

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Address to a Joint Session of Congress Opening the Celebration of the Bicentennial of the Birth of George Washington

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HERBERT HOOVER

Through most of the calendar year 1932, the American people celebrated the bicentennial of George Washington's birth. On February 22, President Herbert Hoover (1874–1964) opened the celebration with this address to a joint session of Congress. Why—and how—does Hoover say we should commemorate the founder of our country? What does he mean by saying, “The true eulogy of Washington is this mighty Nation”? Despite Washington's lack of spectacular qualities, “Why did his brilliant fellow patriots always . . . turn to him?” What, according to Hoover, makes the American system of life “distinctly unique and distinctly American”? Why, according to Hoover, is the Washington monument—rather than a sculptured likeness of him, such as we have of Lincoln and Jefferson in their memorials—the most fitting way to memorialize Washington? Do you agree?

Just 100 years ago in this city Daniel Webster, in commemoration of the birth of George Washington, said:

A hundred years hence, other disciples of Washington will celebrate his birth, with no less of sincere admiration than we now commemorate it. When they shall meet, as we now meet, to do themselves and him that honor, so surely as they shall see the blue summits of his native mountains rise in the horizon, so surely as they shall behold the river on whose banks he lived, and on whose banks he rests, still flowing on toward the sea, so surely may they see, as we now see, the flag of the Union floating on top of the Capitol and then, as now, may the sun in his course visit no land more free, more happy, more lovely, than this, our own country.

The time that Webster looked forward to is here. We “other disciples of Washington” whom he foresaw are gathered today. His prophecy is borne out, his hope fulfilled. That flag “still floats from the top of the Capitol.” It has come unscathed through foreign war and the threat of internal division. Its only change is the symbol of growth. The 13 stars that Washington saw, and the 24 that Webster looked upon, now are 48. The number of

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those who pay loyalty to that flag has multiplied tenfold. The respect for it beyond our borders, already great when Webster spoke 100 years ago, has increased—not only in proportion to the power it symbolizes, but even more by the measure in which other peoples have embraced the ideals for which it stands. To Webster’s expression of hope we may reasonably answer, yes—“The sun in its course visits no land more free, more happy, more lovely, than this, our own country.” Proudly we report to our forefathers that the Republic is more secure, more constant, more powerful, more truly great than at any other time in its history.

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Today the American people begin a period of tribute and gratitude to this man whom we revere above all other Americans. Continuing until Thanksgiving Day they will commemorate his birth in every home, every school, every church, and every community under our flag.

In all this multitude of shrines and forums they will recount the life history and accomplishments of Washington. It is a time in which we will pause to recall for our own guidance, and to summarize and emphasize for the benefit of our children, the experiences, the achievements, the dangers escaped, the errors redressed—all the lessons that constitute the record of our past.

The ceremonial of commemorating the founder of our country is one of the most solemn that either an individual or a nation ever performs; carried out in high spirit it can be made one of the most fruitful and enriching. It is a thing to be done in the mood of prayer, of communing with the spiritual springs of patriotism and of devotion to country. It is an occasion for looking back to our past, for taking stock of our present and, in the light of both, setting the compass for our future. We look back that we may recall those qualities of Washington’s character which made him great, those principles of national conduct which he laid down and by which we have come thus far. We meet to reestablish our contact with them, renew our fidelity to them.

From this national revival of interest in the history of the American Revolution and of the independence of the United States will come a renewal of those inspirations which strengthened the patriots who brought to the world a new concept of human liberty and a new form of government.

So rich and vivid is the record of history, that Washington in our day lives again in the epic of the foundation of the Republic. He appears in the imagination of every

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succeeding generation as the embodiment of the wisdom, the courage, the patience, the endurance, the statesmanship, and the absence of all mean ambition, which transformed scattered communities of the forest and the frontiers into a unity of free and independent people.

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It is not necessary for me to attempt a eulogy of George Washington. That has been done by masters of art and poetry during more than 100 years. To what they have said I attempt to make no addition.

The true eulogy of Washington is this mighty Nation. He contributed more to its origins than any other man. The influence of his character and of his accomplishments has contributed to the building of human freedom and ordered liberty, not alone upon this continent but upon all continents. The part which he played in the creation of our institutions has brought daily harvest of happiness to hundreds of millions of humanity. The inspirations from his genius have lifted the vision of succeeding generations. The definitions of those policies in government which he fathered have stood the test of 150 years of strain and stress.

From the inspiration and the ideals which gave birth to this Nation, there has come the largest measure of liberty that man has yet devised. So securely were the foundations of this free Government laid that the structure has been able to adapt itself to the changing world relations, the revolutions of invention and the revelations of scientific discovery, the fabulous increase of population and of wealth, and yet to stand the kaleidoscopic complexities of life which these changes have brought upon it.

What other great, purely human institution, devised in the era of the stagecoach and the candle, has so marvelously grown and survived into this epoch of the steam engine, the airplane, the incandescent lamp, the wireless telephone, and the battleship?

If we are to get refreshment to our ideals from looking backward to Washington, we should strive to identify the qualities in him that made our revolution a success and our Nation great. Those were the qualities that marked Washington out for immortality.

We find they were not spectacular qualities. He never charged with a victorious army up the capital streets of a conquered enemy. Excepting only Yorktown and Trenton, he won no striking victories. His great military strength was in the strategy of attrition, the patient endurance of adversity, steadfast purpose unbent by defeat. The American shrine

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most associated with Washington is Valley Forge, and Valley Forge was not a place of victory—except the victory of Washington’s fortitude triumphant above the weakness and discouragement of lesser men. Washington had courage without excitement, determination without passion.

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The descriptions of George Washington by his contemporaries give us no clear picture of the inner man, the Washington whose spiritual force so palpably dominated his whole epoch. As a mirror, his own writings do him indifferent justice, whilst the writings of others are clouded by their awe or are obscured by their venom. We must deduce mainly from other records why he stood out head and shoulders above all the crowd around him. It was an extraordinary crowd, living at white heat, comprising men as varied, as brilliant, as versatile as the extraordinary demands which the times made upon them. They were men flexible in intellect, and versed in the ways of the world. Yet in every crisis, and for every role they turned to Washington. They forced upon him the command of Indian fighters; they made him a general against trained British troops; they demanded that he be a constitutionalist and a national statesman; they insisted he must guide his country through the skillful ambushes of European kings; they summoned him to establish the nonexistent credit of an insolvent infant nation. Why did his brilliant fellow patriots always thus turn to him?

The answer of history is unmistakable: They brought their problems to Washington because he had more character, a finer character, a purer character, than any other man of his time. In all the shifting pressures of his generation, all men acknowledged that the one irresistible force was the overwhelming impact of his moral power. Motives and men were measured by their stature when standing in his shadow. Slander fell harmless before him, sham hung its head in shame, folly did not risk to look him in the face, corruption slunk from his presence, cowardice dared not show its quaking knees.

In his integrity, all our men of genius in his day found their one sure center of agreement. In his wisdom and authority they found the one sure way to practical fulfillment of their dreams.

We need no attempt at canonization of George Washington. We know he was human, subject to the discouragements and perplexities that come to us all. We know that he had moments of deepest anxiety. We know of his sufferings and the sacrifices and anguish that came to him. We know of his resentment of injustice and misrepresentation. And yet we know that he never lost faith in our people.

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Nor have I much patience with those who undertake the irrational humanizing of Washington. He had, indeed, the fine qualities of friendliness, of sociableness, of humanness, of simple hospitality, but we have no need to lower our vision from his unique qualities of greatness, or to seek to depreciate the unparalleled accomplishments of the man who dominated and gave birth to the being of a great nation.

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What we have need of today in this celebration is to renew in our people the inspiration that comes from George Washington as a founder of human liberty, as the father of a system of government, as the builder of a system of national life. . . .

Upon these foundations of divine inspiration laid by our forefathers, and led by Washington, our Nation has builded up during this century and a half a new system of life, a system unique to the American people. It is hallowed by the sacrifice and glorious valor of men. It is assured by a glorious charter of human rights.

It comprises a political system of self-government by the majority, resting upon the duties of individual men to the community, and of the local communities to the Nation. It is a government designed in spirit to sustain a dual purpose, to protect our people among nations by great national power, and to preserve individual freedom by local self-government.

It comprises a social system free of inherited position, based upon the ideal of equality of all men before the law, the equal privilege of men to strive and to achieve, and the responsibilities of men to their neighbors.

It embraces an economic system based upon the largest degree of freedom and stimulation to initiative and enterprise which can be permitted and still maintain the ideal of equality of opportunity among men.

Finally, it embraces a system of relationships to other nations based upon no thought of imperialism, no desire to dominate; a determined national self-reliance in defense and independence in action; freedom from all commitment to the unknown future, and an aspiration to promote peace and good will among all men.

Perhaps no single part of this system is different from some instance in history or in some other part of the world. But in its composite form it is distinctly unique and

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distinctly American, a system under which we have reached an assured position among the most powerful of the nations of the world.

This destiny of national greatness was clearly foreseen by George Washington. More fully than any man of his time was he gifted with vision of the future. He spoke habitually of the “American Empire,” and predicted its expansion from ocean to ocean. He planned and wrought for the binding forces of transportation and peaceful commerce. He thought in terms of almost imperial grandeur, and he wrought in terms of republican solidity. His far-flung dreams have come true, and he lives today in his works, in the names of our towns or cities and our States, and in the affectionate reverence of us who so immeasurably benefit by his wisdom.

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Our American system of national life is dependent upon a trust in the principles of government as established by George Washington; a trust in his example to our people; a trust in and a devotion to religious faith, which he himself so devoutly practiced; a trust in that divine inspiration which he so sedulously invoked and which is expressed in the common mind of our people; and above all a trust in the Divine Providence which has always given guidance to our country.

From Washington’s spirit there has grown an infusion of social ideals with the quality of magnanimity: upholding prosperity with generosity, dignity with forbearance, security without privilege, which has raised our institutions to a level of humanity and nobility nowhere else attained.

We have the faith that Webster expressed that 100 years hence our countrymen will again celebrate his birth, will review the memory of his services with no less sincere admiration and gratitude than we now commemorate it, and that they too will see, as we now see, “the flag of the Union floating on the top of the Capitol.”

From the room where I conduct my high office I hourly see the monument which Washington’s proud and grateful countrymen have raised to his memory. It stands foursquare to the world, its base rooted steadfast in the solid substance of American soil. Its peak rises towards the heavens with matchless serenity and calm. Massive in its proportions, as was the character of Washington himself, overwhelming in its symmetry, simplicity, and sincerity, it most fittingly, beautifully, and nobly proclaims the founder of our commonwealth and our acceptance of his faith. Around that monument have grown

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steadily and surely the benevolent and beneficent agencies of orderly government dedicated to the spirit of Washington.

Beyond any other monument built by the hand of man out of clay and stone, this shaft is a thing of the spirit. Whether seen in darkness or in light, in brightness or in gloom, there is about it a mantle of pure radiance which gives it the aspect of eternal truth. It is a pledge in the sight of all mankind, given by Washington's countrymen, to carry forward the continuing fulfillment of his vision of America.

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