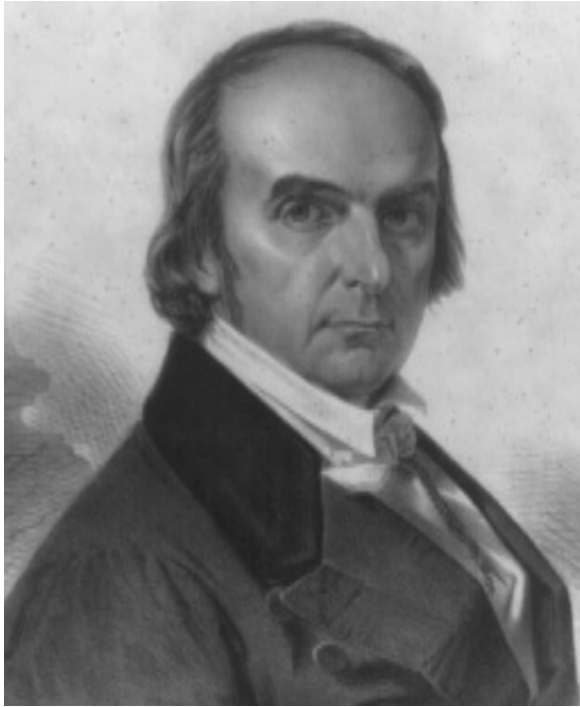


Daniel Webster - Reception at Madison - 1837



“On the diffusion of education among the people rest the preservation and perpetuation of our free institutions. I apprehend no danger to our country from a foreign foe. The prospect of a war with any powerful nation is too remote to be a matter of calculation. Besides, there is no nation on earth powerful enough to accomplish our overthrow. Our destruction, should it come at all, will be from another quarter. From the inattention of the people to the concerns of their government, from their carelessness and negligence, I must confess that I do apprehend some danger. I fear that they may place too implicit a confidence in their public servants, and fail properly to scrutinize their conduct; that in this way they may be made the dupes of designing men, and become the instruments of their own undoing. Make them intelligent, and they will be vigilant; give them the means of detecting the wrong, and they will apply the remedy. ...

I regard it [Constitution] as the work of the purest patriots and wisest statesmen that ever existed, aided by the smiles of a benignant Providence for when we regard it as a system of government growing out of the discordant opinions and conflicting interests of thirteen independent States, it almost appears a Divine interposition in our behalf. ... the hand that destroys the Constitution rends our Union asunder for ever.”

Editors Note: Noah Webster (1758–1843) was one of the youngest founding fathers. He is best known for Blue Back Speller which taught grammar and spelling to students for over 100 years and Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary, the first dictionary in America. Noah Webster’s 1828 edition of Webster’s American Dictionary of the English Language was he crowning achievement. This work was the refinement of years of diligent work, which had driven him to learn many languages to complete. The 1828 edition and previous work defined the meanings many of the words the Founding Fathers used in both the Revolutionary War and founding documents. The Preface to the 1828 edition states, “In my view, the Christian religion is the most important and one of the first things in which all children, under a free government ought to be instructed. ...No truth is more evident to my mind than that the Christian religion must be the basis of any government intended to secure the rights and privileges of a free people.”

Even a religious man like Noah Webster was swept away by The Second Great Awakening (1790–1840) as the Holy Spirit descended for a second time upon the Thirteen Colonies. His letter to Thomas Dawes gives us an insightful look into the life and religious conversion of one of the great Founding Fathers.

Reception at Madison, Speech delivered at Madison, in the State of Indiana, on the 1st of June, 1837.

IF, fellow-citizens, I can make myself heard by this numerous assembly, speaking, as I do, in the open air, I will return to you my heartfelt thanks for the kindness you have shown me. I come among you a stranger. On the day before yesterday I placed my foot, for the first time, on the soil of the great and growing State of Indiana. Although I have lived on terms of great intimacy and friendship with several Western gentlemen, members of Congress, among whom is your estimable townsman near me, (Governor Hendricks,) I have never before had an opportunity of seeing and forming an acquaintance for myself with my fellow citizens of this section of the Union. I travel for this purpose. I confess that I regard with astonishment the evidences of intelligence, enterprise, and refinement every where exhibited around me, when I think of the short time that has elapsed since the spot where I stand was a howling wilderness. Since I entered public life, this State was unknown as a political government. All the country west of the Alleghanies and north-west of the Ohio constituted but one Territory, entitled to a single delegate in the councils of the nation, having the right to speak, but not to vote. Since then, the States of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and the long strip of country known as the Territory of Wisconsin, have been carved out of it. Indiana, which numbers but twenty years since the commencement of her political existence, contains a population of six hundred thousand, equal to the population of Massachusetts, a State of two hundred years' duration. In age she is an infant; in strength and resources a giant. Her appearance indicates the full vigor of maturity, while, measured by her years, she is yet in the cradle.

Although I reside in a part of the country most remote from you, although I have seen you spring into existence and advance with rapid strides in the march of prosperity and power, until your population has equalled that of my own State, which you far surpass in fertility of soil and mildness of climate; yet these things have excited in me no feelings of dislike, or jealousy, or envy. On the contrary, I have witnessed them with pride and pleasure, when I saw in them the growth of a member of our common country; and with feelings warmer than pride, when I recollect that there are those among you who are bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh, who inherit my name and share my blood. When they came to me for my advice, before leaving their hearths and homes, I did not oppose their desires or suggest difficulties in their paths. I told them, " Go and join your destinies with those hardy pinneers of the West, share their hardships, and partake their fortunes; go, and God speed you; only carry with you your own good principles, and whether the sun rises on you, or sets on you, let it warm American hearts in your bosoms."

Though, as I observed, I live in a part of the country most remote from you, fellow-citizens, I have been no inattentive observer of your history and progress. I have heard of the reports made in your legislature, and the acts passed in pursuance thereof. I have traced on the map of your State the routes marked out for extensive turnpikes, railroads, and canals. I have read with pleasure the acts providing for their establishment and completion. I do not pretend to offer you my advice; it would perhaps be presumptuous; but you will permit me to say, that, as far as I have examined them, they are conceived in wisdom, and evince great political skill and foresight. You have commenced at the right point. To open the means of communication, by which man may, when he wishes, see the face of his friend, should be the first work of every government. We may theorize and speculate about it as we please—we may understand all the metaphysics of politics; but if men are confined to the narrow spot they inhabit, because they have not the means of travelling when they please, they must go back to a state of barbarism. Social intercourse is the corner stone of good government. The nation that provides no

means for the improvement of its communications, has not taken the first step in civilization. Go on, then, as you have begun; prosecute your works with energy and perseverance; be not daunted by imaginary difficulties, be not deterred by exaggerated calculations of their cost. Go on, open your wilderness to the sun; turn up the soil ; and in the wide-spread and highly-cultivated fields, the smiling villages, and the busy towns that will spring up from the bosom of the desert, you will reap a rich reward for your investment and industry.

Another of the paramount objects of government, to which I rejoice to see that you have turned your attention, is education. I speak not of college education, nor of academy education, though they are of great importance; I speak of free school education, common school education.

Among the luminaries in the sky of New England, the burning lights which throw intelligence and happiness on her people, the first and most brilliant is her system of common schools. I congratulate myself that my first speech on entering public life was in their behalf. Education, to accomplish the ends of good government, should be universally diffused. Open the doors of the school house to all the children in the land. Let no man have the excuse of poverty for not educating his own offspring. Place the means of education within his reach, and if they remain in ignorance, be it his own reproach. If one object of the expenditure of your revenue be protection against crime, you could not devise a better or cheaper means of obtaining it. Other nations spend their money in providing means for its detection and punishment, but it is the principle of our government to provide for its never occurring. The one acts by *coercion*, the other by *prevention*. On the diffusion of education among the people rest the preservation and perpetuation of our free institutions. I apprehend no danger to our country from a foreign foe. The prospect of a war with any powerful nation is too remote to be a matter of calculation. Besides, there is no nation on earth powerful enough to accomplish our overthrow. Our destruction, should it come at all, will be from another quarter. From the inattention of the people to the concerns of their government, from their carelessness and negligence, I must confess that I do apprehend some danger. I fear that they may place too implicit a confidence in their public servants, and fail properly to scrutinize their conduct; that in this way they may be made the dupes of designing men, and become the instruments of their own undoing. Make them intelligent, and they will be vigilant; give them the means of detecting the wrong, and they will apply the remedy.

The gentleman who has just addressed me in such flattering, hut unmerited terms, has been pleased to make kind mention of my devotion to the Constitution, and my humble efforts in its support. I claim no merit on that account.

It results from my sense of its surpassing excellences, which must strike every man who attentively and impartially examines it. I regard it as the work of the purest patriots and wisest statesmen that ever existed, aided by the smiles of a benignant Providence; for when we regard it as a system of government growing out of the discordant opinions and conflicting interests of thirteen independent States, it almost appears a Divine interposition in our behalf. I have always, with the utmost zeal and the moderate abilities I possess, striven to prevent its infraction in the slightest particular. I believed, if that bond of union were broken, we should never again be a united people. Where, among all the political thinkers, the constitution makers and the constitution menders of the day, could we find a man to make us another? Who would even venture to propose a reunion? Where would be the starting point, and what the plan? I do not expect miracles to follow each other. No plan could be proposed that would be adopted ; the hand that destroys the Constitution rends our Union asunder for ever.

My friend has been pleased to remember, in his address, my humble support of the constitutional right of Congress to improve the navigation of our great internal rivers, and to construct roads through

the different States. It is well known that few persons entertain stronger opinions on this subject than myself. Believing that the great object of the Union is to secure the general safety and promote the general welfare, and that the Constitution was designed to point out the means of accomplishing these ends, I have always been in favor of such measures as I deemed for the general benefit, under the restrictions and limitations prescribed by the Constitution itself. I supported them with my voice, and my vote, not because they were for the benefit of the West, but because they were for the benefit of the whole country. That they are local in their advantages, as well as in their construction, is an objection that has been and will be urged against every measure of the kind. In a country so widely extended as ours, so diversified in its interests and in the character of its people, it is impossible that the operation of any measure should affect all alike. Each has its own peculiar interest, whose advancement it seeks; we have the sea coast, and you the noble river that flows at your feet. So it must ever be. Go to the smallest government in the world, the republic of San Marino, in Italy, possessing a territory of but ten miles square, and you will find its citizens, separated but by a few miles, having some interests which, on account of local situation, are separate and distinct. There is not on the face of the earth a plain, five miles in extent, whose inhabitants are all the same in their pursuits and pleasures. Some will live on a creek, others near a hill, which, when any measure is proposed for the general benefit, will give rise to jarring claims and opposing interests. In such cases, it has always appeared to me that the point to be examined was, whether the principle was general. If the principle were general, although the application might be partial, I cheerfully and zealously gave it my support. When an objection has been made to an appropriation for clearing the snags out of the Ohio River, I have answered it with the question, “ Would you not vote for an appropriation to clear the Atlantic Ocean of snags, were the navigation of your coast thus obstructed? The people of the West contribute their portion of the revenue to fortify your sea coast, and erect piers, and harbors, and lighthouses, from which they derive a remote benefit; and why not contribute yours to improve the navigation of a river whose commerce enriches the whole country? “

In conclusion, my fellow-citizens, I return you my thanks for the patience and attention with which you have listened to me, and pray the beneficent Giver of all good, that he may keep you under the shadow of his wing, and continue to bless you with peace and prosperity.¹

Endnotes:

1. Webster, Daniel, The Union Text Book, Page 256-262; PG.G Evans, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1860. Photo, courtesy of the Library of Congress, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov>

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