

BANCROFT AND EARL RUSSELL.

LETTER

FROM

GEORGE BANCROFT, ESQ.,

DIRECTED TO HON. E. B. WASHBURNE, CHAIRMAN, ETC.,

TRANSMITTING

*Correspondence with Earl Russell relative to a portion of the memorial address on Abraham Lincoln, delivered before both houses of Congress.*

MAY 7, 1866.—Referred to the Joint Select Committee on the death of Mr. Lincoln and ordered to be printed.

NEW YORK, May 3, 1866.

SIR: Having, in conformity with the request of Congress through its joint committee, delivered before them a memorial address on Abraham Lincoln, and Earl Russell having written a letter to deny some of my allegations, I deem it but an act of justice to transmit to you a copy of Earl Russell's letter and of my reply, and of the documents on which my allegation and his denial were founded. I request you to lay these papers before the joint committee of Congress, and I leave them at their disposition.

Very respectfully, yours,

GEORGE BANCROFT.

Hon. ELIHU B. WASHBURNE, of Illinois,  
*Chairman on the part of the House of the  
Joint Committee of Congress, &c.*

*Papers enclosed.*

1. Earl Russell to Mr. Adams, February 28, 1866.
2. Mr. Bancroft to Mr. Adams, in reply to Earl Russell, March 23, 1866.
3. Lord J. Russell's letters of May 6, 1861, to Earl Cowley and to Lord Lyons.
4. Extract of Lord J. Russell's speech in the House of Commons, May 30, 1861.

*Lord Russell to Mr. Adams.*

CHESHAM PLACE, February 28, 1866.

DEAR MR. ADAMS: I observe in the "Daily News" of yesterday extracts from a speech of Mr. Bancroft, delivered in the House of Representatives on the 12th instant.

In this speech Mr. Bancroft is represented to have said, referring to the breaking out of the civil war:

“The British secretary of state for foreign affairs made haste to send word through the palaces of Europe that the great republic was in its agony; that the republic was no more; that a headstone was all that remained due by the law of nations to ‘the late Union.’”

As words pronounced on such an occasion and by so eminent a man as Mr. Bancroft may have an effect far beyond the injury which my personal character might suffer, I must request you to convey to Mr. Bancroft my denial of the truth of his allegations, and to refer him to facts of a totally opposite character.

Soon after the news of the resistance in arms of the southern States to the government of the Union arrived in this country, a member of the House of Commons stated in his place that the bubble of republicanism had burst.

I replied, in the same debate, that the bubble of republicanism had not burst; and that if the curse of slavery still hung about the United States, it was England who had made them the gift of the poisoned garment which was now their torment.

In fact, I have never had any doubt that, whether the United States consented to separation or pursued the war to extremity, the great western republic would remain, happily for the world, a powerful and independent republic.

The authors of the Declaration of Independence in declaring for separation from Great Britain, after enumerating their complaints of her conduct, go on to say: “We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity which denounces our separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, enemies in war, in peace friends.”

That we should be enemies in war is easily understood; but when we are at peace, why should we not be friends, as the great men of the American Revolution intended us to be? If they, in the moment of separation and of war, looked forward to a period of peace and of friendship, why should we, more than three quarters of a century after these events, keep up sentiments of irritation and hostility founded on a mistaken apprehension of facts, and tending to lay the foundation of permanent alienation, suspicion, and ill will?

As Mr. Bancroft’s speech is likely to have very extensive publicity, I reserve to myself the power of making public this letter at such time as I shall judge fit.

I remain, my dear Mr. Adams, your faithful servant,

RUSSELL.

P. S.—I subjoin an extract of my speech on the 30th of May, 1861, as reported in Hansard’s Debates.

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*Mr. Bancroft to Mr. Adams, in reply.*

NEW YORK, March 23, 1866.

MY DEAR MR. ADAMS: I have received from you, by Lord Russell’s desire, a copy of his letter to you of 28th February last, in which he denies the truth of certain allegations in my address to Congress on the 12th of the same month. The passage which he cites contains these three allegations: That, as British secretary of state for foreign affairs, he viewed this republic as “*the late Union*,” that he sent this view of our country through the palaces of Europe; and that he made haste to do so. When Lord Russell calls to mind the authority for these statements, he must acknowledge them to be perfectly just and true.

On the sixth day of May, 1861, Lord John Russell, then secretary of state for foreign affairs, wrote a despatch to Lord Lyons, in which he describes the condition of America as “*the disruption of a confederacy*,” and he further used these words: “*Civil war has broken out between the several States of the late*

*Union. The government of the southern portion has duly constituted itself. Her Majesty's government do not wish you to make any mystery of that view.*" Here is irrefragable proof of my first allegation.

On the day on which the minister of the Queen thus wrote, he addressed a despatch to Lord Cowley, her Majesty's ambassador at Paris, designating our republic as "*the States which lately composed the American Union,*" "*the late United States,*" "*the late Union;*" and he enclosed in that despatch, for Lord Cowley's instruction, a copy of the above-cited letter to Lord Lyons. Having thus ostentatiously communicated his view of our country as "*the late Union,*" he asked, in return, "*to be made acquainted with the views of the imperial government.*" My second allegation is, therefore, true in letter and in spirit.

That Lord John Russell, as secretary of state, was in haste to do this, appears from his not having awaited the arrival of the American minister of Mr. Lincoln's appointment, and from those very letters of the 6th of May, 1861, to Lord Cowley and to Lord Lyons; for in those letters he confesses that he had not, as yet, "*received from Lord Lyons any report of the state of affairs and of the prospects of the several parties;*" but that, on coming to the decision which was so momentous and unprecedented, he acted on the reports of "*some consuls,*" and "*of the public prints.*"

It is true that twenty-four days after Lord John Russell had officially described our country as "*the disruption of a confederacy,*" "*the late United States,*" "*the late Union,*" he reproved a member of the House of Commons for openly exulting "*that the great republican bubble in America had burst; and owned that the republic had been for many years a great and free State;*" but he uttered no expectation or hope of the restoration of our Union, and rather intimated that the Americans were "*about to destroy each other's happiness and freedom.*" Lord John, on that occasion, rightly attributed the rebellion to the "*accursed institution of slavery;*" and confessed that England was the giver of "*the poisoned garment;*" that the former governments of Great Britain were "*themselves to blame for the origin of the evil.*" But this confession must be interpreted by the light of his averments on the 6th of May, 1861, and by Lord Russell's later assertion, that the efforts of our country were but a contest for "*empire.*"

In speaking to the American Congress of the life and character of Abraham Lincoln, it was my unavoidable duty to refer to the conduct of the British government towards our country during his administration, for nothing so wounded his feelings, or exercised his judgment, or tried his fortitude.

I was asked to address the two houses of our Congress, and those only. When I learned that the British minister at Washington was likely to be one of my hearers, I requested Mr. Seward to advise him not to be present; and through another friend I sent him a similar message, which he received and perfectly understood.

I need not recall words of ninety years ago, to be persuaded that in peace America and the United Kingdom should be friends. I have a right to say this; for when in the public service I proved it by public acts; and as a private citizen I have never wished our government to demand of a foreign power anything but justice.

Pray send Lord Russell a copy of this letter, which he is at liberty to publish; and I consider myself equally at liberty to publish his letter, to which this is a reply.

I am ever, my dear Mr. Adams, very truly yours,

GEO. BANCROFT.

[North America, No. 3.—Presented to Parliament, 1862.—LXII.]

*Lord J. Russell to Earl Cowley.*

FOREIGN OFFICE, *May 6, 1861.*

MY LORD: Although her Majesty's government have received no despatches from Lord Lyons by the mail which has just arrived, the communication between Washington and New York being interrupted, yet the accounts which have reached them from *some* of her Majesty's *consuls*, coupled with *what has appeared in the public prints*, are sufficient to show that a civil war has broken out among the States which lately composed the American Union.

Other nations have, therefore, to consider the light in which, with reference to that war, they are to regard the confederacy into which the southern States have united themselves; and it appears to her Majesty's government that, looking at all the circumstances of the case, they cannot hesitate to admit that such confederacy is entitled to be considered as a belligerent, and, as such, invested with all the rights and prerogatives of a belligerent.

I have stated this to Lord Lyons in the despatch of which I enclose a copy for your excellency's information.

In making known to M. Thouvenel the opinion of her Majesty's government on this point, your excellency will add that you are instructed to call the attention of the French government to the bearing which this unfortunate contest threatens to have on the rights and interests of neutral nations.

On the one hand, President Lincoln, in behalf of the northern portion of the late United States, has issued a proclamation declaratory of an intention to subject the ports of the southern portion of the late Union to a rigorous blockade; on the other hand President Davis, on behalf of the southern portion of the late Union, has issued a proclamation declaratory of an intention to grant letters of marque for cruisers to be employed against the commerce of the north.

In this state of things it appears to her Majesty's government to be well deserving of the immediate consideration of all maritime powers, but more especially of France and England, whether they should not take some steps to invite the contending parties to act upon the principles laid down in the 2d and 3d articles of the declaration of Paris of 1856, which relates to the security of neutral property on the high seas.

The United States, as an entire government, have not acceded to that declaration; but in practice they have, in their conventions with other powers, adopted the 2d article, although admitting that without some such convention the rule was not one of universal application.

As regards the 3d article, in recent treaties concluded by the United States with South American republics, the principle adopted has been at variance with that laid down in the declaration of Paris.

Your excellency will remember that when it was proposed to the government of the United States, in 1856, to adopt the whole of the declaration of Paris, they, in the first instance, agreed to the second, third, and fourth proposals, but made a condition as to the first that the other powers should assent to extending the declaration so as to exempt all private property whatever from capture on the high seas; but before any final decision was taken on this proposal, the government of President Buchanan, which in the interval had come into power, withdrew the proposition altogether.

It seems to her Majesty's government to be deserving of consideration whether a joint endeavor should not now be made to obtain from each of the belligerents a formal recognition of both principles as laid down in the declaration of Paris, so that such principles shall be admitted by both, as they have been admitted



by the powers who made or acceded to the declaration of Paris, henceforth to form part of the general law of nations.

Her Majesty's government would be glad to be made acquainted with the views of the imperial government on this matter with as little delay as possible.

I am, &c.,

J. RUSSELL.

No. 2.

*Lord J. Russell to Lord Lyons.*

FOREIGN OFFICE, *May 6, 1861.*

MY LORD: Her Majesty's government are disappointed in not having received from you, by the mail which has just arrived, any report of the state of affairs and of the prospects of the several parties, with reference to the issue of the struggle which appears unfortunately to have commenced between them; but the interruption of the communication between Washington and New York sufficiently explains the non-arrival of your despatches.

The account, however, which her Majesty's consuls at different ports were enabled to forward by the packet coincide in showing that, whatever may be the final result of what cannot now be designated otherwise than as the civil war which has broken out between the several States of THE LATE UNION, for the present at least those States have separated into distinct confederacies, and, as such, are carrying on war against each other.

The question for neutral nations to consider is, what is the character of the war; and whether it should be regarded as a war carried on between parties severally in a position to wage war, and to claim the rights and to perform the obligations attaching to belligerents?

Her Majesty's government consider that the question can only be answered in the affirmative. If the government of the northern portion of THE LATE UNION possesses the advantages inherent in long established governments, the government of the southern portion has, nevertheless, duly constituted itself, and carries on in a regular form the administration of the civil government of the States of which it is composed.

Her Majesty's government, therefore, without assuming to pronounce upon the merits of the question on which the respective parties are at issue, can do no less than accept the facts presented to them. They deeply deplore the disruption of a confederacy with which they have at all times sought to cultivate the most friendly relations; they view with the greatest apprehension and concern the misery and desolation in which that disruption threatens to involve the provinces now arrayed in arms against each other; but they feel that they cannot question the right of the southern States to claim to be recognized as a belligerent, and, as such, invested with all the rights and prerogatives of a belligerent.

I think it right to give your lordship this timely notice of the view taken by her Majesty's government of the present state of affairs in North America, and her Majesty's government do not wish you to make any mystery of that view.


I shall send your lordship, by an early opportunity, such further information on these matters as may be required for your guidance; at present I have only to add that no expression of regret that you may employ at the present disastrous state of affairs will too strongly declare the feelings with which her Majesty's government contemplate all the evils which cannot fail to result from it.

I am, &c.,

J. RUSSELL.

*Extract of Lord John Russell's speech in the House of Commons, May 30, 1861.*

My honorable friend, the member for the west riding of Yorkshire, alluded the other night to one subject in a tone which I was very sorry to hear used by any one. My honorable friend said that "the great republican bubble in America had burst." Now, sir, I am proud to confess—I may be subject to correction—but for my part, when I find that a dark and tyrannical despotism has been abolished, and that people are likely to enjoy free government in its place, I rejoice. It is my duty to represent her Majesty as friendly to all existing states; but if a despotic government fall, and the people who are subject to it are likely to obtain a better and freer government, I cannot conceal that it gives me satisfaction and that I sympathize with them. But I own I have very different feelings when a great republic, which has enjoyed for seventy or eighty years institutions under which the people have been free and happy, enters into a conflict in which that freedom and happiness is placed in jeopardy. I must confess the joy which I felt at the overthrow of some of the despotisms of Italy is counterbalanced by the pain which I experience at the events which have lately taken place in America. I admit that I have thought, and that I still think, that in this country we enjoy more real freedom than the United States have ever done. I admit also that the great founders of that republic, wise and able men as they were, had not the materials at hand by which they could interpose, as we are able to do in this country, the curb and correction of reason, in order to restrain the passionate outbursts of the popular will. Yet we cannot be blind to the fact that the republic has been for many years a great and free state, exhibiting to the world the example of a people in the enjoyment of wealth, happiness, and freedom, and affording bright prospects of the progress and improvement of mankind. When I reflect that the reproaches which are cast by the States of the north upon the States of the south, and the resistance which they have called forth have arisen from that accursed institution of slavery, I cannot but recollect also that with our great and glorious institutions we gave them that curse, and that ours were the hands from which they received that fatal gift of the poisoned garment which was flung around them from the first hour of their establishment. Therefore, I do not think it just or seemly that there should be among us anything like exultation at their discord, and still less that we should reproach them with an evil for the origin of which we ourselves are to blame. These are the feelings with which I heard the remarks of my honorable friend the other night, and I must say that I believe the sentiments which he expressed form an exception to the general impression in England. Indeed, I think nothing could be more honorable to our country than the prevailing pain and grief which have been occasioned by the prospect of that great and free people being about to rush into arms to destroy each other's happiness and freedom.



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