct useful engines recently conceived ; we search the whole surface of the round earth with comparative ease ; we know the appointed courses and seasons of worlds which we can scarcely see. It is doubtful whether the arts of architecture, painting, sculpture and poetry, are susceptible of higher perfection. Why, then, does political science remain obscure, and the art of government uncertain and perplexed ?

It happens, in some degree, because material wants have hitherto exacted excessive care ; in some degree, because the advantages which result from political improvements are indirect and diffusive ; but chiefly because the science is in its nature recondite, and the art intrinsically difficult.

Metaphysics is a science confessedly abstruse, and generally regarded as irksome and fruitless. Lord Bacon so pronounces, and he explains :—“ For the wit and mind of man, if it work upon matter, which is the contemplation of the creatures of God, worketh according to the stuff, and is limited thereby ; but if it work upon itself, as the spider worketh his web, then it is endless, and brings forward, indeed, cobwebs of learning, admirable for the fineness of thread and work, but of no substance or profit.” How could the study of groups be either easier or more satisfactory than that of individual man ? The same philosopher confesses that “ government is a part of knowledge, secret and retired.”

Consider only one State. Its magnitude is immense, its outlines are indistinct, it is without symmetry of parts ; its principles and dispositions are a confused aggregate of the imperfectly understood principles and dispositions of many thousands or even many millions of men. The causes which have chiefly given form and direction to these principles and dispositions are either unknown or forgotten ; those which are now modifying them are too subtle for our examination. The future of States involves further conditions, which lie outside of the range of human foresight, and

therefore are called accidents. Human life is short, while the process of induction in political science reaches through generations, and even ages. Philosophers seldom enjoy facilities for that process. Hence, they "make imaginary laws for imaginary commonwealths, and their discourses are as the stars, which give little light, because they are so high." Statesmen, on the contrary, "write according to the States where they live, what is received law, and not what ought to be law."

A constitutional alteration is often necessary to secure a desirable social improvement; but such an alteration cannot be made without a previous change of public opinion in the State, and even of opinion in surrounding States; for nations are social persons, and members of an universal commonwealth. Habit resists such changes. Timidity, though looking forward, is short sighted; and with far sighted veneration, which always looks backward, opposes such changes. Laws, however erroneous, or however arbitrarily established, acquire a supposed sanctity from the ceremony of their enactment, and derive great strength from protracted acquiescence. In a despotic State, no subject can move changes. In a free one, each member may oppose, and opponents more easily combine than advocates. Ambition is the ruling passion of States. It is blind to defects and dangers, while hurrying them on in careers of aggression and aggrandizement. The personal interests and ambitions of many effective members of the State cling to its institutions, however erroneous or injurious, and protect them against innovation. Reform can only appeal to reason and conscience. Conservatism arouses prejudice, cupidity and fear, and adroitly excites and directs hatred against the person of the reformer. Retaliation too naturally follows; and so the controversy, which properly ought to be a public and dispassionate one, changes imperceptibly into a heated conflict of factions. Humanity and benevolence are developed only with increas-

ing knowledge and refinement. Hence, castes and classes long remain; and these, although all equally interested in a proposed melioration, are, by an artful direction of their mutual antipathies, made to defeat it by their implacable contentions. Material interests are immediately roused and combined in opposition, because they suffer from the least disturbance. The benefits of a social change are more distant, and therefore distrusted and undervalued. The law of progress certainly does not require changes of institutions to be made at the cost of public calamities, or even of great private inconveniences. But that law is, nevertheless, inexorable. A necessary reformation will have its way, peacefully if favored, violently if resisted. In this sense, the Founder of Christianity confessed that he had come upon the earth to bring, not peace, but a sword. Revolutions are not divinely appointed attendants of progress, nor is liberty necessarily born of social convulsion, and baptized with blood. Revolutions, on the contrary, are the natural penalties for unwise persistence in error, and servile acquiescence in injustice and oppression. Such revolutions, moreover, are of doubtful success. Most men engage readily enough in civil wars, and for a flash are hot and active; but they cool from natural unsteadiness of temper, and abandon their objects, and, destitute alike of principle, honor and true courage, betray themselves, their associates, and even their cause, however just and sacred. Happily, however, martial revolutions do not always fail. In some cases, the tempers and dispositions of the nation undergo a propitious change; it becomes generous, brave and self-denying, and freedom consequently gains substantial and enduring triumphs. It is hard, in such cases, to separate the share of fortune from that of merit, in analyzing the characters of heroes. Nor is it absolutely necessary. The martial heroism of such revolutions is wisely honored, even with exaggeration, because such honors stimulate a virtuous and

healthful emulation. Mankind seek out the noblest among the successful champions, and investing him with imaginary excellence in addition to his real merit, set him apart as an object of universal veneration to the world's end. We recognize such impersonations in Tell and Alfred, in Wallace and Washington.

These successful martial revolutions, however, only consummate changes which were long before projected and prepared by bold, thoughtful, earnest and persevering reformers. There is justly due, therefore, to these reformers at least some of the homage which redeemed nations award to their benefactors. We shall increase that tribute, if we reflect that the sagacity which detects the roots and causes from which national calamities and thraldoms spring, and proceeds calmly to remove them, and to avert the need of an ultimate sanguinary remedy, or prepare that remedy so that it shall be effectual, combines the merits of genius, of prudence and humanity, with those of patriotism. Our admiration of these reformers will rise still higher when we remember that they always are eminently good men, denied the confidence and sympathies of the country which they are endeavoring to save. They are necessarily good men, because only such can love freedom heartily.

"All others love not Freedom, but license, which never hath more scope or indulgence than under tyrants. Hence it is that tyrants are not often offended, nor stand much in doubt of bad men, as being all naturally servile; but in whom virtue and true worth most is eminent, these they fear in earnest, as by right their masters. Against these lie all their hatred and suspicion. Consequently, neither do bad men hate tyrants, but have been always readiest, with their falsified names of loyalty and obedience, to color over their base compliances."

The devotion of these real authors of all beneficent revolutions to the melioration of human society, is therefore the most perfect and impressive form of magnanimity.

I know very well that this estimate is not generally allowed; nor is the injustice of the case peculiar. It