

San Francisco Examiner
July 23, 1899

War Topics

In the resignation of Secretary Alger we have an admirable example of assisted volition. There can be no doubt whatever that his action was taken in obedience to intimations (which finally penetrated his indurated understanding) by the press of the country. North, South, East and West united in condemning him for incompetency and worse, and this almost universal condemnation found utterance in the newspapers. There was no other way. Without the press it not only could not have been expressed, but would hardly have existed, for the man's sins would not have been known. Herein is a lesson to those high and mighty statesmen who, drunken with the sense of power, have the hardihood to despise the "irresponsible scribblers of the press." This they can afford to do so long as the "irresponsible scribblers" are divided against themselves; but when they virtually combine no man in this country is strong enough to resist them. Seeing how powerful for good the newspapers are one could almost find it in one's heart to wish that they would more frequently unite to effect it.

It may not count for much that returned non-commissioned officers and privates of the Eighth Army Corps are nearly unanimous in condemning Gen. Otis and his conduct in the Philippine war; these men are not educated soldiers, nor do they survey the whole field of operations, discerning the relation of one movement to another. To a private on the firing line or elsewhere knowledge of what is going on beyond the scope of his vision is not readily had nor often sought. Even an officer of the line may easily know more of a campaign or battle in which he was not engaged than of one in which he was. But there is another way to look at this matter. While the bad opinion of the rank and file of his army is not very strong evidence of a commander's competence as a strategist and tactician, it is nevertheless altogether conclusive as to his fitness to command. A general's first duty is to have the confidence, rightly or wrongly, of his men. Without it he is weak for aggression and weak for defense. It is easily had: some of the most incompetent commanders in history have had it in a high degree, and were thereby enabled to accomplish results not otherwise possible to them, especially in averting disaster. Notable examples (I mention them in the hope of arousing evil passions and provoking controversy) are McClellan and Rosecrans. After months of campaigning about Manila Gen. Otis is seen to be conspicuously destitute of the confidence of his men. No military qualities that he may, or can, have can repair that delinquency: he is unfit to command the army that he cannot inspire.

As to his purely military qualities, there is as little doubt. Officers of the regular army are competent critics of military operations. War is their trade: It interests them and they inform themselves of what is doing. Despite the professional reticence of those in the Philippines; despite, also, the censorship, which, right in principle is wrong in character, it is known to observers that the officers of the regular army in the Philippines regard Gen. Otis as a ghastly

failure. Their view is conclusive and he is to be removed, but whether by Mr. McKinley or by Aguinaldo is not altogether clear.

The President's message of thanks to the volunteers at Manila seem fairly well merited. Under the most dispiriting circumstances these men consented to remain in the service long after their legal term had expired. Some deduction should be made, doubtless, from the credit apparently due for the fun they promised themselves in killing Filipinos; but on the whole it was a rather decent thing to do for these youngsters to remain without complaint in that hideous climate to carry on a war in which they have little heart. Their patriotic action makes the shilly-shally policy of the administration the more discreditable. Having accepted the sacrifice it should have made it as light as possible by a vigorous prosecution of the war. Apparently a vigorous prosecution of the war is what the administration least desires. The American people have a foolish trick of electing successful soldiers to the presidency—a habit which has not the advantage of the present incumbent's approval. So there is to be no successful soldier this year. The accusation is not a pretty one, and would doubtless have been made if not true, but to no one acquainted with the base and selfish motives to which we are indebted for much of the government that we get will it seem either particularly incredible or exceptionally infamous. If Mr. Alger's removal from power is to be interpreted as a sign of its abandonment we shall all be truly thankful, and some of us will wonder what undiscernible turpitude underlies the apparently honourable policy that is to replace it.

M'KINLEY: What you say is very true—it is customary to give a dismissed cabinet officer a certificate of good character: it helps him to get another place. Did I understand you to say that you would like to be a senator from Michigan?

ALGER: A senator. Michigan is the state in which I live when at home.

McK: Um'm—you have not been a very great Secretary of War.

A.: I have had no very great war of which to be secretary. It is better to be good than great, anyhow.

McK: You persuaded me to appoint Shafter to command of the army in Cuba.

A.: Consistency is a jewel—you had already appointed Sampson to command of the fleet.

McK.: The unspeakable Egan is one of your many inventions.

A.: He was not patented—you had the use of him without payment of royalty.

McK.: O, I paid. There is Otis—he of the iron-clad desk. If I rightly remember he was designed and erected by you.

A.: (*uncovering*) A noble edifice!

McK.: Of the Ironic order of architecture, with a rear elevation pleasing to Aguinaldo. Mr. Former Secretary, did you ever touch anything that you did not defile?

A.: My salary.

McK.: About that certificate of character. Why should I give it?

A.: Because I might be elected without it.