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978-1-108-00302-5 - The Statesmen of America in 1846

Sarah Mytton Maury

Excerpt

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THE

STATESMEN OF AMERICA.

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THE PRESIDENT AND PEOPLE OF THE  
UNITED STATES.

THE first time I saw the President was on the first of January, 1846, the morning after the arrival of myself and my son (the Doctor,) at Washington. On New Year's day it is the privilege of every American and his family to pay their respects to the Chief Magistrate of the country, at the White House. Wishing to see this republican ceremony, so unlike any custom of Europe, we repaired to the residence of the President about one o'clock, and not having had time to deliver any of our letters of introduction, we went alone. The crowd was immense, but perfectly well conducted; no pushing forward, no

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murmuring, no jostling; each was solicitous to avoid, if possible, annoying his or her neighbour, and anxiously apologised if such an accident happened; all were neatly dressed, many of the female portion with much elegance, and the men carried their hats high up above their heads to keep them out of the way. I have been in all sorts of crowds, in England and France; at theatres, operas, churches, balls, routs, elections, and ceremonies of various kinds, both public and private, but I have never seen any assemblage of persons so orderly, respectful, patient, and well mannered as the American people on that day. The Democracy behaved like a Lady.

The President stood in the Reception room, and Mrs. Polk at a little distance; they received their guests as they were able to approach; the greeting was friendly and courteous on the one side, and respectful and kind on the other. My son and myself approached with the rest, and I simply introduced myself as an English lady, without even mentioning my name. “I am delighted, madam, to see you here,” said the President, shaking me cordially by the hand. I then

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introduced my son, saying that I should hope to see the President again. “At all times, madam, you will be most welcome.” And he has faithfully kept this encouraging promise; in public and in private I have ever received from him and from Mrs. Polk the utmost kindness and consideration.

This was my first introduction in Washington, and at this time it must be remembered that the United States were at variance, and might soon be at war, with Great Britain. Nor should it be omitted that the Americans, a high minded and sensitive people, jealous of their honour, have been the subjects of vulgar and ignorant remark by English travellers. But these circumstances never seemed to recur to their recollection; or rather they appeared additional reasons why they should extend to me a more than ordinary share of courtesy and hospitality. I was a stranger, a woman, and an invalid;—this was enough for them. In my various interviews with the President he was ever cautious of making any remark which might even by inference give me pain, and he treated my feelings with respect as one devoted

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to the interests of my country, but as regarding America with every hallowed sentiment of gratitude, admiration and love. And this consideration for my position as an Englishwoman, was universal throughout the Union.

The Honourable James Knox Polk entered upon the office of President of the United States on the 4th of March, 1845. He is a native of North Carolina, and was born on the 2nd of November, 1795. His father, who was a farmer, removed to Tennessee in 1806, and in this state Mr. Polk continues to reside. The ancestors of this family, in common with those of many of our distinguished men, emigrated from Ireland. He received his professional education in the University of North Carolina, and was distinguished for his great assiduity and success, particularly in the study of mathematics. In 1820 Mr. Polk was admitted to the bar, commencing his career in Maury county. In 1825 he was chosen to represent his district in Congress, and in 1835 he was elected speaker of the House of Representatives.

The President is of low stature; his address is mild and perfectly unassuming, and the tones of

his voice are gentle and agreeable ; his forehead is broad and high ; his eyes well set, of dark gray, and the mouth is expressive of much firmness. I should think that he is habitually grave and thoughtful, for though I have often seen him smile, I have never seen him indulge in laughter. The President refuses a favour more kindly than any one I have ever heard perform that most ungracious duty of one in power. I was, on one occasion, present when a gentleman pressed very hard for an answer to an application for a consulship. The President said that he had not had time to examine the list of candidates ; that it was a very long one, and that for the moment he was wholly unable to give any reply. The gentleman had the bad taste to reiterate his request ; three times the President repeated his original words, and always with forbearance and patience. The art of conferring a favour is as difficult as the art of refusing it ; but the sagacity and good feeling which called into active service Slidell M'Kenzie and the veteran Major General Gaines, are proofs that the President understands the one as well as the other.

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Mr. Polk is attached to the Presbyterian church; but his sympathies extend to all denominations, and during my residence in Washington he attended the Roman Catholic chapel, when, I believe, a sermon for the relief of the Irish poor was preached. I have understood that his attendance at church is strict and constant, and in every relation of private life he is exemplary and well beloved.

Though the individual reign of the President is limited by the constitution of the country to a certain term of years, no dynasty among the sovereigns of the earth holds tenure on more immutable grounds than the Presidents of America.

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OPINIONS OF COLONEL POLK.

The following are extracted from Governor Polk's Inaugural Address, delivered at Nashville on the 14th of October, 1839, in presence of the two Houses of the General Assembly:—

UNITED STATES BANK.

“The federal government has at different times assumed or attempted to exercise powers which,

in my judgment, have not been conferred upon that government by the compact. Among these I am free to declare my solemn conviction that the federal government possesses no constitutional power to incorporate a national bank. The advocates of a bank insist that it would be *convenient and expedient*, and that it would promote the ‘general welfare;’ but they have, in my judgment, failed to show that the power to create it is either *expressly* granted, or that it is an *incident* to any *express* power that is ‘*necessary and proper*’ to carry that power into effect. The alarming dangers of the power of such a corporation (vast and irresponsible as experience has shown it to be) to the public liberty, it does not fall within the scope of my present purpose fully to examine. We have seen the power of associated wealth in the late Bank of the United States, wrestling with a giant’s strength with the government itself—and although finally overthrown, it was not until after a long and doubtful contest. During the struggle, it manifested a power for mischief which it would be dangerous to permit to exist in a free country. The panic and alarm, the distress and

extensive suffering which, in its convulsive struggle to perpetuate its power, it inflicted on the country, will not soon be forgotten. Its notorious alliance with leading politicians, and its open interference, by means of the corrupting power of money, in the political contests of the times, had converted it into a political engine, used to control elections and the course of public affairs. No restraints of law could prevent any similar institution from being the willing instrument used for similar purposes. The state of Tennessee, through her legislature, has repeatedly declared her settled opinions against the existence of such an institution, and at no time in its favour. She has instructed her senators and requested her representatives in Congress to vote against the establishment of such an institution. In these opinions, heretofore expressed by the state, I entirely concur.”

ABOLITION OF SLAVERY.

“It becomes the duty of all the states, and especially of those whose constitutions recognize the existence of domestic slavery, to look with

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watchfulness to the attempts which have been recently made to disturb the rights secured to them by the constitution of the United States. The agitation of the abolitionists can by no possibility produce good to any portion of the union, and must, if persisted in, lead to incalculable mischief. The institution of domestic slavery, as it existed at the adoption of the constitution of the United States, and as it still exists in some of the states, formed the subject of one of the compromises of opinion and of interest upon the settlement of which all the old states became parties to the compact, and agreed to enter the union. The new states were admitted into the union upon an equal footing with the old states, and are equally bound by the terms of the compact. Any attempt on the part of the Federal Government to act upon the subject of slavery, as it exists within the states, would be a clear infraction of the constitution; and to disturb it within the district of Columbia would be a palpable violation of the public faith, as well as of the clear meaning and obvious intention of the framers of the constitution. They intended to leave, as they did in fact

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leave, the subject to the exclusive regulation and action of the states and territories within which slavery existed or might exist. They intended to place, and they did in fact place it beyond the pale of action within the constitutional power of the Federal Government. No power has been conferred upon the general government, either by express grant or necessary implication, to take cognizance of, or in any manner or to any extent to interfere with, or to act upon the subject of domestic slavery, the existence of which in many of the states is expressly recognized by the constitution of the United States.”