

Executive Speech
of
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SPEECH OF GOV. VAN NESS— 1823¹.

Gentlemen of the Council and Gentlemen of the House of Representatives: Elevated to the office of chief magistrate of an intelligent and virtuous people, by their free, and almost unanimous suffrages, I embrace the earliest moment to record the assurance, that an honour so highly distinguished, and at the same time so cordially conferred, has inspired me with sentiments of the warmest gratitude to my fellow citizens, and the sincerest devotion to their interest and happiness. And having just added the obligations of an oath, to those already imposed upon me, I assume the station which has been so honourably occupied by those who have gone before me, with the deepest impressions of the responsibility incurred, and with the utmost reliance upon the liberality and indulgence of my constituents, in whatever faithful exertions I may make, in the discharge of the trust committed to me. And to none of the others who have preceded me will it be intended as any disparagement, if I mention with peculiar feelings of respect my immediate predecessor.

In casting our eyes over the condition and prospects of our common country, we find on every side abundant cause for gratitude to heaven and felicitation to ourselves. It is but forty-seven years since the United States first claimed the rank of an independent nation, and but forty since that rank was acknowledged by the government whose dominion they had renounced. During this period, the improvement of our country and the increase of her population and her wealth, have been without a parallel. With a government which was erected by the sages of the revolution, upon the broad and durable foundation of equal rights and which stands the loftiest monument of human wisdom, and the most humbling spectacle to tyrants, we enjoy a liberty unknown to any other people on the face of the earth. And being at peace with all the world and likely at present to remain so, we are favoured with every opportunity to attend to the internal improvement of the country, and to the regulation and promotion of her various and permanent interests.

But with all this prosperity, and the possession of these valuable privileges, we cannot overlook a source of regret and apprehension. We are still dependant on foreign nations for the supply of much that we consume, and the sale of much that our soil produces. Hence we are necessarily exposed to the privations and losses incident to the changes that take place in our relations with them, and even in their relations with each other, – and the consequent fluctuations and interruptions of their markets. And from the unfavourable course of trade in regard to us, our citizens are supposed to be already many millions in their debt, while there is much reason to fear, not only that the amount will be increased, but that it will have to be paid in a manner the most disadvantage to this country.

The manufacturing interest of the United States has been left to struggle with obstacles which it can never overpower, until the encouragement afforded to the importation of foreign goods shall be withdrawn, by a sufficient increase of duties, or by direct prohibitory regulations. This, it is believed, might be done without invading the just claims of foreign commerce, considered in connection with the indisputable rights of the other great interests of the nation. On the success of our manufacturing industry depends essentially the prosperity of agriculture, as by the establishment of manufactories is created a market for the articles necessary for manufacturing and for subsistence. And there appears good reason to justify the opinion that by cherishing the resources of our own country, and protecting the industry of our own citizens, we might soon be able, without going abroad to obtain a ready and comfortable supply of our wants, and to find a profitable and steady market for our produce. But if, on the other hand, we should persevere in the course we have been pursuing; if no barrier is erected to the vast importations of foreign merchandise, by which the exertions of our manufacturers have been systematically paralyzed, and the debts, as well as the habits of extravagance of our citizens, constantly increased, it would seem that a period cannot be far distant, which will overwhelm us with difficulties of a most serious and alarming nature.

I am aware that the regulation of this subject belongs to the national government; but it is nevertheless the right, if not the duty of the state authorities, to express their views on a question of such vital and general

¹ From printed *Assembly Journal* of 1823.

importance to the country. And while this is done with due respect, no impropriety is perceived in doing it with that frankness which ought to characterize all the acts of the representatives of freemen.

It is however by no means to be inferred from the remarks I have made, that a liberal confidence is not esteemed to be due to the administration of the general government; at the head of which is a patriot of the revolution, who has devoted the greater part of a long life to the faithful service of this country, with a zeal and ability that have not been surpassed and with a firmness which has never yielded to difficulty, or been dismayed by danger; and who has moreover himself recommended a policy more favourable to the great cause of national industry. With an extensive territory, a variety of climate and soil, a difference of habits and customs, and twenty-four sovereign states, all independant of each other, though subject to one general control, it is not very strange, however much to be lamented, even allowing the purest motives to all concerned, that local and temporary interests should occasionally counteract exertions, and retard the adoption of measures, calculated to promote the lasting honour, and permanent welfare of the nation.

And it is a principle of which we should never for a moment lose sight that notwithstanding the state authorities may sometimes differ in sentiment with the general government, as to the wisdom or propriety of its proceedings, they are not in such cases the loss under obligation to render obedience and respect to the measures of the letter, and to afford the necessary aid to carry them into effect. The men who are called to administer the general government, belong to the same political family with those who compose the state governments, and chosen to office by the same people. It is by means of the general government alone, that the states can act, or move a single step, on any occasion however interesting to their general concerns. And it is to that government only, that they can look for defense and protection in the hour of danger, whether assailed from abroad, or at home. How important it is then that the national government should, be sustained in all its parts, and in its utmost vigour and that we should frown upon every attempt to degrade it, by treating with disrespect any of its measures, or to weaken it, by creating distrust in either of its branches.

Although remote from the nations of the old world, and sheltered from the fury of the storms that agitate them, yet we cannot behold with indifference the enslaved and degraded state of the people who compose them, and the outrages which are committed on their rights. Every American breast must beat high with sympathy at this crisis, for the Greeks and the Spaniards; the former of whom are bravely struggling to break the iron fetters of their slavery, and to reassume a rank among the nations and the latter are endeavouring, though it is feared but too feebly, to defend their constitutional liberties, against the rude encroachments of lawless and despotic power.

In calling your attention to the immediate concerns of this state, I am not sensible that any material alterations in the laws relating to any department of the government, could be beneficially made at this time. And it is now too well understood to be questioned, that such alterations should be resorted to only in cases of pressing and manifest necessity. The stability of laws is next in importance to their wisdom. Yet so great is the desire of mankind for change, and so predominant their ambition for the character of reformers, that they are seldom at a loss for subjects to act upon, and even after starting upon slight and apparently judicious amendments, their zeal will frequently urge them to overleap the bounds prescribed by themselves in the outset, and in their progress to sweep all before them, until they have prostrated the fairest institutions, and the most valuable systems. Let us therefore endeavour to be strict and deliberate, in our necessary examinations of the laws, and when we plainly discover any real defects, to be satisfied when those are provided for.

Knowledge and virtue are the main pillars of a free government and the only foundation on which they can stand, is education. The founders of this state to whom we owe a great veneration, appear to have well understood this important truth. It is declared in the constitution, that "a competent number of schools ought to be maintained in each town, for the convenient instruction of youth, and one or more grammar schools be incorporated in each county in this state," Laws have been from time to time passed for the establishment and regulation of common schools, and for the appropriation of funds to their use by which instruction has been afforded at a low rate, and in some instances almost if not entirely free, for at least a part of the year. Grammar schools and academies have been instituted throughout the state and ample provision has been made for dispensing the benefits of collegiate instruction. A system has been built up which has shed its influence on

every part of the community, and given the people of this state taken together, a superiority in point of useful knowledge and sound information over the population of most, if not all time states in the union.

But while we should not neglect to extend the hand of patronage to the higher studies of literature, as valuable parts of an admirable system, it is that branch of education which is the offspring of the common schools, that we are under peculiar obligations constantly to guard, and anxiously to cherish. The instruction imparted by these schools is both necessary and sufficient for the common purposes of life, and constitutes the preparation for the easy attainment of those higher branches, which are acquired at our academies and colleges on the most reasonable terms. By being rendered so cheap as to be within the reach of all, the diffusion of intelligence becomes universal; and many who would otherwise grow up without any education, are raised from the state of degradation to which the misfortunes or vices of others may have reduced them, and prepared to become useful and virtuous members of society. And besides, it opens the way for the humble and poor to advance, by industry and perseverance, to further attainments, and to the honours and emoluments of public employment; and by raising their condition, and bringing them into associations with those who are higher and richer, it leads to the closer and more permanent connections in life between them; thus tending to preserve that equality in society, which is so just in itself, and so consistent with the simplicity of genuine republican principles.

By a recent decision of the supreme court of the United States, in relation to the rights of lands originally granted under the Crown to the Society for the propagation of the Gospel in foreign parts, and afterwards claimed by this state and the rents arising from them appropriated to the use of schools, it appears: to be settled that the society is to recover the property, and consequently that the schools in a considerable number of towns are deprived of a portion of their support. in consequence of this circumstance and being satisfied of the utility of the measure on other grounds, I would recommend that a particular inquiry be instituted in relation to the schools and if it should be found expedient to raise additional funds for them, that it may be done by an increase of the tax directed to be annually assessed for this object, on the polls and estate of the people, by the act of 1810. I know of no other way in which anything further can be effectually done; and there is, in my view, no injustice in compelling the rich to contribute to the education of the poor. There can be no doubt, that the little which is taken from them, by its effect in improving and elevating the society around them, renders more safe and valuable that which they retain, and enables them, to enjoy it with a greater degree of comfort and pleasure.

Before I part with this subject, justice requires the notice of an institution, uniting civil with military instruction, which has been reared, and advanced to great usefulness and prosperity, by the talents and exertions of a single individual and which is not only highly honourable to the state, but ranks with the most respectable seminaries in our country.²

Agriculture is our leading employment and principal support, and deserves every attention and encouragement that can in any manner tend to the advancement of its permanent prosperity. As it is the most ancient and the most useful, so it should be viewed the, most honourable of all employments. And the general diffusion of this sentiment, and the cultivation of an habitual regard for it, will be sure to conduce to the welfare of the state.

Considerable improvements have been made, within a few years, as it respects the tillage of the soil, and the breed and treatment of domestic animals. These have proceeded, in a great measure, from the spirit of emulation and inquiry excited by the establishment of agricultural societies. To the same source may be traced an improvement in that commendable industry in families, which is directed to the manufacture of articles of clothing, from materials produced on their own farms. These societies do not generally continue to be supported with the same zeal that originated them, though the good effects thus far produced by them, will no doubt be lasting. If it should be considered of much consequence to have them kept up, and their exertions continued to advantage, it would be expedient to afford them some aid, by which they may be better able to distribute premiums, that being one of the most effectual means of their usefulness.

² The allusion was to the late Capt. ALDEN PARTRIDGE, and his Military Academy, which is still continued at Northfield.

On the subject of manufactures I have already expressed myself. But I would add, that I deem it important to afford every facility to manufacturing establishments, by acts of incorporation, by reasonable exemption from taxes, and by whatever other means may be within our proper sphere of action.

By rendering every part of the state easy of access, the advantages for trade, agriculture and manufacturing, would be widely extended. The effect also in promoting settlements by immigration from other states, would be highly beneficial. A due attention therefore to the measure, necessary for improving our roads, and opening new ones wherever they would be useful, is among the most essential of our duties.

A strict regard to economy in the public expenditures is at all times, requisite in the just administration of a republican government. It is peculiarly so in this state, where the means for defraying the expenses of the government are chiefly taken by taxation directly from the earnings of the people. This should be constantly and strongly impressed on our minds.

The militia should always be regarded with interest. They must ever be the reliance of the country, in times of trouble and danger, until a sufficient regular army can be raised; and even after that, it may be necessary for them to co-operate with the regular forces. But without proper organization and, discipline, they are feeble, if not useless. A wise and prudent legislature can never be inattentive to their condition.

In the appointments to office, it is of no small moment that great circumspection should be observed. Every consideration should be discarded except those immediately relating to the character and qualifications of the candidates. These remarks apply with the most force to the Judges of our courts; for to them are entrusted the decisions upon our property, our character, our liberty and our lives. The character of a state is generally determined by that of its officers and a disregard of the latter cannot easily fail to degrade the former. And it being through our courts that the citizens of other states hold much of their intercourse with us, the judiciary, probably more than any other branch of the government raises or sinks the respectability of the state.

In the year 1817 a law was passed directing the Secretary of State to ascertain the number of deaf and dumb persons in this state, and their ages and situations in life. By a report made the next year, it appeared there were then seventy persons of that description; that thirty-five of them were of the proper age to be admitted into an Asylum for education and that twenty-nine of the latter class were in indigent circumstances. Nothing has yet been done by the state towards the education of these helpless and unfortunate beings whose deplorable condition cannot fail to excite the deepest sensibility. I would at this time present their case to your particular notice, in the hope that some means may be devised for their relief.

Permit me, before I close, to congratulate you on the prospect which is opened to us by the completion of a canal communication between Lake Champlain and the Hudson river. This great work has been exclusively accomplished by the noble and munificent spirit which has animated a neighbouring state, and which shines with still greater splendour in an undertaking far more grand and stupendous, though not so immediately interesting to the people of this state. A new era has indeed burst upon us, when we can hear of the arrival of vessels at the city of New York, from the northern extremity of Vermont. The immense value of such a communication to this state will soon be extensively seen and felt in the different branches of business carried on within it.

I would only remark further, that as faithful depositories of the public interest we should use our utmost endeavors to divest ourselves of all political and personal prejudices and animosities, and to cultivate in their stead the kind and elevated feelings of mutual confidence and good will; to allay all jealousies and dissensions of whatsoever kind, among the people at large, and between the different classes, trades and professions, and to inculcate a general spirit of union and harmony to promote industry, economy, temperance, morality and religion; to keep steadily in view that we are not raised to office for our own advantage or aggrandizement, but to serve with our best faculties the interest of those whose agents we are, and to whom we have to account; and finally, we should implore, with becoming reverence and humility, the blessing of the great Ruler of the universe upon all our labours, for without that, however well intended, and well directed they will surely be in vain.

C. P. VAN NESS.