

**THE ADDRESS ON LIFE,  
CHARACTER,  
AND SERVICES OF  
WILLIAM H. SEWARD**

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The Address on life, character, and services of William H. Seward by Charles Francis Adams

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**CHARLES FRANCIS ADAMS**

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WILLIAM H. SEWARD**



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THE ADDRESS  
OF  
CHARLES FRANCIS ADAMS,  
OF MASSACHUSETTS,  
ON  
THE LIFE, CHARACTER, AND SERVICES,  
OF  
WILLIAM H. SEWARD.

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THE ADDRESS

OF

CHARLES FRANCIS ADAMS.

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*Fellow-Citizens of the Senate and Assembly of New York:*

You have honored me by an invitation to perform a duty, from the difficulty of which I shrink the closer I approach it. I undertake it only with an assurance that, were my powers equal to my will, I should erect a monument more durable than marble or brass. The subject is fascinating, from the wide views which it opens of the noblest career of human life, and the highest aspirations of mortal ambition. Whatever may be the value of the modern speculations touching the origin of man, it seems quite clear that his intellectual stature has not essentially changed since the era when we find, in Greece, the most difficult social problems discussed with a profoundness never since surpassed. It is in one of the familiar dialogues reported by the philosopher Plato as having been held by Socrates, with his disciples, that the question is gravely presented whether such a union be possible, in one and the same individual, as that of a philosopher and a statesman. What this combination means is admirably rendered by the latest translator in these words: "A man in whom the power of thought and action is perfectly balanced, equal to the present, reaching forward to the future." The conclusion drawn from that

conversation was that such a person, ruling in a constitutional state, had not yet been seen. More than two thousand years have elapsed since this testimony was recorded, and the solution of the problem, with the added experience of an historic record, embracing the lives of sixty generations of the race, far more widely observed over the globe, is still to seek. Has there ever been such a man?

Without attempting to enter upon such a topic, demanding a lifetime of research, it may, perhaps, be permitted to me to observe that from what we may learn of the career of all those who have since been competitors in this noblest of human pursuits, it is possible for us to deduce some general laws of human action valuable to bear in mind. Praying your pardon for my boldness, I would, then, venture to suggest that, by a comparison of the multitude of examples, we may readily reduce them all to a classification consisting of three forms. The first and lowest of these embraces all those lives in which power has been exercised mainly for personal ends, with little regard to the public good. If called to give an example of this class, I should name the noted Cleon, of Athens, as delineated so forcibly by his contemporaries, Thucydides, the historian, and Aristophanes, the dramatist. But this type of a public man, called a demagogue in a democracy, does not change its essence by transfer to more absolute forms of government. The interested flatterer of the people simply puts on a laced coat and becomes the courtier of a monarch or any other sovereign power, one or many. Cleon, stimulating the passions of the Athenians to the massacre of the male population of Mitylene, was only working for his own influence, just as Ashley Cooper, Lord Shaftesbury, stimulating the treacherous policy of the Second Charles in Great Britain,

“The pillars of the public safety shook;”

and just as Immanuel Godoy, the Prince of Peace, by his



selfish counsels precipitated the fall of the pitiful Charles of Spain.

This, then, is the class which works the fall of nations.

The next, and second division, includes those who with pure motives and equal capacity address themselves to the work of maintaining the existing state of things as it is. Their aim is to reënforce established ideas, and confirm ancient institutions. Of this style I would specify as examples, Cicero in antiquity, Sir Robert Walpole, Cardinal Mazarin, Prince Kaunitz, in later times.

2. This is the class which sustains nations.

The third and last division consists of those who, possessing a creative force, labor to advance the condition of their fellow-men. Of such I find a type in Pericles, in Gregory I., and in Cardinal Richelieu.

3. This is the class which develops nations.

Measuring the life of WILLIAM HENRY SEWARD by this scale, I have no scruple in enrolling his name in the third and highest class. In my mind his case bears analogy to that of Pericles, with this difference, that the sphere of his action was one by the side of which that of the other dwindles into nothing.

On this occasion it is not my design to follow the common course of a purely chronological narrative. It would absorb too much time; besides which, that work has been already well done by others who have preceded me. It will suffice to state that Mr. Seward was born with the century, and issued from the college at Schenectady at the age of nineteen. Three years passed in the customary probation of a lawyer's office gave him his profession, and one year more found him married. In the words of the sagacious Lord Verulam, he had "given hostages to fortune," and very early "assumed impediments to great enterprises, whether of virtue or mischief." From that moment he could hope to enlarge the basis of his imperfect education

only by snatching what he might out of the intervals of rest in a busy life. Hence it becomes proper to assume that, in the just sense of the word, Mr. Seward was never a learned man. In the ardor with which he rushed into affairs, the wonder is that he acquired what he did. To his faculty of rapid digestion of what he could read, he was indebted for the attainments he actually mastered. For it should be further remarked that, though he faithfully applied himself to this profession, it was not an occupation congenial to his taste. On the contrary, he held it in aversion. He felt in himself a capacity to play a noble part on the more spacious theatre of State affairs. His aspiration was for the fame of a statesman, and, in indulging this propensity, he committed no mistake.

The chief characteristic of his mind was its breadth of view. In this sense he was a philosopher studying politics. He began by forming for himself a general idea of government, by which all questions of a practical nature that came up for consideration were to be tested. This naturally led him to prefer the field of legislation to that of administration, though he proved equally skilful in both. Almost simultaneously with his marriage, he appeared ready to launch into the political conflicts of the hour. Commencing in this small way, he rose by easy degrees into the atmosphere of statesmanship. I distinguish between these conditions, not to derogate from either. In our past experience there have been many politicians who have not become statesmen. So, also, there have been statesmen who were never politicians. Mr. Seward was equally at home in both positions. But, inasmuch as this made up the true career which he followed, I am driven to the necessity of considering it almost exclusively. And, while so doing, I am also constrained to plunge more or less deeply into the Serbonian bog of obsolete party politics. I am not insensible to the nature of the difficulties under which I labor in an exposi-

tion of this kind. On the one side I run a risk of trying your patience by tedious reference to stale excitements, and on the other of raking over the ashes of fires still holding heat enough to burn. All I can say in excuse is that, in my belief, no correct delineation of the course of this eminent leader can be made without it. Permit me only to add a promise that, in whatever I feel it my duty to say, it will be my endeavor to be guided by as calm and impartial a spirit as the lot of humanity will admit. Happily, my purpose is facilitated at this moment, by the fact that the passions which so fiercely raged during the period I am to review are in a measure laid asleep by the removal of the chief cause which set them in motion.

The political history of the country under its present form of government naturally divides itself into two periods of nearly equal length. The first embraces the administration of the first five Presidents, and the settlement of the principles upon which a policy was guided, as well at home as abroad. But, by reason of the almost continuous embarrassments occasioned by the violent conflicts then raging over the entire Continent of Europe, the agitation of parties had its chief source in the conflicting views of foreign rather than domestic questions. Hence it came to a natural end with the reestablishment of a general peace. The foundation of parties having failed, there followed an interval of harmony, which, at the time, was known by the name of the "era of good feelings."

Suddenly there sprang up a contest, wholly new in its nature, the first sound of which the veteran Jefferson, in his retreat at Monticello, likened to that of a fire-bell at night. The Territory of Missouri wished to be organized, and admitted into the Union as a State. An effort was made to affix a condition that negro slavery should not be permitted there. The line of division between the free and the slaveholding States was at once defined, and, for a time, the bat-