

San Francisco Examiner
June 24, 1900

The Passing Show

A Record of Personal Opinion and Dissent

Li Hung Chang having been called to Peking, we are perhaps justified in the hope that some of our countrymen there who may have escaped massacre will be spared. That illustrious foreign nobleman can hardly fail to remember with gratitude how in this great republic he was carried in a chair by untitled American citizens through lanes of bent backs and bared heads. He cannot have forgotten that all this homage was sincere, spontaneous, and performed without a blush. Mine was the only voice raised in shame and indignation at the spectacle, and that was raised in this paper, which at that time he probably did not read. However, I am sorry that I spoke, and hope that my fault may be forgiven if he knows about it. I entertain for his lordship sentiments of the profoundest esteem, and hope that he will be graciously pleased to do in Peking more for protection of Americans than anybody is doing in Washington. Like President McKinley, I have not the effrontery to demand that they be altogether exempt from punishment, but I venture to think that Chinese honor and American pusillanimity would be satisfied by sparing Minister Conger's head and cutting off his legs. A possible objection is that he may have been buried.

I am writing this paragraph on Wednesday. The administration, with a firm reliance on Providence, is patiently waiting to see what that power will do for our legation shut up in Peking and our handful of marines that set out to relieve it. True, some war ships have been ordered to go as near to the capital as they can get without wheels, and a single regiment of infantry is said to be on the way from Manila. These "preparations" evince about as intelligent an understanding of the possible magnitude of the task to be undertaken as Lord Salisbury's cabinet once had of the work cut out for it in South Africa. For several days, during which nothing could be heard, nothing was done. It should have been assumed that the worst was happening and that nothing that could be done would be too much. Possibly by the time this is printed the trouble will have proved less serious than it looks now, and the administration will consider that a vindication of its sluggish action. It will be nothing of the sort. The wisdom or folly of an action is not determined by what is known afterward, but by what is known before. It is wise or unwise at the moment it is decided on—is to be examined in the light then had and in no other. Today a state of war exists between the United States and China, and China holds the United States minister incommunicado, if she has not put him to death. This is no time to inquire by what faction of Chinese this is done, nor by whose authority. The Chinese minister is in our power; he should be seized as a hostage, and if ours is put to death by command or connivance of the Chinese government, he should be shot. To enable this to be done, the president should at once formally declare that a state of war does exist, and put the District of Columbia under martial law. The Democrats would howl at that, naturally, but they howl at everything that he does or does not. The country would approve and Congress would not impeach. Retaliation is not revenge; it is a legitimate and lawful military method of compelling an enemy to play at war according to the rules of the game.

If General Jackson were president today it is not to be doubted that the friends and relatives of our countrymen shut up in Peking would feel less uneasiness than they now do. It should be said, however, that Mr. McKinley and his cabinet are not the only persons in fault. The shame of this astounding indifference is as wide as the country; it taints the press, the politicians and the people.

Everywhere is manifest a fatuous indifference to the awful possibilities of the situation and to the fate of those exposed to its actual terrors. Had the English been as heartless during the Sepoy meeting the history of Cawnpore would have served for Lucknow. With the groans of our countrymen and the shrieks of their women and children audible to the ear of imagination, the whole country sits attentive to the quadrennial fiddle-fiddle of the monkey-shiners at Philadelphia solemnly pretending to save it. When for a moment it denies to their tireless tongues the hospitality of its ear, that is because it is thinking of the similar anthropoid apes that are soon to make spectacular extravagances of themselves at Kansas City. Meantime, the Chinese minister, laughing in his long sleeve, protests that all is amity on the Pei-Ho and prepares a new lecture on the American girl. I am told that he is a very good fellow, with an amiable desire to see himself in print, but if we had an administration of the Jacksonian sort there is nothing in which he would now be so anxious to see himself as his own country.

A good opinion of one's country is a precious possession, and it is Senator Wolcott's to have and to hold. In his great speech at the Philadelphia Convention, he said:

No man now, or in the centuries to come, when history, which alone "triumphs over time," recounts the marvelous story of the war (our war with Spain), which changed the map of the world, shall ever truthfully say that this republic was animated by any but the noblest purposes. Recorded time tells of no such war, for it was fought with bloody sacrifice by a great and free republic for the freedom of another race while its own liberties were unassailed.

That is all very pretty and rhetorical and must have evoked earnest applause. Its fault (if it has a fault) is that not a word of it is true. If Senator Wolcott will take the trouble to read the longish document in which the president gave his reasons for demanding the withdrawal of Spain from Cuba, he will find there the real cause of the war, the real justifications of our intervention. Among them he will not find freedom for Cubans cutting much of a figure. We put an end to Spanish rule in Cuba, not because it was feeble, because it could not establish and confirm itself. Its efforts to do so imperilled our tranquillity and imposed upon us a heavy expense in preserving our own neutrality. Had Spain's power in Cuba been great enough to suppress all efforts at resistance her tyranny might have been much more insufferable than it was and we should not have lifted a hand. To give liberty to another people is not recognized among this world's governments as a sufficient reason for making war. The principles of altruism have not won a place in international politics; when one people prepares to shed the blood of another it is expected to ask the approval of the rest by affirming the selfishness of its motive.

We did that. President McKinley frankly and truthfully explained to Spain and to the world how civil strife in Cuba injuriously affected American interests. After we had protected our interests, by conquering, and before we had invented for ourselves a noble motive, we naturally and rigidly took three Spanish provinces by way of reimbursement and profit. It might have been thought that by that act we laid upon our benevolence a perpetual injunction against affirming its connection with that war, but it seems not. There are such things as political exigencies, and there are men to meet them. There are recurrent demands for

“flapdoodle,” and there are Wolcotts to supply them. Without them to sanctify and glorify it our Spanish war would seem hardly worth the trouble of attaching it to the Republican party.

Since January first nearly twelve hundred thousand dollars have been given in this country to educational and charitable institutions by persons who have withheld their names. This looks like a new dodge of the wicked rich to escape observation and exposure.

Source: Transcribed from The Examiner Jan. – June, 1900 (Microform), St. Cloud State University Library.