

## George Bancroft

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### **President of the Association, 1885–86**

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## **On Self-Government**

Brothers of the American Historical Association:

I welcome you to this third anniversary of your existence. You, who, in our universities, instruct the coining generation in the history of their race; you, who break from duties in Church or in State, to show your love for your fellow-men by your zeal in the study of their progress; you, who for a moment throw aside the cares of the press, the toil of authorship, or the delights of study in retirement, in the name of the Association I bid joy to you all at your renewed presence with one another.

The object of our pursuit is one of the grandest that solicit the attention of man. The movement of states over the scene of ever-succeeding action is like the march of so many armies with their various civilizations for their banners: they themselves have faded away; their career, their enduring contributions to the sum of human knowledge, their men of transcendent genius, such as are vouchsafed to the race at great intervals of centuries, all come within the range of our pursuits. Moreover, we are nearest of kin to the students of moral philosophy.

The movements of humanity are governed by law. It is true that the sparrow, when the time comes for its fall to the ground, obeys a law that pervades the Kosmos; and it is equally true that every hair in the bead of a human being is numbered. The growth and decay of empire, the morning lustre of a dynasty and its fall from the sky before noonday; the first turning of a sod for the foundation of a city to the footsteps of a traveller searching for its place which time has hidden, all proceed as it is ordered. The character of science attaches to our pursuits.

The difficulty of discerning the presence of law in the actions of rational beings grows out of the infinite variety of the movements of the human will and of the motives by which it may be swayed. In the department of history the difficulty of judgment is diminished, for history deals with the past, which is beyond the reach of change. The discerning statesman may forecast the character of coming events, and

form a plan of action with a reasonable confidence in its wisdom; but the critic, who does not bring with him the spirit of candid inquiry, cannot comprehend the institutions that are forming themselves before his eyes.

In all antiquity no true democracy existed as a government; yet our national organization accepted elements from the political organizations of the Greeks; it counts Christianity among its sources; it profited by the experience of the Roman empire in establishing inter-citizenship and domestic free trade. It was essentially imbued with the spirit of the Reformation, which rose up in Germany with Luther and was developed by Calvin in France and in Switzerland. It drew from England ideas of personal liberty and elements suited to the form of government which it had to frame. In its colonial period it derived from its own experience an opulence of forms of representative government. The American people have cause to be grateful to preceding generations for their large inheritance. Here is no rule of "the many"; it is the government by the people, the government by all; were individuals or a class to set themselves apart, they would constitute only a sect. A government that is less than government by the entire people will by its very nature incline to the benefit of classes. The government of our "new nation" is rightly described by one of its greatest exponents as "government of the people, by the people, for the people."

The singular combination of the best elements of the past in our institutions favored our increase of territory. Our fathers expressed their vast aspirations in the Articles of Confederation. We never extended our limits in the direction which they pointed out; but it was not long before we reached the Gulf of Mexico. When a foothold in the West India Islands was offered to the United States, they, after reflection, refused to plant their foot on the richest of them all, and have never departed from the decision not to enter the tropics. The completeness of the country was not established till a President of the United States succeeded by one treaty with Great Britain and another with Mexico to enter into the peaceful possession of the continent for sixteen degrees on the Pacific. It was this settlement which perfected the Union. From that moment its majesty and safety rested on the line of east and west; and as far as the human eye can see we may in consequence hold our Union in perpetuity.

In the first Congress slavery brought danger to the Union; under the Presidency of John Adams, it took steps for an early dissolution; it was quieted for a while by Jefferson and his immediate successors; but from the moment that the country advanced its western boundary to the Pacific, the dissolution of the Union became impossible. The will of the people was able to exact its preservation; but what an infinity of power was necessary to carry out that will! To express it I adopt the words of an English writer, who is a master of his own noble language, a thorough scholar, and honored as an historian in both hemispheres. "There are certain things," he says, "which only democracy can execute. No monarchy or privileged order could have dared to take the measures necessary to maintain the American Union. They would infallibly have wrecked themselves in the effort."<sup>1</sup>

We may ask, What is the spirit of the government which has saved its life by its incomparable energy? Because the United States know their Constitution to be for them the ripened fruit of time, they have never been propagandists. Washington, in the letters in which he declares in favor of republican governments for the United States, gives as his reason that no other government is suited to their social and political condition. The United States have never importuned or encouraged others to adopt their principles of government prematurely.

What traits belong specially to government by the people? Montesquieu, the upright magistrate, who, living under despotic rule, nevertheless insisted that by the Constitution of France its king was not absolute, sought in the records of history to discern the tendency of each great form of government, and has left his testimony that “the spirit of monarchy is war and aggrandizement; the spirit of a republic is peace and moderation.” “L’esprit de la monarchie est la guerre et l’agrandissement: l’esprit de la république est la paix et la modération.”<sup>2</sup>

The necessary conditions of the American Union consisted in an absolute equality, of rights among the States. It was hard for some of the original thirteen to think that territories, far in the interior, should be absolutely equal with the original thirteen, and the centre of power be ultimately transferred to the West, which was then a wilderness; but the Voice of wisdom and the counsels of hope prevailed, and when the only irresistible cause of antagonism in our country was removed, there ceased to be any motive for dissension between the North and the South. There never was and never can be a collision between the West and the East, for they both alike wish the highways between the oceans to be free; and by universal consent, from the remotest point where Maine touches Canada to the southwestern line of California, from the orange groves of Florida to the strait where the Pacific Ocean drives its deep tide swiftly between its walls of basalt, there is for the inhabitants the one simple rule of universal inter-citizenship and universal free trade under government of the people by the people.

The people of the United States are the most conservative in the world, for they cherish self-government as the most precious of possessions. They make laws deliberately only after long reflection, and they only make laws within the limits of their Constitutions. From end to end of the United States two houses of legislation exist as the rule, and the executive possesses a veto. A Constitution may be changed only after a reference in some form to every individual of the community.

If the question may be asked, Does a king or a people give the most honest support to the institutions which they both have accepted, we must turn to France for a reply. Once in a reconstruction of its government a Bourbon was enthroned in France as a constitutional king; the first successor to the throne conspired against that settlement and was driven into exile, all the world pronouncing the judgment that he justly fell. Next came the house of Orleans, holding up the flag of a monarchy that should be the best of republics. Its king, in many things a wise and faithful man, made the interest of his family paramount to the interest of the nation, and in legislation obstinately refused to extend the suffrage so as to conform it to the principle on which he had received the crown. And he, too, having been false to the principle on which he accepted power, provoked an insurrection, and in the judgment of mankind justly fell. A member of another dynasty, being called to the presidency of the French republic, reached at the imperial crown, and carried France into an unequal and wilful war with its neighbor, bringing utter defeat on himself and the heaviest sorrows and losses on the generous land which he had ruled.

The form of government of “the new nation” seems to the world to be but of yesterday; and it is so; yet this government by the people, for the people is the oldest one now existing in the civilized world this side of the empire of the Czars. Since the inauguration of Washington, Portugal and Spain have passed from irresponsible monarchy to constitutional rule. The republic of Holland has disappeared. In France government by the people exists by the deliberate choice of the nation. Germany, which in the middle of the last century was divided into hundreds of sovereignties, has formed itself into one consolidated government with a parliament elected by

universal suffrage. The republic of Kosciuszko has utterly perished. Switzerland has thrown aside its mediæval form of confederacy, and is now a true government by the people. It would be hard to count the revolutions which the Grand Duchy of Austria has undergone within the last ninety-six years. Italy, thank God, is become one. The United Kingdom, too, is revolutionized. The case of England is simply this: its king and its church long time ago broke from the Roman see; many of the people accepted the Reformation; Englishmen, including dissenters, were driven through a series of conflicts to the attempt to found the government of the people by the people; the attempt was premature and failed. The court again conspired against the rights of Englishmen. The people, especially the dissenters, kept themselves in the background, and in 1688 intrusted the conduct of a new British revolution to the aristocracy. The price taken by the aristocracy for success was their own all but absolute rule of Great Britain. The House of Commons became master of the king; and that master of the king was elected chiefly on the dictation of the majority of the land-owners. The system was secured by bringing in a new dynasty, which had only a parliamentary title to the Crown. This was the revolution of 1688.

The aristocracy of England seemed to have founded their power upon an everlasting rock; but the great expansion of industry and commerce, and the consequent immense accumulation of wealth, soon compelled them to make a place by their side for the moneyed interest. Commerce and industry went on; in due time the example of the United States had its influence in the world; France excited rivalry by once more entering upon the career of a free state; at last the reform of the British House of Commons began; next the corn laws were repealed; then science by its successful inventions almost annihilated the cost of transportation of articles, wheat among the rest, from continent to continent, so that land in England lost its high value; the basis on which the rule of the British land-holders rested began to totter; and now, in the fulness of time, the House of Commons, which is the ruler of the United Kingdom, has taken itself out of the hands of the land-owners and placed itself in the keeping of the British and Irish people. “The people,” says a late English writer,<sup>3</sup> “are now sovereign, and officials of all ranks will obey their master’s.”

The United States of to-day are the chief home of the English-speaking population of the world; for in all their extent English is the language of a people of sixty millions. Canada stretches along their border; a straight line from England to Australia would cross their domain; Newfoundland, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia flank them on the east; the Bermudas and the Bahamas are anchored near their doors; a general representation of all who speak the English tongue would find in the United States the central place most convenient for meeting.

*George Bancroft (October 3, 1800–January 17, 1891) was a historian and statesman, known for promoting secondary education on the state and federal levels. While he was US Secretary of the Navy, he established the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis.*

## Notes

1. “Oceana,” by James A. Froude, 391–2.
2. Montesquieu, “l’Esprit des Lois,” ix. 2.
3. Froude, in “Oceana.”

More about George Bancroft