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The National Weakness:

A

DISCOURSE

DELIVERED IN

THE FIRST CHURCH, BROOKLINE,

ON FAST DAY, SEPT. 26, 1861.

BY REV. F. H. HEDGE, D.D.

BOSTON:

WALKER, WISE, AND COMPANY,

245, WASHINGTON STREET.

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S E R M O N.

“LET NOT HIM THAT GIRDETH ON HIS HARNESS BOAST HIMSELF AS HE
THAT PUTTETH IT OFF.”—1 Kings xx. 11.

WHEN President Lincoln, five months ago, put forth his Proclamation, announcing a combination against the laws of the land too powerful to be suppressed by ordinary methods, and calling for seventy-five thousand troops to meet this exigency, there mingled, with the grief and indignation awakened in us by the treason which necessitated such an appeal, a thrill of patriotic joy at this demonstration of a new energy on the part of Government, after so many months of passive submission. We gloried in the prospect of a speedy solution of our national difficulties by a vigorous assertion of the Federal authority. Our spirits, which had settled into sullen gloom, almost despair of our country's future, were raised to a pitch of jubilant expectation, as we felt, through all our bones, the shock of national consciousness which that manifesto communicated to the loyal States.

The States were not slack in acknowledging the appeal. Massachusetts, true to her historical primacy, with promptness worthy her illustrious pedigree, re-

sponded to the call. Her Governor's word gave back the President's like its echo; a regiment of her sons, equipped and on the march in less than six days, was the echo to that; and a second 19th of April, dated with her blood, initiated and auspicated the new conflict. The seventy-five thousand were mustered and sent; and to these were added as many more. Our hearts were established: we were not afraid. The prevalent expectation was, that a three-months' campaign would suffice, if not to heal all difficulties, and reinstate the shattered Union, at least to crush the power of the rebels, and make it impossible for them to pursue their disorganizing course and to carry out their nefarious design.

So we girded on our harness with some boasting. With what result? The three-months' campaign, inaugurated with so much enthusiasm, after some less important engagements, terminated with the battle of Bull Run.

The three months expired, — five months have elapsed, — and the rebel power is still unsubdued. "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved." The rebels are not crushed, nor even so weakened as yet to despair of final success, or to manifest the least inclination to recede from their position. So far as they are weakened at all, it is by want of means, by their straitened economy and financial embarrassment, and not by the triumphs of the Federal arms. The Federal arms have not triumphed in any important engagement, except when opposed in overwhelming force to a weak resistance on the part of the enemy.

And, although the disaster at Bull Run cannot be regarded as a victory on the part of the rebels, it added greatly to their confidence, and therefore to their strength ; while it terribly rebuked our own overweening confidence in ourselves, and proved to us how little enthusiasm and patriotic determination will avail, without military discipline, — without wise conduct, prudence, and self-control. An army of brave men, — for such unquestionably they were, — by mere conceit of approaching danger, not real, imminent peril, overtaken with a panic which dissolves all bonds of military organization, almost of human fellowship, and converts a body of warriors into a herd of frightened deer, flying at the top of their speed when none pursued, never halting to ascertain whether any just cause existed for their alarm, utterly bereft of counsel and reason, and given over to a passion of insane terror, — this, after all the noisy demonstrations, the congratulations and harangues, the receptions and parades, which solemnized the setting forth of these hosts, though not an uncommon occurrence in war, and though no worse than a hundred panics recorded in history, is still a shame and a tragedy, which sadly illustrates the difference there is between promise and performance, between girding on and putting off.

Meanwhile, the pirates of the new Confederacy, in defiance of the public sentiment of Christendom, are pursuing their prey, and snatching their plunder, on all our seas. Hundreds of vessels, with large amounts of value, have been seized by these bold buccaneers, who have thus far eluded all attempts to arrest their career.

Such, then, is our position at the present time. With vast resources and superabundant strength at our disposal, we have not as yet, for want of headship, of adequate organization, unity of purpose, and harmony of counsel, succeeded in applying those resources and that strength with decisive effect. The enemy in our borders, whom a well-directed effort might crush into dust, is still unsubdued, undaunted, — still mocks us through our own indirection. The fact is humiliating, and, like all humiliations, a salutary lesson to such as are willing to be instructed by it, — a lesson of weakness which it much concerns us to lay to heart. As a nation, we are proudly conscious of our strength: it were well we understood our weakness also, our national infirmities and faults. Of some of these, I propose now to speak.

One element of weakness is our self-conceit, — the vain-glorious persuasion that we are, on the whole, the greatest people and the wisest that ever occupied the earth with their labors, or tracked it with their foot-prints. One can pardon some degree of self-importance to a great and prosperous nation: I suppose there never was one without it. Let a people think well of their ability, and cherish a high sense of their providential mission. We accept it as a sign of national health. But let the conceit bear some proportion to the fact, and let it respect the national calling rather than the national merit; else it is a sign of morbid development, great superficial expansion, with no proportionate increase of substance. We Americans not only arrogate to ourselves a great destiny, in which, if we are true to our

opportunities, we may be right ; but we boast of great doings, in which we are certainly wrong. We confound prosperity with merit ; we mistake a growth which is partly due to natural laws, partly to rare opportunities, and partly to a certain shiftiness of constitution, for a proof of greatness ; we plume ourselves on our expansion ; we give ourselves airs on the strength of a rapid, perhaps unexampled, increase of population, and a corresponding success in trade. When I hear such boasts, I cannot help recalling what an English cynic says of our pretensions : “ Brag not yet of our American cousins. Their quantity of cotton, dollars, industry, and resources, I believe to be almost unspeakable. But I can by no means worship the like of these. What great human soul, what great thought, what great noble thing, that one could worship or loyally admire, has yet been produced there ? None ! The American cousins have done none of these things.”

I cannot help remembering, that the little republic of Athens, while yet in its youth, with its limited territory, population, and means, produced, within a century after the Persian wars, the immortal works which are still the chief boast of letters and art ; and, what is more, the immortal men whom the world still honors as little less than divine. The most that we can say of ourselves is, that we have occupied a large territory with our civilization, such as it is, and invented some ingenious contrivances for the expedition of business, and the merely mechanical intercourse of life. Mechanical ingenuity, directed to material ends, is, thus far, our chief distinction as a people. And even here our merit is not

supreme. The steamship is a great addition to the sum of human means; but the ship itself, which preceded it, was incomparably greater. The electric telegraph is a cunning invention; but the art of writing, about which little noise was made at the time, was a greater advance in civilization, and a greater blessing to mankind.

The real and most important achievement, and therefore the true test of a nation, is the national character. Tried by this standard, the American people can claim no pre-eminent rank among the nations. Here our weakness is painfully evident. It is true, the national character is not yet fully developed, and must not be too severely judged. True it is also, that the national character has many excellent and noble qualities, among which I may mention generosity, kindness, and daring. But these are offset by fatal defects. Chief among these is a certain looseness which pervades the intellectual and moral life of the nation, debilitating its mental capacity, and vitiating all its action.

Intellectually, this trait appears in the superficiality, the crudeness, the want of discipline, of thorough and effective training, which characterize American life; and are due, in part, to the very constitution of our republican society, in which the facilities afforded for a certain kind of success, the chance of a prosperous career, to mere self-assertion, with little or no culture, and no laborious preparation of any kind, tend to lessen the demand for thorough education, and consequently reduce its standard and restrict its means. Where a hasty education will suffice for social and political success, the greater part will seek no other. To an Ame-

rican, the last criterion of merit, and the supreme mark of his calling, is to get the most votes; and, in this, it is not the best educated that succeed best, but the most unscrupulous and the most importunate. Accordingly, our public men, as a general rule, are worse educated, worse trained, and worse mannered, than those of any other civilized nation. A thoroughly taught and cultivated American gentleman is proverbially a rare phenomenon, and nowhere more so than in public life. The men who represent us in the courts of Europe, represent, too often and too faithfully, our ignorance and ill-breeding. With no knowledge of the language of the country to which they are sent, or of French (the language of courts), with no tincture of polite or diplomatic learning, with no one qualification for the post they occupy but the service rendered in procuring the election of the chief who sends them, they seem rather to have been accidentally cast ashore in those strange lands, than delegated thither as the plenipotentiaries of a great nation. There are splendid exceptions, I know, extending through all our history, — instances like those of Irving, Wheaton, Everett, Bancroft, and that of the accomplished ambassador who now represents us at the court of Vienna; but such has been the prevailing type. How, indeed, can it be otherwise? How should we be better abroad than at home? The representation is according to the constituency. The same want of thoroughness appears in the home-departments of State, whose incumbents are mostly and grossly deficient in knowledge and tact, equal to no exigency requiring brain and heart instead of routine.

A great crisis like the present finds them incompetent and unprepared.

Viewed in its moral aspects, the looseness of which I speak is manifest in the want of reverence and subordination, which forms so conspicuous a trait of our nationality, and proves, at the present juncture, so serious an obstacle in our military operations. The American is not taught by the genius of the civil polity under which he lives, as other nations are by theirs, to respect and obey his superiors. On the contrary, the lesson he learns from his political experience is, that he has no superiors, — a lesson of equality, which, unless counteracted by domestic training or corrected by his own good sense, he is apt to interpret as a right to his own way in every condition and relation of life: a principle of action utterly incompatible with military discipline. It is difficult for him to admit the idea of a superior, much more to submit himself with unquestioning obedience to one who is placed in authority over him. Subordination is the first and fundamental principle, not only of military organization, but of social order. This lesson the American citizen has yet to learn; and, if the war shall serve to enforce it, it will prove a providential school of a very important civil virtue, as well as of a moral and Christian grace.

The same looseness appears in the moral indifference, which, not content with mitigating, has gone far to abolish, the criminal code, or the application of it in practice; which overlooks the gravest transgressions in public men, if associated with popular qualities; which tolerates bankruptcy of the most aggravated and fraud-

ulent kind as a mercantile mishap, not compromising the social position of the offender; — an indifference to which the audacious filibuster is as worthy a hero as Scott or Kane; and which views criminality in general rather as an interesting variety of human nature, than as damnable guilt. Suppose our national difficulties settled, the rebellion suppressed, the Union restored: I fear that the leader in this conspiracy, whose crime against this country is unsurpassed in the annals of treason, so far from receiving his deserts on the gallows, would become the popular hero of the day. Should he visit the loyal States, I fear he would be received with public honors, and would be as likely as another to be elected President of the United States. We may certainly claim, as a people, the merit of extraordinary freedom from vindictiveness; but we must also plead guilty to a most extraordinary degree of moral indifference.

One other element of national weakness I will mention; and that is our present system of political administration, which has come to be a regular quadrennial revolution, extending through all the departments of State, and including every Federal office in the land. No sooner has any functionary become sufficiently versed in the duties of his station to discharge them with credit to himself and with profit to the nation, than immediately he is ejected, and his place supplied by a novice, who, mindful of the brief and precarious tenure of his position, is chiefly intent on making the most that can be made, in the way of pecuniary gain, of the opportunities it affords. The mischief arising from this source is incalculable. Not only are character and talent of

the highest order almost necessarily excluded from the service of the State by a system which makes office the reward of successful demagogism, but a lottery is opened with each Presidential term to hungry adventurers, whose only idea of office is that of a prize in the game of politics, with opportunity of plunder. If occasionally men of the better sort, who might excel in some honorable calling, are tempted by the hope of political preferment to mix in this arena, they do so at the expense of their morals or their time; for this is a race in which merit, self-respect, and scrupulous integrity, are sure to be distanced by importunity, chicanery, and brazen-faced impudence. Can they condescend to tamper with electors, and to foul their hands with low intrigue? If not, let them stand aloof from the game, and renounce all hope of success in that direction. This is a system which throws to the surface the dregs of our American civilization, and opens an impassable gulf between merit and political eminence. The present century has witnessed a steady decline in the character of our public men. Where shining ability and high-minded patriotism were once the rule, they have come to be the exception. To the Jeffersons, the Adamses, and Clays, has succeeded a race of jobbers and hack politicians. Such are the results of this deplorable system of quadrennial rotation in office. This has made us, with all our prosperity, our rapid growth, and extended commerce, a byword and a hissing among the nations.

Since the throne of the world was sold at auction to the highest bidder, there has been nothing in its way so base as American politics. So demoralizing, so disor-

ganizing, is the tendency of this system, that even the rupture of the Union, at the prospect of which we startle and are now so distressed, could bring us nothing worse than our own chosen and established methods were all these years preparing for us. All this must be reformed, or we slide to inevitable ruin, from which, hitherto, our ample territory and vast material resources alone have saved us. The quarrel between North and South which now agitates the land is but an anticipation of (unless it shall prove, as I trust it may, our deliverance from) greater evils that were threatening us before this outbreak, and that must have arrived, independently of the present crisis, by the natural termination of the course we were pursuing. We were rushing, with a speed unexampled in the history of nations, to the civil dissolution which precedes despotism in the natural order of history. The war now enkindled by sectional conflicts, with all the evil and miseries attending it, will prove, in the end, the greatest of blessings, if it serves to arrest this downward tendency; if it opens our eyes to our political errors and vices, and puts us in the way of reforming them; if it raises to the supreme power a truly wise and independent man, with an eye to discern what is needful, and strength of will, in spite of precedent and popular clamor, to enforce it, — a man who, without respect to party, shall put the right men in the right places; retaining the competent and faithful of former administrations, and fearlessly ejecting the incompetent of his own; and whose influence, backed by Congress and the nation, shall avail to make that practice the law of the land. I see no salvation for this people, no

way of redemption from political ruin, until the principle is established of permanence in offices whose term is not prescribed by the Constitution, nor necessarily affected by the exigencies of State, — a permanence limited only by the competence and good behavior of the incumbent. Such a system of administration would tend to make office no longer the reward of electioneering and the prize of demagogues, but the fit investment of intellectual and moral worth; it would tend to take the affairs of State out of the hands of jobbers and pettifoggers and bar-room politicians, and commit them to those who are equal to the trust; it would tend to stop the mouths of the orators of the stump, to abate the nuisance of the popular harangue, and to purify the national speech; it would make the annual and quadrennial elections a safe and peaceable process, instead of the hurly-burly it now is, inflaming the passions, setting friend against friend, dividing households, and imbittering all the intercourse of life; it would help to do away with this periodical Walpurgis, this uncovering of the hells of wrath and strife; and, finally, it would make politics with us what they are in other lands, — a science of civil and international relations, instead of a trade and a trick, which none can be concerned in and not be defiled; it would give us counsellors instead of speculators; magistrates whom we can sincerely respect, instead of available ciphers; and make, in the good old Bible phrase, “our rulers peace, and our exactors righteousness.”

I shall not speak of slavery in connection with this subject of the national weakness; not because I do not feel it to be the great weakness of the land, — the

head and front of our offending, but because the subject has been so thoroughly discussed as to need no comment of mine, and, at present, no further ventilation. Those who do not see it to be the crowning evil of our polity are not likely to be converted by any illustration which I can give it.

The faults and vices I have named, if not the immediate cause of our troubles, are yet, in so far as the head and heart and hand of the nation have been weakened and its action vitiated by them, the true source of the mortifications, the disappointments, and all the bitter experiences, of this year of sorrows. God grant these experiences — “his chastisements,” as our Chief Magistrate calls them — may work in us the good work of discipline and reform, — may open our eyes and bring back our hearts to forsaken truth and violated law! — that we may learn wisdom and learn obedience by the things we suffer, and rise from the humiliation of this affliction, a purified people, “zealous of good works.”

And now, fellow-citizens, it befits us to consider what is needful and good for the present distress. Here we are, committed to a war whose term no mortal can predict, whose issues defy all human calculation; a war which will cost us hundreds of millions of money, and, it may be, hundreds of thousands of lives; a war which will beggar our commerce, check our industry, decimate our cities, dismember our households, engulf our beloved, and wring our hearts with unspeakable anguish. What shall we say, in view of these horrors? what policy embrace? what course pursue? I know but one counsel in this emergency. One thought is uppermost in my

heart; one word gushes up to my lips. It is hard to say it, in the face of all this tribulation and woe; but I know of nothing better: that word is, Onward!—onward, while a dollar remains in our treasury, and a regiment in the field!—onward, with due caution, but with unabated zeal and indomitable hearts! We have girded on our harness; and cursed be he that would bid us put it off until one of two issues arrives to our arms,—until we have quite conquered the enemies of our peace, and driven rebellion into the sea, or we ourselves are so far conquered as to have no means and no hope left; until it becomes evident, and is forced on our reluctant minds, that we have undertaken an impossibility, and are fighting against God, and must needs submit to his decree and the stronger foe, and accept the rupture of the Union as the bitter end and the heavenly doom! There are times when the cry of peace is the voice of treason, frightful and hateful as war ever is. Precious is peace; but liberty and right are more precious still: and liberty and right are at stake in this contest,—the liberties and rights bequeathed to us by our fathers, and bought with their blood. For certain it is, that if we fail to conquer the rebels who have lifted their parricidal hands against the common mother of us all, the National Union, they will eventually conquer *us*, and exercise a deadly dominion over us, if not by force of arms, by the surer weapons of political intrigue,—by insidious tampering with our commerce, by fell collusion with traitors on this side, by sowing dissension in our counsels and strife in our ranks, till province after province is

added to the new confederacy, and, piece by piece, what remains of the old Union is broken up. For the hydra of Secession is a monster that will not cease to ravage and destroy until the life is burnt out of it by the searing application of loyal arms. There will be no drawn game in this warfare: our only alternative is to conquer or succumb.)

The cry of peace has been raised, here and there, by those whose political prospects or material interests are imperilled or impaired by the war. What would they have? what kind and conditions of peace would they propose? Shall the North — that is, the Federal Government — lay down its arms, and say to the rebels, “We have erred: we repent. Go your way; do what you will: we oppose you no longer”? If such be their meaning, let them declare it, and see how many they can draw to their side. But no: they would have a convention for mutual adjustment. Suppose the convention assembled: what is there to adjust that the Constitution has not adjusted? Will the South accept that arbiter? The seceding States have already disowned it. For the North to offer more than the compromises of the Constitution would be saying to the rebels, “We submit to your will: put your feet on our necks.” May I never live to see the day when that concession shall take effect! Better a war of extermination than such adjustment.

The demand for peace has hitherto, so far as I know, been confined to the North, the party aggrieved and assailed, — the party acting in defence of the Union and the Constitution. It must come from the other side

of the Potomac; the cry must go up from the ranks of Secession, and be accompanied by return to the old allegiance, — before our warfare can be accomplished.

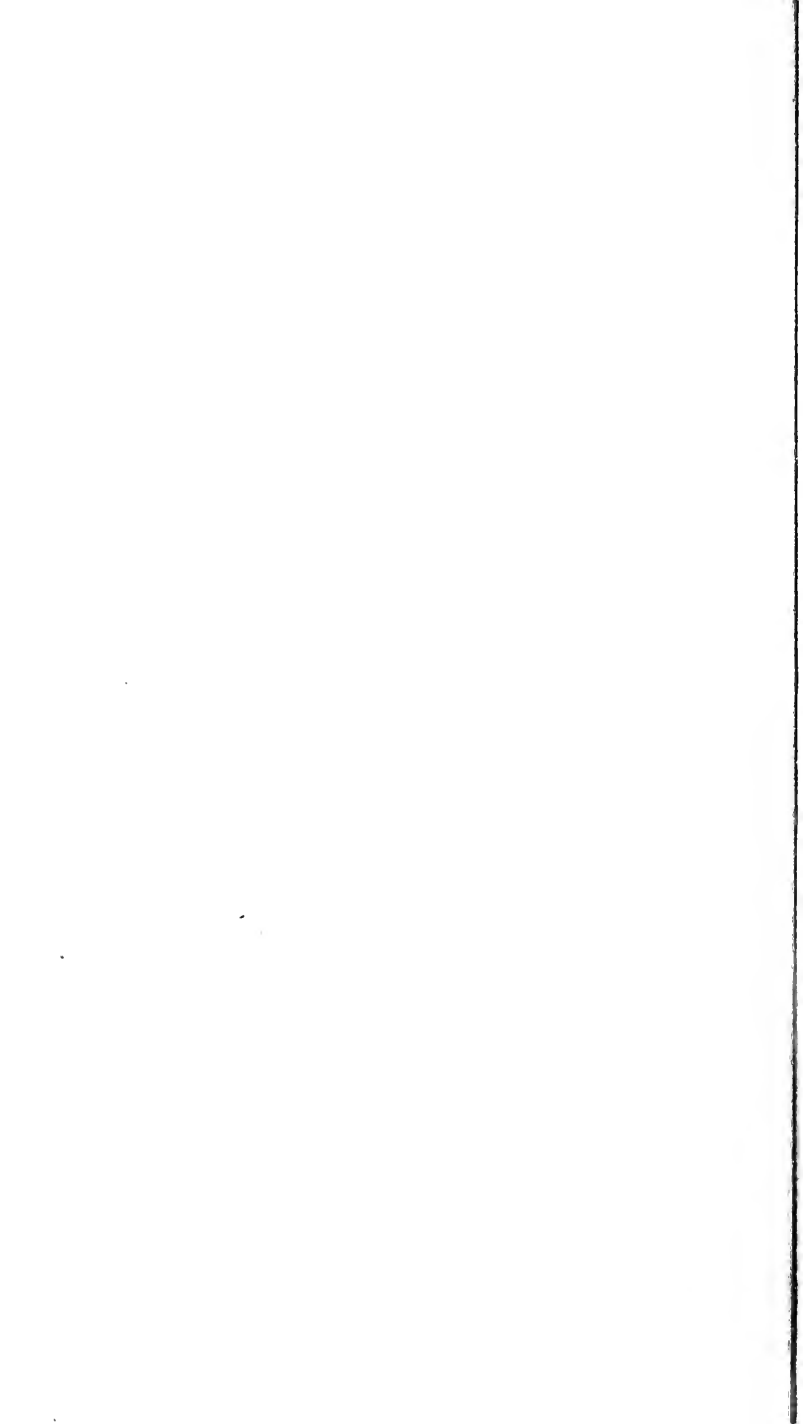
Great are the difficulties attending this struggle for nationality. There never was a conflict so complicated and embarrassing as ours. Had we only the known, declared, and open enemy to encounter, our task would be comparatively light. But we have to contend with secret foes; our enemies are partly those of our own household; Treason lurks in our own ranks, in league with Rebellion outside, and furthering its cause. If we fail at last, it will be the treachery that walketh in darkness, not the destruction that wasteth at noonday, to which we succumb.

But we will not admit the thought of failure, with such an overweight of means and forces as falls to our side, with such issues as hang on our success, — the interests of civil society, the cause of order the world over, the cause of liberty for all time. Let us rather think, with such interests at stake, that Nature herself is in league with us; that the stars, in their courses, fight on our side; that humanity travails with the burden of our victory. Let us think that the shades of our fathers look solemnly down on this solemn struggle to preserve what they gave. And, with these, let our piety connect the more recent memories of those who have fallen in this campaign, — the proto-martyrs of our cause. High among these, shines the honored name of Lyon, than whom no braver ever led the van in the field of death. He sleeps well: his memory is blest.

“ There is a tear for all who die,
A mourner o'er the humblest grave;
But nations swell the funeral cry,
And Triumph weeps, above the brave.”

And so let the day of public humiliation be to all the people of this Union a day of new consecration and new hope. May He who weighs the nations in his balance find this nation true to his word, and trusting in his name, in war as in peace! May those who gird on the harness of battle wear it without boasting, but with cheerful courage and unfaltering trust; and, when in due season we shall put it off, may our boasting be not in ourselves, but in God, who giveth us the victory!





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