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We Should Hold Minister Wu Ting-Fang as a Hostage

WASHINGTON, June 21.—The administration appears to be unable to make up what mind it has as to whether or not we are at war with China. The Chinese minister in Washington has more mind, but less difficulty in making it up; he is of the conviction that “a state of war” does not exist.

True, our minister and his legation in Peking, if they have not been all assassinated, suffer the disadvantage of detention, and the armed force which we have sent for their release and protection are, if still living, opposed by an armed force of Chinese. True, American citizens all over the empire, such as have not been savagely slaughtered, have had to witness the destruction of their property, have been subjected to intolerable insult and are everywhere flying for their lives—except where detained for further outrage. True, Chinese gunners belonging to the Chinese army in Chinese forts have fired upon American warships, which have fought a pitched battle with them. But these acts, according to the administration, may not be incompatible with a state of profound peace. They may be the acts of an irresponsible mob insurgent against Chinese authority.

There is not a Cabinet in Europe that has not been over and over again assured by its representatives in Peking that these outrages are perpetrated with the assent and connivance of the Empress Dowager, the Tsung-Li-Yamen and the several viceroys of the provinces where they have occurred. There is no doubt as to that, unless it is a general doubt founded upon the fallibility and inveracity of human testimony from the most credible sources of which we have knowledge. But the Chinese minister in Washington, an amiable gentleman with a notable knack at saying the sweetest things known to Oriental diplomacy, smiles and smiles, and is persuaded that there is a misunderstanding. He deplors his lack of information, but until his august mistress shall deem him worthy to know what is going on, can do no more than repeat his assurances of high consideration and good will.

By those who believe that the momentous events now occurring in China, including the fighting of pitched battles, constitute a state of war, even in the absence of any formal “declaration,” it has been suggested that Minister Wu Ting-Fang should be given his passports forthwith. I venture to think otherwise. Minister Wu Ting-Fang should, in my humble judgment, be taken into custody and held as a hostage to secure the safety of Minister Conger—if that gentleman has still the good luck to be living. It may be urged that this would be contrary to “the usages of civilized nations.” I do not think so. It is one usage of civilized nations to ignore the other usages when dealing with nations not civilized. International law cannot be held as binding upon a belligerent whose antagonism does not recognize it, has violated it, and continues to violate it. Our legation

at Peking are as good as the Chinese legation at Washington. their lives and liberty should be sacred in our eyes as those of Minister Wu and his suite.

American patriotism is not gratified by the thought of our minister dead in the Chinese capital, or a prisoner whose release seems hopeless without weeks of military preparation and the sacrifice of hundreds of lives, while the Chinese minister walks the streets of our own capital irresponsible for the treachery or feebleness of his government, and not contributory to the safety of its American victims.

American diplomacy has something of reputation for the forthright directness of its methods. Foreign cabinets, schooled in the arts of evasion, indirection and temporizing, are accustomed to deprecate our way of saying what we mean; it confuses them. But the people of this country feel an honest pride in our simpler methods and have no desire to forego them. Here is an opportunity to prove that we not only mean what we say, but are capable on fit occasion of doing what we feel to be right and expedient.

To arrest the Chinese minister and hold him as a hostage to secure the relief and liberty of our own minister would affirm and emphasize our policy of independent action. Let the powers of the European concert take such measures as they choose for the safety of their own legations in Peking, and we will cooperate, as we are doing in so far as American interests may seem to demand. But here is an American interest demanding action prompt, imperious, independent and, if you please, arbitrary. The great powers may have all the time they want for approval; we need be in no hurry for that.

We are confronted with a sudden, an unforeseen and awful emergency. Gentlemen learned in international law and "the usages of civilized nations" may feel aggrieved that they have not had their innings, but it is now too late. they cannot illuminate the situation. We are at war with China, and China appears to have seized or assassinated our minister. Let us hold the minister of China until we know. We can then consider what it is best to do with him.