

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Oration on the Advantages of American Independence

DAVID RAMSAY

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Even as the war was being waged and with the outcome uncertain, intellectuals and statesmen continued to make the case for the importance of American independence. On July 4, 1778, physician, historian, and South Carolina politician David Ramsay (1749–1815) delivered this speech, the nation’s first Fourth of July oration, in Charleston. In 1780, after the fall of Charleston, Ramsay was imprisoned for a year by the British. Once released, he served as a member of the Continental Congress from 1782–83 and again from 1785–86; and after the Constitution was ratified, he served from 1801–15 in the Senate of South Carolina, of which he was also for several years the president. Ramsay also wrote one of the first histories of the American Revolution and a biography of George Washington.

What, according to Ramsay, are the specific virtues or excellences that will result from American independence and the emergence of a democratic polity? What are the accomplishments in the arts and sciences and in self-government that Ramsay foresees? Imagine yourself hearing this speech in 1778, in the midst of the Revolutionary War. How might you have been moved? How does it move you today, and why? Now, over 230 years after Ramsay’s oration, how do you assess the accuracy of his predictions? Are there excellences—and deficiencies or vices—that Ramsay failed to anticipate?

Friends and fellow citizens,

I’m pressed with the deepest sense of my insufficiency, I rise to address you, with particular diffidence. When I consider the knowledge and eloquence necessary to display the glorious prospects which independence opens to this continent, I am stung with a degree of self-reproach for undertaking the important task. But your known attachment to the cause of America encourages me to hope, that you will receive with indulgence, a well-intended exertion to promote her welfare; and emboldens me to cast myself on that candor, which looks with kindness on the feeblest efforts of an honest mind.

We are now celebrating the anniversary of our emancipation from British tyranny; an event that will constitute an illustrious era in the history of the world, and which promises

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an extension of all those blessings to our country, for which we would choose to live, or dare to die.

Our present form of government is every way preferable to the royal one we have lately renounced. It is much more favorable to purity of morals, and better calculated to promote all our important interests. Honesty, plain-dealing, and simple manners, were never made patterns of courtly behavior. Artificial manners always prevail in kingly governments; and royal courts are reservoirs, from whence insincerity, hypocrisy, dissimulation, pride, luxury, and extravagance, deluge and overwhelm the body of the people. On the other hand, republics are favorable to truth, sincerity, frugality, industry, and simplicity of manners. Equality, the life and soul of commonwealths, cuts off all pretensions to preferment, but those which arise from extraordinary merit: Whereas in royal governments, he that can best please his superiors, by the low arts of fawning and adulation, is most likely to obtain favor.

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It was the interest of Great Britain to encourage our dissipation and extravagance, for the two-fold purpose of *increasing the sale of her manufactures*, and of *perpetuating our subordination*. In vain we sought to check the growth of luxury, by sumptuary laws; Every wholesome restraint of this kind was sure to meet with the royal negative while the whole force of example was employed to induce us to copy the dissipated manners of the country from which we sprung. If, therefore, we had continued dependant, our frugality, industry, and simplicity of manners, would have been lost in an imitation of British extravagance, idleness, and false refinements.

How much more happy is our present situation, when necessity, co-operating with the love of our country, compels us to adopt both public and private economy? Many are now industriously clothing themselves and their families in sober homespun, who, had we remained dependant, would have been spending their time in idleness, and strutting in the costly robes of British gaiety.

The arts and sciences, which languished under the low prospects of subjection, will now raise their drooping heads, and spread far and wide, till they have reached the remotest parts of this untortured continent. It is the happiness of our present constitution, that all offices lie open to men of merit, of whatever rank or condition; and the reins of state may be held by the son of the poorest man, if possessed of abilities equal to the important station. We are no more to look up for the blessings of government to hungry courtiers, or the needy dependants of British nobility, but must educate our own children

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for these exalted purposes. When subjects, we had scarce any other share in government, but to obey the arbitrary mandates of a British Parliament: But Honor, with her dazzling pomp, interest with her golden lure, and patriotism with her heartfelt satisfaction, jointly call upon us now to qualify ourselves and prosperity for the bench, the army, the navy, and learned professions, and all the departments of civil government. The independence of our country holds forth such generous encouragement to youth, as cannot fail of making many of them despise the siren calls of luxury and mirth, and pursue heaven-born wisdom with unwearied application. A few years will now produce a much greater number of men of learning and abilities, than we could have expected for ages in our boyish state of minority, guided by the leading-strings of a parent country.

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How trifling the objects of deliberation that came before our former legislative assemblies, compared with the great and important matters, on which now they decide! They might then, *with the leave of the King*, his governors and councils, make laws about *yoking hogs, branding cattle, or marking rice*: but they are now called upon to determine on peace and war, treaties and negotiations with foreign states, and other subjects interesting to the peace, liberty, sovereignty, and independence of a wide extended empire. No wonder, that so little attention has been paid to learning; for ignorance was better than knowledge, while our abject and humiliating condition so effectually tended to crush the exertions of the human mind, and to extinguish a generous ardor for literary pre-eminence.

The times in which we live, and the governments we have lately adopted, all conspire to fan the sparks of genius in every breast, and kindle them into flame. When like children, we were under the guardianship of a foreign power, our limited attention was naturally engrossed by agriculture, or directed to the low pursuit of wealth. In this State, the powers of the soul, benumbed with ease and indolence, sunk us into sloth and effeminacy. Hardships, dangers, and proper opportunities give scope to active virtues, and rouse the mind to such vigorous exertions, as command the admiration of an applauding world. Rome, when she filled the earth with the terror of her arms, sometimes called her generals from the plough. In like manner, the great want of proper persons to fill high stations, has drawn from obscurity many illustrious characters, which will dazzle the world with the splendor of their names. The necessities of our country require the utmost exertions of all our powers; from which vigorous united efforts, much more improvement of the human mind is to be expected, than if we had remained in a torpid state of dependence.

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Eloquence is the child of a free state. In this form of government, as public measures are determined by a majority of votes, arguments enforced by the art of persuasion, must evermore be crowned with success. The rising patriot, therefore, who wishes the happiness of his country, will cultivate the art of public speaking. In royal governments, where the will of one or a few has the direction of public measures, the orator may harangue, but most probably will reap prosecution and imprisonment, for the fruit of his labor: Whereas, in our present happy system, the poorest school-boy may prosecute his studies with increasing ardor, from the prospect, that in a few years he may, by his improved abilities, direct the determinations of public bodies, on subjects of the most stupendous consequence.

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Thus might I go through the whole circle of arts and sciences, and shew, that while we remained British subjects, cramped and restrained by the limited views of dependence, each one of them would dwindle and decay, compared with the perfection and glory in which they will bloom and flourish, under the enlivening sunshine of Freedom and Independence.

I appeal, to the experience of all, whether they do not feel an elevation of soul growing out of the emancipation of their country, while they recollect that they are no longer subject to lawless will, but possess the powers of self-government, and are called upon to bear an active part in supporting and perpetuating the sovereignty of the United States; and in organizing them in such a manner, as will produce the greatest portion of political happiness to the present and future generations. In this elevation of soul, consists true genius, which is cramped by kingly government, and can only flourish in free states.

The attention of thousands is now called forth from their ordinary employments to subjects connected with the sovereignty and happiness of a great continent. As no one can tell to what extent, the human mind may be cultivated, so no one can foresee what great events may be brought into existence, by the exertions of so many minds expanded by close attention to subjects of such vast importance.

The royal society was founded immediately after the termination of the civil wars in England. In like manner, may we not hope, as soon as this contest is ended, that the exalted spirits of our politicians and warriors will engage in the enlargement of public happiness, by cultivating the arts of peace, promoting useful knowledge, with an ardor equal to that which first roused them to bleed in the cause of liberty and their country? Their genius sharpened by their present glorious exertions, will naturally seek for a

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continuance of suitable employment. Having, with well-tryed swords and prudent councils, secured liberty and independence for themselves and prosperity, their great souls will stoop to nothing less than concerting wise schemes of civil policy and happiness—instructing the world in useful arts—and extending the empire of science. I foresee societies formed of our heroes and statesmen, released of their present cares; some of which will teach mankind to plough, sow, plant, build, and improve the rough face of nature; while others critically examine the various productions of the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms, and teach their countrymen to “look through nature up to nature’s God.” Little has been hitherto done towards completing the natural history of America, or for the improvement of agriculture, and the peaceful arts of civil life; but who will be surprised at this, who considers, that during the long past night of 150 years, our minds were depressed, and our activity benumbed by the low prospects of subjection? Future diligence will convince the world, that past inattention was the effect of our dependant form of government.

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Every circumstance concurs to make it probable, that the arts and sciences will be cultivated, extended, and improved in independent America. They require a fresh soil, and always flourish most in new countries. A large volume of the book of nature, yet unread, is open before us, and invites our attentive perusal. Many useful plants, unknown to the most industrious botanist, waste their virtues in our desert air. Various parts of our country, hitherto untrod by the foot of any chemist, abound with different minerals. We stand on the shoulders of our predecessors, with respect to the arts that depend upon experiment and observation. The face of our country, intersected by rivers, or covered by woods and swamps, give ample scope for the improvement of mechanics, mathematics, and natural philosophy. Our free governments are the proper nurturers of rhetoric, criticism, and the arts which are founded on the philosophy of the human mind. In monarchies, an extreme degree of politeness disguises the simplicity of nature, and “sets the looks at variance and thoughts;” in republics, mankind appear as they really are, without any false coloring. In these governments therefore, attentive observers have an opportunity of knowing all the avenues of the heart, and of thoroughly understanding human nature. The great inferiority of the moderns to the ancients in fine writing, is to be referred to this veil cast over mankind, by the artificial refinements of modern monarchies. From the operation of similar causes it is hoped, that the free governments of America will produce poets, orators, critics, and historians, equal to the most celebrated of the ancient commonwealths of Greece and Italy.

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Large empires are less favorable to true philosophy than small independent states. The authority of a great author is apt, in the former case to extinguish a free enquiry, and to give currency to falsehood unexamined. The doctrines of Confucius were believed all over China, and the philosophy of Descartes, in France: But neighboring nations examined them without partiality or prepossession, exploded them both. For the same reason our separate States, jealous of the literary reputation of each other, and uninfluenced by any partial bias, will critically pry into the merit of every new opinion and system, and naught but truth will stand the test and finally prevail.

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In monarchies, favor is the source of preferment; but in our new forms of government, no one can command the suffrages of the people, unless by his superior merit and capacity.

The weight of each State in the continental scale, will ever be proportioned to the abilities of its representatives in Congress: Hence, an emulation will take place, each contending with the other, which shall produce the most accomplished statesmen. From the joint influence of all these combined causes, it may strongly be presumed, that literature will flourish in America; and, that our Independence will be an illustrious epoch, remarkable for the spreading and improvement of science.

A zeal for promoting learning, unknown in the days of our subjection, has already begun to overspread these United States. In the last session of our Assembly, three societies were incorporated for the laudable purpose of erecting seminaries of education. Nor is the noble spirit confined to us alone: Even now, amidst the tumults of war, literary institutions are forming all over the continent, which must light up such a blaze of knowledge, as cannot fail to burn, and catch, and spread, until it has finally illuminated, with the rays of science, the most brilliant retreats of ignorance and barbarity. . . .

We are the first people in the world who have had it in their own power to choose their own form of government. Constitutions were forced on other nations, by the will of their conquerors, or they were formed by accident, caprice, or the overbearing influence of prevailing parties or particular persons. But, happily for us, the bands of British government were dissolved at a time when no rank above that of freeman existed among us, and when we were in a capacity to choose for ourselves among the various forms of government, and to adopt that which best suited our country and people. Our deliberations on this occasion, were not directed by the overgrown authority of a conquering general, or the ambition of an aspiring nobility, but by the pole star of public

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good, inducing us to prefer those forms that would most effectually secure the greatest portion of political happiness to the greatest number of people. We had the example of all ages for our instruction, and many among us were well acquainted with the causes of prosperity and misery in other governments.

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In times of public tranquility, the mighty have been too apt to encroach on the rights of many; but it is the great happiness of America, that her independent constitutions were agreed upon by common consent, at a time when her leading men needed the utmost support of the multitude, and therefore could have no other object in view, but the formation of such constitutions as would best suit the people at large, and unite them most heartily in repelling common dangers.

As the strength of a people consists in their numbers, our separate States, sensible of their weakness, were actually excited by self-interest to form such free governments, as would encourage the greatest influx of inhabitants. In thus manner, an emulation has taken place in all the thirteen States, each contending with the others, who should form the freest constitution. Thus independence has been the fruitful parent of government formed on equal principles, more favorable to the liberty and happiness of the governed, than any that have yet been recorded in the annals of history.

While we were dependant on Britain our freedom was out of the question; for what is a free state but one that is governed by its own will? What shadow of liberty then could we possess, when the single NO of a King, three thousand miles distant, was sufficient to repeal any of our laws, however useful and salutary; and when we were bound in all cases whatsoever by men, in whose election we had no vote, who had an interest opposed to ours, and over whom we had no control? The wit of man could not possibly devise any mode that would unite the freedom of America with Britain's claim of unlimited supremacy. We were therefore reduced to the alternative of liberty and independence, or slavery and union. We wisely chose to cut the Gordian knot, which tied old Britain to the new, and to assume our independent station among the empires of the world. Britain, had she honestly intended it, was incapable of governing us for the great purposes of government. Our distance, and other local circumstances, made it impossible for her to be sufficiently acquainted with our situation and wants: But admitting it was in her power, we had no reason to expect that she would hold the reins of government for any other end but her own advantage. Human nature is too selfish, too ambitious, for us to expect, that one country will govern another, for any but interested purposes. To obtain the salutary ends of government, we must blend the interests of the people and their rulers; or else, the

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former will infallibly be sacrificed by the latter. Hence, the absurdity of our expecting security, liberty, and safety, while we were subjects of a state a thousand leagues distant. . . .

Our independence will naturally tend to fill our country with inhabitants. Where life, liberty and property, are well secured, and where land is easily and cheaply obtained, the natural increase of people will much exceed all European calculations. Add to this, the inhabitants of the old world becoming acquainted with our excellent forms of government, will emigrate by thousands. In their native lands, the hard-earned fruits of uninterrupted labor are scarcely equal to a scanty supply of their natural wants; and this pittance is held on a very precarious tenure: While our soil may be cheaply purchased, and will abundantly repay the toil of the husbandman, whose property no rapacious landlord dare invade. Happy America! whose extent of territory westward, is sufficient to accommodate with land, thousands and millions of the virtuous peasants, who now groan beneath tyranny and oppression in three quarters of the globe. Who would remain in Europe, a dependant on the will of an imperious landlord, when a few years industry can make an independent American freeholder?

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Such will be the fruits of our glorious revolution, that in a little time gay fields, adorned with the yellow robes of ripening harvest, will smile in the remotest depths of our western frontiers, where impassible forests now frown over the uncultivated earth. The face of our interior country will be changed from a barren wilderness, into the hospitable abodes of peace and plenty. Cities too will rise majestic to the view, on those very spots which are now howled over by savage beasts and more savage men. . . .

It is difficult to compute the number of advantages arising from our present glorious struggle; harder still, perhaps impossible, precisely to ascertain their extent. It has attracted the attention of all Europe to the nature of civil liberty, and the rights of the people. Our constitutions, pregnant with the seeds of liberty and happiness, have been translated into a variety of languages, and spread far and wide. Who can tell what great events, now concealed in the womb of time, may be brought into existence by the nations of the old world emulating our successful efforts in the cause of liberty? The thrones of tyranny and despotism will totter, when their subjects shall learn and know, by our example, that the happiness of the people is the end and object of all lawful government. The wondering world has beheld the smiles of Heaven on the numerous sons of America, resolving to die or be free: Perhaps this noble example, like a wide-spreading

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conflagration may catch from breast to breast, and extend from nation to nation, till tyranny and oppression are utterly extirpated from the face of the earth.

The tyrants and landlords of the old world, who hold a great part of their fellow-men in bondage because of their independence for land, will be obliged to relax of their arbitrary treatment, when they find that America is an asylum for freemen from all quarters of the globe. They will be cautious of adding to the oppressions of their poor subjects and tenants, lest they should force them to abandon their country for the enjoyment of the sweets of American liberty. In this view of the matter, I am confident that the cause of America is the cause of human nature, and that it will extend its influence to thousands who will never see it, and procure them a mitigation of the cruelties and oppressions imposed by their arbitrary task-masters.

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If such be the glorious consequences of independence, who can be so lost to every generous sentiment, as to wish to return under royal domination? Who would not rather count it an honor to stand among the foremost, in doing and suffering in a cause so intimately connected with the happiness of human nature? Away with all the peevish complaints of the hardness of the times, and the weight of the taxes. The prize for which we contend, would be cheaply purchased with double the expense of blood, treasure, and difficulty, it will ever cost us.

Our independent constitutions, formed on the justest principles, promise fair to give the most perfect protection to life, liberty, and property, equally to the poor and the rich. As at the conflagration of Corinth, the various melting metals running together, formed a new one, called Corinthian Brass, which was superior to any of its component parts; in like manner, perhaps it is the will of Heaven, that a new empire should be here formed, of the different nations of the old world, which will rise superior to all that have gone before it, and extend human happiness to its utmost possible limits. None can tell to what perfection the arts of government may be brought. May we not therefore expect great things from the patriots of this generation, jointly co-operating to make the new-born Republic of America as complete as possible? It is not to be hoped, that human nature will here receive her most finished touches? That the arts and sciences will be extended and improved? That religion, learning, and liberty will be diffused over the continent? And in short, that the American editions of the human mind will be more perfect than any that have yet appeared? Great things have been achieved in the infancy of states; and the ardor of a new people rising to empire and renown, with prospects that tend to elevate the human soul, encourages these flattering expectations. . . .

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The special interposition of Providence in our behalf, makes it impious to disbelieve the final establishment of our Heaven-protected independence. Can anyone seriously review the beginning, progress, and present state of the war, and not see an indisputable evidence of an overruling influence on the minds of men, preparing the way for this great event?

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As all the tops of corn in a waving field are inclined in one direction by a gust of wind; in like manner the Governor of the world has given one and the same universal bent and inclination to the whole body of our people. Is it a work of man, that thirteen States, frequently quarrelling about boundaries, clashing in interests, differing in policy, manners, customs, forms of government, and religion; scattered over an extensive continent, under the influence of a variety of local prejudices, jealousies and aversions, should all harmoniously agree, as if one mighty mind inspired the whole? . . .

It has never yet been fairly tried how far the equal principles of republican government would secure the happiness of the governed. The ancients, unacquainted with the present mode of taking the sense of the people by representatives, were too apt, in their republic meetings to run into disorder and confusion. The distinction of *Patricians* and *Plebeians*, laid the foundation of perpetual discord, in the Roman commonwealth. If the free states of Greece had been under control of a common superintending power, familiar to our Continental Congress, they could have peaceably decided their disputes, and probably would have preserved their freedom and importance to the present day. Happily for us, warned by experience, we have guarded against all these evils. No artificial distinction of ranks has been suffered to take place among us. We can peaceably convene a State in one small assembly of deputies, representing the whole in equal proportion. All disputes between the different States, and all continental concerns, are to be managed by a Congress of representatives from each. What a security for liberty, for union, for every species of political happiness! Small states are weak, and incapable of defense; large ones are unwieldy, greatly abridge natural liberty, and their general laws, from a variety of clashing interests, must frequently bear hard on many individuals: But our confederation will give us the strength and protection of a power equal to that of the greatest; at the same time that, in all our internal concerns, we have the freedom of small independent commonwealths. We are in possessions of constitutions that contain in them the excellencies of all forms of government, free from the inconveniences of each; and in one word, we bid fair to be the happiest and freest people in the world for ages yet to come.

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When I anticipate in imagination the future glory of my country, and the illustrious figure it will soon make on the theatre of the world, my heart distends with generous pride for being an American. What a substratum¹ for an empire! compared with which, the foundation of the Macedonian, the Roman, and the British, sink into insignificance. Some of our large States have territory superior to the island of Great Britain; whilst the whole together, are little inferior to Europe itself. Our Independence will people this extent of country with freemen, and will stimulate the innumerable inhabitants thereof, by every motive, to perfect the acts of government, and to extend human happiness.

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I congratulate you on our glorious prospects. Having for three long years weathered the storms of adversity, we are at length arrived in view of the calm haven of peace and security. We have laid the foundations of a new empire, which promises to enlarge itself to vast dimensions, and to give happiness to a great continent. It is now our turn to figure on the face of the earth, and in the annals of the world. The arts and sciences are planted among us, and, fostered by the auspicious influence of equal governments, are growing up to maturity; while truth and freedom flourish by their sides. Liberty, both civil and religious, in her noontide blaze, shines forth with unclouded luster on all ranks and denominations of men.

Ever since the flood, true religion, literature, arts, empire, and riches, have taken a slow and gradual course from east to west, and are now about fixing their long and favorite abode in this new western world. Our sun of political happiness is already risen, and hath lifted his head over the mountains, illuminating our hemisphere with liberty, light, and polished life. Our independence will redeem one quarter of the globe from tyranny and oppression, and consecrate it the chosen seat of truth, justice, freedom, learning, and religion. We are laying the foundation of happiness for countless millions. Generations yet unborn will bless us for the blood-bought inheritance, we are about to bequeath to them. Oh happy times! Oh glorious days! Oh kind, indulgent, bountiful Providence, that we live in this highly favored period, and have the honor of helping forward these great events, and of suffering in a cause of such infinite importance!

¹ *The material of which something is made and from which it derives its special qualities.*