

ON THE STATE OF THE COUNTRY.¹

APRIL 20, 1861.

REV. S. I. PRIME, D. D.

REV. AND DEAR BROTHER :

I TOOK occasion, as you will remember, in lifting up my feeble voice to my fellow-Christians on behalf of what was once our country, to point out the infamy which would attach to the Christianity of America, if, after all its boasts of numbers, power, influence, and spirituality, it were found impotent to save the land from fratricidal war. You have informed your readers more than once that you feared it was now too late to reason. Then I wish, through you, to lay this final testimony before the Christians of the North on behalf of myself and my brethren in Virginia, that the guilt lies not at our door. This mountainous aggregate of enormous crime, of a ruined constitution, of cities sacked, of reeking battle-fields, of scattered churches, of widowed wives and orphaned children, of souls plunged into hell—we roll it from us, taking the Judge to witness, before whom you and we will stand, that the blood is not upon our heads. When the danger first rose threatening in the horizon our cry was, “Christians to the rescue.” And nobly did the Christians of Virginia rally to the call. Did you not see their influence in the patriotic efforts of this old commonwealth to stand in the breach between the angry elements? Yes, it was the Christians of Virginia, combined with her other citizens, who caused her to endure wrongs until endurance ceased to be a virtue; to hold out the olive branch, even after it had been spurned again and again;

¹ The following letter, originally published in the *Central Presbyterian*, of Richmond, Va., in 1861, and addressed to the Rev. S. I. Prime, D. D., one of the editors of the *New York Observer*, was deemed so pertinent to the then existing relations between the North and the South, that an association of gentlemen were led to republish it in pamphlet form, with the conviction that, by giving to it a more diffusive circulation, they would thereby render it the instrument of accomplishing great good in behalf of religion and patriotism.

to study modes of compromise and conciliation, until the very verge of dishonor was touched ; to refuse to despair of the republic, after almost all else had surrendered all hope, and to decline all acts of self-defence even which might precipitate collision, until the cloud had risen over her very head and its lightnings were about to burst. So long-suffering, so reluctant to behold the ruin of that Union to which she contributed so much, has Virginia been that many of her own sons were disgusted by her delays and driven to fury and despair by the lowering storm and the taunts of her enemies. And those enemies (woe to them for their folly) mistook this generous long-suffering, this magnanimous struggle for peace, as evidence of cowardice! They said the "old mother of states and statemen" was decrepit ; that her genius was turned to dotage ; that her breasts were dry of that milk which suckled her Henrys and her Washingtons. They thought her little more than a cowering beldame, whom a timely threat would reduce to utter submissiveness. And thus they dared to stretch over her head the minatory rod of correction. But no sooner was the perilous experiment applied than a result was revealed as unexpected and startling as that caused by the touch of Ithuriel's spear. This patient, peaceful, seemingly hesitating paralytic flamed up at the insolent touch, like a pyramid of fire, and Virginia stands forth in her immortal youth, the "unterrified commonwealth" of other days, a Minerva radiant with the terrible glories of policy and war, wielding that sword which has ever flashed before the eyes of aggressors, the "*sic semper tyrannis.*" Yes, the point of farthest endurance has been passed at length. All her demands for constitutional redress have been refused ; her magnanimous, her too generous concessions of right have been met by the insolent demand for unconditional surrender of honor and dignity ; her forbearance has been abused to collect armaments and equip fortresses on her border and on her own soil for her intimidation ; the infamous alternative has been forced upon her, either to brave the oppressor's rod or to aid him in the destruction of her sisters and her children, because they are contending nobly, if too rashly, for rights common to them and her ; and, to crown all, the constitution of the United States has been rent in fragments by the effort to muster new forces and wage war without authority of law, and to coerce sovereign States into adhesion, in

the utter absence of all powers or intentions of the federal compact to that effect. Hence, there is now but one mind and one heart in Virginia; and from the Ohio to the Atlantic, from the sturdy mountaineers, and her chivalrous lowlanders alike, there is flung back with high disdain the gauntlet of deathless resistance. In one week the whole State has been converted into a camp.

Now once more, before the Titanic strife begins, we ask the conservative freemen of the North, For what good end is this strife? We do not reason with malignant fanatics, with the mob whose coarse and brutal nature is phrenzied with sectional hatred. But we ask, where is the great conservative party, which polled as many votes against Abraham Lincoln as the whole South? Where are the good men who, a few weeks ago even, held out the olive branch to us, and assured us that, if we would hold our hands, the aggressive party should be brought to reason? Where is that Albany convention which pledged itself against war? If it is too late to reason, even with you, we will at least lay down our last testimony against you before our countrymen, the church, and the righteous heavens.

Consider, then, that this appeal to arms, in such a cause, is as dangerous to your rights as to ours. Let it be carried out, and whatever may have befallen us, it will leave you with a consolidated Federal government, with State sovereignty extinguished, with the constitution in ruins, and with your rights and safety a prey to a frightful combination of radicalism and military despotism. For what thoughtful man does not perceive that the premises of the anti-slavery fanatic are just those of the agrarian? The cause of peace then was as much your cause as ours. And if war is thrust upon us, you should be found on our side, contending for the supremacy of law and constitutional safeguards, with a courage worthy of the heroes of Saratoga and Trenton.

How horrible is this war to be, of a whole North against a whole South! Not to dwell on all its incidents of shame and misery, let us ask, who are to fight it out to its bitter issue? Not the tongue-valiant brawlers, who have inflamed the fued by their prating lies about the "barbarism of slavery;" these pitiful miscreants are already hiding their cowardly persons from the storm; and its brunt must be borne by the honest, the mis-

guided, the patriotic men of the North who in a moment of madness have been thrust into this false position.

How iniquitous is its real object—the conquest and subjugation of free and equal States! We have vainly boasted of the right of freemen to choose their own form of government. This right the North now declares the South shall not enjoy. The very tyrants of the Old World are surrendering the unrighteous claim to thrust institutions on an unwilling people. Even grasping England, which once endeavored to ruin the colonies she could not retain, stands ready to concede to her *dependencies* a separate existence, when they determine it is best for their welfare; but the North undertakes to compel its equals to abide under a government which they judge ruinous to their rights! Thus, this free, Christian, republican North urges on the war, while even despotic Europe cries shame on the fratricidal strife, and turns with sickening disgust and loathing from the bloody spectacle!

And what can this war effect, except mischief? Will it restore the supremacy of federal laws over the seceded States? Can you conquer the united South? Can you conquer the seven Confederate States? And when Virginia has joined her sisters, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia, and they have rallied to their sides their stalwart daughters of the West, is there one abolitionist insane enough, in the fury of his sectional hate, to believe that he can conquer them all? Then what can this war effect, save to shed rivers of treasure and of more precious blood, to plant the seeds of national hatred which are to bear fruits in other wars for centuries, and to rend this Union forever beyond the hope of reconstruction? Why, then, do you go to war with us?

Let it not be replied, that it is South Carolina which has first gone to war with you, and that Virginia has made herself *particeps criminis* by refusing to permit her righteous chastisement. This is what clamoring domagogues say; but before an enlightened posterity, as before impartial spectators, it is false. And here let us distinctly understand the ground the conservative North means to occupy as to the independence of the States in their reserved rights. If you do indeed construe the Federal compact so that a ruthless majority may perpetrate unconstitutional wrong, may trample on the sacred authority of the Su-

preme Court, and may pervert all the powers of the Federal government, instituted for the equal good of all, to the depression of a class of rights as much recognized by the constitution as any other, and the minority have no remedy except submission; if you mean that sovereign States, the creators by their free acts of these Federal authorities, are to be the helpless slaves, in the last resort, of their own servants; if you mean that one party is to keep or break the compact as his arrogance, interest, or caprice may dictate, and the other is to be held bound by it at the point of the sword; if you mean that a sovereign State is not to be the judge of its own wrong and its own redress when all constitutional appeals have failed, then we say, that it is high time we understood each other; then was this much-lauded Federal compact a monstrous fraud, a horrid trap; and we do well to free ourselves and our children from it at the expense of all the horrors of another revolutionary war. The conservative party in the North declared, with us, that the platform of the Black Republican party was unconstitutional. On this their opposition to it was based. They proclaimed it in their speeches, they wrote it on their banners, they fired it from their cannon, they voted it at the polls, that the Chicago platform was unconstitutional. And now that this platform has been fixed on the ruins of the constitution, and its elected exponent has declared from the steps of the Capitol that the last barrier, the Supreme Court, is to be prostrated to the will of a majority; now that the conservative party of the North has demonstrated itself (as it does this day by its succumbing to this fiendish war-phrenzy), impotent to protect us, themselves, or the constitution (the constitution overthrown according to their own avowals), are we to be held offenders because we attempted peacefully to exercise the last remaining remedy, and to pluck our liberties and the principles of this constitution from the vandal hands which were rending them all, by a quiet secession? Nay, verily! Of all men in the world, the conservative men of the North cannot condemn that act, for they have declared the constitution broken, and they have proved themselves incompetent to restore it. And least of all should Virginia be condemned for this act, because she magnanimously forebore it till forbearance was almost her ruin, and until repeated aggressions had left no alternative. Yet more, Virginia cannot be condemned, because, in the ordinance of

1787, in which she first accepted the constitution, she *expressly reserved* to herself the right to sever its bonds whenever she judged they were used injuriously to her covenanted rights. It was on this condition she was received into the family of States; and her reception on this condition was a concession of it by her partners. From that condition she has never for one hour receded. Witness the spirit of the Resolutions of 1798, 1799. And now, shall she be called a covenant-breaker because she judges that the time has come to exercise her right expressly reserved? Nay, verily.

If, then, we have the right of peaceably severing our connection with the former confederation, and the attempt has been made by force to obstruct that right, they who attempted the obstruction are the first aggressors. The first act of war was committed by the Government of Washington against South Carolina, when fortresses, intended lawfully only for her protection, were armed for her subjugation. That act of war was repeated when armed preparations were twice made to reinforce these means of her oppression. It was repeated when she was formally notified that these means of her oppression would be strengthened, "peaceably if they could be, forcibly if they must." And then, at last, after a magnanimous forbearance, little expected of her ardent nature, she proceeded to what was an act of strict self-defence—the reduction of Fort Sumter.

But, it is replied, the seceding States have committed the intolerable wrong of seizing Federal ships, posts, property and money, by violence! And whose fault is this? Had the right of self-protection outside the Federal constitution been peacefully allowed us, after our rights had been trampled in the mire within it, not one dollar's worth would have been seized. All would yet be accounted for, to the last shoe-latchet, if the North would hold its hand. The South has not seceded because it wished to commit a robbery. As for the forts within their borders, the only legitimate use the United States could have for them was to protect those States. When we relinquish all claims on that protection, what desire can the Federal government have to retain them, save as instruments of oppression? But you say they were forcibly seized! And why? except that the South was well assured (have not events proved the fear well grounded?) that a purpose existed to employ them for her

ruin. My neighbor and equal presumes to obstruct me in the prosecution of my rights, and brandishes a dirk before my face; when I wrench it from his hand to save my own life, shall he then accuse me of unlawfully stealing his dirk? Yet, such is the insulting nonsense which has been everywhere vented, to make the South an offender for acts of self-defence, which the malignant intentions disclosed by the Government of Washington have justified more and more every day.

But it is exclaimed: "The South has fired upon the flag of the Union!" Did this flag of the Union wave in the *cause of right*, when it was unfurled as the signal of oppression? Spain fired upon the flag of France when Napoleon laid his iniquitous grasp upon her soil and crown. Did this justify the righteous and God-fearing Frenchman in seeking to destroy Spain? Let the aggressor amend his wrong before he demands a penalty of the innocent party who has only exercised the right of self-defence.

It is urged again: If the Union is not maintained, the interests of the North in the navigation of the Gulf and the Mississippi, in the comities of international intercourse, in the moneys expended in the Southern States for fortifications, may be jeoparded. I reply, it will be time enough to begin to fight when those interests are infringed. May I murder my neighbor because I *suspect* that he may defraud me in the division of a common property, which is about to be made, and because I find him now more in my power? Shall not God avenge for such iniquity as this?

But it is said, in fine, "If the right of secession is allowed, then our government is only a rope of sand." I reply demonstratively, that the government of which Virginia has been a member has always had this condition in it, as to her; for her right to go out of it whenever she judged herself injured by it was expressly reserved and conceded from the first. Her reception on those terms was a concession of it. If you say that the people of the North are not aware of this, then the only reply we deign to give is, that it is no one's fault but yours that you have allowed yourself to be misled by rulers ignorant of the fundamental points in the history of the government. Now my argument, and it is invincible, is this: that the connection of Virginia with the Federal government, although containing always

this right of secession for an infringement of the compact, has been anything else, for eighty years, than a rope of sand. It has bound her in a firm loyalty to that government. It has been a bond which nothing but the most ruthless and murderous despotism could relax; a bond which retained its strength even when it was binding the State to her incipient dishonor and destruction. Surely it is a strange and disgraceful fact, that men who call themselves *freemen* and *Christians* should assume the position, that no force is a real force except that which is cemented by an inexorable physical power! Do they mean that with them honor, covenants, oaths, enlightened self-interest, affections, are only a rope of sand? Shame on the utterance of such an argument! Do they confess themselves so ignorant that they do not know that the physical power of even the most iron despotisms reposes on moral forces? Even a Presbyterian divine has been found to declare, that if our Federal compact has in it any admission of a right of secession, it is but a *simulacrum* of a government. Whereas, all history teaches us, that if the basis of moral forces be withdrawn from beneath, the most rigid despotism becomes but a *simulacrum*, and dissolves at the touch of resistance. How much more, then, must all republican government be founded on moral forces, on the consent, the common interests, and the affections of the governed. While these remain, the government is strong, and efficient for good; when they are gone, it is impotent for good, and exists only for evil. As long as the purposes and compacts of the Federal institutions were tolerably observed by the North, that government knit us together; with moral bands, indeed, yet they were stronger than hooks of steel. The North has severed them by aggression, and they cannot be cemented by blood.

Why then shall war be urged on? No man is blind enough to believe that it can re-construct the Federal Union on equitable terms. It is waged for revenge, the gratification of sectional hate, to solace mortified pride, to satiate the lust of conquest. From these fiendish passions let every good man withdraw his countenance. It is a war which the constitution confers no power to wage, even were the secession of the South for insufficient cause. The debates of the fathers who framed it show that this power was expressly withheld—even the Federalist, Hamilton, concurring strenuously. This war has no jus-

tification in righteousness, in any reasonable hope of good results, in constitutional law. It is the pure impulse of bad passions. Will the good men of the North concur in it?

I desire, through you, my dear brother, to lay down this last protest on that altar where the peace of the land is so soon to be sacrificed. I claim to be heard. If the reign of terror exercised by the mobs of your cities has indeed made it dangerous for you to lay before your fellow-Christians the deprecatory cry of one who, like me, has labored only for peace, then tell those mobs that not you, but I, am responsible for whatever in these lines is obnoxious to their malignant minds, and bid them seek their revenge of me—not of you—at that frontier where we shall meet them, the northernmost verge of the sacred soil of Virginia. And if you find that the voice of justice and reason is no longer permitted to be heard in the North, that the friends of the constitution cannot lift their hands there with safety in its defence, then we invite you, and all true men, to come to this sunny land, and help us here to construct and defend another temple, where constitutional liberty may abide secure and untarnished. For you we have open arms and warm hearts; for our enemies, resistance to the death.

Yours in the bonds of the gospel.