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## Documents Online

**Title:** “The Instability of Popular Favor,” by Joseph B. Wilson

**Format:** Commencement Oration

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### The instability of Popular favor

No age perhaps has presented a more convenient opportunity for the investigation of the human character than the present. The yart that has for centuries obscured the actuating principles of man has in the progressive strides of intelligence been torn asunder and exposed the concealed motives of men both in their individual and collective capacity to the scrutiny of those who have the will and the desire to know them. An innumerable variety of governments are not wanting by which to obtain an illustration of a particular tendency to develop some of the wisest and most enviable traits together with the most egregious errors in their practical operations. Observation and experience combine to supply the deficiencies of theory in giving <sup>with</sup> to model institutions to subservie the ends of government. But it cannot be doubted even with all this data no matter how well constructed or how much improved by the modifications of experience the proper execution of every system depends upon the inherent justice of its subjects and the only immutable basis is confined to those pure and equitable principles that inspire the patriot's bosom. Every age from remote antiquity to the present has

furnished its examples of the still surviving spirit of democracy, but in comparison with other institutions their existence has been but the ephemera of a day - Free governments such as promise permanence are emphatically the product of modern genius and the invention of our own country - Taking warning from the melancholy wrecks of antiquity we have sought by correcting their errors to steer clear of the yawning whirlpool that precipitated their ruin. But in abolishing their abuses and substituting in their stead such antidotes as might counteract their self producing maladies, there are still other diseases common to all republics which never can be eradicated without the requisite advancement in the moral and intellectual condition of the subject. Of the many evils thus arising may be enumerated the want of a just appreciation of those whose well tried abilities and unsullied integrity qualify them in every respect to hold the helm of state. Men too often made the dupes of factions and ambitious demagogues and seduced from the path of patriotism by the momentary rewards of selfishness or the temporary gratification of the baser passions, award to the reckless and undeserving politician the highest

honors within their gift — Unmindful of the future  
and made the victims of avarice they confide to the  
flattering promises of the suppliant Office-Seeker  
the protection of the most invaluable of their  
possessions — Thus do we see manifested the  
baneful effects of republican ingratitude,  
though perhaps attended with the pleasure  
of present gratification receives in the end the  
just reward of its own indiscretion — We need  
only look to the ~~history~~ history of the past to confirm  
the truth of this assertion — The proud fabric  
of the Athenian Republic whose arms and  
valor repelled with shameful disgrace the  
Muleons of Persia, whose fleets rode triumphant  
in every sea, whose glory and greatness were ma-  
king rapid strides to the subjugation of the  
then civilized world ones her fall to her own  
ingratitude — Her people blinded by prejudice  
and prompted to deeds of infamy by the dictates  
of unbridled passion, whose degraded minds  
had closed the authoritative jurisdiction of the  
moral principle and buried the operations of  
reason beneath the superior power of envy of  
jealousy of bribes reaped the abundant fruits of  
their own ingratitude — The noble services of Cato  
traces one of the most honorable and just of the Grecian  
name was awarded for his glorious services ten

years banishment - The exhaustless and eloquent  
genius of Themistocles - The patriotic services of  
Miltiades - The unshaken and undefiled virtue of  
a Socrates with a host of other great and immortal  
names whose fame whose fame is coeval and co-  
extensive with that of their country - received in  
token of their eminent services the abode of the  
prison, <sup>eternal</sup> banishment, ostracism or the poisonous  
cup of hemlock

Jos B. Wilson

The utility of  
popular fame  
Common out-spoken  
1852 J. B. Wilson

Commencement Oration of Joseph Blake Wilson, Class of 1852  
Transcribed by Tristan Deveney, May 2008  
Edited by Sarah-Hazel Jennings, June 2008

### The Instability of Popular Favor

No age perhaps has presented a more convenient opportunity for the investigation of the human character than the present. The garb that has for centuries obscured the actuating principles of man has in the progressive strides of intelligence been torn assunder and exposed the concealed motives of men both in their individual and collective capacity to the scrutiny of those who have the will and the desire to know them – an innumerable variety of governments are not wanting by which to obtain an illustration of a particular tendency to develop some of the wisest and most ennobling traits together with the most egregious errors in their practical operations. Observation and experience combine to supply the deficiencies of theory in giving birth to model institutions to subserve the ends of government. But it cannot be doubted even with all this data no matter how well constructed or how much improved by the mortifications of experience the proper execution of every system depends upon the inherent justice of its subjects – and the only immutable basis is confined to those pure and equitable principles that inspire the patriots bosom. – Every age from remote antiquity to the present has

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Jos. B. Wilson