

'Reminiscences Of The Civil War',

By John B. Gordon, Maj. Gen. CSA

There is no book in existence, I believe, in which the ordinary reader can find an analysis of the issues between the two sections, which fairly represents both the North and the South. Although it would require volumes to contain the great arguments, I shall attempt here to give a brief summary of the causes of our sectional controversy, and it will be my purpose to state the cases of the two sections so impartially that just-minded people on both sides will admit the statement to be judicially fair.

The causes of the war will be found at the foundation of our political fabric, in our complex organism, in the fundamental law, in the Constitution itself, in the conflicting constructions which it invited, and in the institution of slavery which it recognized and was intended to protect. If asked what was the real issue involved in our unparalleled conflict, the average American citizen will reply, "The negro"; and it is fair to say that had there been no slavery there would have been no war. But there would have been no slavery if the South's protests could have availed when it was first introduced; and now that it is gone, although its sudden and violent abolition entailed upon the South directly and incidentally a series of woes which no pen can describe, yet it is true that in no section would its reestablishment be more strongly and universally resisted. The South steadfastly maintains that responsibility for the presence of this political Pandora's box in this Western world cannot be laid at her door. When the Constitution was adopted and the Union formed, slavery existed in practically all the States; and it is claimed by the Southern people that its disappearance from the Northern and its development in the Southern States is due to climatic conditions and industrial exigencies rather than to the existence or absence of great moral ideas.

Slavery was undoubtedly the immediate fomenting cause of the woeful American conflict. It was the great political factor around

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which the passions of the sections had long been gathered--the tallest pine in the political forest around whose top the fiercest lightnings were to blaze and whose trunk was destined to be shivered in the earthquake shocks of war. But slavery was far from being the sole cause of the prolonged conflict. Neither its destruction on the one hand, nor its defence on the other, was the energizing force that held the contending armies to four years of bloody work. **I apprehend that if all living Union soldiers were summoned to the witness stand, every one of them would testify that it was the preservation of the American Union and not the destruction of Southern slavery that induced him to volunteer at the call of his country. As for the South, it is enough to say that perhaps eighty per cent. of her armies were neither slave-holders, nor had the remotest interest in the institution. No other proof, however, is needed than the undeniable fact that at any period of the war from its beginning to near its close the South could have saved slavery by simply laying down its arms and returning to the Union.**

We must, therefore, look beyond the institution of slavery for the fundamental issues which dominated and inspired all classes of the contending sections. It is not difficult to find them. The "Old Man Eloquent," William E. Gladstone, who was perhaps England's foremost statesman of the century, believed that the Government formed by our fathers was the noblest political fabric ever devised by the brain of man. This undoubtedly is true; and yet before these inspired builders were dead, controversy arose as to the nature and powers of their free constitutional government. Indeed, in the very convention that framed the Constitution the clashing theories and bristling arguments of 1787 presaged the glistening bayonets of 1861. In the cabinet of the first President, the contests between Hamilton and Jefferson, representatives of conflicting constitutional

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constructions, were so persistent and fierce as to disturb the harmony of executive councils and tax the patience of Washington. The disciples of each of these political prophets numbered in their respective ranks the greatest statesmen and purest patriots. The followers of each continuously battled for these conflicting theories with a power and earnestness worthy of the founders of the Republic. Generation after generation, in Congress, on the hustings, and through the press, these irreconcilable doctrines were urged by constitutional expounders, until their arguments became ingrained into the very fibre of the brain and conscience of the sections. The long war of words between the leaders waxed at last into a war of guns between their followers.

During the entire life of the Republic the respective rights and powers of the States and general government had furnished a question for endless controversy. In process of time this controversy assumed a somewhat sectional phase. The dominating thought of the North and of the South may be summarized in a few sentences.

The South maintained with the depth of religious conviction that the Union formed under the Constitution was a Union of consent and not of force; that the original States were not the creatures but the creators of the Union; that these States had gained their independence, their freedom, and their sovereignty from the mother country, and had not surrendered these on entering the Union; that by the express terms of the Constitution all rights and powers not delegated were reserved to the States; and the South challenged the North to find one trace of authority in that Constitution for invading and coercing a sovereign State.

The North, on the other hand, maintained with the utmost confidence in the correctness of her position that the Union formed under the Constitution was intended to be perpetual; that sovereignty was a unit and could not be divided; that whether or

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not there was any express power granted in the Constitution for invading a State, the right of self-preservation was inherent in all governments; that the life of the Union was essential to the life of liberty; or, in the words of Webster, "liberty and union are one and inseparable."

To the charge of the North that secession was rebellion and treason, the South replied that the epithets of rebel and traitor did not deter her from the assertion of her independence, since these same epithets had been familiar to the ears of Washington and Hancock and Adams and Light Horse Harry Lee. In vindication of her right to secede, she appealed to the essential doctrine, "**the right to govern rests on the consent of the governed,**" and to the right of independent action as among those reserved by the States. The South appealed to the acts and opinions of the Fathers and to the report of the Hartford Convention of New England States asserting the power of each State to decide as to the remedy for infraction of its rights; to the petitions presented and positions assumed by ex-President John Quincy Adams; to the contemporaneous declaration of the 8th of January assemblage in Ohio indicating that 200,000 Democrats in that State alone were ready to stand guard on the banks of the border river and resist invasion of Southern territory; and to the repeated declarations of Horace Greeley and the admission of President Lincoln himself that there was difficulty on the question of force, since ours ought to be a fraternal Government.

In answer to all these points, the North also cited the acts and opinions of the same Fathers, and urged that the purpose of those Fathers was to make a more perfect Union and a stronger government. The North offset the opinions of Greeley and others by the emphatic declaration of Stephen A. Douglas, the foremost of Western Democrats, and by the official opinion as to the power of the Government to collect revenues and enforce laws, given to

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President Buchanan by Jere Black, the able Democratic Attorney-General.

Thus the opposing arguments drawn from current opinions and from the actions and opinions of the Fathers were piled mountain high on both sides. Thus the mighty athletes of debate wrestled in the political arena, each profoundly convinced of the righteousness of his position; hurling at each other their ponderous arguments, which reverberated like angry thunderbolts through legislative halls, until the whole political atmosphere resounded with the tumult. **Long before a single gun was fired public sentiment North and South had been lashed into a foaming sea of passion; and every timber in the framework of the Government was bending and ready to break from "the heaving ground-swell of the tremendous agitation."** Gradually and naturally in this furnace of sectional debate, sectional ballots were crystallized into sectional bullets; and both sides came at last to the position formerly held by the great Troup of Georgia: "The argument is exhausted; we stand to our guns."

I submit that this brief and incomplete summary is sufficient to satisfy those who live after us that these great leaders of conflicting thought, and their followers who continued the debate in battle and blood, while in some sense partisans, were in a far juster sense patriots.

The opinions of Lee and Grant, from each of whom I briefly quote, will illustrate in a measure the convictions of their armies. Every Confederate appreciates the magnanimity exhibited by General Grant at Appomattox; and it has been my pleasure for nearly forty years to speak in public and private of his great qualities. In his personal memoirs, General Grant has left on record his estimate of the Southern cause. This estimate represents a strong phase of Northern sentiment, but it is a sentiment which it is

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extremely difficult for a Southern man to comprehend. In speaking of his feelings as "sad and depressed," as he rode to meet General Lee and receive the surrender of the Southern armies at Appomattox, General Grant says: "I felt like anything rather than rejoicing at the downfall of a foe who had fought so long and valiantly, and who had suffered so much for a cause, though that cause was, I believe, one of the worst for which a people ever fought, and one for which there was the least excuse." He adds: "I do not question, however, the sincerity of the great mass of those who were opposed to us."

The words above quoted, showing General Grant's opinion of the Southern cause, are italicized by me and not by him. My object in emphasizing them is to invite special attention to their marked contrast with the opinions of General Robert E. Lee as to that same Southern cause. This peerless Confederate soldier and representative American, than whom no age or country ever produced a loftier spirit or more clear-sighted, conscientious Christian gentleman, in referring, two days before the surrender, to the apparent hopelessness of our cause, used these immortal words: **"We had, I was satisfied, sacred principles to maintain and rights to defend for which we were in duty bound to do our best, even if we perished in the endeavor."**

There were those, a few years ago, who were especially devoted to the somewhat stereotyped phrase that in our Civil War one side (meaning the North) "was wholly and eternally right," while the other side (meaning the South) "was wholly and eternally wrong." I might cite those on the Southern side of the great controversy, equally sincere and fully as able, who would have been glad to persuade posterity that the North was "wholly and eternally wrong"; that her people waged war upon sister States who sought peacefully to set up a homogeneous government, and meditated no

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wrong or warfare upon the remaining sister States. **These Southern leaders steadfastly maintained that the Southern people, in the exercise of the freedom and sovereign rights purchased by Revolutionary blood, were asserting a second independence according to the teachings and example of their fathers.**

But what good is to come to the country from partisan utterances on either side? My own well-considered and long-entertained opinion, my settled and profound conviction, the correctness of which the future will vindicate, is this: that the one thing which is "wholly and eternally wrong" is the effort of so-called statesmen to inject one-sided and jaundiced sentiments into the youth of the country in either section. Such sentiments are neither consistent with the truth of history, nor conducive to the future welfare and unity of the Republic. The assumption on either side of all the righteousness and all the truth would produce a belittling arrogance, and an offensive intolerance of the opposing section; or, if either section could be persuaded that it was "wholly and eternally wrong," it would inevitably destroy the self-respect and manhood of its people. A far broader, more truthful, and statesmanlike view was presented by the Hon. A. E. Stevenson, of Illinois, then Vice-President of the United States, in his opening remarks as presiding officer at the dedication of the National Park at Chickamauga. In perfect accord with the sentiment of the occasion and the spirit which led to the establishment of this park as a bond of national brotherhood, Mr. Stevenson said: "Here, in the dread tribunal of last resort, valor contended against valor. Here brave men struggled and died for the right as God gave them to see the right."

Mr. Stevenson was right -- "wholly and eternally right." Truth, justice, and patriotism unite in proclaiming that both sides fought and suffered for liberty as bequeathed by the Fathers--the one for

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liberty in the union of the States, the other for liberty in the independence of the States.

While the object of these papers is to record my personal reminiscences and to perpetuate incidents illustrative of the character of the American soldier, whether he fought on the one side or the other, I am also moved to write by what I conceive to be a still higher aim; and that is to point out, if I can, the common ground on which all may stand; where justification of one section does not require or imply condemnation of the other--the broad, high, sunlit middle ground where fact meets fact, argument confronts argument, and truth is balanced against truth.