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Self - Criticism North and South

AN ADDRESS

*Delivered before the Faculty and
Students of Washington and
Lee University*

By OSWALD GARRISON VILLARD

on January 11th, 1906

WASHINGTON AND LEE UNIVERSITY
LEXINGTON, VIRGINIA

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As an editor I appreciate the privilege of speaking to the students of this ancient institution now taking on a new life and enjoying a new vigor under its present administration. Just how great the service Washington and Lee is rendering to the South and to the nation would in itself be a tempting subject for me as a Northern journalist. I could, perhaps, dwell upon some aspect of it which may not have occurred to you. But this temptation I must put aside. My purpose to-day is to speak of some recent aspects of our Northern political development and of the value of self-criticism both North and South, which will perhaps interest you since this is above all else a place of historical associations and of hallowed traditions.

As you are aware, the year 1905 was distinguished in the United States by a revolt against those political leaders known as bosses, who had by hook or by crook possessed themselves of certain executive and legislative functions of our city and state governments which

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are by right inherent in the people or their duly chosen representatives. How subtly these dangerous powers were acquired or during what period of time is of no moment here. The all-important fact remains that the American people awoke at last to a realization that, Gulliver-like, they were being bound hand and foot by a tribe of Lilliputian politicians who actually deemed themselves the arbiters of the country's fate, empowered to dispense offices, rich financial favors and legislation—to make and unmake mayors, governors and presidents, quite as they saw fit. Fortunately this Gulliver awoke in time, and awoke all the more widely because of a sudden appreciation that some of the political bosses, particularly those in the North, had gradually changed their characters and had, by selling themselves for cash, become puppets of men of finance and without conscience, and of the soulless corporations which have developed in such numbers and grown to astounding size even within your lifetimes. It was this state of affairs and the proof of its existence brought out by the magazine revelations of a pretendedly repentant frenzied financier, and by the inquiry into the scandalous methods of our insurance magnates which finally brought our Gulliver to his senses at last. That was a glorious victory won at the polls on November 7th. In Massachusetts, in New York, in New Jersey, in Pennsylvania, and in Ohio, the people rose in their might, voting with a most

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notable independence against the bosses and all their works. Party lines were well-nigh forgotten. When the day was over there were beaten or checked bosses in every one of the states mentioned.

Important as were the revelations I have just mentioned in bringing about these striking results, in which every true American must rejoice, I would not for a moment have you think that they were due solely to Mr. Lawson or to the insurance investigation; or, in Ohio, to the liquor question and the exposure of gang rule in Cincinnati. These were undoubtedly important factors in the revolution. But they could not have become even the final straws had there not grown up in the North a school of merciless critics of American institutions, men who believed that they could not render higher patriotic service than to find fault where things went wrong. The first and perhaps the best known of these in the journalistic world was Mr. Edwin L. Godkin, who founded the *Nation* in 1865, and later became editor of the *New York Evening Post*. He soon had distinguished associates. There was the knightly George William Curtis, long editor of *Harper's Weekly*, who was in turn succeeded by Carl Schurz. The *Springfield Republican* was fortunate in having the Bolles, father and son. There were the editors of the *New York Times*, the *Boston Herald*, and others, who guided their newspapers by high prin-

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ciples as fixed as the stars, and who did so irrespective of party and partisanship. Under their tutelage there gradually grew up a new school of political thought, of which the "Mugwumps," as they were first called, or Independents, were the outgrowth. These men, seeing evils in both of the great political parties, took a neutral position, and have ever since 1884 held the balance of power in national elections.

A more thankless task than that of these editors could hardly be imagined. There was no epithet too rigorous to apply to them. At first people thought them unpatriotic and base. That any one could see anything better in any other country and say so appeared a species of treason. Mr. Godkin, for instance, was charged with being a foreign emissary paid by British gold when he denounced the American system of protective duties, and demanded the free trade which has made England great and glorious. Even at the end of his long career it was solemnly printed in many newspapers that he assembled his staff every morning to begin the day's work by singing "God Save the Queen." He and his school were men who "befouled their own nests" and took no pleasure in life, save in decrying their country's institutions. They were the rankest of pessimists, Cassandra-like in their continued prophecies of evil. It was insisted that their policies were merely destructive, and not constructive—always a dreadfully serious charge,

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as well as the easiest one to make and never more unfounded than in this case. For it was they and their followers, who, to cite only one fact, made possible the coming of Civil Service reform—a most patriotic achievement. But their greatest constructive service was the holding up of high national ideals, and insisting upon them in season and out of season. They pilloried bosses year in and year out, when it was most unpopular to do so, and long before boss-baiting had become a favorite and well-patronized sport. They were the ones who mercilessly laid bare the shortcomings of their own cities; who denounced municipal misgovernment so persistently that they finally lashed the public conscience into the formation of good government clubs, and social reform organizations.

At first a mere handful crying out in the wilderness, there grew up about them rapidly men in and out of public life who stood by them in their endeavors, and supported on the platform or in the pulpit the views these men expressed in their editorial pages. As is so often the case, as the movement developed its originators were more or less forgotten. Nobody remembers to-day the courage it took to bolt from a party when such bolting had been unheard of for twenty-five years, and when the Republican party was still considered of the Lord's Anointed. People have forgotten that so sober a journal as the *Chicago Tribune* could deliber-

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ately declare on October 3, 1884, of the bolters that: "They have gone down into the political cesspools and wallowed in the filth, and all the time these brawling Pharisees and canting, sleek-faced hypocrites have boasted of their superior 'tone' and daintiness, their gilt-edged morality, their adoration of high moral issues, and their ineffable political sanctity, as compared with that of ordinary mortals." Their opposition to Mr. Blaine, it appears, was due in the eyes of this journal to his believing "in America against the world, while they believed in England against America." Speaking of its neighbor, the *New York Tribune* asserted that the *Evening Post* "sets up a new standard of private morality and civic virtue, but it is discarded in a thousand homes where the principles it has abandoned are made welcome; and its only perverts are men for whom its founder would have been ashamed to lift his pen."

As a matter of fact there had not long existed in the North that toleration which made any criticism of American institutions possible. Foreign visitors to this country previous to the Civil War found no plainer proof of American provincialism than the indignation with which their frank criticisms were received. Harriet Martineau, the gifted Englishwoman, who was shocked by the lack of culture she found on this side of the water, and who expressed her views in a lengthy book, was vilified and reviled.

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Many elderly people to-day have vivid recollections of the intense indignation created by Charles Dickens's "American Notes." He found things coarse and crude here, and he said so. All America winced. He was given no credit for his honesty or sincerity, but was called a silk-stockinged English snob, "stuck-up" and proud, who did not know what he was writing about, and if he did politeness to those who entertained him should have insured his keeping his mouth shut. It is easy to laugh to-day at such silly vaporings, and to see from the viewpoint of our present-day standards how merited the criticisms of foreign travellers of that time were. But how much of that spirit of fierce intolerant resentment of criticism remained as late as 1884, was well brought out in the first Cleveland campaign. To-day, criticism by party revolt, in the North at least, attracts no attention, while foreign critics are read with respect, allowed to go without defamation, and, if controverted are opposed in decent and moderate language. Indeed it may be said that foreign criticisms are now eagerly welcomed. The views of the London, Paris, and Berlin press on a Presidential election or other American happenings are cabled as regularly as the opinions of Chicago papers are quoted by those in New York, or Boston, or Philadelphia.

In other words, the old blatant American spirit that everything in this country was the

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biggest, grandest, and best because it was American, has largely passed from the land. The men who, like Mr. Lincoln Steffens, uncover the shame of our cities and our States, are no longer accused of a malevolent desire to defame our own institutions, but are honored as men working for better government and higher ideals should be. When four years ago an effort was made to redeem New York from the horrors of the epidemic of officially-favored vice, which was fast making a Sodom of it, the best citizens of the metropolis did not hesitate to portray conditions precisely as they were. The Women's Municipal League printed a pamphlet entitled "Facts for Fathers and Mothers," which called a spade a spade, and explained just what was disgracing the city. Instantly Tammany Hall set up the old cry that the reformers were wantonly destroying the city's fair name, and injuring her standing at home and abroad. But this hoary old pretence, this shameless bit of roguery, fell flat. New Yorkers had at last been educated to the point where they knew that the city was being disgraced by the conditions which were being exposed, and not by the exposures. They recognized that so terrible a social sore could only be treated by being laid bare previous to excision or amelioration. Rising in their might, they turned out of office the men responsible, thereby honoring the city and redeeming its good name. A persistent hushing up of

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the scandal would have been a terrible wrong to its victims, made possible the enticing to their destruction of thousands of still innocent men and women, and would only have deferred an explosion certain to come if the city were not to decay utterly. A clearer case of the necessity of self-criticism for advancement could hardly be cited.

The recent elections, viewed in this light, prove clearly how much more critical of themselves and their institutions the people have become. Instead of there being divisions merely on national questions like slavery, the tariff, or the currency, we have exciting campaigns on matters of purely local or domestic moment, which are eagerly followed by people thousands of miles away. Not only is there a readiness to admit that our institutions are faulty, but under the spur of merciless criticism there are honest efforts to remedy conditions which twenty years ago were deemed inevitable and unchangeable concomitants of our form of government. The political heroes of the hour, Colby, Jerome, and Folk, have come to the front by their readiness to reveal, denounce, and *criticise*. As *critics* of existing conditions were they chosen to office, yet they could hardly have appeared on the political horizon twenty-five years ago, because the way had not yet been prepared for them. The public had not yet been convinced that there was something seriously wrong with our political organi-

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zations, that our party system had broken down and been captured by dangerous corporate forces, who care not at all whether a man is Republican or Democratic so long as he does their bidding.

That this new struggle for freedom has enlisted the sympathies of the young college men of the North is obvious; that it has not yet sufficiently laid hold of the youth of the South is a cause of widespread regret. Speaking before a Northern audience the other day, President Alderman of the University of Virginia dwelt eloquently upon the promise of the young man of the South, saying of him: "He is a fine, hopeful figure, of strong and high political instincts, facing tardily a fierce industrialism and a new democracy with its grandeur and temptations, his ambitions and dreams moving about them and yet holding fast through the conservatism in his blood to the noble concepts of public probity and scorn of dishonor." What is even more striking is the letter of a Northern railway president of note, which I was recently shown. Writing to a brother editor of mine of the grave industrial questions facing the nation, and of latter-day ideas of national ownership of certain lines of business, this Northerner wound up by a fervid declaration that he looked to the young men of the South to cast the deciding vote in the solution of these problems, and counted on their voting with conservatism and

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wisdom. Had they wished he and President Alderman might have quoted as proof of the correctness of their opinions the admirable attitude of the South two years ago, when the emissaries of Mr. Hearst were penetrating this Southern country in the endeavor to purchase the Presidency for their unworthy employer. While many States in the North and West yielded readily to the gold which was this man's sole argument why he should be given the nomination of the Democratic party, the South stood like a stone wall. There was, truly, it then appeared, a "concept of public probity and a scorn of dishonor" among the older men of the South, as well as the younger, which was strong enough to save party and nation from the disgrace that threatened it. For this all concerned deserve great credit, and it has, I am glad to say, been freely accorded to them by the Northern press.

But encouraging as it is that there are some public men in the United States who are proof against bribery and corruption, in whatever form, it is none the less obvious that there are many great political evils south of Mason and Dixon's line, which demand the attention of your best and bravest. If the genus boss is not as distinctly developed as in the North, there are in Southern political life demagogues enough, and they are ever ready to play upon the passions and prejudices of the people in order to obtain office. It was President Alderman, you

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will remember, who last winter deplored at a public dinner the inferiority of Southern political leaders of the present time to those of ante-bellum days, asking, according to first reports of the affair, "Where are the Calhouns and Clays?" Certainly they are not masked by the names of Vardaman of Mississippi or Jeff Davis of Arkansas. To say that these men misrepresent the brains and breeding of the South is merely to state a plain truth. To regard them as typical Southerners would be to insult this entire section, for it would mean that the South in the one case was lacking in truth, fairness, dignity, and chivalry, and in the other that it approved of lawlessness and public brawling in a State officer. I might lengthen this list, but these two names will suffice. Your own experience will suggest others.

Nor is the South free from the evils of city misgovernment. Take Louisville for example. In her last election there were incredible scenes of disorder and lawlessness, and widespread official and judicial corruption. A Southern gentleman of standing, a graduate of Yale, and a lifelong resident of Louisville, speaks of the situation as follows: "Direct looting exists beyond common belief. There is no criminal law in Louisville save by grace. There is judicial protection; there is even judicial persecution. The administration of law in the police court is the city's shame. Grand juries are in some way cor-

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rupted. Indictments in the most flagrant cases, where politics are concerned, cannot be secured. This partnership with the machine comprehends all the agents of criminal justice from the patrolman to the governor. The protégés of the Government are the keepers of disorderly saloons and houses—the gamblers, thieves, and other lawbreakers who can give money or services at elections. Four years ago a conspicuous gambler was convicted. The verdict was in a four. Before bedtime Gov. Beckham had signed an absolute pardon, and the jailer had lost his guest. In 1903 the Louisville election was stolen bodily with a thousand breaches of law on that election day." What occurred at the last election was even worse.

If the story of such wrong is not sufficient to "stir your hearts to mutiny and rage," I would remind you of some other great causes which should appeal to your hearts and to your minds as college men. There are the unspeakable chain gangs which still disgrace the South; there is the dangerous spread of child labor in the factories for which Northern capitalists, to their shame be it said, share the responsibility with your supine legislators. There is the poor and inadequate school system to be upbuilt. There is the liquor problem to be solved—at least in the rural communities. The whole question of the suffrage is yet to be worked out, for in Virginia and in Maryland, particularly, there have

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been sinister efforts not merely to disfranchise the negroes, but whites as well, and always in the interests of a political ring or oligarchy which seeks in this way to keep forever in its control, and that of its heirs and assigns, the political destinies of the various States. Surely the call to patriotic service is loud and ringing. As American patriots the mere recital of these conditions should serve to strengthen your arms, and steel your hearts, to go forth from these cloistered walls and do battle for your rights and your institutions.

But how? you may ask. My reply is first by unsparing criticism of that which is wrong and false, narrow and intolerant, degrading instead of uplifting, ungenerous instead of generous, low and debasing instead of high and inspiring, precisely as the independent editors of the North undertook their task of rousing the people years ago. If you will take my word for it, there is nothing that the South needs so much to-day as self-searching, self-criticism, freedom of opinion, and readiness to accept and profit by the well-meant criticisms of other Americans who have no end in view save the welfare of their country. But I had rather you took another's and a wiser man's word for it than my own. While this paper was being penned there died one of the noblest, bravest, and wisest gentlemen it was ever my good fortune to meet—Chancellor Walter B. Hill of

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the University of Georgia, a Georgian by birth, training, and residence. When he passed away the country lost a patriot it could ill afford to spare. As a Georgian he watched every political and social move in his State with a most jealous eye, and spoke out with vigor against any procedure which did not commend itself to his judgment, and to his high-minded morality. To my mind, of all his valuable services none was greater than the "plea for tolerance," which he published in the *Atlanta Constitution* less than a year ago apropos of Senator Bailey's attack upon President Alderman for that same alleged criticism of Southern public men which I have already cited. Senator Bailey assailed Dr. Alderman for criticising the South to a Northern audience, and withdrew his name from the committee which was raising an endowment for his alma mater. In other words he actually wanted to punish his own university because its president differed with him in his estimate of present day statesmen. This was too much for Chancellor Hill. He took up his pen to say that the question whether Dr. Alderman was right or wrong became insignificant beside the larger question whether Senator Bailey was right or wrong in his method of dealing with this difference of opinion. "Have we," he asked, "freedom of opinion in the South? Must every man who thinks above a whisper do so at the peril of his reputation or his influence, or at the deadlier

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risk of having an injury inflicted upon the institution or the cause he represents?"

Since Mr. Walter H. Page, a loyal and devoted son of the South, had said in his magazine, the *World's Work*, that "The curse of the South to-day is small men in politics," Chancellor Hill thought that Senator Bailey, to be consistent, should have had passed a bill excluding the *World's Work* from the Congressional Library and the mails. So far as Dr. Alderman's views were concerned, Mr. Hill thought that considering all the circumstances the South was to be congratulated upon having as able and as broad men in public life as it did. The great evil, he found, is the "enforced unanimity of thought within the lines of one party," which causes a "deadly paralysis of intellect," and he thought that if similar conditions prevailed in the North the North would have suffered still more. The truth of this observation is proved by the experience of Pennsylvania; there, too, there has been a unanimity of thought in one party—the Republican—and with it there came not only "a deadly paralysis of intellect" in public life, but, what is more, a deadly paralysis of the moral instincts, as is clearly shown by the careers of Senators Quay and Penrose. If you have made a careful study of our institutions in such works as those of Bryce and De Tocqueville you will readily agree that one thing is necessary to a

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safe and sane democracy, and that is a sound and vigorous political opposition.

While therefore differing from Dr. Alderman, Chancellor Hill none the less declared that Senator Bailey's extraordinary attack gave him the text for a warning "against the worst evil in our intellectual, social, political, and religious life, the illiberality that is ready to inflict the injury of rebuke and ostracism as a penalty for difference of opinion." "We all know," he continued, "whence this situation comes. It is one of the entailed curses of slavery. Our fathers in the assertion of their constitutional rights and their property interests stood together for the defence of slavery after the world at large and the thought of the age had entered up judgment of condemnation against it. This produced inevitably in the South a morbid self-consciousness, an awareness of itself as an object of criticism and attack, and a touch-me-not sensitiveness." This, he explained, had lasted all too long. The South is not yet loyal to Jefferson's inaugural of 1801, in which that great Southerner said: "Error of opinion may be tolerated as long as truth is left free to combat it." I cannot resist quoting also Chancellor Hill's closing sentiment: "The Almighty, who sends rain upon the just and unjust, rebukes the narrowness of persecution. We have gotten away from the stake, the dungeon, the rack, and the thumb-screw; but every vindic-

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tive action by which we seek to punish a fellow-citizen for a divergence of opinion by inflicting injury upon him or the cause he represents is an abridgment of that reasonable liberty of thought and speech, which is the richest and ripest heritage of freedom, and the indispensable requisite for the ascertainment of truth. This is a topic, Mr. Editor, on which the Southern press, as well as the pulpit, forum, and platform, should speak out loud." Braver and truer sentiments than these may have been uttered by some other teacher in this broad country of ours, but if so I have yet to read them.

Do not, young gentlemen of Washington and Lee, underestimate the gravity of this evil of intolerance upon which this splendid Southern leader dwelt, because it has been your good fortune to attend a university which has no censorship of its platform or lecture room. Remember that if the University of Georgia, Sewanee, Trinity College of North Carolina, Vanderbilt, and others similarly permit freedom of utterance and opinion, there are far too many institutions in which there is a mediæval attempt not to teach the truth, cost what it may, but to teach a truth limited by prejudice or by preconceptions. You will remember that Prof. Andrew Sledd was driven away from Emory College for printing an article in the *Atlantic Monthly* which was distasteful to the college's trustees. With the case of Professor Bassett you are also familiar. The

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attempt to drive him out of his chair failed utterly. Instead came a ringing declaration of academic liberty, which Chancellor Hill described as "A document which will be an immortal chapter in the history of civilization in this country." I hear many complaints from Southerners that the South produces but few writers to-day, and that when they do arise they quickly find their way North like Walter Page, James Lane Allen, Thomas Nelson Page, William Garrott Brown, and many others. The plaint is singularly like Wordsworth's,

" France, 'tis strange,
Hath brought forth no such souls as we had then,
* * * * *
No single volume paramount, no code,
No master-spirit, no determined road;
But equally a want of books and men!"

Surely if any section of the world would say with him,

"Great men have been with us, hands that penn'd
And tongues that uttered wisdom—better none"

there must be the freest of atmospheres, the broadest tolerance and absolute liberty of opinion.

Fortunately this spirit of liberty is rising in the South as it did in the North. Mr. Hill himself proved this, as did the occurrence at Trinity College, and Professor Sledd's triumphant instalment as president of the Florida State College is an event to be welcomed. But there must be deeper draughts yet from this bitter chalice of self-criticism I am commending to your lips

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before there will come that true freedom, that divine tolerance for which Chancellor Hill pleaded, and also the social and political reforms we all long to see accomplished. We of the North know all too well just how unpalatable the draught is. It hurts and pains to let the world see that one's own have gone wrong or are not all they ought to be. Yet there is no other way. And so if you would aid you can have no higher religion of duty than to inflict those dearest, those most faithful wounds that only a friend can give, and to do so by truth-telling as one sees it, without thought of cost. Have no fear of being alone, for it has been truly said: "When one stands alone with God for truth, for liberty, for righteousness, he may glory in his isolation," and such isolation is never of long duration. He who contends for the right does not need to sow dragon's teeth to obtain allies. If, carrying his banner manfully, he but stamp his foot upon the ground there will spring up not one but a thousand men panoplied in the shining armor of righteousness and full-armed, not with carnal, but with spiritual weapons, to march on to predestined success.







