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An Essay On The History Of Civil Society

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Sect. II. Of the Temporary Efforts and Relaxations of the National Spirit.

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S E C T. II.

Of the Temporary Efforts and Relaxations of the National Spirit.

FROM what we have already observed on the general characteristics of human nature, it has appeared, that man is not made for repose. In him, every amiable and respectable quality is an active power, and every subject of commendation an effort. If his errors and his crimes are the movements of an active being, his virtues and his happiness consist likewise in the employment of his mind; and all the lustre which he casts around him, to captivate or engage the attention of his fellow-creatures, like the flame of a meteor, shines only while his motion continues: the moments of rest and of obscurity are the same. We know, that the tasks assigned him frequently may exceed, as well as come short of his powers; that he may be agitated too much, as well as too little; but cannot ascertain a precise medium between the situations in which he would be harassed, and those in which he would fall into languor. We know, that he may be employed on a great variety of subjects, which occupy different passions; and that, in consequence of habit, he becomes reconciled to very different scenes. All we can determine in general is, that whatever be the
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subjects with which he is engaged, the frame of his nature requires him to be occupied, and his happiness requires him to be just.

WE are now to inquire, why nations cease to be eminent; and why societies which have drawn the attention of mankind by great examples of magnanimity, conduct, and national success, should sink from the height of their honours, and yield, in one age, the palm which they had won in a former. Many reasons will probably occur. One may be taken from the fickleness and inconstancy of mankind, who become tired of their pursuits and exertions, even while the occasions that gave rise to those pursuits, in some measure continue: Another, from the change of situations, and the removal of objects which served to excite their spirit.

THE public safety, and the relative interests of states; political establishments, the pretensions of party, commerce, and arts, are subjects which engage the attention of nations. The advantages gained in some of these particulars, determine the degree of national prosperity. The ardour and vigour with which they are at any one time pursued, is the measure of a national spirit. When those objects cease to animate, nations may be said to languish; when they are during any considerable time neglected, states must decline, and their people degenerate.

IN



IN the most forward, enterprising, inventive, and industrious nations, this spirit is fluctuating; and they who continue longest to gain advantages, or to preserve them, have periods of remissness, as well as of ardour. The desire of public safety, is, at all times, a powerful motive of conduct; but it operates most, when combined with occasional passions, when provocations inflame, when successes encourage, or mortifications exasperate.

A whole people, like the individuals of whom they are composed, act under the influence of temporary humours, sanguine hopes, or vehement animosities. They are disposed, at one time, to enter on national struggles with vehemence; at another, to drop them from mere lassitude and disgust. In their civil debates and contentions at home, they are occasionally ardent or remiss. Epidemical passions arise or subside, on trivial, as well as important, grounds. Parties are ready, at one time, to take their names, and the pretence of their oppositions, from mere caprice or accident; at another time, they suffer the most serious occasions to pass in silence. If a vein of literary genius be casually opened, or a new subject of disquisition be started, real or pretended discoveries suddenly multiply, and every conversation is inquisitive and animated. If a new source of wealth be found, or a prospect of conquest be offered, the imaginations of men are inflamed, and whole quarters of the globe are suddenly engaged in ruinous or in successful adventures.



COULD we recall the spirit that was exerted, or enter into the views that were entertained, by our ancestors, when they burst, like a deluge, from their ancient seats, and poured into the Roman empire, we should probably, after their first successes, at least, find a ferment in the minds of men, for which no attempt was too arduous, no difficulties insurmountable.

THE subsequent ages of enterprise in Europe, were those in which the alarm of enthusiasm was rung, and the followers of the cross invaded the East, to plunder a country, and to recover a sepulchre; those in which the people in different states contended for freedom, and assaulted the fabric of civil or religious usurpation; that in which having found means to cross the Atlantic, and to double the cape of Good Hope, the inhabitants of one half the world were let loose on the other, and parties from every quarter, wading in blood, and at the expence of every crime, and of every danger, traversed the earth in search of gold.

EVEN the weak and the remiss are roused to enterprise, by the contagion of such remarkable ages; and states which have not in their form the principles of a continued exertion, either favourable or adverse to the welfare of mankind, may have paroxysms of ardour, and a temporary appearance of national vigour. In the case of such nations, indeed, the returns of moderation are but a relapse to obscurity, and the presumption of one age is turned to dejection in that which succeeds.

BUT



BUT in the case of states that are fortunate in their domestic policy, even madness itself may, in the result of violent convulsions, subside into wisdom; and a people return to their ordinary mood, cured of their follies, and wiser by experience: or, with talents improved, in conducting the very scenes which frenzy had opened, they may then appear best qualified to pursue with success the object of nations. Like the ancient republics, immediately after some alarming sedition, or like the kingdom of Great Britain, at the close of its civil wars, they retain the spirit of activity, which was recently awakened, and are equally vigorous in every pursuit, whether of policy, learning, or arts. From having appeared on the brink of ruin, they pass to the greatest prosperity.

MEN engage in pursuits with degrees of ardour not proportioned to the importance of their object. When they are stated in opposition, or joined in confederacy, they only wish for pretences to act. They forget, in the heat of their animosities, the subject of their controversy; or they seek, in their formal reasonings concerning it, only a disguise for their passions. When the heart is inflamed, no consideration can repress its ardour; when its fervour subsides, no reasoning can excite, and no eloquence awaken, its former emotions.

THE continuance of emulation among states, must depend on the degree of equality by which their forces are balanced; or on the incentives by which either party,



ty, or all, are urged to continue their struggles. Long intermissions of war, suffer, equally in every period of civil society, the military spirit to languish. The reduction of Athens by Lyfander, struck a fatal blow at the institutions of Lycurgus; and the quiet possession of Italy, happily, perhaps, for mankind, had almost put an end to the military progress of the Romans. After some years of repose, Hannibal found Italy unprepared for his onset, and the Romans in a disposition likely to drop, on the banks of the Po, that martial ambition, which, being roused by the sense of a new danger, afterwards carried them to the Euphrates and the Rhine.

STATES even distinguished for military prowess, sometimes lay down their arms from lassitude, and are weary of fruitless contentions: but if they maintain the station of independent communities, they will have frequent occasions to recall, and exert their vigour. Even under popular governments, men sometimes drop the consideration of their political rights, and appear at times remiss or supine; but if they have reserved the power to defend themselves, the intermission of its exercise cannot be of long duration. Political rights, when neglected, are always invaded; and alarms from this quarter must frequently come to renew the attention of parties. The love of learning, and of arts, may change its pursuits, or droop for a season; but while men are possessed of freedom, and while the exercises of ingenuity are not superseded, the public may proceed, at different times,

times, with unequal fervour; but its progress is seldom altogether discontinued, or the advantages gained in one age are seldom entirely lost to the following.

If we would find the causes of final corruption, we must examine those revolutions of state that remove or withhold the objects of every ingenious study, or liberal pursuit; that deprive the citizen of occasions to act as the member of a public; that crush his spirit; that debase his sentiments, and disqualify his mind for affairs.

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