

Inaugural Address of Governor John J. Jacob

March 4, 1871

Fellow-Citizens of West Virginia:

By the Constitution and laws of the State, I am charged with the performance of duties which more or less affect the interests and well-being of all the people. However light these duties may seem, when compared with those imposed upon the chief executive officers of some of our larger sister States, with respect to the freedom and welfare of our own people, they are most grave and important. I do not, therefore, enter into the office to which I have been elected by your suffrages with that confidence in my ability to meet successfully all its responsibilities, which one with larger experience in public affairs might rightfully claim; nor do I look upon the office itself as an empty honor simply, to be conferred by the people of the State upon one of her citizens.

Though elected to office by one of the great political parties of the country, I do not conceive it to be my duty to regard the rights and interests of that party alone. The views and wishes, and, may I not also say the prejudices, to some extent, of all, must be regarded and respected. The minority as well as the majority - the few as well as the many - have rights which cannot be trampled upon without giving a shock to our whole political system. The blind, unreasoning rule of the majority over this minority is wholly at variance with the spirit of our Republican institutions, and if we ever lose our boasted freedom it will be when we forget that others have rights as well as ourselves. Our written Constitution and the laws made in pursuance thereof, are intended to afford ample protection to the rights of all citizens alike, and if it fail in this respect in the slightest degree, surely all should consent to correct the wrong by amending it. It is my primary duty to see that the Constitution be preserved inviolate, and that the laws be faithfully executed. It is my province neither to make laws nor to construe them except so far as authorized to do so. The Legislative and Judicial Departments of the Government have their well defined and independent powers and limitations, and their appropriate functions must not be invaded by the Executive Department.

The continued advancement of our people in wealth, and in the arts of civilized life, demand that as small a proportion of their means shall be withdrawn from the productive forms of industry in the way of taxes as is compatible with the requirements of a well organized Government. The position that heavy taxation is ultimately no loss or injury to a people, from the fact that the money drawn from them in this way is refunded by its expenditure among them, is a dangerous fallacy. Every dollar unnecessarily collected as a tax is the conversion of so much productive resources into non-productive expenditures.

In view of the fact that honor and our Constitution alike require us to assume or pay an equitable portion of the old debt of Virginia, and of the probably increase of our public burdens from this cause, it will be absolutely necessary that our ordinary expenditures shall be reduced to the lowest amounts that our necessities will permit. That the State may promptly meet all of its obligations and the machinery of its government be kept in proper motion, officials having charge of the collection of the public dues, must be required strictly and accurately to account for all moneys with which they are chargeable.

A system of public instruction has become a part of the policy of nearly all the States of the Union. This will always require a considerable outlay of money, but it is believed that a system, simpler and better adapted to the peculiar character of our State, can be devised that will be less expensive and more satisfactory in its results. While I can have no voice in the imposition of taxes, it will be my care to see that the money appropriated by the Legislature from time to time shall be honestly used for the purposes intended. It is most dishonorable to think that the public money can be controlled or disposed of with less caution or care than we employ in our private affairs.

The liberal and enlightened policy of the Legislature which has recently adjourned, looking to the full and complete enfranchisement of all the citizens of the State, will doubtless be received with lively satisfaction by the masses of the people. For a long time a large class of our citizens have been denied all participation in public affairs. Much dissatisfaction and discontent have been the natural result. In our little State we could ill afford to spare the intelligence and hearty co-operation of any of our people, in measures having the common good in view. The passions and ill will aroused by the latter unhappy struggle in the country, have passed away. With the disappearance of the last traces of the unwise political distractions that have existed among our people, will come an era of good feeling and harmony which will be fruitful of the happiest results, and I confidently believe that those who are then enfranchised will enter with generous rivalry into that noble struggle with their fellow citizens to secure those ends which will promote the highest good. I consider myself most fortunate in the belief that the auspicious results which are now to follow this enfranchisement will be fully realized during my term of office.

Our State is small, it is true, yet its position and great natural resources must, in time, attract to us a busy, active and enterprising population. With two great lines of trade and travel, from the west to the east, across her territory, the one in successful operation and the other soon to take its legitimate position among the great thoroughfares of the country; with large and valuable mineral deposits; with the largest supply of valuable timber in the central part of the Union; with a soil that yields ample returns for the active labor of the farmer, with almost unsurpassed advantages for grazing and raising stock of all kinds, and with a genial climate, the State must take no mean rank among her sisters of the Union. The increased facilities for travelling of the present day have greatly stimulated emigration. People readily abandon their old homes and seek new ones with the hope of improving their condition in life. Europe annually sends to our shores thousands of their people, whose labor and skill so largely contribute to the national wealth, and yet how small a proportion of them come among us. Let us invite a portion of this emigration to come to us, and go on with us in laying the foundation of a prosperous State. But to do this we must make it appear to them that it will be to their interest to settle among us. Let this tact be made clear to them and the flow of population will soon set in. Some of the more densely peopled States, also contribute their share to the tide of population that always flows westward. To the enterprise, skill, capital and labor of such as these we have large inducements to offer. But men in establishing their homes look not only to the means of acquiring a subsistence or wealth, but also to the protection of person and property afforded by the laws; the freedom and independence in the modes of thinking; the means of education and liberality of sentiment

among those who are to be their neighbors. Surely it cannot be said that we are wanting in any of these things.

During my term of office I may have some delicate duties to perform, and it is not unlikely that in their discharge I may at times err or commit mistakes. In advance I can only ask the candid consideration and impartial judgment of all good citizens, promising simply on my part an honest and earnest effort to serve the State to the best of my ability; and that I may be enabled to do so I invoke the guidance of the All Wise Ruler of States whose sovereignty I humbly acknowledge.