

An abridged version of

"American Independence"

Samuel Adams

August 1, 1776

Samuel Adams gave a long speech titled, "American Independence," less than one month after the Declaration of Independence was signed. Although Adams was specifically referring to the oppression of the British government at the time, what he says about freedom and government involvement in private life is timeless. In this speech, Samuel Adams also makes some important points about religious liberty and the role of God in the founding of this country. The text of this abridged version of his speech, as well as a link to the entire speech, can be found on our website, KRSF.NET.

Our forefathers threw off the yoke of popery in religion: for you is reserved the honor of leveling the popery of politics. They opened the Bible to all, and maintained the capacity of every man to judge for himself in religion. Are we sufficient for the comprehension of the sublimest spiritual truths, and unequal to material and temporal ones? Heaven hath trusted us with the management of things for eternity, and man denies us ability to judge of the present, or to know from our feelings the experience that will make us happy. ... This day, I trust the reign of political protestantism will commence. We have explored the temple of royalty, and found that the idol we have bowed down to, has eyes which see not, ears that hear not our prayers, and a heart like the nether millstone. We have this day restored the Sovereign, to whom alone men ought to be obedient. He reigns in Heaven, and with a propitious eye beholds his subjects assuming that freedom of thought, and dignity of self-direction which He bestowed on them. From the rising to the setting sun, may His kingdom come.

Having been a slave to the influence of opinions early acquired, and distinctions generally received, I am ever inclined not to despise but pity those who are yet in darkness. But to the eye of reason what can be more clear, than that all men have an equal right to happiness? ...

Were the talents and virtues, which Heaven has bestowed on men, given merely to make them more obedient drudges, to be sacrificed to the follies and ambition of a few? or, were not the noble gifts so equally dispensed with a divine purpose and law, that they should as nearly as possible be equally exerted, and the blessings of Providence be equally enjoyed by all? Away then, with those absurd systems, which, to gratify the pride of a few, debase the greatest part of our species below the order of men. What an affront to the King of the universe, to maintain that the happiness of a monster, sunk in debauchery and spreading desolation and murder among men ... is more precious in his sight than that of millions of his suppliant creatures, who do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with their God! No! in the judgment of Heaven there is no other superiority among men, than a superiority in wisdom and virtue. And can we have a safer model in forming ours? The Deity then has not given any order or family of men authority over others ...

Men who content themselves with the semblance of truth, and a display of words, talk much of our obligations to Great Britain for protection! Had she a single eye to our advantage? A nation of shopkeepers is very seldom so disinterested. Let us not be so amused with words: the extension of her commerce was her object. When she defended our coasts, she fought for her customers, and convoyed our ships loaded with wealth, which we had acquired for her by our industry. She has treated us as beasts of burden, whom the lordly masters cherish that they may carry a greater load. Let us inquire also against whom she has protected us? Against her own enemies with whom we

had no quarrel, or only on her account, and against whom we always readily exerted our wealth and strength when they were required.

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Did the protection we received annul our rights as men, and lay us under an obligation of being miserable?

Who among you, my countrymen, that is a father, would claim authority to make your child a slave because you had nourished him in his infancy?

It is a strange species of generosity which requires a return infinitely more valuable than anything it could have bestowed: that demands as a reward for a defense of our property, a surrender of those inestimable privileges, to the arbitrary will of vindictive tyrants, which alone give value to that very property.

...

[God,] The Author of Nature[,] directs all his operations to the production of the greatest good, and has made human virtue to consist in a disposition and conduct which tend to the common felicity of his creatures. ... Men associate for their mutual advantage. Hence the good and happiness of the members, that is, the majority of the members of any state, is the great standard by which everything relating to that state must finally be determined; ...

It is inconsistent with common-sense to imagine that any people would ever think of settling in a distant country on ... condition ... that the people from whom they withdrew should forever be masters of their property, and have power to subject them to any modes of government they pleased.

We are now on this continent, to the astonishment of the world, three millions of souls united in one common cause. We have large armies, well disciplined and appointed, with commanders inferior to none in military skill, and superior in activity and zeal. We are furnished with arsenals and stores beyond our most sanguine expectations, and foreign nations are waiting to crown our success by their alliances. There are instances of, I would say, an almost astonishing Providence in our favor: our success has staggered our enemies, and almost given faith to infidels: so that we may truly say it is not our own arm which has saved us.

The hand of heaven appears to have led us on to be, perhaps, humble instruments and means in the great providential dispensation which is completing. We have fled from the political Sodom; let us not look back, lest we perish and become a monument of infamy and derision to the world! ...

From the day on which an accommodation takes place between England and America, on any other terms than as independent States, I shall date the ruin of this country. ... If we love wealth better than liberty, the tranquility of servitude, than the animating contest of freedom - go from us in peace. We ask not your counsels or arms. Crouch down and lick the hands which feed you. May your chains set lightly upon you, and may posterity forget that ye were our countrymen.

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As the administration of government requires firmer and more numerous supports in proportion to its extent, the burdens imposed on us would be excessive, and we should have the melancholy

prospect of their increasing on our posterity. The scale of officers, from the rapacious and needy commissioner, to the haughty governor, and from the governor with his hungry train, to perhaps a licentious and prodigal viceroy, must be upheld by you and your children. The fleets and armies which will be employed to silence your murmurs and complaints must be supported by the fruits of your industry.

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Other nations have received their laws from conquerors: some are indebted for a constitution to the sufferings of their ancestors through revolving centuries. The people of this country, alone, have formally and deliberately chosen a Government for themselves, and with open and uninfluenced consent, bound themselves into a social compact. Here, no man proclaims his birth or wealth as a title to honorable distinction, or to sanctify ignorance and vice with the name of hereditary authority. ...

Some who would persuade us that they have tender feelings for future generations, while they are insensible to the happiness of the present, are perpetually foreboding a train of dissensions under our popular system. Such men's reasoning amounts to this - give up all that is valuable to Great Britain, and then you will have no inducements to quarrel among yourselves; or suffer yourselves to be chained down by your enemies, that you may not be able to fight with your friends.

This is an insult on your virtue as well as your common sense. Your unanimity this day and through the course of the war, is a decisive refutation of such invidious predictions. Our enemies have already had evidence that our present constitution contains in it the justice and ardor of freedom, and the wisdom and vigor of the most absolute system. When the law is the will of the people, it will be uniform and coherent: but fluctuation, contradiction, and inconsistency of councils must be expected under those governments where every revolution in the ministry of a court produces one in the state. Such being the folly and pride of all ministers, that they ever pursue measures directly opposite to those of their predecessors.

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And, brethren and fellow-countrymen, if it was ever granted to mortals to trace the designs of Providence, and interpret its manifestations in favor of their cause, we may, with humility of soul, cry out, Not unto us, not unto us, but to thy name be the praise. The confusion of the devices among our enemies, and the rage of the elements against them, have done almost as much towards our success as either our councils or our arms.

...

[T]he gradual advances of our oppressors enabling us to prepare for our defense, the unusual fertility of our lands and clemency of the seasons, the success which at first attended our feeble arms, producing unanimity among our friends and reducing our internal foes to acquiescence - these are all strong and palpable marks and assurances, that Providence is yet gracious unto Zion, that it will turn away the captivity of Jacob.

Our glorious reformers when they broke through the fetters of superstition, effected more than could be expected from an age so darkened. But they left much to be done by their posterity. They lopped off, indeed, some of the branches of popery, but they left the root and stock when they left us under the domination of human systems and decisions, usurping the infallibility which can be attributed to Revelation alone. They dethroned one usurper only to raise up another: they refused allegiance to

the Pope, only to place the civil magistrate in the throne of Christ, vested with authority to enact laws, and inflict penalties in his kingdom. And if we now cast our eyes over the nations of the earth we shall find, that instead of possessing the pure religion of the gospel, they may be divided either into infidels who deny the truth, or politicians who make religion a stalking horse for their ambition, or professors, who walk in the trammels of orthodoxy, and are more attentive to traditions and ordinances of men than to the oracles of truth.

The civil magistrate has everywhere contaminated religion by making it an engine of policy: and freedom of thought and the right of private judgment, in matters of conscience, driven from every other corner of the earth, direct their course to this happy country as their last asylum. Let us cherish the noble guests, and shelter them under the wings of a universal toleration. Be this the seat of unbounded religious freedom. She will bring with her in her train, industry, wisdom, and commerce. She thrives most when left to shoot forth in her natural luxuriance, and asks from human policy, only not to be checked in her growth by artificial encouragements.

Thus by the beneficence of Providence, we shall behold our empire arising, founded on justice and the voluntary consent of the people, and giving full scope to the exercise of those faculties and rights which most ennoble our species. Besides the advantages of liberty and the most equal constitution, heaven has given us a country with every variety of climate and soil, pouring forth in abundance whatever is necessary for the support, comfort, and strength of a nation. Within our own borders we possess all the means of sustenance, defense, and commerce; at the same time, these advantages are so distributed among the different States of this continent, as if nature had in view to proclaim to us - Be united among yourselves, and you will want nothing from the rest of the world.

The more northern States most amply supply us with every necessary, and many of the luxuries of life - with iron, timber, and masts for ships of commerce or of war: with flax for the manufacture of linen, and seed either for oil or exportation.

So abundant are our harvests, that almost every part raises more than double the quantity of grain requisite for the support of the inhabitants. From Georgia and the Carolinas, we have, as well for our own wants as for the purpose of supplying the wants of other powers, indigo, rice, hemp, naval stores, and lumber.

Virginia and Maryland teem with wheat, Indian corn, and tobacco. Every nation whose harvest is precarious, or whose lands yield not those commodities, which we cultivate, will gladly exchange their superfluities and manufactures for ours.

...

These natural advantages will enable us to remain independent of the world, or make it the interest of European powers to court our alliance, and aid in protecting us against the invasions of others. ...

If there is any man so base or so weak as to prefer a dependence on Great Britain to the dignity and happiness of living a member of a free and independent nation - let me tell him that ...[w]e have now no other alternative than independence, or the most ignominious and galling servitude. ... Recollect who are the men that demand your submission; to whose decrees you are invited to pay obedience! Men who, unmindful of their relation to you as brethren, of your long implicit submission to their laws; of the sacrifice which you and your forefathers made of your natural advantages for commerce to their avarice - formed a deliberate plan to wrest from you the small pittance of property which they had permitted you to acquire. Remember that the men who wish to rule over you, are they who, in pursuit of this plan of despotism, annulled the sacred contracts

which had been made with your ancestors: conveyed into your cities a mercenary soldiery to compel you to submission by insult and murder - who called your patience, cowardice; your piety, hypocrisy."

Countrymen! the men who now invite you to surrender your rights into their hands, are the men ... to whom we are exhorted to sacrifice the blessings which Providence holds out to us - the happiness, the dignity of uncontrolled freedom and independence.

...

Our Union is now complete; our constitution composed, established, and approved. You are now the guardians of your own liberties. We may justly address you, as the Decemviri did the Romans, and say - "Nothing that we propose can pass into a law without your consent. Be yourselves, O Americans, the authors of those laws on which your happiness depends."

... The hearts of your soldiers beat high with the spirit of freedom - they are animated with the justice of their cause, and while they grasp their swords, can look up to heaven for assistance. Your adversaries are composed of wretches who laugh at the rights of humanity, who turn religion into derision, and would, for higher wages, direct their swords against their leaders or their country. Go on, then, in your generous enterprise, with gratitude to heaven, for past success, and confidence of it in the future. For my own part, I ask no greater blessing than to share with you the common danger and common glory. If I have a wish dearer to my soul, than that my ashes may be mingled with those of a Warren and Montgomery - it is - that these American States may never cease to be free and independent! ¹

¹ <http://www.revolutionary-war-and-beyond.com/american-independence-speech-by-samuel-adams-august-1-1776.html>