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Political Science: A Discourse on the Questions, "What Is the Seat of Sovereignty in the United States, and What the Relation of the People of those States to the Federal and State Governments Respectively"

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I am persuaded, gentlemen, that I should disappoint your just wishes, should I permit myself to be led away by this glorious theme into a declamatory celebration of the important event. It becomes me to suppose, that, in inviting me to appear before you, you expected that I should submit to you sober thoughts upon some subject of deep practical and enduring interest. I was bound to suppose that you wished me to select a topic illustrative of some important point in the institutions of our country. It was under this impression that I fixed on vengeance on the heads of tyrants, and then turning their thirsty weapons on each other's hearts. In these two extremes is a summary of the every-day history of man. Here the dull ox bears not more tamely the master's yoke, than he submits to the exactions, the caprices, the atrocious cruelties of tyranny. There, the tiger roars not for his prey, with more eager ferocity than that which wields his sword against his brother's life, and proclaims "war to the knife," against him who hung with him at the same breast.

How refreshing, how consoling to the buried spirit, to turn from the contemplation of scenes like these, to the calm, yet grand and imposing spectacle of a people but just emancipated from a degrading slavery, and, in sober wisdom and quiet dignity, addressing themselves, as to the performance of a sacred duty, to the solemn and responsible task of SELF GOVERNMENT!

That spectacle, on this day sixty-three years, Virginia exhibited to the world, and the memory of that magnificent scene is now my task to rescue from oblivion. It was on that day that she pronounced her colonial dependence on Great Britain, and separated herself forever from that kingdom. Then it was, that, bursting the manacles of a foreign tyranny, she, in the same moment, imposed upon herself the military restraints of law and order. In that moment she commenced the work of forming a government complete within itself, and, having perfected that work, she, on the 29th of June, in the same year, performed the highest function of independent sovereignty, by adopting, ordaining and establishing the constitution under which all of us were born. Then it was that, sufficient to herself for all the purposes of government, she prescribed that oath of fealty and allegiance to her sole and separate sovereignty, which all of us, who have held any office under her authority, have solemnly sworn upon the sacredness of hearts to witness and record. In that hour, gentlemen, it could not be certainly known, that the other colonies would take the same decisive step. It was indeed expected. In the same breath in which she declared her own independence, Virginia had avowed it. She had instructed her delegates in the general congress to urge it. And it was by the voice of one of her sons, whose name will ever proudly live in her history, that the word of power was spoken, at which the chain that bound the colonies to the parent kingdom fell asunder, "as fast that severs at the touch of fire." But even then, and while the terms of the general declaration of independence were yet unsettled, her's had already gone forth. The voice of her defiance was already ringing in the tyrant's ears, her's was the cry that summoned him to the strife, her's was the shout that invited his vengeance.

"Me! me! Adjutant qui facit. In me miseris forum."
Standing in her own place, and in her own strength, of establishing itself a free, sovereign and independent nation, has been said to show that Virginia, on that occasion, declared for the common interest, under which all the powers of government were to be exercised by the ministers of her sole and sovereign will. In that day she severed her connection with any other power, from all subjection or responsibility to any authority on earth but her own. Her right to do this was indeed contested by the only country having an interest in disputing which Virginia had just set the example. So too was Canada; and there was not one of them, which, like Canada, might not have identified herself with the common enemy, by shunning from that decisive step of which Virginia had just set the example.

What then do we learn from these words? Do they not teach us that governments are but creatures, and the people the creator? That they, whom we familiarly call rulers, are but servants, and that the people are their master? That sovereignty cannot be rightfully predicated of government, the creature, or of magistrates the servants, but that it inheres, and must forever rightfully inhere in the people, the creator and master.

If this admits of any doubt, that doubt must vanish when we read in the same instrument the further declaration, that whenever any government shall be found inadequate or contrary to the happiness and safety of the people, a majority of the community hath an indubitable, irresistible and indefeasible right to reform, alter, or abolish it, in such manner as shall be judged most conducive to the common weal." Gentlemen—in other countries men may speculate on the theory of the social compact. Here is the thing itself, in written and palpable form. In these words, thus promulgated, we find an authority for affirming their truth. As far as we are concerned they are true, because thus declared to be so. Elsewhere the authority of government may not be the result of universal consent, and men may elsewhere be governed by laws enacted by those whose interests they have never agreed to serve. Not so here. Here is the unanimous act of all concerned; the unanimous consent of all to live in obedience and fidelity to Virginia, under any form of government that a majority of her people may prescribe to the rest, so long as it may be so prescribed, and no longer. If there be any lawful sovereignty on earth; if any where the authority of men to bind their fellows can be traced to a legitimate source, it is here.

May I not then safely affirm, that on the day when these memorable words were spoken, Virginia was a sovereign state; that her sovereignty resided in the collective body of the people, and that in that people was the seat of all power. May I not affirm, that nothing then done can be rightfully so construed as at all to derogate from this paramount supremacy thus distinctly asserted? May I not go further and affirm, in virtue of this fundamental principle of our social compact, that nothing done then or since, and nothing to be done hereafter, can have the effect of disparaging or impairing the sovereign right here pronounced to be unalienable and indefeasible, but by the utter dissolution thereof?
of the society in which it is declared to inhere. Vir-
ginia may dissolve her ancient incorporation; her peo-
ple may disband, or amalgamate themselves, by a sort
of political fusion, with another community, but here
stand the original terms of our association, that so long
as she retains her individuality, so long will the right of
a majority of her people to reform, or abolish any form
of government that they have adopted, or may adopt,
remain inviolable, unalterable, indefeasible. Are we
not at least bound to understand these words as
qualifying and explaining every delegation of power
made by the constitution about to be adopted? Are
they not an admonition to those, whom, in conformity
to the jargon of courts, we call our rulers, that they are
not our servants, but ours, executed through them, our in-
dependents.

I beg you to observe, gentlemen, that the answer
to these questions is not affected by the degree of power
thus conferred, or the forms used in designating and
appointing those who are to exercise it. Remove all
the restrictions of the constitution on the powers of gov-
ernment; obliterating every prohibition; surrender the
freedom of religion, of speech, and of the press; abolish
popular election, and let the title to office be conferred
by lot or birth, for one year or for life; it will make no
difference. The rights of the people will be less secure,
but not less unquestionable. The ultimate sovereignty
may not so easily exerted, but it will be no less ac-
cred. As long as the words of the people are sounding
in the ears of magistrates; as long as they are admon-
ished in the very charter of their authority, that their
powers are but delegated, and may be resumed; that
the constitution is but the creature of the people, and
may be by them abolished; and that they themselves are
servants, not masters; so long must we confess that
the seat of sovereignty is in the people. "Do ye
sure," saith the Psalmist, "that the Lord he is God. It
is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves." "God
spake once. Yes, twice have I heard the same. Power
belongeth unto God." "He can create, and he destroy;"
and he "is God alone." Gentlemen, I mean nothing
profane. But such is the relation in which the people
stand to the political existence of their governments;
and such is the language, modified to the nature of the
case, which it becomes magistrates to apply to their
creator, the master of their life, the people.

But, gentlemen, it is not my purpose to magnify
this sovereignty of the people. It is not from my lips
that even to this hallowed name shall be addressed that
flattery which all sovereigns delight to hear. My only
object is to disabuse the minds of those who are in the
habit of imputing sovereignty to governments. The
error is so natural that it is almost universal. In other
countries it may not be error. There may perhaps be
nations, where, by the consent of all concerned, sove-
ignty resides somewhere else than in the people. I
do not know that the case is possible; but if it be, that
is their concern, not ours. But, unfortunately, our lips
are familiar with forms of speech more suited to foreign
institutions than our own. We are taught to associate,
in our minds, the idea of sovereignty with the trappings
of royalty; and we look at least for the insignia of
active power; the axe—the fasces, and the lictors. It
demands an effort of thought and imagination for which
we are ill prepared, to look beyond the veil, to the
providing spirit of the Temple, that sanctifies the
Priest, the Altar, and the Sacrifice. Like him who spoke
to Moses on the Mount, it has no bodily presence by
which we can identify it. It is an object of contempla-
tion to the mind alone. The moral and intellectual
faculty alone can comprehend it. What is that object?
It is the common mind, made up of the collective intelli-
gence and experience and virtue, and alike of the pre-
judices, passions and infirmities of a great multitude,
tied together in one great permanent co-partnership
of generation with generation; of the living with the
dead, and with those who are yet unborn; in which
the wisdom of each is the wisdom of all; the strength
of each the strength of all; and the wants and weaknesses
of each the care of all. He must have a very im-
perfect perception of this object, who does not discover
in it something to be approached with reverence and
awe. The idea of a common will pervading such a
multitude, and acting with a power so overwhelming,
is august and imposing. The sense of mere dignity
must be perverted and corrupted in that man, who does
not feel that it is the more august, the more imposing,
because, withdrawn from vulgar gaze; "circling its
throne with the majesty of darkness," it reposes quietly
in the ears of magistrates. The idea of a common
existence of their governments; (ut·e 7
not be error. There may perhaps be citizens, Virginia again accompanied this new delega-

tion of power with the same emphatic declaration, "tha-
I. Be ye
which we ourselves ure part.

But is there then no sovereignty in that great central
government, which, Colossus-like, besidest the conti-
inent, and beneath which the states are sometimes in-
vised to seek shelter (or their violated rights and insulted

dignity? Can there be so much active power, and yet
no sovereignty? Can the thing so huge be yet a crea-
ture?"

Yea, gentlemen. "That central government itself is
but "the Leviathan of all the creatures of the people's
will." Lange as it is, and while it is "like floating, many a
road, it is still a creature. Its ribs, its fins, its whale-
bone, its blubber, the very spiracles through which it
spouts its torrents of brine against the author of its ex-
istence, every thing of it and about it is from the peo-
ple."

In proclaiming that ratification of the federal consti-
tution, from which it derives all its authority over her
citizens, Virginia again accompanied this new delega-
tion of power with the same emphatic declaration, "th-
that all power is naturally vested in, and consequently de-

rived from the people; that magistrates, therefore, are
their trustees and agents, and at all times amenable to
them."

In the very act of ratification itself she again declares,"that the powers granted under the constitu-
tion, being derived from the people of the United States,
may be resumed by them, whenever the same shall be
perverted to their injury or oppression."
of such language as coupled with the delegation of power to the functionaries of the state governments, that by that delegation the sovereignty of the people was in no wise surrendered or impaired? And shall I be wrong when I draw the like inference now? Is the sovereignty right of the people to annihilate the work of their hands, to recall the powers they have granted, to abolish the government they have established, the less merited, the less unquestionable, because the exercise of the right might be attended with greater difficulty in the latter case than in the former?

I foresee that many will be reluctant to give to these questions the only answer they admit of. Their democracy is content to exercise itself in dominating over the poor limited and feeble state government, which modestly recognizes its responsibility and dependence on the people for its existence, and which is not provided with the means to purchase favor, or to overpower dissension. At Washington things wear a different face; and men require double conviction before they will consent to adopt opinions which may not find favor in the eyes of those who dispense honors to which the loftiest ambition may aspire, and distribute revenues that might glut the rapacity of avarice. Such gentlemen will tell me, that though sovereignty is not to be imputed to the government of the United States, yet it resides in an imaginary body politic which they call the people of the United States.

To this, I answer at once, there is no such body politic, and no such people. In proof of the first of these assertions, I appeal to the record. The Journal of the Convention, by which the constitution was framed and submitted to the states, respectively, shows that it was proposed in that assembly to constitute the United States a body politic, endowed with the powers appropriate to that character; and that this proposition was either rejected or withdrawn by the proposer as inadmissible. There is then no such body politic as the United States, and therefore there can be no such people as the people of the United States. The idea of a people is not that of a mere multitude of men. It is that of men so associated as to form a body politic. Where there is no body politic there is no people; and though a number of bodies politic may associate their combined authority and forces, for the accomplishment of any common purpose, the several bodies politic thus associated do but form a league, each retaining its several and distinct political individuality, without constituting a new body politic compounded of the whole.

But I do not choose to rest this proposition on an argument, which may seem too technical for the magnitude of the subject. I shall be the last to contend that the great and essential rights of men are to be determined by the niceties of special pleading. It is to the test of practical consequence that I propose to bring the question.

If the inhabitants of these United States have indeed undergone that sort of political fusion, by which states are melted down into one aggregate body politic, then in that body politic resides all the rights and powers incident to that character. A body politic owes not its authority to the government by which it is pleased to act, nor to the constitution establishing that government. These are but its creatures, and instruments. It is paramount to both, and its existence and powers will survive the abolition of both. We are all familiar with the recent instance in which the commonwealth of Virginia, no longer satisfied with the constitution that adopted, no longer willing to have its authority represented by the functionaries appointed under that constitution, came forward on the stage, and, by one word of power, annihilated both. Was the commonwealth of Virginia annihilated? Was the arm of her authority shortened? Was the right of the collective whole to give law to itself in all its parts, all impaired? Just the reverse of this was the fact. The limited authority of the agent was exchanged for the unlimited authority of the master. A government of mitigated and restricted powers had disappeared, and we found ourselves in the presence of an authority indefinite—boundless—to which all things were lawful. Then it was that the absurdity of imputing sovereignty to governments was indeed made manifest. That beggarly counterfeit sovereignty vanished like the detected valet at the appearance of the master whose clothes he had stolen, and whose name he had assumed. That which before had seemed the source of authority was now found to be its instrument. That which before had seemed the fountain of light and heat, now proved to have been but a screen to soften the intensity of its rays. It was removed, and we stood at once in the annihilated blush of a sovereign power, to which none might say “What dost thou?” From the government existing under the constitution, men were safe in life and liberty and property, save only their responsibility for crimes previously defined and known. The rights of conscience, the right to bear arms, the privilege of speech and of the press, all were safe. Bills of attainder, ex post facto laws, and laws invading vested rights had not been within the competency of that government. But the power which abolished it, and took its place, acknowledged no such restrictions. Supreme in all things, its will was law, without responsibility and without appeal.

Such was the effect of the abolition of the constitution of Virginia. What was it but the removal of an incumbrance, not unjustly likened to the frail covering of clay that binds down to earth the indestructible spirit of man. Strip off that worthless husk. Take away the organs of sense, through which as through loopholes we look out dimly on the objects that surround us. What then? The soul needs them not. All eye, all ear, all nerve, it sees and hears and feels, alike in every part.

Just so of the sovereignty of the people, when, by the abolition of constitutions and governments, it frees itself from self-imposed restraints. It doffs aside the puny agencie of magistrates, executive, legislative and judicial; and stands confessed in unclouded majesty, sufficient for itself in all things, combining and exercising all powers and all functions.

Gentlemen: if there be such a people, and such a body politic as the people of the United States, even such must be the effect of the abolition of the constitution of the United States. But is any one prepared to admit this? Do they err who suppose that the abolition of that constitution and the revocation of the powers delegated by the states, would but reinstate the states themselves in the exercise of those powers? Are we to be told, that instead of this, the abolition of that
instrument would abolish too the constitutions of the states, and even the states themselves? Are we to believe, that as a necessary consequence of such a measure, the ancient landmarks between the states, must instantly disappear? Is the whole organized population of twenty-six distinct states to sink down at once, into one chaotic mass, in which the discordia semina rerum, shall struggle for the mastery, and finally take whatever form a majority of the whole may choose to impose? Can it be, that the severance of the only tie that binds us to the other states, is to be followed by a necessary complete and inextricable amalgamation with them?

Gentlemen; I beg you calmly and distinctly to contemplate the absurdity of this idea. At present, the only right of the man of Maine, Missouri or Louisiana to meddle with any thing that concerns Virginia is derived from the constitution. By this, certain defined and limited powers are conferred upon the common agents of all the states. To abolish the constitution should be to determine these powers. And shall we be told, that instead of this, the effect of such a measure must be to abolish, not the powers themselves, but all limitations on those powers. Yet this must be so, if indeed there be a body politic comprehending all the inhabitants of the United States. Whatever abuses there be, whatever oppressions we may encounter, can be borne with patience, lest a worse thing befall us. We must be careful not to recall any authority, which, in the language of the ratification by Virginia, "may be perverted to our injury or oppression," lest, in the attempt, we do but make a full surrender of that and every other power whatever. Gentlemen; if the science of government admits of a reduction ad absurdum, this is one. If there be any proposition, which may be proved to be false, by the preposterous conclusions to which it leads, such is the proposition that affirms the sovereignty of the United States, or the existence of such a body politic or such a people. How then, it may be asked, are we to understand the language of Virginia herself, when, in ratifying the constitution, she declares, that "the powers granted under the constitution, being derived from the people of the United States, may be resumed by them whatsoever the same shall be perverted to their injury or oppression?"

I answer, that the phrase must be understood here as in the preamble to the constitution, not as technically designating a political body, but as a mere noun of multitude. For, I beg you to observe, gentlemen, the declaration is that the powers granted may be resumed—restored to those to whom they before belonged; not distributed, in wide and wasteful profusion to those who had never yet possessed them. The states alone had possessed these powers as separate and distinct bodies politic, and they could only be resumed in the same character. The grant and the reappointment of power are both predicated of the same subject. Of this subject it is alike affirmed, that the powers under the constitution had been granted and were to be resumed thereby, and hence we conclude that those powers proceeded from the same source to which they were to revert. That source was the sovereignty of the states, and not any such body politic as the people of the United States, whose association would be dissolved by the very act which was to restore the power to the hands that conferred it. So far then from giving countenance to the idea of the existence of any such body politic, this very language exposes the absurdity of that idea.

It shows, that the abrogation of the constitution was not to be attended with the consequences which the existence of any such body politic would render inevitable. It was not to be followed by the establishment of an absolute and unqualified supremacy in the collective whole, but the parts were to be reinstated in the exercise of all the powers and functions which they had delegated.

Observe then, I beseech you, gentlemen, the difference between the actual, though dormant sovereignty of the people of Virginia, and the imaginary sovereignty of the people of the United States. Take away the constitution of Virginia: the government is abolished, but the people and the commonwealth remain. The sovereignty, which before had slumbered while its servants watched, is awakened, and its authority absolute, boundless, unqualified, takes the place of the restricted functions it superseded. But take away the constitution of the United States, and no such august object is disclosed. The people of the United States vanish. The body politic, if there be one, dissolves into this air; and we see instead, twenty-six distinct and disconnected states, each under its simple republican form, exercising its separate sovereignty by the same limited and responsible agents as before. Virginia may abolish her constitution, and, by the original terms of her social part, a majority of her people may prescribe to the rest what form they will. But let the constitution of the United States be abolished, and the authority of the central government expires, and can never be restored but by the unanimous consent of each one of the several states. None would have power to bind the rest in any thing.

The government then, is but the outward covering of the body politic—the fleshly vesture of the spirit within. Through this indeed it performs the functions of sovereignty, and, in the exercise of these functions, are the evidences of its living energy. And here, gentlemen, is the proof of a self-inherent power, original and indestructible. The State has power to lay down her life; and she has power to take it up again. Not as the Union. Let the spirit once depart from the government of the United States, and it sleeps in eternal death. The master of life—the same power which first created may restore it; but the act will not be the act of the people of the United States, acting by any authority in a majority, or in any other portion to bind the rest, but the free and voluntary act of sovereign and independent states completely dissociated, and coming together again by a new league, in forming which each must act for herself alone.

The Constitution does not admit that I should trace out in detail all the results of this argument. Nor have I a right to weary you by conjecturing the answers and objections to it which will doubtless be eagerly urged by those who bow the knees to the Saul of federal supremacy. Such will be shocked and scandalized at being told that their God is no God. I cannot stop to soothe their offended superstition; but I will take leave to say what must be the legitimate result of the doctrine which denies the sovereignty of the states, or affirms that of the government or people of the United States.

If the government be sovereign, then all our ideas of
the sovereignty of the people are erroneous. If the government be sovereign, then are magistrates no longer the servants of the people, but their masters. But, gentlemen, if they are our masters, it must be because Virginia has made them so. She once was sovereign, and her's was once the only voice which spoke in tones of authority to her children. If her sovereignty be impaired, it must have been by her own act, when she commanded her people to render obedience to the authority of the officers of the federal government. Had she not done this, we should have owed them none. But she commanded it, and her command was law to us. But what did she command? Was it that we should obey them as our masters and her's? No, gentlemen; she commanded us to obey them as her trustees and agents, as the ministers of her will. In the very act of commanding obedience she declared them to be so, and as such, as persons authorized to speak and act in her behalf, in their appropriate spheres, she required us to submit to her authority represented by them. Over us, at least, the government of the United States is not sovereign.

But the people of the United States! Gentlemen; I will admit, that if there be a body politic consisting of the whole population of the United States, that body politic is sovereign, and the sole sovereign over us. And not only is that body politic sovereign over us, but it is sovereign over the government of the United States, consisting of its agents and servants, and over the constitution, its creature. What then becomes of the reserved rights of the States? Of what value is an instrument for the plunder and oppression of minorities? Has not the event proved the wisdom of this apprehension? Are we not sensible, that they who struggle to free the government of the United States from the restraints of the constitution, do so only that they may give free scope to a system of plunder and oppression, of which we are to be the victims? In this danger we look to the constitution as the safe-guard of our rights. But of what value is that safe-guard, if, after all, it is but the creature of that very majority against which it should protect us? Constitutions cannot give law to the sovereignty that creates and may abolish them. They are but the instruments by which the sovereignty makes known and enforces its will; instruments that the sovereignty may at any moment cast away, if unsuited to its purposes.

Gentlemen—if the ideas I have presented are not utterly false, they should lead you to perceive, that they who talk to you of divided sovereignty, talk of that which is absurd and can have no existence. There can be but one Supreme. There is no god but God. The officers of the federal and state governments, said Mr. Madison, in his exposition of the constitution, are alike the agents of the people of the several states; the one acting in the name, and for the behoof of one state alone, the other acting for all alike. The state acts through both, surrendering nothing of its sovereignty to either, but delegating an authority to exercise some of the functions of sovereignty to one set, some to the other.

Gentlemen—in this view of the subject I see nothing but harmony and consistency; and in this view I see the only security for our covenanted rights. The conclusion to which it conducts is rational and safe. It shows the sovereignty, which the states once possessed, and which they never have surrendered in terms, still abiding in them; and it establishes you in the comfortable assurance, that your relation to the federal and state governments alike is that of a master to servants; not that of servants to a master.

But I may perhaps be asked, why I urge, with so much earnestness, what no one denies. Who among us questions the sovereignty of Virginia, that I should argue as if it were disputed? I admit, gentlemen, that it has not been my fortune to meet with any one among us disposed to deny it. But while it is thus universally admitted, I have been concerned to see that men seem strangely averse to affix any distinct meaning to the word. I am doubtful whether, in the mouths of most men, it stands for anything more than a mere vague compliment paid in the same spirit in which the subject of a king imparts majesty to the crowned puppet that he despises. A sovereignty should command the fear and love, the respect and reverence of his subjects. Their allegiance should be an affair of the heart, not mere lip service. His personal qualities indeed may render this impossible; but to a people, owning no other sovereignty, such qualities certainly cannot be imputed by themselves. Every citizen of a sovereign state should be expected to recognise in that state an object at once august and lovely, before which all that is evil in men should stand recollected, and to which all the better affections of the heart should cling with humble but proud devotion. And is it thus that the citizens of Virginia are affected to her at this day? It should be so. The memory of her old renown is still our inheritance. The men who made her name illustrious in the annals of the world are still remembered as her sons. She is still the mother of heroes and the nurse of statesmen; and the same simple integrity and self-renouncing devotion to the right, which once distinguished her, are still her characteristics. She is still the mistress of our arts, the protectress of our lives and fortunes, the guardian of all our rights, the sanctuary of our honor. What has happened, that so few hearts are animated by the sentiments appropriate to this relation? Why is it that so few regard her with the eye of reverential love,

Such is her best and sun-like majesty:
But rather drawn, and hang their eye-likes down,
Sleep in her face, and render such respect,
As coldly men use to their adversaries?

Why is it that her own proud banner no longer floats from her capitol? Why is it, that, with a name to live, her sovereignty is as though it were dead? Why, that while none among us deny it, none find pride in asserting it; none resent the denial or invasion of it by others?

Do I speak of that which is not? Are not you all sensible that these things are so? And why? Is it that she has stripped herself of the means of reward-
ing her children's love? Is it that the honors that tempt ambition are bestowed by functionaries who sit on behalf of other states as well as her? Is it that the revenues to which the mercenary zeal of avarice looks for its reward, have been poured into the common treasury of the Union? Alas! yes. The simple blessings of distinction won in her service, the laurel garland and the oaken wreath, have lost their charm. There is now no value but in gilded honors; no majesty in a diadem that does not glitter; no authority in any sceptre not of gold. Thus it is that no man speaks of her sovereignty as anything but a name, profane to the rage of such as "do but crook the hinges of that knee, where thrift may follow fashion."

How else is it, that over a transaction like that of which this day reminds us, the pale pall of oblivion has already fallen? How is it that the memory of such an event has perished from our minds? What pilgrim visits the spot consecrated by that glorious act? What monument marks it to the eye? Alas! "The fire has resounded in its halls, and the voice of the people is heard no more." None summons the sons of Virginia to "build the walls of her political Zion." None "takes pleasure in her stones." The scene of so many hal­lowed recollections is waste and desecrated;

"White Desolation, on the grass grown streets, Expand her raven-wing; and up the wall Whose arms had triumphed on every shore, and whose The men of that day live, and, I trust, will live forever, as the founders of our free institutions, and the champions of our rights. We venerate them as our instructors in all its arduous duties. We boast them as our protectors in the science of self-government, and our great ex­emplars in its arduous duties. We boast them as the bold defenders of the rights of an infant people, against the power of the most formidable nation upon earth. Not a year passes over that the fourth of July is not celebrated by us as the birth day of American Independence. Neither do we forget the memory of the illustrious men who acted and suffered and triumphed in the scenes which the events of that day recalls. And well may this be so. The annals of mankind must be searched in vain for examples more illustrious of virtue, wisdom and ability. Above all we contemplate, with admiring wonder, the intrepid boldness, the self-devised magnanimity, which manned the hearts of thirteen feeble, disunited colonies to defy a power accustomed to give law to Europe. We remember, that of their own strength they as yet had no experience. Their sufficiency had seemed all derived from her. And now the sword which had so long blazed before them, guarding, like that of the angel of the Lord, their forest paradies, was to be turned against them. Without armies, without navies, without revenue, without resources of any kind, but such as a good cause, a clear conscience, a strong will, and a firm reliance on Providence, suggest to impotence itself, they stood, like the Psalmist, confident, with the mailed and giant form before which the stoutest hearts had quailed. Like him indeed they were not unfamiliar with the taste of danger. Like him they had grappled successfully with a savage foe, and learned that the devotion of the soul to the task of peril. The red man of the forest had been to them the lion and the bear; and they had learned to trust for their defence against this new enemy, in the same gracious power which had delivered them from their former foes. Of such noble confidence glorious success is the appropriate fruit. To this the instincts of our nature teach the heart to give its highest admiration, and thus instructed, we learn that boldness in extremity of danger is the part of prudence. This wise and just and salutary sentiment is nobly taught in the example before us. Whenever we shall learn to look on it with that cool and calculating and self-seeking wisdom, which measures the strength of the adversary we should defy, and balance consequences and the cost of any struggle in defence of our rights, our freedom will be well nigh gone. Thus it is, that in celebrating the virtues and achievements of our ancestors, we perform a duty, not only to the illustrious dead, but to ourselves and our posterity. It is a duty which brings its own reward in its chastening, purifying, and humbling, yet elevating and ennobling influence on our hearts. It teaches us to prize our rights at the full value of the sacrifices they cost: it renews the love of liberty in our bosoms; and, above all, we are encouraged to feel, that all obstacles to success in a good cause must go down before the concentrated energy of a people resolved to live free or die. Such, gentlemen, is the lesson taught us by the history of our revolutionary struggle, and well does it deserve that we should keep it fresh in our memories, and warm in our hearts. By no passage in that history is this lesson so strikingly inculcated, as in that which records the event of which this day reminds us. Was it glorious for the Congress of the United States, that on the fourth day of July, 1776, they adopted the bold and hazardous resolve which established their independ­ence? Was it glorious that the representatives of three millions of people, new to the tasks of govern­ment, unprovided with the organization, the implements, and the resources of war, thus naked and defenseless, dared defy the wrath of a nation armed to the teeth in all the panoply of war; a nation whose power encircled the globe; whose flag floated over every sea; whose arms had triumphed on every shore, and whose coffers overflowed with contributions from the commerce of the whole earth? Was this an act to be remembered with wonder, and with grateful praise by us? Was
this an act which should fill our hearts with pride while we trace our descent from its illustrious authors? Oh, yes! And happy he, who, on the records of that day, can point to some time-honored name, and say, "Thus my father spoke, and thus he acted; here he fought, and here he fell."  

What then, gentlemen, should be our pride of heart in remembering, that it was not on the 4th of July, 1776, but on the 15th of May in the same year; not by the concurrent voice of three millions of people, but by that of one fifth of that number; not by the unanimous resolve of thirteen colonies, but by her own sole and separate act, that Virginia took her independent stand among the nations of the earth.  

We do injustice to the dignity of this theme, if we do wrong to our fathers and to ourselves, when we permit the memory of this event to fade from our minds. It well deserves to be remembered, and commemorated, not as a topic of vague and empty declamation, but as an occasion for sober thought, and serious self-examination. It calls upon us, as in the presence of the sacred dead, to look into our own hearts, and estimate the value which we set at this day on the heritage purchased by the blood of our fathers. That heritage is the independent sovereignty of Virginia, and the inquiry to which I have invited your thoughts, is to lead you to a just sense of its importance, and a wise choice of the means of preserving it. It is a question on which depends the value of all those charter rights to which you look as the monuments of your liberties. You owe it to yourselves to understand all these aright, that you may transmit unimpaired to your children the blessings which they have so far secured to you. No people should ever permit themselves to feel secure in the enjoyment of their rights. They are always in danger from some quarter. The rights of men are always the natural prey of the worst passions of the human heart, whether aspiring or base. Ambition, in its eagle-flight, is ever hovering over them, and ready at any unguarded moment, to pounce upon them. The serpent-guile of avarice, that creeps upon its belly, and costs the dust, is always seeking to inveade the nest where all our dearest blessings lie. If we mean to preserve them, we must watch over them; we must learn to know and number them; we must study the tenure by which we hold them; we must qualify ourselves to avert nay of the dangers that threaten them; to trace the serpent by his slime, and to know the eagle by his portentous scream.  

The rights of Virginia have been more than once invaded, and the assault has always been on the same quarter. The device of the enemy has always been to question her sovereignty; to deny her right to self-government, and to establish a claim to hold her, (always, as it has been pretended, for her own good,) in a state of pupillage. Whether the object were to bring her under the dominion of a low-breod tyrant in a distant land, the murderer of his king, and the felon usurper of his country's rights; or to lay open her resources to the plundering rapacity of a foreign parliament, claiming the right to give what was not their own; or to transfer her very heart's blood, by a sort of political suction-pipe, to fertilize the barren shores of a neighboring state; in each and every instance, the device of the adversary has been to deny and to deride her claim of sovereignty. Here they saw was her tower of strength, and all their art has been employed to wipe her from it, and to tempt her to put her trust in other defences, and to rely on the justice and benevolence of those who offered protection in the words and tones of friendship. Happily for her, she has always been no less sensible than they of the consequences of such reliance, and has always, in her hour of need, sought safety behind the bulwark of her sovereignty. Therefore it is that I have been thus careful to lay bare to you its foundations; to remove the rubbish that conceals them, and to show that it is built upon a rock. Gentlemen—if I have so far succeeded in embodying the idea of the sovereignty of Virginia, that it is palpable to your understandings, that your minds "can lay hold of it by faith"—then I say to you, "Consecrate it in your hearts: establish it in the hearts of your children: set it up among your household gods: hang it out on your banners, with the true and appropriate motto, In hoc signo victorius: in his signe vincemus." If any man shall pursue you to exchange this sacred right of a people constituting a community within themselves, to govern themselves in all things, and to decide for themselves, in the last resort, in all that pertains to their welfare, for the plighted faith of other communities, or for any other security under Heaven, distrust him. He would tempt you to the language of the wolf with the sheep. Consent to part with that jealously guarded right of your sons, under whose watchful care you may sleep secure from all external danger, and every thing you can ask will be promised you. But put away from among you that sanction to your rights, which unfettered and irresponsible sovereignty alone affords, and you will find that all your covenants are but a paltering jugglere, "that keeps the word of promise to the ear, but breaks it to the hope."