

Lafayette in Congress: Bids Farewell to America

Lafayette addressed a joint session of Congress on Dec. 9-10, 1824, where he was greeted by Speaker of the House Henry Clay with the following words:

The vain wish has been sometimes indulged, that Providence would allow the patriot, after death, to return to his country, and to contemplate the intermediate changes which had taken place—to view the forests felled, the cities built, the mountains levelled, the canals cut, the highways constructed, the progress of the arts, the advancement of learning and the increase in population—General, your present visit to the United States is a realization of the consoling object of that wish. You are in the midst of posterity. Everywhere, you must have been struck by the great changes, physical and moral, which have occurred since you left us. Even this city, bearing a venerated name, alike endeared to you and to us, has since emerged from the forest which then covered its site.¹

Lafayette :

... You have been pleased Mr. Speaker, to allude to the peculiar felicity of my situation, when after so long an absence, I am called to witness the immense improvements, the admirable communications, the prodigious creations, of which we find an example in this city, whose name itself is a venerated pædium; in a word, all the grandeur and prosperity of those happy United States, who, at the same time they nobly secure the complete assertion of American independence, reflect, on every part of the world, the light of a far superior political civilization. What better pledge can be given, of a persevering national love of liberty, when these blessings are evidently the result of a virtuous resistance to oppression, and

1. Both the U.S. population and its territory quadrupled from 1775 to 1825, from 2.5 million people and 393,152 square miles in 1775, to 11.3 million people and well over 1.6 million square miles in 1825.

institutions founded on the rights of man, and the republican principle of self-government.

The day before Lafayette left to return to France, on Sept. 6, 1825, he again appeared before a joint session of the Congress. President John Quincy Adams spoke:

... Go, then, our beloved friend—return to the land of brilliant genius, of generous sentiment, of heroic valour; to that beautiful France, the nursing mother of the twelfth Louis, and fourth Henry; to the native soil of Bayard and Coligni, of Turenne and Catinat, of Fenelon and D'Aguesseau. In that illustrious catalogue of names which she claims as her children, and with honest pride holds up to the admiration of other nations, the name of Lafayette has already for centuries been enrolled. And it shall henceforth burnish into brighter flame; for if, in after days, a Frenchman shall be called to indicate the character of his nation by that one individual, during the age in which we live, the blood of lofty patriotism shall mantle in his cheek, the fire of conscious virtue shall sparkle in his eye, and he shall pronounce the name of Lafayette. Yet we, too, and our children, in life and after death, shall claim you for our own...

Lafayette, in his last speech on American soil, responded:

... I have had proudly to recognize a result of the republican principles for which we have fought, and a glorious demonstration to the most timid and prejudiced minds, of the superiority, over degrading aristocracy or despotism, of popular institutions founded on the plain rights of man, and where the local rights of every section are preserved under a constitutional bond of union. The cherishing of that union between the states, as it has been the farewell entreaty of our great paternal Washington, and will ever have the dying prayer of every American patriot, so it has become the sacred pledge of the emancipation of the world, an object in which I am happy to observe that the American people, while they give the animating example of successful free institutions, in return for an evil entailed upon them by Europe, and of which a liberal and enlightened sense is everywhere more and more generally felt, show themselves every day more anxiously interested...