

Enos Hitchcock Oration, Providence, 4 July 1788 (excerpt)

... A revolution can never be considered as complete till government is firmly established—and without this independency would be a curse instead of a blessing—These jointly were the great object of the American revolution—and the sole reason why we have not enjoyed all the emoluments of the latter, is because we have not availed ourselves of the former.—We came into national existence without national ideas, and therefore, could not have those arrangements which more experience is suited to give.

This great and extensive people, pressed together by common danger, and loos[e]ly holden by a confederacy suited only to their present exigency, united their efforts for common safety.—But when freed from the apprehensions of danger, their government lost its energy—their councils were divided—the refractory conduct of some States—the clashing interests of others, and the divided politics of the whole made it utterly impossible to draw forth national resources, and to comply with the just demands of creditors, or even defray the contingent expenditures of government.—The tottering fabric of their union shook from its foundation, and threat[e]ned the very existence of empire.—Feuds and animosities arose in every quarter; and formidable insurrections teemed with all the horrors of civil war—But the liberties of America are the object of divine patronage—a guardian God protects them—This intervening cloud, which spread darkness and distress over our land, was a prelude to a brighter day.

Independence was but a part of the revolution—and as we experienced many difficulties in laying the foundation, it was but natural to look for some in erecting the superstructure.—The blessings of a free government, which many nations have been unable to procure, even after ages of efforts and misery, are granted by divine providence, to the confederating States after a few years struggle.

The boasted wisdom of Greece and Rome were not sufficient to prevent convulsions in the State, nor to effect revolutions by reason or by rhetoric.

Rivers of blood ran down the streets of Rome in defence of the republic, and for the establishment of government—and while her legions triumphed in Italy, Gaul, Spain, Britain, and some parts of Germany,—while the provinces of Asia Minor, together with Armenia, Syria, Mosopotamia and Media, yielded to her superior force—while the most of the inhabitants of Africa obeyed the voice of the Roman senate, there subsisted within her own walls civil wars of the most threatening and sanguinary nature.

Greece could boast of a Solon, a Lycurgus and other splendid genii, who did honour to human nature, but they cannot boast of a revolution by reasoning, began and completed in so short a period as that which distinguishes the present Era.

It was not till a struggle of more than forty years had distressed and impoverished Holland that she gained her independence, and many more before she attained to a firm government.—England has been a great theatre of civil discord and contention for centuries—In all their variations of the mode of government recourse was had to the sword—and almost the whole of that island has been stained with the blood of

contending nations and domestic factions;—and they have found that when a sovereign or a system was agreed upon, their reduction to order was far less rapid than ours.

The road to empire has usually been slow and difficult.—As order progressively arose out of Chaos by the forming hand of the great Architect, so must a well-ordered government be collected and formed from the scattered materials and wild mixture of a chaotic people.

How to rescue these materials from the splendid ruins of government, and give stability to the rising fabric with the greatest rapidity and least difficulty, is a question which hath nonplussed all the philosophers, lawgivers and politicians of the world.—The answer to this question has been reserved to the American States.—After ages of fruitless attempts in other countries, this country affords the first instance of an entire revolution in policy and government, the most important that ever marked the progress of human society, without the effusion of human blood, without force, fraud or surprize.

Having had painful experience of the imbecility of the confederation and its inadequacy to the purposes of government, the same patriotism which glowed in the American breast at the commencement of the revolution,—which animated the patriot in the cabinet, and supported the brave soldier in the sufferings and dangers of the field, is renewed in a Convention for devising a more perfect scheme of government.

Behold “the majesty of a free people, convened in awful simplicity, to consult their safety and promote their happiness!”—Here again rises to view, from the placid shades of domestic life, the great American Cincinnatus, whose virtues in the field can be equalled only by his wisdom in the senate!—Illustrious Chief—May remotest ages reap the fruit of thy toils, and the happiness of a grateful people crown thy most ardent wishes!

The business devolved on this august body is as difficult as it is new—as important as it is difficult.—To balance the different interests of the States, so that each might give up its proportion of local advantage for the good of the whole,—to frame a model of government that should so accord with the genius of a large, extensive and free people, of different education, manners and employments, that should meet the consenting voice of even of nine among thirteen independent republics;—to effect all this was a task, to which nothing was equal short of that assemblage of wisdom and philanthropy which appeared in convention.

To the disappointment of our enemies and the joy of our friends, their wisdom and candour accomplished the wondrous deed, and we now behold a system of federal government acceded to with a degree of peace and unanimity, all circumstances considered, which has no parallel.—The abilities and political knowledge,—the patient deliberation and constant attention,—the mutual candour and condescension, which were exhibited by those who framed the Federal Constitution—and the similar spirit which actuated the most of those States in which it has been received, do immortal honour to our country, and add lustre to the present age.—Justly may it be said, “The present is an age of philosophy, and America the empire of reason.”¹

Yes, my fellow-countrymen, this is an Era reserved for the commencement of this western empire! The confederating States exhibit to the world the noble image of a community, which, founded in equality and justice, secures to the individuals every

enjoyment which can be derived from human institutions.—The fields and the fruits are their own,—the regulations under which they live are theirs—they are the proprietors and lords of the soil, and jointly constitute the sovereignty of their country.—They are under a government of laws and not of men.

Happy people! whose minds are not awed by the dread of a master, nor dazzled with the peagantry of courts, nor enslaved by superstitious customs and prejudices.

It is not my province to point out the merits or defects of that federal constitution which has employed the ablest pens—I will only offer you the sentiment of an ingenious writer on the subject—“The Constitution defines the powers of Congress; and every power not expressly delegated to that body, remains in the several State legislatures. The sovereignty and the republican form of government of each State is guaranteed by the constitution; and the bounds of jurisdiction between the federal and State governments are marked with precision. In theory, it has all the energy and freedom of the British and Roman governments, without their defects.”—And I may venture to add, that whatever defects appertain to this plan of government, it has this perfection, it prescribes a remedy for them, and contains within itself the means of its own cure—a circumstance which ought to have its weight in the minds of all opposers! ...

Cite as: *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution Digital Edition*, ed. John P. Kaminski, Gaspare J. Saladino, Richard Leffler, Charles H. Schoenleber and Margaret A. Hogan. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009.

Canonic URL: <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/RNCN-03-18-02-0065-0004> [accessed 02 Aug 2011]

Original source: Commentaries on the Constitution, Volume XVIII: Commentaries on the Constitution, No. 6