

INAUGURAL ADDRESS

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Called from a retirement which I had supposed was to continue for the residue of my life, to fill the Chief Executive office of this great and free nation...

It was the remark of a Roman Consul, in an early period of that celebrated Republic, that a most striking contrast was observable in the conduct of candidates for offices of power and trust before and after obtaining them...

Although the fiat of the people has gone forth, proclaiming me the Chief Magistrate of this glorious Union, nothing upon their part remaining to be done, it may be thought that a motive may exist to keep up the delusion under which they may be supposed to have acted...

If, however, any may be my present purpose to realize the expectations of a unanimous and cheering hope, I too well understand the infirmities of human nature, and the dangerous temptations to which I shall be exposed...

The broad foundation upon which our Constitution rests, being the people—a breath of theirs having made, as a breath can unmake, change, or modify it—it can be assigned to none of the great divisions of Government but that of Democracy.

But if there is danger to public liberty from the acknowledged defects of the Constitution, in the want of limit to the continuance of the Executive power in the same hands...

The boasted privilege of a Roman citizen was to own a sword only against a petty provincial ruler, whilst the proud Demagogue of Athens could console himself under a sentence of death, for a supposed violation of the national faith...

Notwithstanding the limited sovereignty possessed by the people of the United States, and the restricted grant of power to the Government which they have adopted, enough has been given to accomplish all the objects for which it was created.

have ultimately received the sanction of a majority of the people. And the fact, that many of our statesmen, most distinguished for talent and patriotism, have been at one time or other of their political career, on both sides of each of the most warmly disputed questions, forces upon us the inference that the errors, if errors there were, are attributable to the intrinsic difficulty, in many instances, of ascertaining the intentions of the framers of the Constitution...

When the Constitution of the United States first came from the hands of the Convention which formed it, many of the sternest Republicans of the day were alarmed at the extent of the power which had been granted to the Federal Government, and more particularly of that portion which had been assigned to the Executive branch.

I proceed to state, in as summary a manner as I can, my opinion of the sources of the evils which have been so extensively complained of, and the correctives which may be applied.

As, however, one mode of correction is in the power of every President, and consequently in mine, it would be useless, and perhaps invidious, to enumerate the evils of which, in the opinion of my fellow citizens, this error of the sages who framed the Constitution may have been the source, and the bitter fruits which we are still to gather from it, if it continues to disgrace our system.

But if there is danger to public liberty from the acknowledged defects of the Constitution, in the want of limit to the continuance of the Executive power in the same hands, there is I apprehend, not much less from a misconstruction of that instrument, as it regards the powers actually given.

It may be said, indeed, that the Constitution has given to the Executive the power to annul the acts of the legislative body, by refusing to them his assent. So a similar power has necessarily resulted from that instrument to the Judiciary; and yet the Judiciary forms no part of the Legislature.

At the period of the formation of the Constitution, the principle does not appear to have enjoyed much favor in the State Governments. It existed but in two; and in one of these there was a plural Executive. If we would search for the motives which operated upon the purely patriotic and enlightened assembly which framed the Constitution, for the adoption of a provision so apparently repugnant to the leading Democratic principle that the majority should govern, we must reject the idea that they anticipated from it any benefit to the ordinary course of legislation.

capitol, in the centre of the country, could better understand the wants and wishes of the people than their own immediate representatives, who spend a part of every year among them, living with them, often laboring with them, and bound to them by the triple tie of interest, duty, and affection.

There is another ground for the adoption of the veto principle, which had probably more influence in recommending it to the Convention than any other. I refer to the security which it gives to the just and equitable action of the Legislature upon all parts of the Union.

Upwards of half a century has elapsed since the adoption of our present form of Government. It would be an object more highly desirable than the gratification of the curiosity of speculative statesmen, if its precise situation could be ascertained, a fair exhibit made of the operations of each of its Departments, of the powers which they respectively claim and exercise, of the collisions which have occurred between them, or between the whole Government and those of the States, or either of them.

Connected with this subject is the character of the currency: The idea of making it exclusively metallic, however well intended, appears to me to be fraught with more fatal consequences than any other scheme, having no relation to the personal rights of the citizen, that has ever been devised.

Amongst the other duties of a delicate character which the President is called upon to perform, is the supervision of the government of the Territories of the United States. Those of them which are destined to become members of our great political family, are compensated by their rapid progress from infancy to manhood, by the partial and temporary deprivation of their political rights.

of the most approved writers upon that species of mixed monarchy, which in modern Europe, is termed monarchy, in contradistinction to despotism, is correct, there was wanting no other addition to the powers of our Chief Magistrate to stamp a monarchical character on our Government, but the control of the public finances.

There is no part of the means placed in the hands of the Executive which might be used with greater effect, for unallowed purposes, than the control of the public press. The maxim which our ancestors derived from the mother country, that "the freedom of the press is the great bulwark of civil and religious liberty," is one of the most precious legacies which they have left us.

Upon another occasion I have given my opinion, at some length, upon the impropriety of Executive interference in the legislation of Congress. That the article in the Constitution making it the duty of the President to communicate information, and authorizing him to recommend measures, was not intended to make him the source of Legislation, and in particular, that he should never be looked to for schemes of finance, it would be very strange indeed, that the Constitution should have strictly forbidden one branch of the Legislature from interfering in the origination of such bills, and that it should be considered proper that an altogether different department of the Government should be permitted to do so.

It may be observed, however, that organized associations of citizens, requiring compliance with their wishes, too much resemble the recommendations of Athens to her allies—supported by an armed and powerful fleet. It was indeed, to the ambition of the leading States to control the domestic concerns of the others, that the destruction of that celebrated confederacy, and subsequently of all its members, is mainly to be attributed.

sons are to be found, who, under a settled system of policy, are deprived of many important political privileges, without any inspiring hopes as to the future. Their only consolation, under such circumstances of such deprivations, is that of the devoted secure tranquility and safety within. Are these any of their countrymen who would submit them to greater sacrifices, to any other humiliations than those essentially necessary to the security of the object for which they were thus separated from their fellow-citizens?

The people of the District of Columbia are not the subjects of the people of the States, but free American citizens. Being in the latter condition when the Constitution was formed, no words used in it as instruments could have been intended to deprive them of that character.

I have spoken of the necessity of keeping the respective Departments of the Government, as well as all the other authorities of our country, within their appropriate orbits. This is a matter of difficulty in some cases, as the powers which they respectively claim are often not defined by very distinct lines. Mischievous, however, in their tendency, as collisions of this kind may be, those which arise between the respective communities, which for certain purposes compose one nation, are much more so; for no such union can long exist without the careful culture of those feelings of confidence and affection which are the effective bonds of union between free and confederated States.

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Our Confederacy, fellow citizens, can only be preserved by the same forbearance. Our citizens must be content with the exercise of the powers which the Constitution clothes them. The attempt of those of one State to control the domestic institutions of another, can only result in feelings of distrust and jealousy, the certain harbinger of domestic violence, civil war, and the ultimate destruction of our free institutions.