Edward Everett and the Cause of Greek Independence,
October 1823 *

Edward Everett's long crusade for the liberation of the Greeks from Turkish rule culminated in his noted editorial of October 1823, which appeared in the North American Review. In his defense of the American crusade Everett presented a standard statement of the proposition that the people of the United States could exert themselves effectively in behalf of oppressed peoples in distant lands. In terms of precise action he recommended no more than a system of individual subscriptions of money and material for the Greek liberty fighters. Everett prefaced this major effort to enlist support for the Greek cause with the publication of the Greek Appeal to the American people, dated May 25, 1821.

To the citizens of the United States of America [began the Greek Appeal]—Having formed the resolution to live or die for freedom, we are drawn toward you by a just sympathy; since it is in your land that Liberty has fixed her abode, and by you that she is prized as by our fathers. Hence, in invoking her name, we invoke yours at the same time, trusting that in imitating you, we shall imitate our ancestor, and be thought worthy of them if we succeed in resembling you.

Though separated from you by mighty oceans, your character brings you near us. We esteem you nearer than the nations on our frontiers; and we possess, in you, friends, fellow-citizens, and brethren, because you are just, humane and generous,—just because free, generous and liberal because Christian. Your liberty is not propped on the slavery of other nations, nor your prosperity on their calamities and sufferings. But, on the contrary, free and prosperous yourselves, you are desirous that all men should share the same blessings; that all should enjoy those rights, to which all are by nature equally entitled. It is you, who

states of Europe, which for centuries have taken the lead in the affairs of the world, stand aghast at this spectacle, and know not if they shall dare to sanction what they cannot oppose, our envoys have already climbed the Andes and reached the Pacific, with the message of gratulation. We devoutly trust that another season will find them on their way to Greece.

Meantime there is something for the people of this country in their private capacity, to do for Greece. In Germany, and in France, large numbers of enthusiastic young men have devoted themselves personally to the cause, and flocked to Greece, as the same class of generous spirits did to this country, in the revolutionary war. Considerable sums of money have also been raised in those countries, and supplies of arms and ammunition sent to the Grecian armies. In England a benevolent association has been formed under the presidency of Lord Milton, a nobleman of one of the wealthiest and most powerful British families; and this association has entered into a correspondence with the Grecian authorities. Local political dissensions have unfortunately mingled themselves with the counsels adopted in England for the relief of the Grecians. Still, however, large subscriptions have been made and forwarded to that country. We are sorry for the fact, that America did not set this example also. The experience of our own revolutionary war is so recent, that we ought to have felt, how precious would be any aid from a distant land, however insignificant in amount. Who does not know that there were times in our own revolutionary war, when a few barrels of gunpowder, the large guns of a privateer, a cargo of flour, a supply of clothing, yea, a few hundred pairs of shoes, for feet that left in blood the tracks of their march, would have done essential service to the cause of suffering liberty.

America has done something for Greece. Our missionary societies have their envoys to the Grecian church, with supplies of bibles and religious tracts for their benighted flock. But in the present state of this unhappy people, this is not the only succor they require. They are laying the foundations of civil freedom, without which even the blessings of the Gospel will be extended to them in vain.

... At this crisis the messenger of the gospel fraternity should come in other guise than the distributer of the word; and could the broad and deep current of religious bounty be turned into a channel to reach the seat of the principal distress, it is not going too far to say, that it might be the means of giving another independent country to the church of Christ; and do more to effect the banishment by the crescent to the deserts of Tartary, than all that has yet been achieved by the counsels of Christendom.

The same considerations call upon our wealthy citizens to extend their aid to the citizens of a country possessed of more than one bond of community with ours. The common council of London have voted £1000 for the relief of the sufferers in Greece. Let Boston appropriate ten thousand dollars for the same object; New York, and Philadelphia, and Baltimore, and the cities of the South in proportion to their means, will heartily unite in the cause; and a sum of money may be transmitted to Greece, either directly or through the English committee, which will teach those who are now toiling and bleeding for freedom, that we prize the blessing too highly, not to aid them in attaining it.

... It is the great curse of a despotism like that of the Turks, that it inverts the laws of conduct for its subjects, and connects suffering and death with those principles and actions, to which providence attaches the rewards of life in a healthy state of society. We are able to pity individuals among us, so unfortunately born and bred, as to be surrounded with corrupting examples, and taught to find occupation and pleasure in vice. What a spectacle do not the Greeks present in this connection, to the practical philanthropist! Are they zealous in the profession of their religion and in the observance of its rights, they jeopardize the continuance of the jealous and contemptuous toleration beneath which they live. Do they love and serve the land of their birth, they are guilty of treason against its barbarous master. Do they with industry and enterprise acquire wealth, it is necessary studiously to conceal it from unprincipled extortion, and to invest it in foreign countries. Do they found schools and make provision for education, they expose themselves to exaction and their children to outrage, and are obliged to proceed with the greatest possible secrecy and circumspection.

What a monstrous complication of calamity, to have the best, the worthiest, the purest designs and actions, loaded with all the consequences of vice and crime; to be deprived not only of all that makes life joyous, but to be punished for doing well, and to be forced to go privately about those good deeds, to which men, in other countries, are exalted as to a source of praise and honor. These things ought to be considered; and a reprehensible apathy prevails as to their reality. If liberty, virtue, and religion, were not words on our lips, without a substance in our hearts, it would be hardly possible to pursue our little local interests with such jealousy; to be all on fire in one state, for fear Congress should claim the power of internal improvements, and up in arms in another against a change of the tariff, and carried away in all, with a controversy between rival candidates for an office, which all would administer in much the same way; if a narrow selfishness did not lie at the bottom of our conduct, we could not do all this, while men, christians as good as we, who have nerves to smart, minds to think, hearts to feel, like ourselves, are waging unaided, single-handed, at perilous odds, a war of extermination against tyrants, who deny them not only the blessings of liberty, but the mercies of slavery.

But we hope better things of our country. In the great Lancastrian school of the nations, liberty is the lesson, which we are appointed to teach. Masters we claim not, we wish not, to be, but the Monitors we are of this noble doctrine. It is taught in our settlement, taught in our revolution, taught in our government; and the nations of the world are resolved to learn. It may be written in sand and effaced, but it will be written again and again, till hands now fettered in slavery shall boldly and fairly trace it, and lips, that now stammer at the noble word, shall sound it out in the ears of their despots, with an emphasis to waken the dead. Some will comprehend it and practice it at the first; others must wrestle long with the old slavish doctrines; and others may abuse it to excess, and cause it to be blasphemed awhile in the world. But it will still be taught
and still be repeated, and must be learned by all; by old and degenerate communities to revive their youth; by springing colonies to hasten their progress. With the example before them of a free representative government—of a people governed by themselves—it is no more possible that the nations will long bear any other, than that they should voluntarily dispense with the art of printing or the mariner’s compass. . . .

19 | Debate on the Greek Resolution in Congress, January 1824 *

Among Everett’s converts in support of the Greek cause was Daniel Webster, then Congressman from Massachusetts. Webster, a spokesman for New England’s business interests, had been cautious in his public statements because the Smyrna trade of the Turkish Empire was one of the most lucrative in the world for Boston merchants. Indeed, the nation’s tangible interest in Turkish trade far outweighed its abstract interest in Greek independence. Nevertheless, Webster introduced a resolution into the House in December 1823 which provided: “That provision ought to be made by law, for defraying the expense incident to the appointment of an Agent or Commissioner to Greece, whenever the President shall deem it expedient to make such appointment.” On this seemingly non-committal text Webster, on January 19, 1824, launched into his celebrated and eloquent appeal to American humanitarian sentiment. He asked nothing of Congress. Courage and spirit, properly encouraged by the passage of the resolution, would, he said, achieve more than money.

. . . This magnificent edifice, these columns, with their stately proportions, this fine architecture by which we are surrounded, what are these but so many witnesses of what Greece once was, and what she has taught us to be? Yet, sir, . . . I have not introduced the resolution, now on your table, with any view towards repaying aught of the debt, which we, in common with the civilized world, owed to that land of science, freedom, arts, and arms. It is a debt that never can be paid. Whatever may be our feelings of gratitude for these gifts, we are constrained to act with a view alone to the present state of the world, and of our relations to it. What I propose, and what I shall say, has reference to modern, not to ancient Greece—to the living, not to the dead.

I am aware, sir, that it is a very easy thing to turn over common places on

struggling for these very principles, the cheering aid of our example and opinion? . . .

. . . This thunder is at a distance—the wide Atlantic rolls between—we are safe: would you have us go to war? Would you have us send armies into Europe? No: I would not. But this reasoning mistakes the age. Formerly, indeed, there was no making an impression on a nation but by bayonets, and subsidies, by fleets and armies: but the age has undergone a change: there is a force in public opinion which, in the long run, will outweigh all the physical force that can be brought to oppose it. Until public opinion is subdued, the greatest enemy of tyranny is not yet dead. What is the soul, the informing spirit of our institutions, of our entire system of government? Public opinion. While this acts with intensity, and moves in the right direction, the country must ever be safe—let us direct the force, the vast moral force of this engine, to the aid of others. . . .

I shall not detain this Committee by laying before it any statistical, geographical, or commercial account of Greece. . . . This people, a people of intelligence, ingenuity, refinement, spirit, and enterprise, have been for centuries under the most atrocious, unparalleled Tartarian barbarism that ever oppressed the human race. This House is unable to estimate duly, it is unable even to conceive or comprehend it. It must be remembered that the character of the force which has so long domineered over them is purely military. . . . Despotism power is there, if the phrase may be allowed, formed into a regular system of anarchy. The power delegated to the inferior tyrant is as absolute within its sphere, as the power of the Sultan himself—and hence, there is scarcely a great post under the whole government whose incumbent is not virtually, often actually, at war with the Porte. Between these two opposite Powers, both despotic, it is dangerous to take sides, and yet sides must be taken: in all the empire there is no property, no security. The well known and undisguised sale of all offices, is, of itself, a sufficient index of the state of society. In the whole world no such oppression is felt as that which has crushed down the wretched Greeks. . . .

It may now be asked, will this resolution do them any good? Yes, it will do them much good. It will give them courage and spirit, which is better than money. It will assure them of the public sympathy, and will inspire them with fresh constancy. It will teach them that they are not forgotten by the civilized world, and to hope one day to occupy, in that world, an honorable station. . . .

Do gentlemen fear the result of this resolution in embroiling us with the Porte? Why, sir, how much is it ahead of the whole nation, or rather let me ask how much is the nation ahead of it? Is not this whole people already in a state of open and avowed excitement on this subject? Does not the land ring from side to side with one common sentiment of sympathy for Greece, and indignation towards her oppressors? Nay more sir, are we not giving money to this cause? More still, sir, is not the Secretary of State in open correspondence with the President of the Greek Committee in London? The nation has gone as far as it can go, short of an official act of hostility. This resolution adds nothing beyond what is already done; nor can any of the European Governments take offence at such a measure. But, if they would, shall we be withheld from an honest expression of liberal feelings in the cause of freedom for fear of giving umbrage to some member of the Holy Alliance? We are not, surely, yet prepared to purchase their smiles by a sacrifice of every manly principle. Dare any Christian Prince even ask us not to sympathize with a Christian nation struggling against Tartar tyranny? We do not interfere—we break no engagements—we violate no treaties—with the Porte we have none.

Mr. Chairman, there are some things which, to be well done, must be promptly done. If we even determine to do the thing that is now proposed, we may do it too late. Sir, I am not one of those who are for withholding aid when it is most urgently needed, and when the stress is past, and the aid no longer necessary, overwhelming the sufferer with caresses. I will not stand by and see my fellow man drowning without stretching out a hand to help him, till he has by his own efforts and presence of mind reached the shore in safety, and then encumber him with aid. With suffering Greece, now is the crisis of her fate—her great, it may be, her last struggle. Sir, while we sit here deliberating, her destiny may be decided. The Greeks, contending with ruthless oppressors, turn their eyes to us, and invoke us by their ancestors, by their slaughtered wives and children, by their own blood, poured out like water, by the hecatombs of dead they have heaped up as it were to heaven, they invoke, they implore of us some cheering sound, some look of sympathy, some token of compassionate regard. They look to us as the great Republic of the earth—and they ask us by our common faith, whether we can forget that they are struggling, as we once struggled, for what we now so happily enjoy? I cannot say, sir, that they will succeed: that rests with Heaven. But for myself, sir, if I should to-morrow hear that they have failed—that their last phalanx had sunk beneath the Turkish scimitar, that the flames of their last city had sunk in its ashes, and that naught remained but the wide melancholy waste where Greece once was, I should still reflect, with the most heartfelt satisfaction, that I have asked you, in the name of seven millions of freemen, that you would give them at least the cheering of one friendly voice.

— "We are absolutely combatting shadows."

Randolph's reply to Webster on January 24 revealed the conservatism that the nation had learned to expect of him. He attacked especially Webster's effort, through the employment of sentimental appeals, to commit the nation abroad to what it could not accomplish except at the destruction of its own interests. Why, he wondered, would Webster launch a crusade against slavery in the eastern Mediterranean when slavery existed by law within the United States itself. His argument against the pursuit of liberal causes abroad, embellished with a touch of his inimitable style, remains a classic presentation of American conservative doctrine.

... It is with serious concern and alarm... that I have heard doctrines broached in this debate, fraught with consequences more disastrous to the best interests of this people, than any that I ever heard advanced during the five and twenty years since I have been honored with a seat on this floor. They imply, to my apprehension, a total and fundamental change of the policy pursued by this Government, *ab urbe condita*—from the foundation of the Republic, to the present day. Are we, sir, to go on a crusade, in another hemisphere, for the propagation of two objects as dear and delightful to my heart as to that of any gentleman in this, or in any other assembly—Liberty and Religion—and, in the name of those holy words—by this powerful spell, is this nation to be conjured and beguiled out of the high way of Heaven—out of its present comparatively happy state, into all the disastrous conflicts arising from the policy of European Powers, with all the consequences which flow from them? Liberty and Religion, sir! Things that are yet dear, in spite of all the mischief that has been perpetrated in their name. I believe that nothing similar to this proposition is to be found in modern history, unless in the famous decree of the French National Assembly, which brought combined Europe against them, with its united strength, and, after repeated struggles, finally effected the downfall of the French power...

... Among other cases forcibly put by the gentleman from Massachusetts, why should we embark in this incipient crusade against Mussulmen, he stated this as one—that they hold human beings as property. Ah, sir,... and what says the Constitution of the United States on this point? unless, indeed, that instrument is wholly to be excluded from consideration—unless it is to be regarded as a mere useless parchment, worthy to be burnt, as was once actually proposed. Does not that Constitution give its sanction to the holding of human beings as property? Sir, I am not going to discuss the abstract question of liberty or slavery, or any other abstract question. I go for matters of fact. But I would ask gentlemen in this House, who have the misfortune to reside on the wrong side of a certain mysterious parallel of latitude, to take this question seriously into consideration—whether the Government of the United States is prepared to say that the act of holding human beings as property is sufficient to place the party so offending under the ban of his high and mighty displeasure?

Sir, the objections to this resolution accumulate as I proceed—*vires acquirit eundo*. If I should attempt to go through with a statement of them all, and had strength to sustain me, I should do what I promised I would not do—I should worry and exhaust the patience of this Committee. ...

Permit me, sir, to ask why, in the selection of an enemy to the doctrines of our Government, and a party to those advanced by the Holy Alliance, we should fix on Turkey? She, at least, forms no party to that alliance; and I venture to say, that, for the last century, her conduct, in reference to her neighbors, has been much more Christian than that of all the “Most Christian,” “Most Catholic,” or “Most Faithful” Majesties of Europe—for she has not interfered, as we propose to do, in the internal affairs of other nations.

But, sir, we have not done. Not satisfied with attempting to support the Greeks, one world, like that of Pyrrhus or Alexander, is not sufficient for us. We have yet another world for exploits: we are to operate in a country distant from us eighty degrees of latitude, and only accessible by a circumnavigation of the globe, and to subdue which we must cover the Pacific with our ships, and the tops of the Andes with our soldiers. Do gentlemen seriously reflect on the work they have cut out for us? Why, sir, these projects of ambition surpass those of Bonaparte himself...

Sir, I am afraid, that, along with some most excellent attributes and qualities—the love of liberty, jury trial, the writ of habeas corpus, and all the blessings of free government, that we have derived from our Anglo-Saxon ancestors, we have got not a little of their John Bull, or rather John Bull Dog spirit—their readiness to fight for anybody, and on any occasion. Sir England has been for centuries the game cock of Europe. It is impossible to specify the wars in which she has been engaged for contrary purposes; and she will, with great pleasure, see us take off her shoulders the labor of preserving the balance of power. We find her fighting, now, for the Queen of Hungary—then, for her invertebrate foe, the King of Prussia—now at war for the restoration of the Bourbons—and now on the eve of war with them for the liberties of Spain. These lines on the subject were never more applicable than they have now become—

Now Europe's balanced—neither side prevails; For nothing's left in either of the scales.

If we pursue the same policy, we must travel the same road, and endure the same burdens, under which England now groans...

Let us adhere to the policy laid down by the second, as well as the first founder of our Republic—by him who was the Camillus, as well as the Romulus, of the infant state:—to the policy of peace, commerce and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none: for to entangling alliances we must come, if you once embark in projects such as this. ...

... We are absolutely combatting shadows. The gentleman would have us to believe his resolution is all but nothing: yet again it is to prove omnipotent, and fills the whole globe with its influence. Either it is nothing, or it is something. If it is nothing, let us lay it on the table, and have done with it at once; but, if it is that something which it has been on the other hand represented to be, let us beware how we touch it. For my part, I would sooner put the shirt of Nessus on my back, than sanction these doctrines—doctrines such as I never heard from my boyhood till now. They go the whole length. If they prevail, there are no longer any Pyrenees—every bulwark and barrier of the Constitution is broken down; it is become *tabula rasa*—*a carte blanche*, for every one to scribble on it what he pleases.