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A  
S E R M O N

PREACHED BEFORE THE

H O U S E O F C O M M O N S,

O N

TUESDAY, JUNE 1<sup>st</sup>, 1802.

*Mercurii, 2<sup>o</sup> die Junij, 1802.*

ORDERED, *Nemine Contradicente,*

**T**HAT the Thanks of this House be given to the Reverend Doctor VINCENT, for the Sermon by him preached Yesterday, before this House, at *Saint Margaret's, Westminster*; and that he be desired to print the same: And that the Lord *Glenbervie* and Mr. *Bankes* do acquaint him therewith.

J. L E Y,  
*Cl. D. Dom. Com.*

A  
S E R M O N  
Preached before the HONOURABLE  
HOUSE OF COMMONS,

AT THE  
CHURCH OF ST. MARGARET, WESTMINSTER,

ON  
TUESDAY, JUNE 1, 1802,

BEING  
THE DAY APPOINTED FOR A GENERAL THANKSGIVING.

BY  
WILLIAM VINCENT, D.D.  
SUB-ALMONER TO HIS MAJESTY, AND PREBENDARY OF WESTMINSTER.

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L O N D O N :

Printed by Luke Hanford, Great Turnfile, Lincoln's-Inn Fields ;

AND SOLD BY  
T. CADELL, JUN. AND W. DAVIES, IN THE STRAND.

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1802.





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P S A L M lviii. Ver. 10.

DOUBTLESS THERE IS A GOD THAT JUDGETH THE  
EARTH.

**W**E have lived to see a great nation renounce  
Christianity and embrace heathenism; and  
again revert from heathenism to submit once more to  
the empire of the Gospel.

WE have been engaged in a contest with this na-  
tion, such as Europe never before experienced; we  
have finished it in victory, and concluded it with  
peace.

WE are assembled here this day, by the command  
of our beloved Sovereign, to return our humble thanks  
to Almighty God for this blessing; and to acknow-  
ledge that it was not our own sword that saved us;

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“ \* but His right hand, and His arm, and the light of  
 “ His countenance, because He had a favour unto  
 “ us.”

WE are bound more especially in the present instance to offer up this sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, at the throne of grace, because it was a war, originating in causes, and attended with circumstances unknown in the annals of mankind ; and because that we alone of all that have been engaged in the contest, have been the only nation which has remained unshaken from without and from within ; the only nation which has stood in the breach, to preserve the civilized world from anarchy, and society itself from dissolution.

It has been called a war, not of the sword, but of principles ; and such unquestionably it was ; but if the principles on which it commenced, have been found upon the experiment, equally ruinous as impracticable ; if they have all been renounced by the very nation which advanced them ; and if there was

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\* Psalm xlv. 3.

an absolute necessity for renouncing them, before any government of any kind could be established, then is the issue of the contest more successful than that of any other in which we have been engaged; then is Europe saved from a calamity greater than all the miseries of war it ever experienced in ages past.

THESE principles it is my intention to examine, as they affect the religion, the morals, and the political existence of society; and if in point of religion, the same nation which tolerated Atheism, has been forced to acknowledge that there is a God that judgeth the earth; if in regard to morals, they have been compelled to recal the law of divorce; if in their political capacity, they have been driven to declare in one of their last \* publick documents, that an equality of rights is an equality of misery; what farther evidence can be required, than they themselves furnish against those extravagancies of theory, which confounded all

\* Dupuy, counsellor of state, in his address to the legislative body on the state of the Negroes, May 17th, 1802.



the established maxims of reason, wisdom, and experience; which alarmed the whole civilized world with the dread of barbarism, convulsion, and dissolution.

WE have been accused of being too liberal in bestowing the name of atheists upon those who have not deserved it; but if atheism was ever publickly avowed, it was in France; if heathenism ever was professed, it was evidenced in that country by the erection of altars to reason, liberty, and nature; and without a wish to exaggerate, without a thought of imputing the madness of a few to the account of a whole people; we may at least be permitted to say, that during all the fleeting forms of government, which succeeded like the transient fabricks of a dream, religion never formed a part of any one system that arose; the first object was to deprive the crown of the support it received from religion, the second was to seize the revenue of the church, and the third was to drive the clergy from their charge, by proposing conditions and restrictions, which they knew would not be accepted; and, finally, by proscription, banishment, and death.

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To violence succeeded art, manifested by changing the calendar, by abolishing the sabbath, by shutting up of many churches, by transferring others to civil uses, and by the sale of more for the value of the materials, while the mockery attending all this system of demolition, was the toleration of all religions by the state. But it was no toleration, it was only a cover for deeper malignity; it was an oblique method of degrading Christianity, by reducing it to a level with the grossest superstitions upon earth.

SUCH was the mild spirit of philosophy, as it was styled by some of their writers, who reproached Christianity with intolerance and persecution. That Christians have been persecutors is true; the church of Rome, when mad with power, was drunk with the blood of the saints; the church of Constantinople, when polluted with the intrigues of the court, made the hierarchy as insolent as the tyranny of the sovereign was oppressive. But if all the evils committed by those who are called Christians are imputable to the Gospel, then are the crimes of philosophers to be ascribed

ascribed to philosophy; upon this ground we are ready to meet them; and if they will enter upon the argument, we will prove that more blood was shed in France during seven years under the mild dominion of philosophy, than in the last seven hundred years of Christianity.

IF the conductors of these atrocities revolt at the name of atheists, we will use a milder term adopted from those scriptures, which *we* believe and *they* condemn; we will say “that they lived without God in “the world,\*” they were restrained by no fear of future punishment, they were guided by no hopes of future reward. Men possessed of power, with this principle in their hearts, are the scourge and pest of the world; and if endowed with abilities, the range of their mischief is in proportion to their intellect.

BUT perhaps it will be said that we are combating a phantom; that the moment of fascination is past; that the people have returned to their God, and the state to a regular form of government; that, as they say themselves, revolutions cannot be effected with-

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\* Ephes. ii. 12.

out excesses; and that as the fermentation subsides, the good will appear and preponderate. I mean not to reproach a whole nation with the crimes of individuals; I mean not to keep alive animosities which have been allayed by peace; but I have a right to shew, for the instruction of our own people, that every principle by which these excesses have been excited and continued, has been abandoned; and that in the progress from anarchy to the government of a single person, the whole system was to be reversed, which had reduced the monarchy to destruction.

THE people, however corrupt in morals, were not without a sense of God, without reverence for the religion of their fathers; the government saw and felt this, and has acknowledged it; and the government saw likewise, that society cannot exist without religion. This is the lesson of instruction for us; we have a religion, and it is too good to try experiments upon it; and we have the excesses on the Continent to warn us of the effect. They *have* warned us, they did warn us during their progress,

progress, and many that thought little about religion at all, that were dazzled with the first dawn of the revolution, have been led to think more upon the subject than they might otherwise have done; and they have learnt, that man is by nature a religious being; that atheists are as anomalous as suicides; and that the belief of a God is a principle as generally fixed in the human breast, as the love of life itself.

THAT there were moments of anxiety and alarm in this country is true; the theories of speculative men assumed a bolder air, and the profligacy apparent among too many of the lower orders, increased the cause of apprehension; but the firmness of the Sovereign, and the vigour of the government, by a wise confidence in the body of the people, suppressed the evil, over-awed the counsels of the anarchists, and rescued the instruments of their mischief from the delusion which had been practised with too much success upon the Continent.

· If we now ask why the body of the people was the security of this country, while it was the cause of all the evil among our neighbours, will it not immediately appear, that a moral and religious sentiment was not extinguished? that though we had writers who endeavoured to undermine both, their success was incomplete; that the daily progress of increasing evil, shewed the malignity of the principles above all reasoning, and all argument; and, finally, that the renunciation of these principles has left the preachers of anarchy and sedition without a hearer.

2. If then it is once more acknowledged that there is a God “who judgeth the earth,” the eternal obligation of His moral law must be re-established of course. Much parade about the moral sense, and much profession of the moral duties; and much ostentation in regard to moral instruction, were the delusions held out to the people, for the first ten years of the revolution; when it was at last discovered, that morals had declined in proportion to the continuance of the disorder, and that moral and

mental instruction were in equal danger of annihilation ; as the knowledge of good and evil is eternal, so is the law of right and wrong a statute of perpetual obligation ; the sense of neither can be eradicated from the mind till the existence of God is denied ; and if that is denied, moral obligation cannot be substantially erected on any other basis.

THE innate beauty of virtue, the good of society, the duty of a citizen, are in vain held up to the people, if they have no foundation but their own intrinsic excellence. However men of refined sentiment or deep reflexion may be influenced by this motive, the people neither see it, or feel it, or are actuated by it ; every individual sees only his own particular convenience, and every man's own judgment is a law to himself ; the philosophy of the ancient world, so far as it was conducted by the \* wisest of its professors, considered God as the origin of society, law, and morals ; while the doctrine of Epicurus in disclaiming a God, or (which is the same thing) in discarding Him from the government of the world, left every  
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\* Aristotele de Mūdo. Cicero de Legibus.

man's own will to be his guide ; and taught him that injustice deserved no other punishment than the inconvenience to which it exposes the unjust. Virtue, indeed, under this system was still supposed to be beautiful, and happiness more attainable by a life of moderation than excess. But if these motives were not sufficient, men were at liberty to try the contrary ; every system was indifferent, but nothing wrong.

Am I guilty of misrepresentation, if I say, that these were precisely the principles of those who concerted and conducted the revolution on the Continent? who, when they declared that nothing was a crime but what was punishable by law, left every man to the gratification of his own will, and held out a general impunity as a reward for the evasion of the law.

How different from this is the voice of religion? of religion in its grossest form? What superstition is there so base in the world that does not declare the



approbation or anger of the Deity? the reward of virtue or the punishment of vice? and if the revolt-ers from religion will not allow the Scriptures to contain the revealed will of God, they must at least confess, that a religion which comes home to the heart, which punishes the crime that the law cannot reach, which tends to make men better citizens by the force of conscience, than they can be made by the terror of the law, is the best security of society, the best friend of justice, the best foundation of morals; and that every state, if it had not such a religion, ought to adopt it the moment it was proposed. Well, it has been adopted again, the experiment of rejecting it has been tried and failed; and what is the conclusion we must now draw? but that all the imagination of man has been exerted in vain to find a substitute for the Gospel, and that if a nation cannot subsist without virtue and morals, as well as law, it is to the Gospel they must revert; for those who have once seen the light of the Gospel, cannot discover God in any other system, and will never submit to the invention of men.

IF we could look back at these transactions without disgust, it would be amusing to trace the extravagancies of those who, having once left the religion of their fathers, could never find again rest to their mind, or an end to their wanderings. The wretched expedients they were first driven to, savoured of a return to heathenism: pageants, processions, scenick representations, altars, and temples, were to restore the festivity of Grecian games, and the magnificence of Roman solemnities. Christianity was a gloomy superstition, but paganism had been the blessing of its votaries, the light of life, and the ever-smiling enchantment of felicity. Such was the picture drawn by the pen of their most celebrated writers, and copied in the delusive page of our own historian of the Roman Empire. Little however did the effect correspond with the expectation of the inventors. The people were invited, and almost compelled by publick edicts to attend, and the delusion ended with the novelty. If these fopperies were adopted in order to restore ancient manners and morals, their tendency was exactly the reverse. Every succeeding form of government called  
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for morals, and morals were progressively on the decline; it is wasting time to mention their civick education, their central schools, their declamations upon social manners, and the duties of a citizen; their bad imitations of sermons, in those edifices which had once been consecrated to the service of God; where the virtues of a Titus or an Antonine were to be displayed instead of the doctrines of Christ; in all this there was neither plan or system, no union of sentiment, no central point of energy; hostility to the Gospel indeed was common to all, but in every other respect their doctrines were as opposite as their interests.

No sect, no school arose out of this discordant mass of heterogeneous philosophy, till we heard at last of the theophilanthropists, who acknowledged both a God and the immortality of the soul, two very good doctrines, but unaccompanied, as far as we know, with any principles to render them useful; for unless God exists as the rewarder of good, and the avenger of evil; and unless the soul is received into a state of bliss or punishment, according to its merits in the body, its

mere duration of existence is a doctrine of little importance to mankind in this mortal state. I would speak, however, without harshness of any sect that disclaimed Atheism; and if it had spread to any extent previous to its extinction, we ought to acknowledge it as a preparatory step to the re-establishment of the Gospel; for the mind that is once brought to acknowledge these two leading truths, will not long rest contented with the authority of man. It will apparently fly to revelation as a refuge, it will compare the tenets of a sect with the doctrines of the Gospel; the inventions of man, with the word of God; and if it is capable of being restored to sanity, it will soon discover where the preference is due.

BUT after all the wanderings of imagination, whether any of those who led the way in the destruction of religion, have returned into the bosom of the church; whether the most virulent have perished in the convulsions of the revolution, or whether experience and the political interests of the more moderate have induced them to submit to the change, the change itself

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is effected. This is the point of importance to the nation, and the means of instruction to us ; we cannot see it without reflecting on our own situation, how mercifully God has dealt with us, how graciously He has been pleased to spare us the same humiliation, how powerfully He has rescued us from those who endeavoured with equal ardour to propagate infidelity in this kingdom, and how essentially He has confirmed our faith and established our principles, by exhibiting to our view the evils we have escaped.

THAT morals will re-appear in France with the re-establishment of religion, is more than we can calculate or assert ; but even in the midst of corruption, it is a very different consideration, whether men think they have a licence for vice, or whether they sin under an impression that sin is displeasing to God, and that God will revenge the breach of His law. In the first case, vice will continue through life ; in the latter, there is hope of amendment and repentance, as long as life endures. We have sufficient corruption of manners, God knows ! and vice, and sin, in our own country ;

country; but unless the light of the Gospel were extinguished, we will never despair of reformation; and in the midst of all the levity, thoughtlessness, luxury, and dissipation of the age, we yet reflect with pleasure that the religious and moral character is still entitled to pre-eminence of respect, and that no one in this country can be thoroughly vicious, without at the same time becoming an object of contempt.

THIS was not the case on the Continent, where those who took advantage of the law of divorce, rather boast of the number of victims that fell a sacrifice to their lust, than feel either shame or remorse at the misery they have brought on the objects of their deception: they excuse themselves indeed by throwing the blame on the sex; but one of the best of their own writers\* has shewn, that in all countries, the character of women is formed by reflection from the conduct of men; and that where women are corrupt, it is a proof that men are abandoned. If there is any one circumstance above all others, that marks a decided de-

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\* Montesquieu.

pravity of morals in any age or country, it is a disregard to the sanctity of the marriage covenant ; and if marriage is any where made as easy to dissolve, as to contract, there it will soon be considered as little more than a legalised concubinage.

THIS again is an experiment which has been tried, and failed upon the trial ; and we ought to consider the retraction of the legislature in this instance, as the greatest victory which the cause of morality has obtained over the dominion of vice. The restraint now put upon divorce, may not repair the evil that has been done, but it is at least an evidence how perfectly the existing government is convinced, that the profligacy of morals derived from this source, is incompatible with the well-being of society ; and that unless the law puts a stop to the caprices of passion, the mind of the individual never will.

No example which has occurred, tends more to our instruction at home than this occurrence. We cannot

contemplate the extent of the mischief without dread ; we cannot see the remedy applied to it without exultation ; we cannot regard the jealousy of our own supreme court on this head, without gratitude and satisfaction ; without respecting it as the guardian of virtue, in that point which above all others conduces to the moral character of the people, which makes society desirable, and life itself a blessing.

3. BUT if all the plans, principles, and designs of the anarchists, in regard to religion and morality, have been tried in the balance and found wanting ; if they have all been renounced, and the nation which has been deluded by them is returned to the system, and the maxims, which have governed the world, from the first formation of society to the present hour, it will be no matter of surprize, that their political principles should have proved as defective as their moral doctrines ; or that the system which destroyed the monarchy, should have been found inconsistent with any form of government whatsoever.



THE *holy* right of insurrection goes as effectually to the subversion of a republick, as a despotism, because the necessity of insurrection is always determined by the judgment or the will of the insurgent. On this ground a leader of banditti has the same right to complain of the law against robbery, as the conspirator to renounce the law of treason ; and both, if they can acquire the means, are equally entitled to the privilege of destroying any power that is set over them.

To what end then does society exist, but for the purpose of controuling individual will for the good of all ? and what is the constitution of government in any form, but to preserve the peace of society ? Foreign relations, the conducting of war, or the re-establishment of peace, are but the accidents and appendages of sovereign power ; but the domestick administration of the interior, is its essence, its daily and constant care, and the primary purpose for which it is established. To maintain, that every one who lives under a government has a right to take arms against it, because he feels an injury or oppression, because he does not approve

prove of its form or administration, is to contend that every one who has the power to overturn an establishment, has the right also ; but the power and the right are perfectly distinct. A wicked subject may dethrone a weak sovereign, but it is wickedness nevertheless. Our religion declares, that the power of the magistrate is from God ; nay, it puts the sword into his hand to controul by force, what cannot be prevented by law : in saying this, we say nothing more, than that society is the institution of God ; and the same doctrine is maintained by all the philosophy of the ancient world that is worth recording. Is it any wonder, then, that the anarchists rejected our religion, or made a new philosophy for themselves ? Nothing that was established would serve their purpose ; the revelation of Scripture, and the wisdom of ages, was to sink before them ; they were to be the instructors of mankind ; they were not only to dissolve their own government, but to assist the discontented in all the nations of Europe, in order to effect the same good work ; they were to disseminate their principles by missionaries, and they were to establish these principles by the sword.

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BUT what did all this amount to in the event? neither more or less, but that when they had by these arts got the power into their own hands, they were the first to disclaim the doctrines they had advanced. They suppressed tumults by the sword, annihilated the conventicles of sedition by force, and declared all that opposed them anarchists and enemies of their country.

THERE is nothing new in this: in all ages and in all countries, those who wish to gratify their own ambition, flatter the people to their ruin: Absalom practised the same delusion above two thousand years ago; and two thousand years hence, there will still be deceivers to make the people feel evils which they never felt; and there will still be discontented subjects for the artful to work upon, to inflame, to arm, and finally to enslave.

THIS perhaps will be called the language of passive obedience, adapted equally to the support of tyranny and oppression, as to the maintenance of legal government. Thanks be to God! there never was less to be apprehended

apprehended from the imputation. The submission of the people to the law, and to the sovereign, was never more genuine or conspicuous; and never did a long reign subsist with so little ground for complaint of injustice or oppression. Wherever there is oppression, our constitution points out a legal method of redress; but for an individual sense of wrong, no one is authorized to take arms, more than in his own cause to take the law into his own hands. The revolution is the test of our principles on this subject, and the man who does not subscribe to it, is unworthy of the happiness, liberty, and security he enjoys under the influence of that great event: had our neighbours on the Continent possessed the same moderation, they would not have been reduced to the necessity of renouncing every doctrine they had advanced, of retracing every step they had taken, and of disclaiming all the violences they had committed, before they could again settle in any form of society whatsoever; to this they have been finally compelled; and whether the government is good or bad, whether they might have had a better, whether they must submit to the  
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strong hand of power, and are incompetent to enjoy the blessing of rational liberty, are questions we are not called upon to discuss: they are at least, by the renunciation of their principles, once more to be numbered among the nations of Europe; they are equal to the administration of their own government, to the relations of peace and intercourse with other nations, and to their renewed connexions with the civilized world.

THE great error they committed, was in yielding to that desire of the desperate, which manifested itself from the beginning; of recurring to first principles, and regenerating their state, as they called it, instead of correcting it; they had a sovereign who would have conceded every thing, but the concessions of weakness produce no good; they had a power which knew no limits, because the publick opinion was almost unanimous in their favour; every thing might have been accomplished; but every thing was demolished, and nothing built. Precipitated by the boldness of the wicked, deceived by the machinations of  
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the anarchists, and misled by the speculations of visionaries, they saw nothing but perfection, and at last found nothing but confusion; constitutions succeeded like the scenes of a drama; and laws were multiplied like the hydra's heads. Is it matter of astonishment, that the people who suffered equally under the conflicts of all the contending parties, who had lost all the resources of commerce and colonization, who had nothing left but their agriculture, and no consolation but the triumph of their arms; is it to be wondered at, I say, if they submitted to any government, rather than live without one? and suffered one man to reap the fruits of all the errors that had been incurred, and all the crimes that had been committed during the space of an interminable revolution? Their conquests indeed may alarm all Europe, and us above all others, because we have more to lose; but, in every other sense, their present state is only a refuge from a worse; their present government a suspension of calamity.

THIS is a subject on which it becomes not me to speak, neither should I have introduced it now,

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unless in pursuance of the design which I have adopted from the first, of shewing that the example of France is a lesson to us; and I cannot conclude this argument better, than by contrasting the spirit of our own constitution, and our own laws, to all the innovations of the present age; for we know nothing of first principles, or regeneration, or even reformation. The language of our constitution is the redress of grievances; we never think of perfection in good, but the remedy of existing evil; we have no censorial magistrate like the Romans; no council of inspection like the Spartans; no senate for the correction of morals like the Athenians; no committee of publick instruction, like the French; the correction of manners is in our laws, and the redress of grievances in our parliament. It is from this fountain that a liberty has flowed, more rational and practical than history can boast in any other instance, and a maxim of policy has at the same time been produced; that it is wiser to avoid positive evil, than seek after imaginary good. All the constitutions of government in Europe were feudal as well as our own; but while some have merged into the monarchy,

narchy, and others perished under licentiousness, our own has been in a progressive state of improvement from the ratification of the great charter to the revolution. In a progressive state, because we never boast of perfection either in our constitution itself, or in the administration which conducts it, or in the parliament which advises and balances the whole ; but the constitution, though incomplete, is good ; and the parliament, though imperfect, is still the voice, the guide, and the palladium of the people ; to this they look with confidence for the redress of grievances, and while that confidence is unabated, the innovator will rear the standard of sedition in vain. Our constitution knows nothing of innovation, or first principles ; the revolution itself had no recourse to them ; it neither regenerated, or restored ; but continued and preserved ; and those great statesmen who effected it, crowned and completed the code with the Bill of Rights. What more then have we to wish at the present moment, but that the rational liberty established at that period, may never be sacrificed to the refinement of theory, or polluted by the licentiousness of democracy ?



SUCH is the condition of France, and such is the situation of England at the termination of a war, which has ended on our side with victory, and the undoubted sovereignty of the sea. On theirs, with the accession of territory, and the aggrandizement of their empire. Both have cause to exult, and both have wounds to heal. May they be healed! and may the God of peace heal all the animosities which they have caused! We have upon many occasions had reason to be persuaded, that the special interposition of Providence had been visible in the preservation of this kingdom, but never more than in the present instance. Open war is a calamity; but the dissolution of society, the perversion of the human mind, the delusion of the people, the abolition of religion, the destruction of moral principles, are evils which the world knew not how to combat; but if these notions have been exploded, if those who renounced all religion, have been compelled to acknowledge "that there is a God who judgeth the world;" if those who denied the Gospel, have been obliged to assume it once more as the only true foundation of morality; if those who dissolved monarchy, have again taken

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refuge under the dominion of a single person ; if we have escaped the contagion of their example ; if the example itself has perished in the folly that conceived it, then have we more reason to thank God at the present instant, than at the issue of any war in which this nation was ever engaged. Thine,\* O Lord, is the praise, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty, in Thy hand is the power and the might ; it is Thou that givest strength, and makest us to stand alone among the nations ; it is Thou that savest us, and not we ourselves ; to Thy name be the praise, now and evermore, world without end.

\* 1 Chron. c. xxix. 11.

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