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A Word of Warning

If we are to have war with Spain let us not commit the customary error of underrating the enemy: the American heart can be sufficiently fired without. American courage, it is hoped, does not require fortification by assurance of an easy victory. It is very true that Spain is virtually bankrupt—which is bad for her creditors' but a nation with no visible means of support is able to fight hard and long, a fact that has had memorable illustration among ourselves. If any belligerent was ever poorer in purse than the Southern Confederacy for two years before it gave in it was the federation of rebellious British colonies for a much longer time before it won. An empty stomach has a stout heart, and a no shirt is very good backing. History is full of instances of unpaid, ragged and ill-shod armies cutting out more work for their full-fed antagonists than the latter were able to perform. Soldiers and sailors willing to take their pay in glory are likely to get pretty high wages, for they are their own paymasters. Indubitably our national wealth in money, credit and material resources is an important military advantage, but immediately decisive it certainly is not.

A good deal too much is made too of our superiority in the matter of ships and guns. The superiority is real, though not so great as we are invited to believe by those whose business it is to kindle the fires of patriotism by a brand from the altar of self-interest. Moreover, the last word has not been spoken in the ship market, and it may well be that by secret purchases Spain has reduced the disparity; not all the purchases of warships are bulletined. There is no apparent reason for believing that we have been outdone in particular, and there is ground to think that with our greater financial ability we have outdone Spain; but all is uncertain, and it is as well not to foot up the figures until we have them all set down.

Another element of uncertainty regarding this feature of the matter is due to the facts that a Navy is a good deal more than a certain, or uncertain, number of ships and that a war vessel bought at a foreign bargain-counter and manned with a scratch crew for immediate services is far less effective than a native-built vessel of a design familiar to her officers and men. As these are considerations affecting both sides they are perforce negligible quantities in an estimate of relative strength; they are mentioned here only as clouding the situation and discrediting dogmatic assertion.

The value of the torpedo in naval warfare is not yet accurately determined, but among those most competent to judge it is thought to be very great. If so the disparity between the naval strength of the United States and that of Spain, as they stood before the present activity in purchase of ships, is not nearly so great as is complacently affirmed. In torpedo boats and their ominous missiles Spain is many times richer than we, and every intelligent and patriotic American would view with apprehension a sea-fight between the torpedo flotilla at Cape Verde Islands and the fleet of either Captain Sampson at Key West or Commodore Schley in Hampton Roads.

It may be assumed that all the land fighting, or virtually all, will be done on Cuban soil; any formidable invasion of United States territory is a military impossibility. It is believed that Spain can put into the field in Cuba nearly a hundred thousand troops, a full one-half of whom are veterans of her “regular” army; the other half will be mainly composed of volunteers and conscripts inferior in organization, equipment and experience, but having an incomparable advantage over any American soldiers in that they are acclimatized. (In Cuba the best soldier is the one least vulnerable to yellow fever.) Such a force is not to be despised. Eventually, no doubt, the proximity of the field of operations to our shores, our immense superiority in men, money and ships, our probable ability to blockade the ports and the cooperation of the insurgents will give us the victory’ but it will be no “walkover.” On land, as at sea, we have the prospect of stubborn fighting and much of it. The perfervid patriot may now, as always, deflate the lung of him with blatant assurances of a “dead easy” conquest, but those of us who happen to be old enough to remember the cries, “On to Richmond!” and “*A Berlin!*” will not fail to hear in his words the expression of a fallacious hope. Gentlemen who are always prophesying for the commander who has the advantage of their sympathy an immediate and overwhelming victory commonly overlook one thing making it difficult for him to win it—namely, that the enemy will not let him.

Equally fallacious are the hopes of those who look for dissensions among the Spaniards, calculating upon indirect assistance from the Carlists, the republicans, and so forth. With the possible exception of the anarchists—a cowardly and feeble folk—none of the several political factions will try to grasp an opportunity to obtain an unpatriotic advantage which would be without value if obtained. At the sound of the first gun all Spaniards, as all Americans, will unite against the enemy and fight side by side. Later, if we are so fortunate as to win, rage and humiliation may play their immemorial part, and discord rear its hideous head among the beaten. It is altogether probable that then not only the present ministry may be driven from power, but the royal family from the country. Carlism or Republicanism, as God wills, seizing the reins of authority. But with all that we shall have nothing to do; while the hard fighting is on we shall have all the factions on our hands at once. Here, too, memory may serve to enlighten us—at least us oldsters. Who of us has forgotten how confidently the South counted upon active assistance from the Democrats of the North?—how thoroughly persuaded were many Northerners that the anti-secessionists of 1860 would refuse to fight; and when that hope was gone, how sure were the original abolitionists that the slaves would revolt? And today many Spaniards are cheerfully prophesying as an imminent result of hostilities the re-secession of the Southern states!

Let us not delude ourselves with convictions of an easy victory. The Spaniards are a courageous and civilized people, proud, patriotic and conscientiously convinced of the justice of their cause. The public spirit which so far their government has not dared to defy by surrender to our superior power will sustain them through many a reverse and prompt them to an heroic resistance, even after hope has failed them.

There is another consideration worthy of mention here, not as a calculable military quantity in the estimate of relative strength, but, like some others already mentioned, as an element of uncertainty present in all wars—namely, the possible rise of a great military genius. That is an imprevisible phenomenon profoundly, and sometimes decisively, affecting the result. Obviously, it is as likely to occur in our favor as against us, and cannot therefore be taken into the account in balancing advantages; I mention it only to suggest the folly of over-confidence. If it please “whatever gods may be” to raise up against us on the sea a Spanish Nelson, denying us one of the same sort, there will be lamentation in the land—a lamentation which even the chin-

thunder of talking Bob Evans cannot drown. And if in Cuba a Spanish Napoleon cometh up as a flower we may find that the game of taking that island is not worth the candle.

If we must make war let us make it with all possible vigor, yet modestly withal, remembering that it is a three-handed game, Chance being the third player. He is sometimes the strongest player of the three and gives his assistance to the weakest.

As an American I hope that we shall defeat Spain if we fight her; as an observer I believe that we can; as one who professes to have profited somewhat by the lessons of military history, I foresee a deal of difficulty in doing so.