



The True Greatness of Our Country William H. Seward (1848)

William Seward was a white politician who served as governor of New York, a US senator, and, through most of the 1860s, US secretary of state. In that last capacity, he pursued an expansionist agenda: he purchased Alaska from the Russian empire, tried but failed to acquire the Danish West Indies and the rights to build a canal across the Isthmus of Darien, and expressed interest in acquiring territory in the Dominican Republic and Haiti, as well as Greenland and Iceland. Seward's expansionism—joined to white nationalism and a form of Christian republicanism—is already apparent in this speech from 1848, which he gave shortly before his election to the US Senate. The audience for the speech was the Young Catholic Friends Society in Baltimore, Maryland, a Catholic charity that sought to aid impoverished children and teens. Seward was Protestant.

A virtuous citizen is not satisfied with knowing that his country is great and free and happy; he desires to understand why it is so, what are the elements of its empire, how long they will endure, and what will be their perfect development—because he knows that his country and his race are immortal, and he feels assured that, although mortal himself, he shall not altogether perish. [...] Let us attempt to make such a valuation [...] of our country [...]

[Resources and population]

Our territory is a belt across the continent, approaching on either side the limit of the temperate zone. It is not broken into separate and distinct fragments, divided from each other by impassable mountain barriers, by intervening states or provinces, or by seas subject to hostile intrusion; but it is one whole dominion, continuous, compact, and inseparable. We need scarcely say that its climate is salubrious and that its lands and waters are rich in stores for the supply of human wants in every stage and condition of social life. [...] The American continent, with its adjacent islands—a continent extending southward beyond the equatorial line and northward to the arctic circle—will, at no distant period, have on our Atlantic and Pacific coasts necessary and naturally reciprocating markets for the productions of all its various latitudes. The same markets—situated midway between the ancient continents, and soon to be connected with direct highways which will supersede a costly and dangerous navigation—will invite equally, and with irresistible attraction, on the one side the commerce of Europe and Africa, and on the other that of the rising insular communities in the southern ocean, as well as the trade of the populous regions of China and the eastern Indies. An intellectual and active people, holding a position so favorable and possessing resources so boundless, could not fail to secure the freedom of the seas, without which no nation in modern times can be great; while they would furnish a political alembic which, receiving the exhausted civilization of Asia and the ripening civilization of western Europe, and commingling them together after their long separation, would disclose the secret of the ultimate regeneration and reunion of human society throughout the world. [...]

The Americans are a homogenous people and must remain so, because however widely they expand, they swell in one great and unbroken flood. All exotic elements are rapidly absorbed and completely assimilated. The remnants of the aboriginal and African tribes, seeming incapable of such assimilation, have hitherto, in different ways, affected and modified the force of the

superior and controlling race. Without speculating on the ultimate destiny of either of those unfortunate classes, we may assume that the feeble resistance they offer to the aggrandizement of the Caucasian family is continually becoming less and less and will finally altogether disappear. Most other empires were composed not of one homogenous people, but of various tribes, races, or nations; discordant in language, religion, habits, and laws; reduced, after long conflicts, into more or less perfect combination but seldom into entire unity. How inconceivably great must have been the waste of mental activity and energy, not to speak of numbers and treasure, resulting from such conflicts! The American people, on the other hand, are practically one family. [...]

[Social and civil life]

Seventy years ago, we were a nation without capital, without credit, with very indolent agriculture, without manufactures, and with a commerce struggling for life under restrictions which bound this whole continent and its islands in colonial vassalage to paternal states in Europe. We were without a navy, and without canals or roads, and were hemmed in between the forest and the ocean by savage tribes. Our schools gave scarcely more than rudimental education, and we were without libraries or literature, and without invention. It is not presumptuous to say that now we possess adequate capital, prosperous agriculture, and rising manufactures; that we have redeemed our country and most of the continent from colonial dependence; that we enjoy a commerce second only to that of Britain, and a navy equal to any but hers; and that we have canals and railroads spread like network over all our populous territory; that the Indian tribes are our stipendiaries; and that we have a system of general education, with universities nobly endowed, charities vigorous and comprehensive, literature aspiring to excellence, and mechanical invention that has brought the world under grateful obligation.

The influence of freedom is manifested in the moral elevation, social order, and domestic virtues of the people. The religion of the Redeemer of mankind has been left to perform its functions by purifying the motives and refining the affections, free from restraint and corruption by the civil power. Thus we have seen atheism rebuked and repelled by the reason to which it presumptuously appealed; law sustained without force; and woman restored to her just influence without the licentious aid of chivalry. [...]

The successful establishment of a republican government, adapted to an expanded state, is itself a demonstration of national greatness. All history describes indefinite and perpetual aspirations of the wise and the good for the establishment of some durable system in which the people should exercise sovereignty over themselves, without turbulence or imbecility. At a period quite recent, the failure of all kindred attempts had induced an acquiescence almost unbroken, though reluctant, in the belief that mankind were incompetent to self-government, and a consequent reference of all authority exercised over them to the appointment of God. These principles drew after them a universal obligation of implicit obedience to arbitrary and even despotic power—and therefore allowed unlimited and unmitigated oppression. At length, philosophy sought an escape from a theory so derogatory [to] the providence of the Creator and so pernicious to the happiness of men [...] The American Revolution [...] demonstrated to mankind that the only foundation of authority was the consent of the people, who had lawful right to subvert, modify, or change civil institutions at their own pleasure. [...]

[Probable durability]

We see only the rising of the sun of empire—only the fair seeds and beginnings of a great nation. Whether that glowing orb shall attain to a meridian height or fall suddenly from its glorious sphere—whether those prolific seeds shall mature into autumnal ripeness or shall perish, yielding no harvest—depends on God's will and providence. But God's will and providence operate not by casualty or caprice, but by fixed and revealed laws. If we would secure the greatness set before us, we must find the way which those laws indicate and keep within it. That way is new and all untried. We departed early—we departed at the beginning—from the beaten track of national ambition. Our lot was cast in an age of revolution, a revolution which was to bring all mankind from a state of servitude to the exercise of self-government, from under the tyranny of physical force to the gentle sway of opinion, from under subjection to matter to dominion over nature. It was ours to lead the way, to take up the cross of republicanism and bear it before the nations, to fight its earliest battles, to enjoy its earliest triumphs, to illustrate its purifying and elevating virtues, and, by our courage and resolution, our moderation and our magnanimity, to cheer and sustain its future followers through the baptism of blood and the martyrdom of fire. A mission so noble and benevolent demands a generous and self-denying enthusiasm. Our greatness is to be won by beneficence without ambition.

We are in danger of losing that holy zeal. We are surrounded by temptations. Our dwellings become palaces, and our villages are transformed, as if by magic, into great cities. Fugitives from famine and oppression and the sword crowd our shores and proclaim to us that we alone are free and great and happy. Ambition for martial fame and the lust of conquest have entered the warm, living, youthful heart of the republic. Our empire enlarges. The castles of enemies fall before our advancing armies; the gates of cities open to receive them. The continent and its islands seem ready to fall within our grasp, and more than even fabulous wealth opens under our feet. No public virtue can withstand, none ever encountered, such seductions as these. Our own virtue and moderation must be renewed and fortified under circumstances so new and peculiar. [...]

Where, then, shall we go to find an agency that can uphold and renovate declining public virtue? Where should we go but there, [...] where motives are formed and passions disciplined: to the domestic fireside and humble school where the American citizen is trained. Instruct him there that it will not be enough that he can claim for his country Lacedaemonian heroism [...] but that more than Spartan valor and more than Roman magnificence is required of her. Go, then, ye laborers in a noble cause, gather the young Catholic and the young Protestant alike into the nursery of freedom, and teach them there that, although religion has many and different shrines on which may be made the offering of a "broken spirit," which God will not despise, yet that their country has appointed only one altar and one sacrifice for all her sons, and that ambition and avarice must be slain on that altar, for it is consecrated to HUMANITY.

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