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BAKER *at* BALLS BLUFF

An Address

BY

J. HAMPTON MOORE

OF PHILADELPHIA



BALLS BLUFF, ON THE POTOMAC

October 21st, 1911

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BAKER AT BALLS BLUFF

ADDRESS

OF

Hon. J. HAMPTON MOORE
Member of Congress from Pennsylvania

AT

Reunion of Survivors of the Seventy-first Pennsylvania (California) Regiment, G. A. R., and Confederate Veterans, at Balls Bluff, Potomac River, Virginia, on the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Battle, October 21, 1911.

VETERANS:—Baker's death at Balls Bluff was one of the severest shocks sustained by the overburdened Lincoln. The two men had been associates in Congress from Illinois, and had stood side by side in the argument against dis-union. Baker's return to Washington as a United States Senator from Oregon was reassuring to the President. He sought and received a Colonel's commission, although he was offered appointment as a Major-General. The higher rank he never accepted, although the tender of it was regarded as the President's estimate of his dignity and capabilities.

LINCOLN WANTED ACTION.

McClellan was in command of the Army of the Potomac. He was the only officer holding the rank of Major-General at that time, and he was moving with great deliberation, undoubtedly over-estimating the strength of the enemy on the other side of the river. The disaster at Bull Run had alarmed and angered the Nation and had caused the President the greatest solicitude. There were

moments when, to all intents and purposes, he was upon his knees at the McClellan headquarters or in the McClellan home, begging for action.

What Baker wanted was what Lincoln wanted. In his dramatic debate with Breckenridge, accoutred as he was in the uniform of Colonel, he clearly indicated his belief that the Rebellion should be put down, and that there must be no temporizing. He went forth with his regiment, which he had recruited largely in Philadelphia subject, of course, to the orders of his commanding officers.

OBEYED ORDERS AND DIED.

After the lapse of fifty years there is still some mist enshrouding the motives and plans of the commanders who directed the movement which, so unhappily, resulted in Baker's death. That McClellan was endeavoring to force an opening upon the Virginia side of the Potomac is evident. That the Division Commander, Stone, directed the movement at Balls Bluff, and gave the orders to Baker, is a matter of official record. That brave men from Massachusetts, New York and Pennsylvania, who had not long been trained in the art of war, were suddenly ordered across the river at Harrison's Island, above Edward's Ferry, and that they spent most of the night in getting over, and much of the succeeding day of October 21st in struggling like rats in a trap on the top of Balls Bluff and the approaches thereto, is a reasonable statement of the facts. The heroic work of portions of the Massachusetts regiments before the arrival of Colonel Baker, and the re-alignment of forces after his appearance on the scene, and their gallant defense until the close of the day, demonstrated that the new recruits could fight, and that they were determined, if possible, to wipe out the humiliation of Bull Run. Even Baker's death in the afternoon, although it greatly disorganized the men, did not prevent their fighting on. They were hopeful, as he was, that reinforcements would come.

REINFORCEMENTS DID NOT COME.

The miserable transportation facilities for getting the men back and forth over the Potomac River was perhaps the weakest spot in the campaign. They consisted only of an accidentally discovered flat boat and a few skiffs, and delayed the arrival of a portion of Baker's command until too late to be of assistance to the hard-

pressed fighters on the Bluff; they were also utterly inadequate as a means of retreat. But it was held out to the commanders and the men that the four thousand troops at Edward's Ferry, a few miles away, would come to their rescue, and so the shattered forces kept on fighting. But disappointment followed defeat, and at nightfall the worn-out remnant of Baker's men found themselves at the foot of the Bluff, huddled along the hostile banks of the Potomac, with no alternative but surrender, or death. A few managed to escape by swimming the turbid river under cover of the night, but many who made the attempt were shot in the water.

QUICKENING EFFECT OF THIS DISASTER.

It was a pitiable spectacle, and while it added greatly to Lincoln's anguish, it stirred the Nation to a greater realization of its danger. It checked the assurance and jealousy of some of the leaders in Congress and the Army, and quickened the activities of all the supporters of the Union. It taught the self-satisfied Northener that the Southern man was brave and determined, and, while a mere incident in the bloody train of hostilities that followed through the four long years of strife, served to arouse the people to such a frenzy of excitement as had only been witnessed after the disaster at Bull Run.

NATIONS GENEROUS AND FORGETFUL.

It is said of nations that they are ungrateful, and yet in many ways the Government of the United States has belied the assertion. No other nation in the world has been more generous to those who bore arms in its defense. One-sixth of all the revenues of the Government are this day devoted to the care and the maintenance of the veterans who were loyal in the service of their country. We have reared monuments to celebrate the achievements of our chieftains upon land and sea, and we have signalized the exploits of the private soldier in bronze and marble; but, much as we have done for the heroic living and the martyred dead, we have here and there slipped a cog and overlooked the bravest of the brave. And, pray, who more brave than they who, yielding up their homes and opportunities, and obediently marching into the very jaws of death upon Balls Bluff, laid down their lives on October 21, 1861! They were true soldiers, for, without asking the reason why, they followed their commanders and plunged into the maelstrom of death, with

no hope of glory or reward in this life, and without even the assurance that their graves would be marked.*

TARGETS FOR SHARPSHOOTERS.

Hemmed in on the brow of the Bluff, with Confederate forces occupying the surrounding woodland and gradually closing in upon him, Baker ordered his men to lie down, since, standing, they were only targets for the sharpshooters in the trees.

"Don't expose yourself," said he to a soldier who was standing erect, loading and firing.

"Colonel, you expose yourself, why shouldn't I?"

But the answer of the Commander indicated that, although he knew the importance of keeping his men under cover and of safeguarding them until reinforcements came, he could not himself "lie down in the face of the enemy." Thus he became the target of the marksmen from whom he strove to shield his men. Several bullets struck him as he fell.

NO MONUMENT TO BAKER.

There is no monument to Baker at Balls Bluff. The bones of many heroes who died with him, slumber there in obscurity. A Nation which has been so generous in other respects should not longer permit this palpable injustice to continue. Balls Bluff in the Civil War had all the startling significance of the first shot upon Sumter. It was like the blowing up of the Maine in our more recent conflict with Spain. It involved the Nation in a controversy which stirred Congress to action. It carried down with it the life of one of the Nation's greatest orators and statesmen, a firm and devoted follower of the immortal Lincoln, and one of his chief allies in Congress and the Army. His life had been devoted to such high and lofty and statesmanlike purposes that his tragic death had all the effect of a national catastrophe. The sacred soil upon which Baker fell, and around which the gallant Philadelphians and their

* Balls Bluff today is a bit of rugged country bordering the Potomac and overlooking a valley of much scenic beauty. It is the end of a three miles drive from the old town of Leesburg. The road cuts through rolling farm land which is divided up into large Virginia estates. The Bluff is thickly wooded and slopes abruptly to the river bank. On the clearing at the top of the Bluff, the United States Government has located a small cemetery within the stone walls of which have been gathered together the bodies of some of those who were killed October 21, 1861. Of all those remaining unclaimed (a total of 25) only one, James Allen, of a Massachusetts regiment, was identified. The others are numbered amongst the unknown. There is a flagstaff in the center of the plot, and this, save a small granite marker in memory of a Confederate soldier, about 100 feet from the cemetery, is all that marks the battle ground—a battle ground upon which the casualties, dead, wounded and missing, reached nearly 1,200.—J. H. M., October 21, 1911.

comrades of Massachusetts and New York poured out their life's blood in the last stand against the charging troops of Virginia and Mississippi, should be marked, and that speedily, as a tribute to the dead and a signal to the living.†

THE AFTERMATH OF WAR.

But, veterans, we have passed beyond the borderland of strife. The fierce yell of the Confederate soldiers, breaking through the woodland with fixed bayonets or smoking musketry, is no longer to be seen or heard. The stubborn resistance of the invading but unsupported Union men, driven back to defeat and surrender at Balls Bluff, is interesting to the newer generation only as a matter of history, but to you, survivors of the thrilling scenes of half a century ago, they involved the sacrifice of human life and blood, and shaped a Nation's destiny! You understand what all this meant, you men who wore the Blue, and you who wore the Gray; you understand as we do not! And in this age of progress, made possible by your struggles and the gallantry of those who here laid down their lives with Baker, we may well indulge the hope that this and future generations shall continue to reverence and respect and, if need be fight for, the institutions of our common country. We have much to do that has not yet been done. The turning of the swords of '61 into the plowshares of today is not the sum of all our hopes and expectations. Under a single flag our country is expanding and our wealth increasing, but we have been wasteful; we have not more than scratched the surface of our resources. The love of ease and the lure of gold have followed in the wake of our

† About 100 feet from the Balls Bluff Cemetery (it is said to be the smallest of all the National Cemeteries) at the edge of the Bluff slope, a bushful of loose stones hold up a wretched worm-eaten fence rail, to mark the spot where Baker fell. It is the only monument to one of the Nation's greatest orators and statesmen. Colonel Baker was an Englishman by birth, but his Americanism was intense. From a mill-boy in Philadelphia, he had risen to be a lawyer, and colleague in Congress of Lincoln in Illinois. As a speaker he had thrilled great audiences East and West. In California he was famous as an advocate, and Oregon gladly sent him to the United States Senate. He had served with distinction in the Mexican War and though risen to the proud post of a United States Senator, he promptly stepped from the rostrum to the field when he felt that the country needed his services there.

Baker's strength in the Senate was exceptional. His reply to Breckenridge as his regiment waited in camp under the very shadow of the capital, was dramatic in the extreme. His power over his men was magnetic. His presence was imposing and his example was inspiring. The men whom he called his "boys," loved him. They followed him cheerfully when he scaled the heights at Balls Bluff, and they faltered only when he fell. There was so much of gentleness and nobility in his character, that it would seem now, after the swing of fifty years, that some monument more lasting than an unheven stick should adorn the ground where ebbed and closed the life of one whose patriotism and bravery earned him a place amongst the nation's heroes.—J. H. M., October 21, 1911.

prosperity, like the stealthy camp follower behind the battling armies. Indeed we have mighty problems yet to be determined.

THE DUTY OF BEING PREPARED.

We are dealing with a generation which knows little of the struggles and privations of the men who fought on the one side for the maintenance of the Union, and on the other for what they believed to be the rights of the separate States. In our great onward march of civilization, fifty years remote from the great war in which you participated, we cannot forget that he is best assured of peace who is best prepared for war. We seek no war; we pray for peace; and yet from out the clear, unclouded sky the thunderbolts of war are hurled—when, where, we cannot tell. We are dependent today upon a standing army which is but a corporal's guard compared with the standing armies of European or even of Asiatic countries. Our navy is growing stronger, but the surprise which Italy has just given the Sultan carries a warning to us that we must maintain our ability to defend upon the high seas.

MUST CONSERVE OUR NATIONAL STRENGTH.

And as we rear our monuments to the heroic dead, and seek by their example to inspire the living, insisting upon peace as we maintain a readiness for war, let us seek, by a closer interest in the real welfare of our country, to have men know and firmly believe in its worth and glory. Our land is rich and full of opportunity. Our soil is fertile and capable of cultivation. We have millions of acres of untilled land that need but the hand of man to give it value and utility. We must depend upon the soil and the products of the soil for our national strength. If we abandon the plowshare and the sturdy occupations which create the wealth of our country, the maintenance of an Army or a Navy will indeed be a burden. The spirit of the soldier is the spirit of sacrifice. He entered the great four years' struggle not for wealth, but to establish the reign of peace and progress which followed the war.

WE SHOULD PROFIT BY HIS EXAMPLE.

The spirit of '76 united the Colonies and taught us the lessons of liberty and independence. It was the spirit of '61 that gave us the Union and taught us the lessons of peace and industry. What

we have gained through the shedding of blood and the loss of life and happiness, should not be lost to the succeeding generations. As we should be prepared on land or sea for the foreign thunderbolt which we trust will ne'er be hurled against our land, it is likewise prudent that we should fortify ourselves against that more insidious conflict, the modern spirit of greed and selfishness which tends to undermine and sap the Nation's strength. We need true men to make the Nation strong.

OUR MONUMENTS A HERITAGE.

Rear, then, your monuments, ye veterans of the great civil conflict; rear them high upon mountain top and in valley; memorialize the personal sacrifice and the unselfish devotion of your comrades who laid down their lives in noxious swamps and rocky fastnesses. Rear them to the memory of brave and generous souls whose patriotism far excelled the love of gold. They died that the union of States might be maintained, and that under that union succeeding generations should enjoy the blessings of peace, of justice and of equal opportunity. This is the heritage of your valor, as it is our lesson for the day.





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