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War Topics

Certain optimists are uttering a hope that Great Britain's friendly attitude toward us and her incalculable moral service to us in this war may be gratefully remembered after we have ceased to drive the immediate advantage. That is not likely. In order that the American mind may entertain a genuine and lasting sentiment of gratitude, or any other kind of goodwill, toward Great Britain—in order, even that it may clearly recognize her power and primacy in the world's affairs—there must be “a new deal” in Americans. The greatest generation must pass away and be replaced by more enlightened successors. Even then the principle of heredity will enjoin the light, and the American of the twentieth century reflect the passions and prejudices that darkened the minds and hearts of his ancestors of the eighteenth and nineteenth. Deprived of his sustaining faith in England's unworthiness, our average fellow citizen and sovereign elector would be too pitiable a figure for Heaven to have had a hand in his reduction to that awful plight. A fortunate few of us are able to get on, after a fashion, without it, though suspected of the darkest designs against our country's commerce and currency; but to the mass of our compatriots some degree of Anglophobia seems as necessary as the hope of another and a bitter world. It is possible that under conditions which we cannot foresee it may someday be a less needful element in the national life, or even altogether superfluous; and with that possibility in view a wise forethought will concern itself with means for abatement of the peculiar faith whenever the time arrives. As a first step toward that and nothing could promise better results than such a revision of our school “histories” as would give them a closer conformity to the Decalogue—that part of it which forbids the bearing of false witness against one's neighbors. Doubtless it will go hard to renounce the fine old fruit narratives about the brutality of Clinton, Tarleton and the other gentlemen of Revolutionary times whose reprehensible practice it was to eviscerate babes and flay women after the immemorial manner of invaders; just as it is hard for our Southern brethren to forego the educational advantages of narratives about the total depravity that distinguished Northern generals from red Indians and pirates of the Spanish Main. If the Frenchman of this our day and generation had to relinquish his conception of the German character as something deriving a high joy from moans of torment, fragrance of infant blood and mutilation of the dead he would be sick inexpressibly. Nevertheless, if the time should ever come when the truth should be thought good enough in our school “histories” of the Revolutionary war and the war of 1812, and no further national profit should be seen in pointing out to our young the essential identity of the Englishman militant and the Adversary of Souls, we may perhaps cherish a hope of revised versions and a pedagogical exegesis devoid of rancor toward the most powerful, just, magnanimous and friendly nation of the world.

If Commodore Dewey has by this time subdued the Spanish land forces, and holds the Philippine islands, the situation over there must be interesting to the natives lately in rebellion, or

would be if they had as much understanding as should go with political discontent. Presumably they have co-operated with our sailors and marines in effecting the overthrow of the common enemy and may reasonably expect the fruits of victory—the more reasonably because they are the original antagonists of Spanish domination, we only eleventh-hour converts to the cause. They had already made tremendous sacrifices when we appeared upon the scene to assist them. To them success would mean only their independence—their right to govern their native land. To us what does it mean? Not that, certainly; whatever we may eventually do with these islands we are not likely to toss them to Japan and the European powers as a bone of contention by handing them over to the rightful owners. If on the other hand we cede them to Japan or Great Britain, as has been proposed, or keep them for our honesty, as the trend of our desire now seems to be, the native patriot will be no nearer to the fruition of his hope than he was when under the rule of Spain; and in promising himself an advantage from our assistance he will have “imagined a vain thing.” It is possible that we shall not find him easy to get on with—that he will welcome us with that degree of hospitality to strangers that is not inconsistent with a strenuous endeavor to kick them out. It looks at this time as if we had made a brilliant conquest of Spain’s white elephant, but it does not look as if we should know any too soon or any too clearly what to do with it. At present we may find amusement in conjecturing with a curious interest the feelings of the humble person from whose despoiler we took the beast.

If the “old salts” and “seadogs” of the press will persist in bewildering us land lubbers by the use of nautical expressions I know of no objection to their using them correctly, with a due regard to fitness and meaning; that would bewilder us only a trifle less, and would notably augment the vraisemblance. For example of the contrary practice, note their almost universal misuse of the word “convoy.” This is a veritable pelican of a word: it is of the ocean, oceany. It has a salt savor like that of kelp, and is peculiarly suited to the taste and purpose of the newspaper admirals who wish to impart to their work a certain marine quality—something of the sea shell’s murmur of the sea. Unhappily they do not know what it means. They write of a transport, troopship or prize as “convoyed” by a man-o’-war, and of the man-o’-war as the “convoy.” That is erroneous: the man-o’-war is the escort; the ship escorted is herself the “convoy.” Naturally the unspeakable Webster confirms them in the error: the sciolist whom he does not support in his sciolisms—who cannot quote him as authority for almost any nonsense that he may have been inspired to write—is hard pressed indeed. Here is a part of what this lunatic lexicographer actually has the effrontery to say of the noun “convey”: two definitions with nothing interposed to break the force of the contrast:

“2. A vessel or fleet, or train or trains of wagons employed in the transportation of munitions of war, money, subsistence, clothing, etc., and having an armed escort.

“3. A protecting force accompanying ships or property on their way from place to place, by sea or land.”

So, then, the protecting vessel is the “escort” or the “convoy,” just as you please; that is, it is a different thing from the vessel protected, or the same thing, according to your mood. But why is similar duality denied to the vessel protected? Why should it not be (at your pleasure, sir) a “convoy” or an “escort”? It looks as if the Lexicographer of the People did not, after all, go in for equal rights, and was perhaps a traitor to the American language, bought with “British gold.”

In the light of patriotism’s altar fires, newly kindled and splendoring the Land of the Comparatively Free, I note a revival of that disgusting solecism, “the United States is,” :the

United States does” etc. Actually, there are persons—writers, too—who believe that the laws of syntax are affectable by political phenomena, and that the word “States” becomes singular in number if the things that it represents are for some purposes “united.” They would not think of saying: “The herded cows is grazing,” or “The yoked oxen is tired”—there would be no patriotism in that; and these excellent persons are, before all else, lovers of their country. (The shrillest and most raucous of them—a teacher in the public schools!—is chief proponent of the simple plan of making little children good and loyal citizens by compelling them once a week to perform monkey-tricks before the flag.) Tell them that this is not a political matter, but a grammatical, and they will put you down with “E pluribus unum,” the only Latin that they know. They will affirm (and not care a cent if overheard by the effete dynasties and tottering despotisms of the Old World) that these United States is one nation—one nation, sir, and don’t you forget it! We shall not forget it, nor are we permitted to forget that they themselves are one nuisance; yet Heaven forbid that any of us should say “These united intolerable is in danger of everlasting fire!” God sees them, and that is enough.

The war is not three weeks old, and already we have destroyed one of the enemy’s fleets, which effectually clears him off the Pacific and secures our commerce and coast on that ocean from molestation. That is a good deal to have accomplished so soon, even though Morro’s “castle-keep” still “scowls defiance over the deep.” It is altogether too early to rise and clamor for “a more vigorous prosecution of the war,” that dear old familiar demand of the early ’60s. With an Atlantic fleet but little superior to that of the enemy we should be fools to send it against the forts and mines of Havana at present; that doubtless is what the Spanish admirals are praying that we may have the folly to do. Possibly we should take the place, but almost certainly we should lose several ships in so doing—enough perhaps to enable the enemy to cover over and beat the remaining ones. That would be a pretty kettle of fish, truly. Havana is not going to run away; it will be there when we want it, and under an effective blockade is growing feebler day by day. That growing feebleness is the determining consideration that must eventually (if it has not done so already) bring the Spanish fleet across to our side to fight us at a great disadvantage—an almost fatal one if we intercept it eastward of Puerto Rico. Yet it must take the hazard or Cuba is ours without the necessity of firing a gun. Time fights for our side; it were nonsense to complain that he is doing more than his share of the fighting. It is Spain’s move.

I have the following letter from a well-known physician of San Francisco:

“Dear sir—I read your article in “The Examiner” on some personal recollections of Chickamauga’ with a great deal of interest . . . from the fact that I had heard a description of that battle from a personal friend who was on the staff of General Jeff C. Davis. Your account differs from his in this particular: he characterizes Rosecrans’ retreat with his staff from the battlefield as cowardly and ignominious in the extreme, of which you say nothing, possibly because Rosecrans so recently passed away. I should be more than pleased, if this was not the case, to have you relate the battle more fully, telling us why and through whom it was so nearly lost, and through whom the army was saved, although I have always understood that it was through the consummate skill of General Thomas and his brave supporters.”

Rosecrans’ retirement from the field was not cowardly; he was caught in the rout of the right and naturally supposed that the entire army had given way. His error lay in accepting that view of the disaster without inquiry and endeavoring to repair his broken fortunes by holding the reorganized fugitives at Chattanooga instead of leading them back to the support of his unbeaten

left. If that was impracticable he should at least have gone himself, though Thomas undoubtedly did better work without him. There is no reason to doubt that he acted on his best judgment, which, however, was never very good. Rosecrans was many kinds of a brilliant crank, but his personal courage was beyond question. The action was lost, as I explained, by withdrawal of Woods' division from its center just as the enemy was attacking. That was Rosecrans' fault, for his order, in obedience to which Wood withdrew, was made under an unpardonable misconception. Wood was directed to close on the right of another division, which was supposed to be next to him on the left. It was not, and in order to reach it he left the front line to move behind the troops intervening. Rosecrans had forgotten his own dispositions. Under these circumstances, Wood would have been justified in deferring obedience and apprising his commander of the situation. As to who saved the army there can be no two intelligent opinions: it was saved by the superb obstinancy of Thomas and the soldierly instinct of Gordon Granger in marching toward the sound of cannon.