

Inaugural address

of

Carlos Coolidge

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Inaugural Address

Fellow Citizens of the Senate, and of the House of Representatives:

At our entering upon the service of the State for a new political term, it is due to Him from whom all good things proceed, that we gratefully acknowledge His goodness so signally illustrated by the ample measure of temporal blessings imparted to the people of this State, in the year past. With the deepest conscientiousness, our fathers, in peace and in war, in prosperity or adversity, in all their public councils, recognized the Divine Providence: and it is a fact which keeps bright the hope we cherish for the permanent welfare of our country, that the reverent example the departed commended to us has not been, as yet, either forgotten or slighted. The prayer of the true patriot is, that it may be long before human pride or a vain philosophy shall seduce us, as a nation, to deny our dependence on God, or make us ashamed to avow it. And now, while we are interchanging congratulations over the physical gifts bestowed upon us, let us not be unmindful, that whatever of wisdom we have with which to conceive measures for the general good, springs not from ourselves but, cometh down from above. The thought of this, if it attend our legislative deliberations, will chasten the feeling of self-confidence, and aiding us in the exercise of judgment in deciding, and of prudence in acting, will guide us the more surely in the path of duty.

You will not expect that, in making this communication, I array before you many topics.—So simple is the form and so easy the working of our State government—so quietly do our civil and political institutions move on in their courses—so seldom, in our comparative seclusion, is the surface of popular content ruffled—that a very stringent exigence for legislative interposition rarely occurs. Our municipal polity still rests, mainly, on its first principles, and few among us, it is believed, are disposed to disturb the foundation. Its theory is, that laws, not men, govern, and although the maxim has been so often uttered as to have become a truism, we shall nevertheless be profited by frequently recurring to the essential truth it contains. In a political system based on the undoubted right of all men to self-government, the maintenance of civil liberty depends upon the supremacy of the law. The proofs, that a government originated by and administered for the people is practicable, are thickly spread on the pages of our history: and we are living witnesses to the eminent success of the experiment for the enlargement of the happiness of the race, on which our ancestors hazarded all they had. Intrinsically, the laws have no force. They cannot, so to speak, execute their own commands. Being only the exponents of the resolutions of the representative body, they require the will and the action of the people to energize them. Here, therefore, where no executive power exists which is not derivative from the legislative power, moral submission to a law is a positive condition of its supremacy. The sentiment of reverence of it should be early cultivated. No one, who, loving his children, loves also his country, will neglect to teach at his fire-side the doctrines of respect and of obedience to the laws of the land.

It is truth having intimate connection with the idea above expressed, that the sense of obligation to honor the laws and enforce their sanctions is weakened by very frequent changes in them. The first conception of a stable government is that in the nature of things, its rules of duty are to be constant, alterable, at most, only on imperative necessity for conforming with the material changes that grow out of the progress of society. It is to be kept in mind moreover, that no code can be made to meet and satisfy at once every emergency in the affairs of life. The leading provisions of all statutes are to be deemed, in one view of them, mere principles, in the adaption of which to cases as they arise, the tendencies and effects of those provisions will be elicited. Time and careful study are indispensable to the duly adjusting with the general law a new statute. Besides, no habitual observer of the different sources of legal controversies can have failed to discern, that some of them owe their existence to the uncertainty which veils the construction of some recent act not yet judicially expounded. Yielding to the force of the considerations thus briefly stated, and others of much weight omitted, I submit the proposition, which, I think, should have continual presence and authority in every law-making body that no enactment be passed until it shall have been clearly shown that the harmony of the general law of the main subject would not be thereby broken. The matured experience of others sustains my confidence in the

opinion that were the rule intimated adhered to, conjectural emendations of the statutes would less frequently be tried, and so our legal system would obtain time for consolidation.

The subject of Popular Education is one that must not pass unnoticed. While I would not consciously invade the province of the accomplished State superintendent of common schools whose report, it is assumed, will soon be laid before you, I should feel that part of my duty remained unperformed if I omitted to pay my tribute of respect to a cause so manifestly deserving of high consideration. In this State, much to its honor, an ardent desire to widen the scope and multiply the means of mental instruction, has evinced its resoluteness in persevering efforts on the part of the Legislative authorities for the attainment of those objects; and to these endeavors the people, moved by an impulse too disinterested for jealousy, have given a generous support. In this cause no party victories may be won.

Education for all, is now demanded. Inquisitive men long since found out, that there is no such a thing as that which literary fops have called the “vulgar mind”. The artificial distinctions of the past are yielding to the claims of common sense and common justice, and it is foreshadowed that, in our country, if not elsewhere, man is to take rank by the measure of his intellectual ability and the degree of his moral worth.

Coming up from all parts of our commonwealth, you have ample information of the operations and auspices of the system of common Schools. That it is the best that can be devised, is not yet demonstrated. Results in some of its provisions, remain to be developed. These ascertained, may show that it has intrinsic defects. As it might have been expected, there are conflicting opinions pronounced in respect of its utility. There are those who insist that it is encumbered with too many officers, and is, therefore, distractedly administered. Others urge, that it does not insure the requisite competency of those who are to decide upon the qualifications of teachers: holding that, as a consequence, the standard of fitness to instruct is widely varied by different examiners. Upon these suggestions I make no comment. In my view, however, there rests upon us a weighty obligation to create and maintain a legal scheme for common Schools which shall, in due time become permanent. The honor of the State and the welfare of its people exact it. And if there is ever required a stout resistance to frequent radical innovations, it would seem to be emphatically demanded in behalf of every general educational policy: such as one always pleading, with cogent reason, for time as the main criterion of its merits. If we bear in mind the fact, that the character of each generation is, substantially, formed by the one that precedes it, we shall not inconsiderately vary the course of public action upon any of the leading measures that bear upon that character. In this day of ardent rivalry pervading all departments of science, art, and trading economy, we may not deal out scholastic knowledge to the youth in set portions. Nor will any amount of human learning suffice for them, unless they are, also, trained in the disciplinary exercises that *educate*, while they inform the mind; in which sense, only, is knowledge power. We shall not, I trust, be satisfied with any advance towards the acquisition of a sound literature, for all classes, until we shall have secured of high ground of exaltation for the intellectual character of the mass of the people of this State, as they now occupy for republican virtue. Vermont has not many of the recognized elements of political power. But she has enough to satisfy the real wants of civilized life—enough for all desirable renown. Although she has no luxuries of commerce to send to other climes, she has treasures for rich gifts. Those she has liberally bestowed without being impoverished by it. Many of her sons have gone forth, whose well-schooled minds, firm morals, and enterprising spirits enabled, them, wheresoever they alighted, together and send home contributions to the honest fame of the common parent. We can all join to wish, that the characteristic institutions of this State and of her New England sisters might diffuse throughout our country the social happiness that radiates its gentle light for us. How long Vermont shall hold her place in the union as she now does—or how soon be turned off when mightier and prouder sovereignties shall have arisen and overshadowed the broad West—it is idle to inquire. Be that as it may, this State has in hand her own independent guaranties. Whatever may be, in the future, her relations to the rest of the world she will, we trust, forever remain the same—her citizens industrious and frugal, religious in sentiment and in life, sturdy in republicanism, unbending in adherence to the unpretending, yet conservative system of government under which they have hitherto found peace and security, and cemented in unity as a free and highly educated yeomanry.

Is it not due to the cause of popular education, that we consider whether instruction in political science should not be engrafted on the body of our schooling? Under the constitution of this State, he who attains to the

prescribed age is thenceforth, theoretically, a politician; and whether qualified or not to act discreetly in the new character, he is now one of the constituents of the government and of its laws. They that would ascertain the principal source of the political knowledge by which the electors are guided, will find it in the public journals. Comparatively, few study the science of politics to its widest range—few, indeed, have leisure to pursue to its full extent. Yet, on it every free government leans, and from it draws its necessary ailment. All may understand so much of the science, as to have acquaintance with the forms, and correct understanding of the nature, of different governments—to be cognizant of the principles and the spirit of law as a rule of human conduct—to know the distinctions in rights—and to have clear comprehension of their obligations as citizens. A much more extended indoctrination of the young men of our country in political truth than they have yet had is, in my view, indicated as a precaution by numerous “signs of the times;” and I am not now aware of any mode in which the proposed object could so easily be accomplished as by making a text-book of the science for Common Schools. He who should apply the energies of a disciplined mind to the preparation of such a work, and render it acceptable for its completeness and accuracy, will have conferred upon his countrymen an invaluable favor.

Recent events, of which none of us are ignorant, have placed in unusual prominence before the public eye a subject which it is impossible to touch without stirring the sensibilities of the whole Union. One of the effects of the war with Mexico, is the acquisition of large portions of her domain, which are now waiting to be placed by the United States under territorial government. Of the character of that war, or the justness of that acquisition, I do not propose here to speak, being forbidden so to do by the respect due unto the opinions of others, and by the rules of official decorum. But, the territory is the common property of all the States, and upon the point of the disposal, or of the management of it, Vermont is entitled to be heard, and to act. It is, therefore, a matter of domestic interest, and, as such, claims our attention and vigilance. The country yielded by our sister republic being contiguous to the slaveholding States, and much of it being supposed to be naturally suited to the labor of the black man, it is insisted that slave owners should be allowed to carry their slaves into it and there hold them as property: that Congress, in providing a government of it, should expressly legalize slavery therein. I do not understand that the Statesmen of the slave States, except the few that ascribe to slavery a divine origin, claim any natural, or unqualified, right in one man to enslave another—nor, allowing the same exceptions, do they hold that slavery exists as an institution. It was not established by the federal government, but tolerated only: and this was a reluctant concession to a supposed necessity. Whether Congress can, *rightfully*, by act of legislation put slaveholding under guaranty in any place, where it did not exist when the constitution was formed, and its compromises, so called, were arranged, the people of this State, I apprehend, do not consider to be debatable—they denying to that body such right. But, that Congress, in making “all needful rules and regulations respecting the territory” belonging to the United States, may, and ought to, put an interdict upon Slavery—that, although they may not legislate for the introduction of it, they may for its exclusion. If, viewed as a compound case of right asserted, and of power exercised and in some degree submitted to, it has come to be considered as settled by practical construction, that national legislation can be properly exercised in either way; still, this State, in confining herself to protests, has not surrendered the principle.

The attempt to procure the allowance of slaveholding in Oregon, and its failure, are fresh in the recollection of all.—Upon that defeat, of a design to extend slavery and upon the evidence it affords of a resolution of the free States to restrict the institution to its present limits. I heartily congratulate you—not in exultation as for a sectional ascendancy gained, but in joy that humanity has achieved a victory—the joy not a little enhanced by the belief, that ere long, our southern brethren will ennoble themselves and make the world glad, by voluntary removal of the blasting evil from their fair fields, and then start away with unshackled limbs, to run the race of national prosperity.

In relation to the point of Slavery, the position of this State cannot be misunderstood. This institution was interlaced with the fabric of the federal constitution, and it may not be violently extracted. Yet as it injuriously affects our representative rights, no further similar encroachment there on will be consented to. For a sufficient political reason, then, this State objects to the extension of Slavery.

There is, however, a profounder cause for her uncompromising opposition to it. The people of Vermont have never needed lessons in humanity; nor have they yet to learn how to distinguish between what they owe to

the Union and what to themselves. Hostility to Slavery is, in them, an instinct. From the first, they have ever stood before the world and avowed their determination to make no other terms with it than those that now bind them. This resolve Vermont has, at all times to which it was appropriate, distinctly announced in clear consciousness of her maintaining the right. She has proclaimed in her legislative assemblies and in the national councils, by her own voice and the voices of her faithful representatives, as is fully attested by her highest records. There is no ground for fear that she will not continue steadfast therein. In performing their part of the work of destroying slavery her people will not falter at that which they can rightfully do. They will not do evil that good may come, but they will obey the voice of an enlightened conscience, and labor when, where and how, it bids them do so. Humbly following, not running before, the indication of the designs of the Infinite Mind herein, they may trustfully abide the issues.

A copy of the Memorial of inhabitants of the county Missisquoi, Canada, to the Governor General of British North America, upon the subject of obstructing the navigation of the waters of Lake Champlain, communicated by the Charge d'Affairs of her Britannic Majesty to the Department of State of the United States, has been transmitted from that department to this: and it, with sundry communications from other States and public bodies, will shortly be submitted to you.

CARLOS COOLIDGE.

Executive Chamber, }
Oct. 19, 1848.