

W. H. Seward

The Intelligencer.

A Weekly Newspaper, Devoted to News, Politics, Literature, Agriculture, Manufactures, Domestic Economy, &c., &c.

VOL. III.

STATESVILLE, N. C., SATURDAY, JANUARY 17, 1874.

No. 3.

JUDGE BLACK TO MR. ADAMS.

Seward Responsible for the War.

Our readers are perhaps aware that Hon. Charles Francis Adams is one of the foremost lawyers in our land. He is, we take him, as just and patriotic as he is able and learned. It will be also remembered that when Charles Francis Adams was placed in some time ago to pronounce an elaborate eulogy on the late William H. Seward, the eulogy has been severely criticized in the public prints and by men who have held high stations. Notably among them is Hon. Gideon Welles, who has done the country real service in his exposures of Mr. Adams' false statements, and in removing the veneering that the Massachusetts statesman had laid on the character of the dead Secretary so thickly. In the January number of the *Intelligencer*, an article from Judge Black appears in review of the Adams eulogy. In the meantime the advanced sheets published it in full. It is remarkably healthy reading for the times. We copy for the benefit of our readers the main part of his letter. It will be seen that Judge Black establishes most conclusively that the cunning, oily, tyrannical, wicked Secretary of State was responsible for the war that raged so fiercely for four years. It will be seen that he, William H. Seward, could have dissipated the lowering clouds so heavily charged with death and destruction. But he was bent on carrying out his insidious and devilish doctrine of the "Higher Law," although it devastated the land and sowed the dragons' teeth of ruin and discord. But here is what Judge Black has to say, and it is worthy of an attentive reading:

To the Hon. Charles Francis Adams: Among a certain class of the American people a desire prevails that your Memorial Address on the late William H. Seward should receive a fuller examination than Mr. Welles has given it. His papers are very strong and clear, but there are certain fundamental questions which he does not touch, and which the friends of constitutional government cannot allow to be "washed in Lethe and forgotten."

Your reputation for stainless integrity, or great talents, and for liberal principles, given your words almost the authority of an oracle. There is, perhaps, no man in this country whose naked assertion would go further than yours, at home or abroad, hence it should be subjected to a free revision. This is an important matter. Mr. Seward was so connected with the greatest events of the last twenty years, that a misrepresentation of his life is a falsification of public history. Besides, he differed so widely from all his predecessors in a number of his contemporaries, that unqualified approval of him implies the severest condemnation of them. Your own consciousness of this is betrayed in your harsh denunciation of those who committed no crime but that of being opposed by him. If Mr. Seward was not a wise and virtuous man, if he was unfaithful to his public duties, if his policy tended to the corruption of moral habits, if the consequent destruction of popular liberty, and laws which he often saw provisions wrong you have done a great wrong in holding him up as an example for others to follow.

Your comparison of Mr. Seward to Pericles was rash and extravagant. A little reflection and another reading of *Pericles* will satisfy you that the New York politician bore not the slightest resemblance to the illustrious Athenian. It is easy to eulogize a man by appropriating to him the qualities of another whose history has already consecrated to the admiration of mankind. Mr. Lincoln was said by his admirers to be a reproduction of Socrates; Robespierre was the Aristides of the French Assembly, and Klotz was Anacharis. Congress and the State Legislatures are full of Clotzes. We have among the directors of Credit Mobilier, Thackeray heard Mr. Ames described as one who was *Catonian Catone*—more severely virtuous than the sternest of Roman censors. Your analogies are more absurd than any of these. You might as well have carried it out by showing that Mr. Thurlow Weel was the counterpart of Aspicin.

Your claim of great professional ability for Mr. Seward is one of the most surprising you have made. The conviction is almost universal that he knew less of law and cared less about it than any other man who has held high office in this country. If he had not abandoned the law he might have been a sharp attorney, but he never could have risen to the upper walks of the profession. He would have been kept in the lowest rank, not by want of mental capacity or lack of diligent habits, but by the inherent defects of his moral nature. If he had understood and respected the laws, he would have led a tolerable different life, and perhaps the general decay of our political institutions would not have taken place.

But let us go over the particular case of which you have given a most elaborate report, derived, no doubt, from Mr. Seward himself, or from somebody else who was decidedly his *comes and fides detestis*. Your own facts and conclusions will show Mr. Seward's real grade as a lawyer, and at the same time test the value of your judgment upon his merits.

The sequel of this story, as you tell would show that Mr. Seward not only sacrificed himself but magnanimously plucked down ruin upon his political friends. Your words are: "Here he was not only injuring his own interests but those of the party with which he was associated. In vain did it labor to disavow all connection or sympathy with him. The press on all sides thundered its denunciations over his head. The elections all went one way. The Democratic party came sweeping into the ascendant. And 'all about the life of a negro idiot.' These amazing facts were not known or suspected before you uttered them. The political history of our country has not instructed us that all the elections of that period turned upon the trial of a negro at Anburn, N. Y., or that one party was completely wrecked and another swept up to the seats of power merely because Mr. William H. Seward

tried in vain to prevent the acquittal of a murderer on false pretenses. It can not be true. The odium of his conduct, whatever that may have been, was all his own. It shocks the mind of an intelligent reader like the narrative of the German novelist who tells how the peace of Europe was broken by a naval conflict on the Ohio river between fleets of English cruisers and French merchantmen in 1751, when, as every schoolboy knows, the Ohio had never felt the pressure of any craft heavier than a birch canoe.

It seems that Mr. Seward was about the same time or a little before employed for another negro—a convict in the State prison, who had killed one of his associates. Here also the defense was a *comes and fides detestis*. You describe the account of the trial by saying: "The argument rested on the insanity of the prisoner. But *N. carried no weight*. Within a month the convict was tried, condemned and executed." What else could have been expected? Do you think this felonious murderer should have gone unpunished? If yes, why? Because Seward was his counsel? Because the defense was a false one? Or simply because he was a negro? You say, in a respectful tone, that Mr. Seward's conduct in this matter was not viewed favorably in the neighborhood. Are you not the most unreasonable man in the world to think it should have been? Attempts to get criminals off by false pleas are often for you, especially when the fraud is detected by the justice of the courts, but they are never regarded with approbation or favor by an honest community.

He began his active political life with anti-Masonry. A charge was publicly made that one William Morgan, a citizen of Western New York, had been forcibly seized by Masons and taken out of the State to prevent him from revealing the secrets of their society. A judicial investigation was obviously proper; the accused parties were indicted and tried. Mr. Seward took no part in the legal proceedings which were instituted to ascertain the truth of the charges and to punish guilt according to law. That was a business to which you say, with truth, he had an aversion. He set himself the task, more congenial to his taste, of hissing up popular prejudice against those who were known to be innocent. A faction was organized which became locally powerful. He worked himself to the front of it, and was elected State Senator.

They professed to believe that the country could not be safe until every Freemason was excluded from office and stripped of his influence; but as soon as they could, they transferred themselves and their followers, without restoration of body or soul, to another party, which John Quincy Adams described as "a case compound of Royal Arch Masons and Hartford Convention Federalists, held together by no bond but that of a common hatred for better men than themselves." They fostered the growth of anti-Masonry until it was large enough to set—just as a dealer in live stock fattens a calf until it is ready for the market, and then lets it go for what it will fetch. That Mr. Seward had any faith in the anti-Masonic creed is hardly extremely doubtful; but the agency with which he entered the service of the "base compound," and the rewards he took for doing so. If his indignation was actually excited by the abduction of Morgan, he must have got bravely over it before he boasted to Lord Lyons of his own exploits, in the kidnapping line. The just and reasonable as well as the charitable conclusion is that on these, as on other subjects affecting the rights of his fellow citizens, he had no convictions whatever.

You are out in your chronology when you say that anti-Masonry made him Governor of New York for two terms, unless you mean to credit anti-Masonry with what Whiggery did in pursuance of the bargain and sale. But, in fact, Mr. Seward had his election as Governor had shown the flexibility of his political principles by supporting Masons as heartily as he had ever opposed them. It cannot be said that he was not true to the Whigs as long as he was with them and of them or that he did not earn the proffered title they gave him. He went through thick and thin for tariffs, banks, internal improvements by the general Government, distribution of surplus revenue, all their superstitious, and in 1840 he killed in the general blaze of enthusiasm for hard cider and cow-skins. He never once broke faith with them by discountenancing any partisan slander which would weaken the Democracy in the desperate struggle to preserve, protect and defend the constitution.

There is no evidence that he ever contaminated his fingers with base bribes or put into his own pocket the wages of any special iniquity, but Mr. Welles's statement is undeniably true which he was intimately associated with the leaders of the most corrupt rings at Albany and Washington and devoted much of his parliamentary skill to the promotion of their schemes, while they in return were the most efficient supporters he had for the Presidency. As a public debater he was distinguished almost exclusively by elaborate efforts to propagate those licentious doctrines which have since demoralized the public service and put common honesty out of countenance.

One instance you mention which is characteristic of you, and him both, that it must be adverted to. In 1848 the Buffalo Convention nominated Mr.

Van Buren and you as candidates President and Vice President, against General Taylor, the Whig, and General Cass, the Democratic candidate. Mr. Seward professed to believe most devoutly in your anti-slavery platform. Nevertheless he voted and spoke for General Taylor, a planter holding many slaves in one of the richest cotton producing States. You were as justified and grieved at the inconsistency, which seemed at first blush to be proper to be countenanced for a moment. You have puzzled over this mystery ever since, in the belief that some solution might be given creditably to his patriotism and sincerity; and your explanation is still very far from a satisfactory one. You do not go the length of saying that you do not go the length of looking for the motives of the conflict among those high public considerations which would have influenced your own in a similar situation. The riddle is easily read. You have only to remember that Whiggery was strong enough to make him a senator in Congress, for which he was at that time a candidate, while you could do nothing for his personal interests. Would he go out empty-handed from a party which was able and willing to give him his "back pay" for the sake of making his fortunes with a fellow organization like yours? Would he have that mountain in baptism on his coast if he did not expect some in you to expect some sacrifice? You thought, like Otis, that he "should be punished," he believed, with fangs, that he should be wise for honesty's sake. That does not seem what it works for.

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With these views he came into the national councils. At the very outset of his career in Congress he began to press the bloody gun to the lips of the South. As soon as he had a voice in the Federal Legislature he announced that emancipation was near and inevitable. It might be peaceable or violent, and every effort to hinder or delay it would tend to the consummation of violence. He would hear of no compromise and offer no terms to the South. This mode of beginning his Senatorial duties, persistently followed up, made him your *beau ideal* of a great statesman; far superior to Clay and Calhoun, who "equally retracted" at his policy; and towering high above Webster, who "never could make up his mind to meet it fully in the face," because he saw there the Union broken into dishonored fragments and the country drenched with fraternal gore.

By many persons who knew him well, these ferocious denunciations of hostility to the peace, the Union, and the constitution, were regarded as the clap net of a mere demagogue; schemes intended to juggle the ultra abolitionists, and flatter their cruel rapacity with hopes of blood and plunder which would never be gratified. Those who held this opinion, while they did not think him a dangerous man, had a most unspokeable contempt and detestation for the character. But others took him in a more serious way. Southern men especially believed it unsafe to despise his threats of pain and ruin. They watched his gathering strength with dread and terror, and when his fortunes culminated in the possession of supreme authority they felt that their hour had come.

You found it easy enough to say that he was the greatest of American statesmen, and that he proved it by proposing such legislation as this—But consider a moment whether it was consistent with any true idea of wisdom or justice. You will concede the simple point that Congress had no jurisdiction over the subject of slavery in the States. What he contemplated and desired and worked to accomplish could not be done without a fraudulent breach of the trust on which he and all others held and exercised the powers of the Federal Government. The practicability of carrying out the usurpation was based on the assumption that the Southern people would choke down their resentment and submit tamely to the restraint of their constitutional rights, and this you admit to have been a *misadventure* of the passions which would be caused by the attempt. It follows that Mr. Seward's political

conduct consisted merely of a fraud and a blunder compounded. You have not yet proved your position as to his able despatch of principles and procedure. He pleaded the safety, indignation of economy and the opening of doors of humanity in favor of his measures. These "principles" and "indignation" have probably made so deep an impression on your susceptible heart that you are willing to condemn both the fraud and the blunder for their sake. You do not assert the infamous maxim that the end justifies the means, but you have made up your mind that Mr. Seward's object in legislating was to get rid of a man who would not go the length of looking for the motives of the conflict among those high public considerations which would have influenced your own in a similar situation. The riddle is easily read. You have only to remember that Whiggery was strong enough to make him a senator in Congress, for which he was at that time a candidate, while you could do nothing for his personal interests. Would he go out empty-handed from a party which was able and willing to give him his "back pay" for the sake of making his fortunes with a fellow organization like yours? Would he have that mountain in baptism on his coast if he did not expect some sacrifice? You thought, like Otis, that he "should be punished," he believed, with fangs, that he should be wise for honesty's sake. That does not seem what it works for.

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By many persons who knew him well, these ferocious denunciations of hostility to the peace, the Union, and the constitution, were regarded as the clap net of a mere demagogue; schemes intended to juggle the ultra abolitionists, and flatter their cruel rapacity with hopes of blood and plunder which would never be gratified. Those who held this opinion, while they did not think him a dangerous man, had a most unspokeable contempt and detestation for the character. But others took him in a more serious way. Southern men especially believed it unsafe to despise his threats of pain and ruin. They watched his gathering strength with dread and terror, and when his fortunes culminated in the possession of supreme authority they felt that their hour had come.

You found it easy enough to say that he was the greatest of American statesmen, and that he proved it by proposing such legislation as this—But consider a moment whether it was consistent with any true idea of wisdom or justice. You will concede the simple point that Congress had no jurisdiction over the subject of slavery in the States. What he contemplated and desired and worked to accomplish could not be done without a fraudulent breach of the trust on which he and all others held and exercised the powers of the Federal Government. The practicability of carrying out the usurpation was based on the assumption that the Southern people would choke down their resentment and submit tamely to the restraint of their constitutional rights, and this you admit to have been a *misadventure* of the passions which would be caused by the attempt. It follows that Mr. Seward's political

conduct consisted merely of a fraud and a blunder compounded. You have not yet proved your position as to his able despatch of principles and procedure. He pleaded the safety, indignation of economy and the opening of doors of humanity in favor of his measures. These "principles" and "indignation" have probably made so deep an impression on your susceptible heart that you are willing to condemn both the fraud and the blunder for their sake. You do not assert the infamous maxim that the end justifies the means, but you have made up your mind that Mr. Seward's object in legislating was to get rid of a man who would not go the length of looking for the motives of the conflict among those high public considerations which would have influenced your own in a similar situation. The riddle is easily read. You have only to remember that Whiggery was strong enough to make him a senator in Congress, for which he was at that time a candidate, while you could do nothing for his personal interests. Would he go out empty-handed from a party which was able and willing to give him his "back pay" for the sake of making his fortunes with a fellow organization like yours? Would he have that mountain in baptism on his coast if he did not expect some sacrifice? You thought, like Otis, that he "should be punished," he believed, with fangs, that he should be wise for honesty's sake. That does not seem what it works for.

It is now more than thirty years that we turn to his achievements in the field of national politics, and especially to his dealings with the Southern States on the slavery question. You inform us that long before he became Senator he made a speech at Anburn in which "the deliberate charges of a night in the Federal Government to enlighten slaves by legislation was not less remarkable than the misadventures of the force of the passions which led the South, in the end, to the very step that brought on the predicted sequences." The misadventure you speak of was thus set forth by Mr. Seward himself in the speech you quote: "The South," said he, "will never, in a moment of resentment, expose themselves to a war with the North while they have such a great domestic population of slaves ready to embrace any opportunity to assert their freedom."

These words, Federalists or Whigs, are the meek concerns of the Southern States, however unjust it might seem to the Southern people, would be quietly submitted to by them for fear of a Northern war accompanied by negro insurrection and massacre. This brilliant and humane conception wins your approval, and proves, in your opinion, that Mr. Seward had a special genius for administering government in a country of laws.