

Confederate Veteran



Jefferson Davis

From a Picture Given to Miss Sue Tarpley. (See page 209.)

WHY THE SOUTH SECEDED.

[Address of Hon. John H. Reagan, only surviving member of the Confederate States Cabinet, before the R. E. Lee Camp, at Fort Worth, Tex., April 19, 1903.]

Comrades, Ladies, and Gentleman: I answer your request for a statement of the cause of the war.

It would be pleasant to speak of the heroic valor of the Confederate soldiers, of the skill and intrepidity of their officers, of the patriotism and wisdom of the members of Congress who enacted the laws for the organization and conduct of the Confederate government, of the great and patient labor of the Confederate cabinet and their assistants, of the masterly statesmanship, self-sacrificing devotion, and sublime courage and constancy of President Jefferson Davis, and of the matchless devotion, services, and holy prayers of the women of the Confederacy for the success of the cause in which their fathers, husbands, and sons were engaged. But for the present I must forego the discussion of these interesting themes, and call your attention from the glories of the past to the questions of future interest.

During the war, 1861 to 1865, and ever since there has been a studied, systematic effort on the part of those who were our adversaries to pervert and falsify the history of the causes which led to that war, and the conduct of the war, and to educate the public mind to the belief that it was a causeless war, brought about by ambitious Southern leaders. And it is much to be regretted that this policy has had a very large measure of success. This has been brought about largely by the baseless assumptions in acts of Congress and the doings of the Executive Department, in the action of State Legislatures and of political conventions, the declarations of public speakers, and by the writers in newspapers and magazines.

It will be the purpose of what I shall say to-day to show the great wrong and injustice done to those who supported the Confederate cause, by this systematic falsifying of the great facts of history on this subject.

In proposing to do this we must recognize the fact that that great war ended nearly forty years ago, and that we are now fellow-citizens with those who occupied the other side, living in the same government, under the same Constitution, laws, and flag, and interested as they are in the peace of the country and the welfare of all its people, with no desire to revive the passions and prejudices of the war, and with an earnest wish for the best fraternal relations between the people of the two sections of the country. While this is our earnest wish, we cannot consent to a perversion of history which would brand the defenders of the Confederate cause as rebels and traitors, and teach that falsehood to our children and to posterity. And we are led to hope that in after times, when the passions of the war have subsided, and when the prejudices engendered by it have died out, that none of the people of this great republic will wish such a stain to be attached to any part of their fellow-citizens. However this may be, it is a paramount duty on our part to preserve and perpetuate the real history of the causes of that greatest war of modern times, as those causes are witnessed by the provisions of the Constitution of the United States, by the history of the action of the Congress, of the courts of the country, of the messages of Presidents, by the acts of the Governors and Legislatures of States, by the declarations of political conventions—in fact, by the political history of the United States down to the time when that political history of the United States down to the time when that political crusade was actively commenced which led up to that bloody conflict. Fortunately for the truth of history, these facts appear in the imperishable records of the Federal and State governments, and in the entire history of this country which preceded the war, and it is to these facts, which cannot be successfully controverted, that I shall appeal to-day.

It has been to a large extent assumed that negro slavery was the cause of that war. This is not strictly true. It was the occasion of the war, but not the principal cause of the war. The real cause of the war was sectional jealousy, the greed of gain, and the lust of political power by the Eastern States. The changing opinions of civilized nations on the subject of slavery furnished the occasion which enabled political demagogues to get up a crusade which enabled them in the end to overthrow, in part at least, the Constitution of the United States, and to change the character of the Federal government by a successful revolution.

This sectional jealousy was strongly developed at the time of the purchase of the Louisiana territory, in 1803. That purchase was bitterly opposed, especially by the people of the New England States, one of the grounds of opposition being that it would add to the power of the agricultural States and be opposed to the interests of the manufacturing States, for then, as ever since, they desired to control the policy of the Federal government, and to use it as an agency for the promotion of individual and sectional interests. And in their opposition to this measure they threatened to secede from the Union. This jealousy was still further manifested at the time of the war of 1812, a war which was gone into more for the protection of the shipping interest of the New England States, and for free trade and sailors' rights, than for any other cause. They denounced that war and gave encouragement to the enemies of the United States, furnishing signal lights to the enemy. Their Members of Congress, their Governors of States, their State Legislatures, and a convention called for the

purpose threatened to secede from the Union. This jealousy again manifested itself when Missouri was admitted as a State, because, as they assumed, it would increase the power of the agricultural States and be against the interest of the manufacturing States. And on like grounds they opposed the acquisition of Texas and of the territory of Mexico, acquired as a result of the war with that country. And in their greed to levy tribute on the South by means of high protective tariffs they drove South Carolina into nullification in 1831, and an armed conflict was only averted by a compromise reducing the duties on imports.

Up to 1820 there had been no serious trouble over the question of African slavery, and, as shown by Mr. Bancroft, New England's great historian, in his history of the United States, slavery in some form then existed in every civilized government in the world. It had been planted in the American Colonies by the governments of Great Britain, France, and Spain, and by the Dutch merchants, all of them participating in the African slave trade. And it was defended and justified by the Churches and the priesthood on the ground that it was transferring the Africans from a condition of barbarism and cannibalism to a country where they could be at peace, learn something of the arts of civilized life and of the Christian religion. And the New Englanders became largely engaged in the African slave trade, and they, to some extent, as their history shows, made slaves of the Indians and shipped them off to the West Indies. And African slavery existed in all the colonies at the date of the Declaration of Independence (1776), and it existed in all the States except Massachusetts in 1787, the date of the formation of the Constitution of the United States.

The question of slavery was first brought seriously into our politics in 1820-21, when Missouri was admitted as a State. Public opinion in this and other countries began to change on this question, and Great Britain and France abolished slavery in their West India possessions and the question began to be agitated more extensively in the United States in 1852.

The great number of immigrants from Western Europe made white labor cheap in the Eastern States, and slave labor was not regarded as profitable there, and those who owned slaves then sold them to the rice, cotton, and sugar planters of the South, where their labor was more profitable. In this way the States which contained a majority of the population of the United States became what were called free States, and the politicians, to secure advantage of the South in legislation and to secure offices by popular favor, appealed to this sectional majority, and aroused and cultivated hostility to the people of the South because of the existence of slavery in those States. In 1856 the agitation of this subject developed a political party strong enough for a national organization, which nominated John C. Fremont for President and William L. Dayton for Vice President, and this ticket received one hundred and fourteen votes in the electoral college, all from the free States, as against one hundred and seventy-four for Buchanan and Breckenridge, who were elected—all the South States and the States of Pennsylvania and New Jersey voting for the Buchanan ticket, making nearly a strict division.

This demonstration of sectional strength caused an increase of the aggressiveness of the politicians of the North, and their appeals in favor of the liberty of the slaves greatly fired Northern sentiment and led to the national success of the anti-slavery party four years later, when Mr. Lincoln was elected President and Hannibal Hamlin Vice President, by a purely sectional majority. In these appeals to the sentiment in favor of popular liberty no consideration was given to the question of race and the capacity for self-government and for the duties of freemen. A reference to the British and French West India Islands, in which the blacks have been in a condition of chronic revolution ever since they were set free, was calculated to have given pause to a people not blinded by partisan zeal.

The leaders of that party, including President Lincoln and Mr. Seward, insisted that this country could not remain half free and half slave, and their party leaders proclaimed that there was a higher law than the Constitution of the United States. They claimed that their mission was to liberate the slaves, and, without the consent of the Southern States, they could only do this by substituting a popular majority of the people of all the States in place of the Constitution, with its limitations on the power of the Federal government, and by a revolutionary movement in plain violation of the Constitution.

Article I., Section 3, of the Constitution recognizes the persons bound to service, in defining the free people of the country. Article I., Section 9, of the Constitution provides that the slave trade shall not be prohibited before the year 1808, twenty years after its adoption. Article IV., Section 2, Clause 3 of the Constitution provides for the return of fugitive slaves escaping from one State and found in another. So it is seen that in this solemn compact between the States and the people of the Union African slavery and the right of property in such slaves

was recognized and protected. In bringing to your view these great facts I am not doing so for the purpose of saying that slavery was right or wrong in itself, nor for the purpose of condemning those humane feelings which favored its abolition. And I say for myself, and I think I speak the sentiments of the great body of the Southern people, that I would not restore slavery if I had the power to do so. I am calling attention to these facts to show that the unconstitutional and revolutionary methods adopted by the Republicans to secure its abolition, involving as it did the breaking up of the social and industrial system of fifteen States of the Union, the confiscation of three thousand million dollars' worth of what the Constitution and the laws held to be property, the risk of a servile war (then much feared by the Southern people), the sacrifice of hundreds of thousands of human lives, the making of countless widows and orphans, and the sacrifice of many billions of dollars' worth of property, attended with all the sufferings and horrors of the greatest war of modern times.

When the American colonies came to be formed into States, as the result of the Revolutionary war, warned by the oppressions and denial of rights imposed on them by the crown of Great Britain, each of them accompanied their State Constitutions with a "Bill of Rights" in which it was declared that the people possessed certain inalienable rights of which they could not be deprived, which they specified; so when the American people came to form the Constitution of the United States, animated by the same jealousy of the unlimited power of government, they created a government with delegated and strictly limited powers only, and for greater security for their liberty and rights they provided that the powers not therein delegated were reserved to the States and to the people respectively. The Federal government was given jurisdiction over questions of a national and those of an inter-State character, while the States retained jurisdiction over all the local questions and domestic institutions. This is the authority for the doctrine of State rights. Slavery was from the first treated by all the States as a domestic institution, to be controlled or disposed of as each State might choose for itself. And this is the reason why the Northern States abolished slavery without asking the sanction of the Federal government. And when the people of the Northern States commenced their crusade for the abolition of slavery by the numbers and powers of their people where slavery did not exist, and in the States where it did exist without their consent, they commenced a revolution in distinct violation of the Constitution and laws; they made themselves a lawless, revolutionary party, and became rebels against the Government of the United States. And when they levied war to carry out their policy they became traitors. But the minority could not try and punish the treason of the majority. Their pretense was that they were fighting to save the Union, and they made thousands of honest soldiers believe they were fighting for the Union. Their leaders knew that the Union rested on the Constitution, and that their purpose was to overthrow the Constitution. The Union the soldiers fought for was the Union established by the Constitution. The Union the leaders sought was only to be attained by the subversion of the Constitution, the annulment of the doctrine of State rights, the making of a consolidated central republic, abolishing the limitations prescribed by the Constitution and substituting a popular majority of the people of the whole Union in their stead, and to open the way for individual and corporate gain through the agency of the government.

In the face of these great historic truths that party has habitually and constantly charged that the war was causeless and brought about by ambitious political leaders of the South, and that the Confederates were rebels and traitors. Can any one conceive of a greater departure from truth, or of a more audacious attempt to falsify history? And that, too, in the face of the Constitution and laws, in the face of the imperishable public record of the country and of the public history of their own actions.

I have thus endeavored to give some of the facts and reasons which justified the Southern people in attempting to withdraw their allegiance from a government openly hostile to the rights of their State and people in order to form for themselves a government friendly to those rights.

Our people were not responsible for the war; it was forced on them. They were not rebels or traitors. They simply acted as patriots, defending their rights and their homes against the lawless and revolutionary action of a dominant and reckless majority.

I refer those wishing fuller reliable information on this subject to President Davis's "[Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government](#)," and to Vice President Stephen's "[War Between the States](#)."