

# SPEECHES AND LETTERS

OF

GERRIT SMITH

(FROM JANUARY, 1863, TO JANUARY, 1864)

ON THE

# REBELLION.



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# ON THE COUNTRY.

LETTER TO HON. D. C. LITTLEJOHN.

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PETERBORO, January 14th, 1864.

HON. MR. LITTLEJOHN, M. C.:

DEAR SIR: In common with your other constituents, I lament your sickness. May you soon regain your health, and the country soon regain your services! This is emphatically a time when the country needs to have every one of her true and intelligent friends at his post.

July 22d, 1861, the House of Representatives adopted with but two dissenting voices, Mr. Crittenden's Resolution, a part of which is that: "This war is waged but to defend and maintain the supremacy of the Constitution, and to preserve the Union with all the dignity, equality, and rights of the several States unimpaired; and that as soon as those objects are accomplished the war ought to cease."

This resolution is in my judgment the greatest and most pernicious of all our mistakes in carrying on the war. From the day of its passage it has never ceased to furnish the Seymours and other enemies of the Administration with their most plausible and effective arguments against the Administration, and with their mightiest influences to obstruct and pervert the war. The resolution declares war for the Constitution and Union—which it should not have done; and it fails to declare war against the rebels—which alone it should have done. No wonder that with so bad a beginning the nation has not even yet carried on an unconditional war against them!—and no wonder therefore that the war has been so protracted! Should a portion of her people revolt, England would feel that here was something to declare war *against*. She would find no time and feel no disposition to declare war *for* any thing—not even for her chosen form of government—no, nor even for her existence. She would address herself to the one work of subduing the revolt, cost however much it might to what she most cherished. She would go forward to conquer or perish. Very precious, indeed, the interests she would leave behind her. But she would no more suffer them to interfere with the absorbing object before her than would Cortes have suffered his ships to tempt his little

army with the possibilities of a safe retreat. He burnt his ships; and she would call for no stipulations in behalf of those interests. To save our Constitution and Union has been our chief object (real and pretended) in this war. Whereas our sole object in it should have been to crush the Rebellion—and this too at whatever needful expense even to the Constitution or the Union. In saying this, I surely do not expose myself to the charge of undervaluing either Constitution or Union. For who has written and spoken more than I have for the Constitution, just as it is?—and who has accepted more constantly and cordially all the terms of the Union?

A wise and firm father resolves, uncalculatingly and unconditionally, to put down his rebellious child. If reminded that his family may thereby be broken up, his reply is, that, family or no family, the young rebel shall go down. So too the brave household whom the burglar awakes, will, if told by him to see to their safety, prefer, at whatever hazard to their safety, to see to his capture. And why a nation act upon a different principle? No other nation, in the circumstances of ours, ever did. No other nation, ancient or modern, ever furnished a parallel at this point to the conduct of our own. A Rebellion, the most gigantic the world ever saw—the most guilty too, since its only real plea was that under the Constitution there were not sufficient scope and provision for the safety, extension, and perpetuity of Slavery—broke out against us. Our one and unconditional work was to put it down. No part of this work was it to save Constitution, Union, or Nation. Nay, if, in our struggle to put it down, all these shall perish, their never-to-perish monument would be worth infinitely more to the glory of God and the good of man, than could their salvation if achieved by compromise or indirection. Very sacred is nationality. But our sense of its sacredness is shown far less in trying to save a nation than in trying to punish, though at whatever hazard to the nation, the miscreants, who are at work to destroy it.

And now whence comes it that our nation has, at this point, behaved so unlike every other nation? Whence comes it that when heaven and earth bade it crush the Rebellion, and at whatever cost and without any condition or calculation—whence comes it, I ask, that it turned away from the one and only work it had to do to listen to the traitorous cry: "Save the Constitution: Save the Union!" It comes, I reply, from the simple fact that, from the first, the American people have been artfully, industriously, constantly trained to worship the Constitution and the Union. And what is it that has so successfully called for this training? It is Slavery. By day and by night Slavery has worked to make the American people worshipers of the Constitution and the Union—urging, all the time, its lying claim that the Constitution and the Union were made to uphold, extend, and perpetuate Slavery. Only a short and entirely natural step was it to their becoming worshipers of Slavery itself. And, because they took that step, the

American people have not yet been able to stand up to a square fight against the Rebellion. For the Rebellion is simply Slavery in arms; and to their deluded minds Slavery, whether armed or unarmed, being the very pet and cosset of the Constitution and Union, is as much to be cherished and protected as the Constitution and Union. The onomy paralyzed the Egyptians when he succeeded in placing between them and himself on the battlefield their sacred animals. And why our people could not strike promptly and unreservedly at the Rebellion, was simply because sacred Slavery stood between it and them. You well remember that the first concern of our early Commanders in this war was to provide for the safety of Slavery. Nothing had been seen more insane or ridiculous since the days when an Egyptian army made more account of saving the worshiped cat or crocodile than of conquering the enemy.

Let me refer to some of the evil results of this Congressional Resolution of July 22d, 1861, which, as its first and unquoted part shows, was intended to be a resolution of safety to Slavery instead of destruction to the Rebellion. It estops Congress from complaining of the over-zealous and one-idea Abolitionist, who withholds his hand from the work of putting down the Rebellion unconditionally. It licenses him to substitute for that work the upholding of the Constitution and Union. Moreover, as it virtually licenses him to take his own Abolition way for upholding them, it must not complain if that shall prove an unwise and even wild way. It also estops Congress from complaining of the Pro-Slavery Democrats for their incessant clogging of the wheels of war with their affected cautions for the safety of the Constitution and the Union. For it has itself supplanted the only true issue—the sole and stern issue of the nation with the Rebellion—by a paramount concern for the Constitution and the Union. It is in the name of this very concern that the Seymours and Woods are at work to consummate the ruin of our Republic, and to build up a slaveholding oligarchy which will be grateful to all, North as well as South, who, like themselves, love the distinctions of Aristocracy and hate the level of Democracy.

Would that Congress had not taken a ground, which allows certain men to pretend to be against the rebels, when they are not! Would that Congress had declared war against the rebels, and so compelled these certain men to stand forth openly for or against the war! Nay, would that Congress might now, even at this late day, summon the courage to make a clean, unconditional, uncompromising declaration of war—a declaration which shall be *for* nothing; and which shall be *against* the rebels, and against nothing else.

“The Reconstruction of the Government!” For one I am sorry that the public mind should be prematurely occupied with the subject. From the day when the Rebellion began, the nation should have been concerned about nothing else than to put it down; and I add, that until it is put down the nation should be concerned

about nothing else than to put it down. We are not so strong and so entirely certain of success that we can afford to be divided amongst ourselves by premature issues. Moreover, we shall not know what will be our duty to the conquered South until we shall have conquered her, and seen in what temper the conquest leaves her. As we advance into the enemy's territory, let it be subjected to a military or other temporary government; and when, if ever, the whole territory shall be ours, then let the terms of a Treaty of Peace, and not a mere Proclamation, say whether the governments and constitutions of that territory shall be as they were before, or shall be so modified as to meet any reasonable demands for their modification: That the Treaty of Peace will have no right to modify them is absurd. That the Constitution will stand in the way of it is ridiculous. When half a nation arms itself against the other half, and throws off the common Constitution, it is for that other half, if victorious, to choose whether it will or will not treat the conquered rebels according to the Constitution. It may, at its own option, treat them as rebels, or as it would foreign enemies. In such circumstances it is bound by no code nor Constitution. It is a law unto itself; and in the light of that law it is to decide what the national welfare calls for. I am free to say that I would have the Treaty revive all the conquered States, and all those rights to which they were formerly entitled under the Constitution. I say it, because I would that they might be found worthy of it. But to repose such confidence in those States, were they still impenitent and revengeful, and waiting and longing for another opportunity to strike at the heart of the nation, would be madness; and would be an immeasurable wrong as well toward the conquered as toward the conquerors. The conquered States will be entitled to nothing in virtue of their rights under their former relations. What they have done to break up these relations, (the North is entirely innocent of any thing to this end,) has worked the forfeiture of all those rights. In the name, however, of wisdom as well as humanity, let the Treaty accord to them all that it would be safe for them and for us to have accorded. Let it restore to them gladly and lovingly, all the rights of sister States, provided only that, in a sound view of the circumstances, prudence shall not forbid so entire a restoration.

I expressed my preference for a Treaty of Peace. It was proper that Washington should proclaim on what terms a local insurrection in Pennsylvania might be pacified and ended. But I would not leave it even to a Washington to decide on what terms the two halves of a mighty nation should make peace with each other.

The Proclamations! Our President is both a strong and an honest man. Moreover, his patriotic heart is firmly set on subduing the Rebellion. Nevertheless, even he, as well as other men, may fall into errors. I do not complain that his Proclamation of Freedom did not cover all the slaves. It covered as many as in his convictions the exigencies of war allowed him to declare free; and he

certainly had no moral right to extend his Proclamation beyond these convictions. In his civil capacity he could not liberate a single slave; and in his military capacity he could liberate only so many as there was a military necessity for liberating. What I do complain of is his recognition of the right of the Supreme Court to pass upon that Proclamation. This Court has not the right to say whether it is or is not valid and operative; and I would that Congress might protest unanimously and most solemnly against the President's recognition of it. Let this Court, if it please, take into its hands whatever Proclamations the President may make in his civil capacity. But in regard to all those which he puts forth as Head of the Army, I would say to it: "Hands off!" It is true that it is the Constitution, of which this Court is the acknowledged interpreter, which makes the President the Head of the Army. But it is also true that it is the LAW OF WAR and not the Constitution, which tells him what he may do in that capacity. What if among his military orders should be one to poison the springs and wells and food in the enemy's territory!— would our country submit to it, in case the Supreme Court should sanction it? None the less because of that sanction would our whole country along with the whole civilized world rise up against the barbarous order. Surely, surely this Court needs no encouragement to enlarge its powers. The Dred Scott case is of itself sufficient to prove that its tendency is to set no limits to those powers.

Hundreds of thousands are petitioning Congress to abolish what remains of American Slavery. The "Confiscation and Emancipation Bill" left comparatively little of it; and then came the President's Proclamation to make even that little less. I hope Congress will grant the petition. There are some persons who hold that Congress can, as a civil measure, enact the abolition of Slavery—and this, too, without providing any indemnity. There are also some who hold that there can be no legal Slavery under a Constitution which requires "a republican form of government" in all the States, and also requires that "no person shall be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law." And there are some persons of such extreme views as to hold that Slavery, being the matchless crime against God and man, can no more than murder itself, be legalized by any Constitution, or embodied in any real law. But I could wish that Congress might avoid all these questions and abolish Slavery as a war measure, and accompany the abolition with a suitable indemnity to loyal slaveholders.

I notice that the plans for military canals are already coming before Congress, and that an objection to building the canal around Niagara Falls is much urged. It is a taking one, inasmuch as it appeals to local interests and individual selfishness. This objection is, that Western produce, when once afloat on Lake Ontario, will descend the St. Lawrence, and thus be lost to our cities. And is this an objection? Most certainly, the race of bad logicians is not yet extinct. In the first place, the Government does not propose to build these canals for commerce, but for military protection and

advantage. And in the next place, if the Niagara Canal shall give to the immense agricultural West a better market on the St. Lawrence than it can have in Boston, New-York, or Philadelphia, then ought the whole nation to rejoice in the prospect of the building of that Canal. To get better prices for its produce is of infinitely greater importance to our country than to keep undiminished a few branches of trade in a few of its cities. Because I have some land in your Oswego, I naturally desire to have a share of the vessels laden with Western produce turn into that city, and so benefit her as well as Boston and New-York. But it would be very selfish and mean in me to desire this if the produce can find a better market on the St. Lawrence. Rather should I say, let Oswego be deserted; and let Montreal outgrow New-York, if she can do so by attracting the produce and increasing the wealth of our farmers. But I apprehend that the great West will be sadly disappointed, if she expects by means of the Niagara Canal to have a better market on the St. Lawrence, which for half the year is closed with ice, than she can have elsewhere. If this is her expectation from that Canal, then so far she is unwise in calling for the building of it. The Canal will be an important military work; but it will bring comparatively little to the markets of Canada.

And I also notice, that there is a movement in Congress to terminate the Reciprocity Treaty—that Treaty which, you remember, I worked so hard for when I was a Member of Congress. I hope that my country will not be guilty of the illiberality and unsound political economy of refusing to exchange natural productions with any country. The complaint is, that Canada sells too much to us. But if she is profited by selling to us, so are we by buying of her. If the lumberman in Maine can not get as much for his lumber under the "Reciprocity Treaty," there is nevertheless a full equivalent in the fact that the builder in Ohio buys his Canada lumber far cheaper because of that Treaty. If it is a gain to sell dear, so it is also a gain to buy cheap. We have now free access to the vast and rich forests of Canada. What a folly to cut ourselves off from this advantage for the miserable reason that Canada enjoys a corresponding advantage!—that whilst we reap the profit of buying her lumber, she reaps the profit of selling it to us! But it is held that the price of our wheat, as well as of our lumber, is reduced by this Canada competition. Can it, however, make any material difference to our farmers, whether the Canada wheat goes to Liverpool by the St. Lawrence or by New-York and Boston? Both our country and Canada grow a surplus of wheat; and hence, in the case of both, the price is regulated by the foreign market. Canada wheat will come into competition with ours, whether we do or do not continue to enjoy the advantage of transporting it across our country. Why then should we surrender this advantage? And it is also held that free Canada coal cheapens the price of ours. The more the better, declare reason and

humanity! And in response to this declaration, all the people, including especially the shivering poor, cry: "Amen!"

I close with inquiring who they are that clamor for 'Tariffs and the termination of the "Reciprocity Treaty"?' They are few else than the comparative handful, who desire higher prices for what they have to sell. The masses, and especially the poor who make up so large a share of the masses, desire low prices. In, then, their name and behalf let us favor, not the policy which makes dear, but that which makes cheap, the necessaries of life!

Your friend,                      GERRIT SMITH.