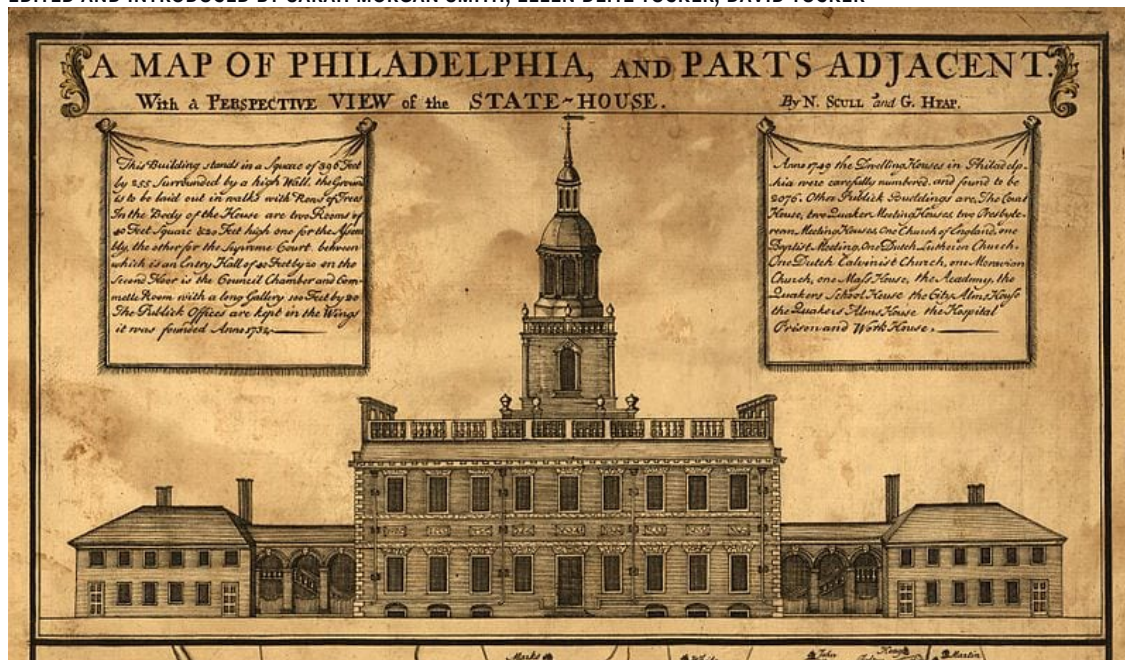


An Address... Celebrating the Declaration of Independence

by John Quincy Adams

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EDITED AND INTRODUCED BY SARAH MORGAN SMITH, ELLEN DEITZ TUCKER, DAVID TUCKER



Introduction

When John Quincy Adams was Secretary of State, he was invited to give a speech to celebrate the anniversary of the Declaration of Independence in 1821. The speech is most famous for the words “Wherever the standard of freedom and independence has been unfurled, there will [America’s] heart, her benedictions and her prayers be. But she goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy.” Yet these words were preceded by a less famous but more important exposition of the causes and meaning of the Declaration of Independence. In this detailed exposition, excerpted below, Adams argues that the United States was the first legitimate government in the history of mankind, an achievement, as he says, that “must forever stand alone.” In addition to expressing what is now called American exceptionalism, Adams’ speech epitomizes the moral and political view of the Protestant establishment that dominated the United States until late into the nineteenth century. In this view, the Declaration was made possible by the Reformation. Adams argues that the Reformation restored reason to its rightful place in religion, making its restoration in politics only a matter of time. That time came with the Declaration. Among other things, this understanding of the connection between the Reformation

and the Declaration helps explain the longstanding animus of the Protestant establishment to Catholics. Not accepting the work of the Reformation, how could Catholics be citizens of a country essentially shaped by its spirit?

—*Sarah Morgan Smith, Ellen Deitz Tucker, David Tucker*

Fellow Citizens,

Until within a few days before that which we have again assembled to commemorate, our fathers, the people of this Union, had constituted a portion of the British nation; a nation, renowned in arts and arms, who, from a small Island in the Atlantic ocean, had extended their dominion over considerable parts of every quarter of the globe. Governed themselves by a race of kings, whose title to sovereignty had originally been founded on conquest, spell-bound, for a succession of ages, under that portentous system of despotism and of superstition which, in the name of the meek and humble Jesus, had been spread over the Christian world, the history of this nation had, for a period of seven hundred years, from the days of the conquest till our own, exhibited a conflict almost continued, between the oppressions of power and the claims of right. In the theories of the crown and the mitre, man had no rights. Neither the body nor the soul of the individual was his own....

The religious reformation was an improvement in the science of mind; an improvement in the intercourse of man with his Creator, and in his acquaintance with himself. It was an advance in the knowledge of his duties and his rights. It was a step in the progress of man, in comparison with which the magnet and gunpowder, the wonders of either India, nay the printing press itself, were but as the paces of a pigmy to the stride of a giant....

The corruptions and usurpations of the church were the immediate objects of these reformers; but at the foundation of all their exertions there was a single plain and almost self-evident principle—that man has a right to the exercise of his own reason. It was this principle which the sophistry and rapacity of the church had obscured and obliterated, and which the intestine divisions of that same church itself first restored. The triumph of reason was the result of inquiry and discussion. Centuries of desolating wars have succeeded and oceans of human blood have flowed, for the final establishment of this principle; but it was from the darkness of the cloister that the first spark was emitted, and from the arches of a university that it first kindled into day. From the discussion of religious rights and duties, the transition to that of the political and civil relations of men with one another was natural and unavoidable; in both, the reformers were met by the weapons of temporal power. At the same glance of reason, the tiara would have fallen from the brow of priesthood, and the despotic scepter would have departed from the hand of royalty, but for the sword, by which they were protected; that sword which, like the flaming sword of the Cherubims, turned every way to debar access to the tree of life.^[1]

The double contest against the oppressors of church and state was too appalling for the vigor, or too comprehensive for the faculties of the reformers of the European continent. In Britain alone was it undertaken, and in Britain but partially succeeded.

It was in the midst of that fermentation of the human intellect, which brought right and power in direct and deadly conflict with each other, that the rival crowns of the two portions of the British Island were united on the same head. It was then, that, released from the fetters of ecclesiastical domination, the minds of men began to investigate the foundations of civil government. But the mass of the nation surveyed the fabric of their Institutions as it existed in fact. It had been founded in conquest; it had been cemented in servitude; and so broken and molded had been the minds of this brave and intelligent people to their actual conditions, that instead of solving civil society into its first elements in search of their rights, they looked back only to conquest as the origin of their liberties, and claimed their rights but as donations from their kings. This faltering assertion of freedom is not chargeable indeed upon the whole nation. There were spirits capable of tracing civil government to its first foundation in the moral and physical nature of man: but conquest and servitude were so mingled up in every particle of the social existence of the nation, that they had become vitally necessary to them, as a portion of the fluid, itself destructive of life, is indispensably blended with the atmosphere in which we live.

Fellow citizens, it was in the heat of this war of moral elements, which brought one Stuart to the block and hurled another from his throne, that our forefathers sought refuge from its fury, in the then

wilderness of this Western World. They were willing exiles from a country dearer to them than life. But they were the exiles of liberty and of conscience: dearer to them even than their country. They came too, with charters from their kings; for even in removing to another hemisphere, they “cast longing, lingering looks behind,”^[2] and were anxiously desirous of retaining ties of connection with their country, which, in the solemn compact of a charter, they hoped by the corresponding links of allegiance and protection to preserve. But to their sense of right, the charter was only the ligament between them, their country, and their king. Transported to a new world, they had relations with one another, and relations with the aboriginal inhabitants of the country to which they came; for which no royal charter could provide. The first settlers of the Plymouth colony, at the eve of landing from their ship, therefore, bound themselves together by a written covenant; and immediately after landing, purchased from the Indian natives the right of settlement upon the soil.

Thus was a social compact formed upon the elementary principles of civil society, in which conquest and servitude had no part. The slough of brutal force was entirely cast off; all was voluntary; all was unbiased consent; all was the agreement of soul with soul.

Other colonies were successively founded, and other charters granted, until in the compass of a century and a half, thirteen distinct British provinces peopled the Atlantic shores of the North American continent with two millions of freemen; possessing by their charters the rights of British subjects, and nurtured by their position and education, in the more comprehensive and original doctrines of human rights. From their infancy they had been treated by the parent state with neglect, harshness and injustice. Their charters had often been disregarded and violated; their commerce restricted and shackled; their interest wantonly or spitefully sacrificed; so that the hand of the parent had been scarcely ever felt, but in the alternate application of whips and scorpions.

When in spite of all these persecutions, by the natural vigor of their constitution, they were just attaining the maturity of political manhood, a British parliament, in contempt of the clearest maxims of natural equity, in defiance of the fundamental principle upon which British freedom itself had been cemented with British blood; on the naked, unblushing allegation of absolute and uncontrollable power, undertook by their act to levy, without representation and without consent, taxes upon the people of America for the benefit of the people of Britain. This enormous project of public robbery was no sooner made known, than it excited, throughout the colonies, one general burst of indignant resistance. It was abandoned, reasserted and resumed, until fleets and armies were transported, to record in the characters of fire, famine, and desolation, the transatlantic wisdom of British legislation, and the tender mercies of British consanguinity....

For the independence of North America, there were ample and sufficient causes in the laws of moral and physical nature. The tie of colonial subjection is compatible with the essential purposes of civil government, only when the condition of the subordinate state is from its weakness incompetent to its own protection. Is the greatest moral purpose of civil government, the administration of justice? And if justice has been truly defined, the constant and perpetual will of securing to every one his right, how absurd and impracticable is that form of polity, in which the dispenser of justice is in one quarter of the globe, and he to whom justice is to be dispensed is in another.... Are the essential purposes of civil government, to administer to the wants, and to fortify the infirmities of solitary man? To unite the sinews of numberless arms, and combine the councils of multitudes of minds, for the promotion of the well-being of all? The first moral element then of this composition is sympathy between the members of which it consists; the second is sympathy between the giver and the receiver of the law. The sympathies of men begin with the relations of domestic life. They are rooted in the natural relations of domestic life. They are rooted in the natural relations of husband and wife, of parent and child, of brother and sister; thence they spread through the social and moral propinquities of neighbor and friend, to the broader and more complicated relations of countryman and fellow-citizens; terminating only with the circumference of the globe which we inhabit, in the co-extensive charities incident to the common nature of man. To each of these relations, different degrees of sympathy are allotted by the ordinances of nature. The sympathies of domestic life are not more sacred and obligatory, but closer and more powerful, than those of neighborhood and friendship. The tie which binds us to our country is not more holy in the sight of God, but it is more deeply seated in our nature, more tender and endearing, than that common link which merely connects us with our fellow-mortal, man. It is a common government that constitutes our country. But in that association, all the sympathies of domestic life and kindred

blood, all the moral ligatures of friendship and of neighborhood, are combined with that instinctive and mysterious connection between man and physical nature, which binds the first perceptions of childhood in a chain of sympathy with the last gasp of expiring age, to the spot of our nativity, and the natural objects by which it is surrounded. These sympathies belong and are indispensable to the relations ordained by nature between the individual and his country. They dwell in the memory and are indelible in the hearts of the first settlers of a distant colony. These are the feelings under which the children of Israel “sat down by the rivers of Babylon, and wept when they remembered Zion.” These are the sympathies under which they “hung their harps upon the willow,” and instead of songs of mirth, exclaimed, “If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning.”^[3] But these sympathies can never exist for a country, which we have never seen. They are transferred in the hearts of succeeding generations, from the country of human institution, to the country of their birth; from the land of which they have only heard, to the land where their eyes first opened to the day. The ties of neighborhood are broken up, those of friendship can never be formed, with an intervening ocean; and the natural ties of domestic life, the all-subduing sympathies of love, the indissoluble bonds of marriage, the heart-riveted kindliness of consanguinity, gradually wither and perish in the lapse of a few generations. All the elements, which form the basis of that sympathy between the individual and his country, are dissolved.

Long before the Declaration of Independence, the great mass of the people of America and of the people of Britain had become total strangers to each other.... The sympathies therefore most essential to the communion of country were, between the British and American people, extinct. Those most indispensable to the just relation between sovereign and subject, had never existed and could not exist between the British government and the American people. The connection was unnatural; and it was in the moral order no less than in the positive decrees of Providence, that it should be dissolved.

Yet, fellow-citizens, these are not the causes of the separation assigned in the paper which I am about to read. The connection between different portions of the same people and between a people and their government, is a connection of duties as well as rights. In the long conflict of twelve years which had preceded and led to the Declaration of Independence, our fathers had been not less faithful to their duties, than tenacious of their rights. Their resistance had not been rebellion. It was not a restive and ungovernable spirit of ambition, bursting from the bonds of colonial subjection; it was the deep and wounded sense of successive wrongs, upon which complaint had been only answered by aggravation, and petition repelled with contumely, which had driven them to their last stand upon the adamant rock of human rights.

It was then fifteen months after the blood of Lexington and Bunker’s hill, after Charlestown and Falmouth, fired by British hands, were but heaps of ashes, after the ear of the adder had been turned to two successive supplications to the throne; after two successive appeals to the people of Britain, as friends, countrymen, and brethren, to which no responsive voice of sympathetic tenderness had been returned.... Then it was that the thirteen United Colonies of North America, by their delegates in Congress assembled, exercising the first act of sovereignty by a right ever inherent in the people, but never to be resorted to, save at the awful crisis when civil society is solved into its first elements, declared themselves free and independent states; and two days afterwards, in justification of that act, issued this [Declaration].

[Adams here read the Declaration of Independence]

...The interest, which in this paper has survived the occasion upon which it was issued; the interest which is of every age and every clime; the interest which quickens with the lapse of years, spreads as it grows old, and brightens as it recedes, is in the principles which it proclaims. It was the first solemn declaration by a nation of the only legitimate foundation of civil government. It was the corner stone of a new fabric, destined to cover the surface of the globe. It demolished at a stroke the lawfulness of all governments founded upon conquest. It swept away all the rubbish of accumulated centuries of servitude. It announced in practical form to the world the transcendent truth of the unalienable sovereignty of the people. It proved that the social compact was no figment of the imagination; but a real, solid, and sacred bond of the social union. From the day of this declaration, the people of North America were no longer the fragment of a distant empire, imploring justice and mercy from an inexorable master in another hemisphere. They were no longer children appealing in vain to the

sympathies of a heartless mother; no longer subjects leaning upon the shattered columns of royal promises, and invoking the faith of parchment to secure their rights. They were a nation, asserting as of right, and maintaining by war, its own existence. A nation was born in a day.

How many ages hence

Shall this their lofty scene be acted o'er

In states unborn, and accents yet unknown?^[4]

It will be acted o'er, fellow-citizens, but it can never be repeated. It stands, and must forever stand alone, a beacon on the summit of the mountain, to which all the inhabitants of the earth may turn their eyes for a genial and saving light, till time shall be lost in eternity, and this globe itself dissolve, nor leave a wreck behind.^[5] It stands forever, a light of admonition to the rulers of men; a light of salvation and redemption to the oppressed. So long as this planet shall be inhabited by human beings, so long as man shall be of social nature, so long as government shall be necessary to the great moral purposes of society, and so long as it shall be abused to the purposes of oppression, so long shall this declaration hold out to the sovereign and to the subject the extent and the boundaries of their respective rights and duties; founded in the laws of nature and of nature's God. Five and forty years have passed away since this Declaration was issued by our fathers; and here are we, fellow-citizens, assembled in the full enjoyment of its fruits, to bless the Author of our being for the bounties of his providence, in casting our lot in this favored land; to remember with effusions of gratitude the sages who put forth, and the heroes who bled for the establishment of this Declaration; and, by the communion of soul in the re-perusal and hearing of this instrument, to renew the genuine Holy Alliance^[6] of its principles, to recognize them as eternal truths, and to pledge ourselves and bind our posterity to a faithful and undeviating adherence to them....

FOOTNOTES

[1.](#) Genesis 3:24

[2.](#) An allusion to Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard."

[3.](#) Psalm 137.

[4.](#) Shakespeare, Julius Caesar, Act 3, Scene 1, l. 112-114.

[5.](#) Shakespeare, The Tempest, Act 4, Scene 1, l. 170-173.

[6.](#) Adams here contrasts the Holy Alliance of the American people based on the principles of the Declaration with the so-called Holy Alliance of Russia, Prussia and Austria formed in 1815 against the spread of republicanism.