

A LETTER ON LINCOLN

BY

EDWIN L. GODKIN

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THIS LETTER, WRITTEN BY EDWIN L. GODKIN TO
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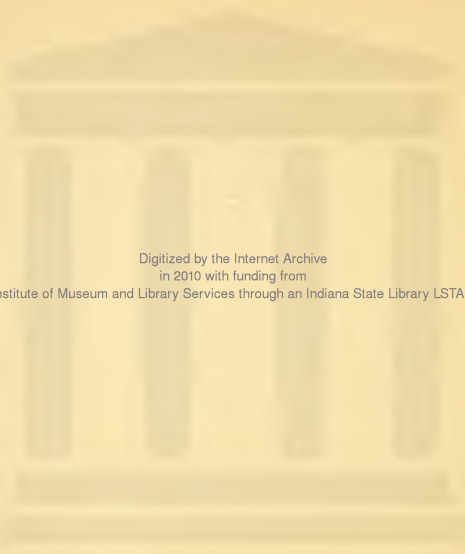
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A LETTER ON LINCOLN

WRITTEN MARCH 7TH, 1865.



HE PRESIDENT has been inaugurated, and has delivered what is, I suppose, the shortest "inaugural address" on record, probably for the best of all reasons—that he had very little to say. He has no new policy to trace out, nothing to explain that has not been already explained half-a-dozen times. In fact his real inaugural address was his last message to Congress, which was written immediately

after his election, and was virtually his response to the country. What he said last Saturday was little more than a formal acknowledgment of the honor which has just been conferred on him, and though formal was hearty, but what is perhaps better still, and certainly rarer, it was in excellent taste. His English is about as good as Lord Malmesbury's, but he hardly ever says a feeble thing, and except when he undertakes to discuss questions of political economy, which are far out of his depth, he is invariably shrewd, if not wise. There is nothing in his state papers, admirable as they have been in many respects, so creditable, however, both to his head and heart, as the entire absence of all violence, either of

language or opinion. I believe he has never once been betrayed into those paltry outbursts of passion and spite by which nearly everything that his Confederate rival says or writes is disfigured. Lincoln never attempts invective, and, although there is probably no living man who has been the object of more blackguard abuse, it has never, so far as I know, elicited from him a single expression of impatience or resentment. I use the term "blackguard" advisedly, for I believe he is the first public man, either native or foreign, with regard to whom the English press has thrown aside those restraints of which it is ordinarily and justly so proud. The rules which writers laying claim to decency in all countries agree to

observe have been suspended, by many of the most respectable journals, both in England and America, for his annoyance. Even his dress and personal appearance have been made the subjects of indignant invectives, and this, not by "the ruffians of the press," but by scholars and gentlemen. His humble origin has been treated as a crime by men who were actually fêting the grandson of a small New York tallow-chandler as a "Southern cavalier." His want of book-learning has been howled over by men who are opposed to competitive examinations, on the ground that physical and moral qualities are on the whole more important for the public service than mere knowledge, and who think a man may make a very

good Indian civil servant, though he may never have heard of Shakspeare or Milton. Mr. Lincoln's acceptance of the Presidency has actually been treated as a proof of depravity, and Mr. Beresford Hope, in one of those extraordinary outbursts of rage which he called "lectures" on the American war, likened him to the most sensual and unscrupulous of Eastern tyrants, apparently for the singular reason that he had not been sufficiently penetrated with the sense of his own worthlessness to decline an honor conferred on him unasked by the majority of a nation of twenty millions. The opposition press in this country has, of course, not spared him either, though I do not remember to have seen many things in its columns which

could be said to surpass in sheer brutality much that has been written about him in London. And yet I have never heard of his uttering or writing one word to show that these shameless attacks ever roused in him a single angry impulse. How many men of high breeding and culture are there who could pass through a similar ordeal with as much credit? His great rival, Mr. Davis, though an object of the highest admiration to half Europe as well as half America, never makes a speech, or writes a message to Congress, that is not half made up of railing and accusation, which sometimes sink into mere Billingsgate.

When one comes to examine what this "baboon," "buffoon," "clodhopper," "peasant," "rail-

splitter," has done, to compare his promise of four years ago with his performance since then, the secret of his patience is at once revealed. "They may laugh who win." He found himself uncouth, illiterate, with no experience of life, except such as could be gained in one community, and that by no means in the most advanced state of culture, without any of the gifts which usually captivate the people, or attract their confidence, either commanding presence, or silver tongue, or long official experience, saddled suddenly with the responsibility of confronting, and of directing, what everybody acknowledges to be the greatest political convulsion of modern times. He was placed at the head of a democracy in the hour

of its greatest peril, and you must not forget what English philosophers at that time considered it—fickle, demoralized, cowardly, unwarlike, unused to arms and to horsemanship, impatient of taxation, incapable of discipline, singularly adverse to prolonged effort, without leaders, and inordinately conceited and indocile. Everything had to be organized, and from the rawest material—army, navy, and civil service. The task before this railsplitter was in short such as no European statesman has ever faced, and every foreign observer and a great many native ones were confident he would fail. Three things were predicted with the utmost certainty—that he would never be able to raise a second army; that he

would never be able to raise any considerable portion of the revenue by taxation; and that if he attempted to do either of these things by force, the Western States would secede, and either set up a separate Confederation or join that of the South.

Well, he has raised army after army, fully a million and a half of men in all; he has equipped one of the largest, perhaps, in the number of guns and men, the largest navy in the world; he is at this moment raising nearly £100,000,000 by inland revenue alone, and after four years of murderous warfare, conducted with varying success, he has, nevertheless, managed to inspire such confidence in the nation, of which he has exacted such sacrifices, that he has been

re-elected by an almost unanimous vote, the Western States casting the heaviest majorities in his favor, to the highest office in their gift. There is something almost painfully absurd in the spectacle of writers and orators in London, who are probably themselves incapable of managing a parish vestry, laboriously proving, in the teeth of all this, Mr. Lincoln's incompetency. The final test of his statesmanship will, of course, be the condition and prospects of the South ten years hence; but every other test short of this has been applied to him, and it is difficult to conceive of any man's bearing it more successfully under all the circumstances. A long catalogue of the things that he might have done, but has failed to do, and

of other and better ways of doing the things he has done, might of course, be made out; but there are few persons who have studied the lives of men who have successfully carried nations through great revolutions who will not agree that this would be one of the least profitable of exercises. Nobody can ever predict with certainty what the precise consequence of any political or military step will be, or whether it will have only one or many consequences, and as long as this is the case it will be foolish as well as unjust to condemn any public man who has actually done well, for not having accomplished things which bystanders conceive as possibilities. Two-thirds of the criticism of Mr. Lincoln is about as sage as the

recent announcement of the *Times*, that Grant would have been certainly defeated in the Wilderness if a flank movement undertaken by Longstreet had not been prevented by that general receiving a wound at the hands of his own men; and like the young officer who narrowly escaped death at Dettingen by being sent fifteen miles away the night before the battle. Mr. Lincoln promised in his first inaugural, in 1861, that the power confided to him would be used to hold, occupy, or possess the property and places belonging to the Government, and collect the duties and imposts; but beyond what may be necessary for these objects there will be no invasion, no using of force against or among the people any-

where. He added afterwards: "The course here indicated will be followed, unless current events and experience shall show a modification or change to be proper." This, it must be admitted, is a modest programme, and was traced out under a very mistaken impression of the magnitude of the task before him; but he has not only done all he promised, but very much more than any one, when the full proportions of the rebellion had been fully revealed, could have believed it was possible for him to do in the time. What this is any one may ascertain by contrasting the condition of the Confederacy in the spring of 1863 with what it is to-day. He has, perhaps, a stronger claim, however, on the popular confidence

and gratitude than that which arises out of the positive results which he has achieved. It is based on the fact that he is perhaps the only man at the North who has never wavered, or doubted, or abated one jot of heart or hope. He has been always calm, confident, determined; the very type and embodiment of the national will, the true and fit representative of the people in its noblest moods; and to be this is certainly one of the highest duties, if not the highest duty, of the leader of democracy.

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