


JOHN BELL

 OHN BELL, a noted American politician, was born near Nashville, Tenn., Feb. 15, 1797, and died at Cumberland Iron Works, Tenn., Sept. 10, 1869. Educated at the University of Nashville, he became prominent in the politics of his State, and was sent in 1827 as representative to Congress, continuing in the House until 1841, and was speaker in 1834. During this period he was conspicuous as a protectionist. He was elected to the Senate in 1847, and again in 1853, and there actively opposed the repeal of the Missouri Compromise and the Kansas-Lecompton Constitution. In 1860, as one of the four candidates for the Presidency, he received thirty-nine electoral votes. At the opening of the Civil War he strongly opposed Secession, but objected to the principle of coercion, and with other Tennesseans issued an address urging that their State should preserve an armed neutrality. Many speeches of his have been printed singly, but no collection, we believe, has as yet been made.

SPEECH ON NON-INTERVENTION

DELIVERED IN THE UNITED STATES SENATE, APRIL 13, 1852

I HAVE said that the great American question of the day is, How is this country to be affected by the present condition of Europe?

What, then, is the position of Europe, at present, in relation to the great principles and questions connected with the organic forms of government? Sir, I propose briefly to sketch the recent changes and what I consider to be the present condition of Europe in these important aspects.

You may remember, sir, that general tranquillity and confidence in the established order of things had reigned in Europe for a considerable period when the sudden and unexpected overthrow of Louis Philippe, followed in rapid succession by popular and insurrectionary movements in Italy and the German states, in Austria and Hungary, roused the world from its supineness. The simultaneous movement of the Liberals in

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so many states, and their partial successes, inspired the lovers of freedom everywhere with hopes of the most beneficent results and led to the greatest excitement; but the public mind, with the receding tide of republican successes, regained its composure without its confidence. The unsettled condition of affairs and the power of the contending factions in one great country still held the public mind in suspense, and all awaited the solution of French politics, perceiving that upon that would depend in no small degree the future quiet of the Continent. That solution came like a clap of thunder to unexpected ears, on the *coup d'état* of the 2d of December. The excitement was now intense and expectation continued on tiptoe until the question would be solved—which had no clue in the knowledge or conjecture of this country—whether the French people, appealed to as they were with every external show of freedom of choice, would condemn or approve the daring usurpation of Louis Napoleon.

While in this suspense, lo! tidings came that seven of the eight millions of the adult male population of France had approved and sanctioned the decree which abolished the republic and confided to the arbitrary will of one man the power of reconstructing their government. Thirty-six millions of freemen thus voluntarily surrendered their liberty and gave their powerful sanction to the creed that popular sovereignty was not a safe element in the organic form of a government!

If the event of the 2d of December was startling, these last tidings were absolutely astounding; and men's minds were set to work to account for the strange and unexpected result, scarcely yet doubting that the next arrival of a steamer from abroad would bring accounts of a spontaneous and successful uprising of the partisans of freedom in France which had hurled the daring usurper from power.

But astonishing as were the events I have just recounted, the fact—the most amazing to me, at the time, of all that have transpired since the expulsion of Louis Philippe from his throne—remains yet to be stated.

Contemporaneously with the first report of the event of the 2d of December which reached this country, came vague, and at the time little credited, assurances that the movement of Louis Napoleon would not only be successful, but that the peace of France and of Europe would be rather consolidated than disturbed by its success! And now, after four months, after more than a hundred days have passed, fresh assurances reach us from so many reliable sources to the same effect that it would seem a species of madness any longer to resist absolute conviction on that point—assurances the more incredible from the first, when we consider that they were accompanied by advices that the King of Prussia, following the lead of France and Austria, was proceeding as fast as he durst to remodel the constitution of his government upon a basis which excluded every vestige of republicanism.

What, then, sir, is now the recognized and well-understood position of the nations of Europe—the cradle and still the great nursery of modern civilization—in regard to popular rights and free government? Let facts speak the answer. If what we hear be true of Prussia, then the four great Powers of the Continent are modelling their governments upon the basis of absolutism—upon the theory that popular sovereignty or popular control to any extent in the affairs of government, directly or by representative assemblies, is incompatible with peace and order, and utterly subversive of the securities and blessings of civil society. Sir, a new order of things has arisen which decrees the abolition of the very symbols of liberty. Every monument of the transient existence of for-

mer republics—every inscription, every memento of former freedom, is to be razed to its foundations, effaced and obliterated, so that no trace shall remain, no tradition be allowed to go down to posterity of the time when republican forms had found a foothold in Europe.

Thus, sir, the great and imposing fact stares us in the face, that the continent of Europe has reverted to the old ideas of monarchy and absolutism; and liberty lies prostrate, discarded and dishonored.

And what, I repeat, as still more surprising, is that the opinion prevails, founded upon the most reliable sources of information—the entire mercantile class, the stock market, the great capitalists upon the London Exchange and the Paris Bourse, the money kings, who have their argus eyes fixed upon every part of the Continent, and their secret agents in every cabinet—not only that republicanism is down, but that there will be no further commotion, no war, and that this state of things is permanent in Europe!

Can this be true, Mr. President? Can it be true that the spirit of liberty is extinct in Europe; or, if existing at all, so feeble, so exhausted, so dead, as to give no signs of future awakening; no promise of an early resurrection! and this, too, in the middle of the nineteenth century and among the most civilized people of the earth; this, too, in the full and meridian blaze of science, moral and physical—in an age which has been emphatically and universally proclaimed and recognized as the age of progress, to distinguish it from all antecedent ages and generations of the world!

Sir, at such a time as this, in such an age as this, among a people so civilized, to affirm that a new order and condition of things has arisen which rejects and repudiates the idea of popular rights or sovereignty as incompatible with the ends

of society, and that this state of things is permanent! or affirm that republicanism is effete—fast becoming an obsolete idea; that its merits have been weighed in the balance and found wanting; that the handwriting has appeared upon the wall announcing confiscation and banishment to the partisans of freedom! Why, I wonder that some gentlemen do not start from their seats in this chamber upon the announcement of so stupendous a fact upon any credible authority—and yet the authority is the highest known in the range of human testimony.

And this is the advancing spirit of the age; this the denouement, the final result of sixty years of revolution, of agony and of blood, in the cause of liberty in Europe! . . .

The great curse of Europe of the present day is that the theories and doctrines of the champions and advocates of liberty and republicanism have, all along, proceeded upon the same error which rendered all the philosophy of the schools of antiquity abortive, and, for the most part, utterly useless to mankind. They all proceed upon abstractions.

All their theories of society and government, all their ideas of liberty and equality, and the forms they would institute to secure them, are founded upon some preconceived notion of what they conceive ought to be right and proper, without the slightest reference to any practical test—to anything that has been proved to be sound and practicable in the past history of the world.

Sir, to get right, and to be able to construct true and practical systems of government, they must first reconstruct their system of philosophizing; they must reconstruct their own theories and adapt them to human nature as they have seen it developed in the past, as they see it displayed at the present day. They must adapt them to the races of men as they per-

ceive them to exist in all their varieties and differences of capacities and propensities, without troubling themselves about the question of original unity or equality. They must found their theories upon experience and not upon fancy.

They must come to understand that the competency of man for self-government is not a simple or universal truth, but that it is a complex and conditional proposition, which may be true of one and the same people at one stage of their progress and not at another; and as to races, they must come to learn that every race has a civilization peculiar to itself, and physical and mental faculties of various grades of capacity for improvement and development, as all history testifies.

In short, they must adopt the method of reasoning and theorizing pointed out by the great founder of modern progress, Bacon. When they shall have done this they will have taken the first step toward a true progress in the science of government. Discarding all unmeaning cant and catch terms about liberty and equality, they must come to know that there is a liberty, that there is an equality which is agreeable to nature, a liberty and an equality resting on a basis that will stand, and that all else is spurious, delusive and mischievous.

I trust, sir, I may now be allowed, without taking my final leave of Europe, to pay a short visit to America—America, always open and exposed to every disease or contagion, moral and physical, which originates in a foreign atmosphere. We see it proclaimed through the columns of a thousand presses in this country that the spirit of democracy is necessarily progressive. I ask pardon—for I intended to divest myself as far as possible of every partisan view and feeling in delivering my sentiments on this great subject; but I am unable to proceed in my argument without allusions and the use of terms which may seem to have a partisan cast.

We are told that reform in this free country is a laggard—that it lingers far in the rear of the advancing spirit of the age. Sir, it is proclaimed through the same channels to the people of this country that too much of the old anti-democratic leaven still lurks in our constitutional forms and in our legislation.

By a more circumscribed party, but still widely diffused over the country and of no insignificant influence, our institutions are denounced as being oppressive and unjust to the natural rights of mankind, alien to liberty, upholding social forms which admit of no equality of position or of happiness; that there is no true fraternity; no freedom, such as the spirit of the age and the progress of civilization demand.

Whence this type of democracy in this country? No man can mistake the paternity. It is European born. It is the same type of democracy which has undone the cause of liberty in Europe; and its mission in this country can never be accomplished but by the ruin of liberty in America. Does not everyone know that the most popular and leading champions of the cause of republicanism and democracy in Europe regard with positive contempt—nay, that they turn away with disgust—at the very mention of American republicanism. They scorn to receive our American, home-bred ideas of liberty.

Why, say they, you have no philosophy; you have no true and lofty conceptions of the destiny of man and of human society; you are far in the rear of European enlightenment upon all these subjects! Such are the arrogant pretensions of the European champions of liberty. Some of the more reckless among them have the hardihood to declare that our whole system is false, and that if it cannot be reformed they are prepared to destroy it; that it is a model which misleads the friends of freedom abroad, and that it had better be pulled down than upheld in error! . . .

But should that war of opinion, so long predicted, that war of principle, that great conflict between the free and the despotic forms of government—should such a war as that arise in Europe, do you think, Mr. President, as a sound, practical statesman, and with your experience and observation of this country, and its present population—do you suppose that if such a conflict should arise in Europe—a conflict involving the settlement of principles which may have universal ascendancy for centuries—that we should be so unimpressible, so indifferent, that we could not be drawn into it, despite all calculations of policy or of interest?

Do you conceive, sir, with your knowledge of the heart of this country at this day, that a cold and sordid calculation of mercantile profit, that the devotion to mammon, or any more laudable service, would be so faithful and intense as to restrain even those reckless passions and emotions which belong to our nature, to say nothing of freezing up all generous and noble impulses, tempting us to enlist on the side of freedom in such a strife? No; the time has never been when, in any one country in Christendom, mind meets mind in fierce conflict upon principles which touch nearly the social feelings and interests of men, the mental strife would not become contagious and move the sympathies of every other.

But let the clash of arms add to the excitement, and the blood will be stirred and fired in its inmost recesses. Let the tidings of such a conflict, such a war of opinion, but reach our shores, and, my word for it, whatever may be the conclusions of mere policy, Young and Old America alike will be swayed to and fro by the passions natural to the occasion, like the trees of a forest swept by a strong wind.

Little time, I ween, would be allowed for weighing the counsels of the illustrious and immortal sages of fifty years

ago. Nor are the feelings and calculations which sway the twenty millions of freemen of this day the same which controlled the two or three millions of fifty years ago. All change is not progress; but the law of change, under changing circumstances and conditions, is inexorable. We have our destined career to run. Nations cannot stand still until the point of maturity and manhood is passed; as yet we go forward; and we will go forward; whether for good is another question. Our discretion may not, however, be put to the test of a war of opinion in Europe at this juncture.

But if a war should spring up in Europe of the old-fashioned kind—a war of aggression on one side, and defence on the other—a war of ambition and conquest, with the feelings of jealousy and of resentment which may exist on the part of the nations of Europe against the United States at this time, do you suppose that such a war can rage in Europe for one year, especially if any of the great maritime powers be parties to it, without compromising the peace of this country? Our commerce and navigation are too extensive and widely diffused; the general competition for the trade of the world is become too fierce to allow any escape from a collision with the belligerents of Europe.

Have you not seen, sir, in the last few years, how difficult it is, even in times of peace, to digest the insults which the war vessels of Great Britain, presuming upon their superior naval power, occasionally offer to our flag? But let there once be war and you will soon perceive the difference in the calculations and feelings which control the people of this country and of this generation and those which controlled them forty or fifty years ago. Since that period we have grown six or seven fold greater in population and resources; and, true to the characteristic traits of our lineage, we have grown in conceit of our

puissance still more. Neither our temper nor our prudence improves with the changing circumstances of our condition and resources. Let there be a war in Europe, and the first open violation of our neutral rights, the first breach of the accustomed courtesies to our flag, will be instantly retaliated, and thus the war would be begun, all unprepared as we may be.

And let me say to the people of this country that, with the feelings which exist probably at this moment in Europe, any of the maritime powers of that continent would be nothing loth to accept the issue of war thus presented. The weak points in our condition, our six thousand miles of inadequately protected seacoast, to say nothing of other causes which may paralyze our energies, are as well understood abroad as at home.

And let me say further that, under existing circumstances, it will be rare good fortune if, in any European war in which we shall be engaged, we shall not have the sympathies of every other power of that continent enlisted against us, except only such as may be strengthened by our interposition. . . .

The last great practical conclusion to which I have intended to direct my remarks is, that in view of the present posture of European affairs; in view of the prospect of a war, at no distant day, in which the United States may be eventually involved; in view of the obligations and responsibilities we have already incurred; in view of the honor, dignity, and duty which attach to our position in the family of nations; in view of the wisdom, prudence, and forecast which should distinguish a great model republic in providing against the contingencies of the future; in view of our own safety; in view of the best method of preserving the blessings of peace; in view of the

policy of reviving and cementing a truly national spirit and sentiment throughout the land, we should lose no time in making every essential preparation to put forth the energies and resources of the country in any emergency which may arise, in such manner as to successfully fulfil and discharge all our obligations, all our duties; and which, if we omit to do, we may justly incur the reproaches and, it may be, the curses of the present and of future generations.

What are those preparations? What I propose is:

First, to look well and narrowly into the operation of our financial system; to provide the proper securities for an ample revenue against the contingency of war, and the consequent interruptions of foreign trade; to give every encouragement within the competency of the national government to the improvement and extension of internal commerce; and especially to establish a direct overland communication, by the construction of a railway between the valley of the Mississippi and the Pacific coast.

Secondly, to give to the spirit and resources of the country their full efficiency and development it becomes our duty to guard with increased vigilance against all causes of sectional irritation and to eradicate, as far as possible, from the national councils and policy the seeds of sectional strife, as we would the deadly nightshade from our grounds; not by proscription and denunciation, but by cultivating a spirit of mutual forbearance and conciliation.

Thirdly, to strengthen our national defences; to place them upon a footing which may not leave the country exposed, in the event of war, to shameful and mortifying disasters; and especially to add largely to our military marine, a measure demanded by our extended foreign trade, and the manifest inadequacy of the present naval establishment to give to it

that protection and security which is necessary even in time of peace.

From a statement, the most authentic and reliable I have been able to procure, of the present naval armaments of the states of Europe, it appears that Great Britain can put afloat a fleet of 678 effective war vessels of all classes—150 of which are propelled by steam—with an aggregate complement of 18,000 guns. The French navy consists of 328 effective war vessels, with an aggregate of 8,000 guns. Russia has a fleet of 175 effective war vessels, with an aggregate complement of 6,000 guns. The proportion of war steamers in the navies of France and Russia I am not able to state upon any reliable authority; but from statements I have seen and which I attach some credit to, the war steamers of the French navy may be set down at 100. That was the number authorized by the government of France in 1845.

I will not extend these remarks by any notice of the naval establishments of the inferior maritime powers of Europe; but I am sure the Senate will take an interest in the statement I am able to make of the navy of the United States, which consists of 76 effective vessels of all classes, with an aggregate complement of 2,250 guns; and of these vessels six are propelled by steam!

Such is the naval force that we must rely upon for the protection of the honor of our flag, our commerce, which penetrates every sea accessible to American enterprise, and an ocean frontier of 6,000 miles in extent!

Such is the beggarly and miserable preparation of the means of maritime warfare, either offensive or defensive, with which we proceed to provoke and insult the great powers of continental Europe! Why, sir, one single fact ought to be sufficient to awaken in the minds of the people of this coun-

try a lively apprehension of the perils of the condition in which we may be placed. Our communication at this moment with California and Oregon, for all purposes of effective supply and defence, is by sea, requiring an average voyage of four thousand miles by the Isthmus route, and of sixteen thousand miles, and not less than six months' time, if the passage be made around Cape Horn or through the Straits of Magellan.

It will thus be seen at a glance that either of the maritime powers of Europe, whose navies I have alluded to, could, in one or two months' time, so effectually block up our only reliable communication with California and Oregon as to defy all the resources of this country short of a year or two's preparation to re-open it.

But that is not the most lamentable and mortifying aspect of the condition of affairs in this country. At a period of time when all the eastern world may be regarded as trembling upon the verge of convulsion and change; when principles most vital and momentous to mankind threaten to become the subject of universal conflict; at a period when we may be exposed to a hostile combination of all the great powers of continental Europe; at such a period as this, under such circumstances as these, what are the prevalent ideas and passions and cares which occupy American politicians and statesmen? The passion for place and position, the idea of power!

These are the ideas and passions which control every great interest in this country; every branch of public policy, internal and external, foreign and domestic commerce, the extension and improvement of internal communications, the public defences; all, all are become but secondary considerations, neglected or molded into shapes and forms subservient to the purposes or adapted to the exigencies of the great, the eternal conflict which goes on as to whose hand, or what clique, or

faction, or party, shall be made the depositary, from time to time, of the power and patronage of the government.

Even the slave question could not escape the predominant and controlling passion of the times; originally stimulated into being and wrought up to its present complexion by the same interests, it is indebted for all its present disturbing vitality to the necessities and exigencies of these factions or parties, if you please to dignify them by the name, including, if you choose, the party to which I belong.

I would not do so great an act of discourtesy or injustice to the honorable members who grace this chamber by their presence and enlighten it by their counsels, nor to the politicians and statesmen of the country generally, as to deny that there are many individual exceptions to the general averment I have made as to the passions and influences which control public affairs. But, with this explanation I repeat that all political calculations and speculations verge to one end. One idea reigns triumphant throughout the land—the idea of power! And this, too, at such a period in the affairs of the world; this, too, in the American republic! Well may we invoke the spirit and the counsels of Washington to inspire us with wisdom and kindle once more in our bosoms the flame of revolutionary patriotism.