

Senator Kern on Pensions

Speech of Hon. John W. Kern, of Indiana, before the United States senate, as in committee of the whole, having under consideration the bill (H. R. 1) granting a service pension to certain defined veterans of the civil war and the war with Mexico. Mr. Kern said:

Mr. President: I rise to speak in favor of a pension bill that will settle the pension question for all time to come; that will forever put an end to special pension legislation; that will, when once put into operation, enable the government to dispense with services of thousands of examiners and special agents, spies, and detectives—a measure which has the support of the great majority of the soldiers of the nation who served in the ranks of the union army as privates during the civil war and who by the thousand are registering their protest against the McCumber or Smoot substitute now under consideration.

Mr. President, the last democratic state convention of Indiana, held on April 28, 1910, was made up of more than 1,500 delegates representing every township in each of the 92 counties of the state. By a unanimous vote it adopted a platform of principles in which it pledged the honor of the party that the candidates that day nominated should, if successful, carry out and perform, in so far as they were able, the promises therein made. One of those platform declarations was as follows:

"We favor the immediate enactment of a pension law by congress providing for a pension of not less than \$1 a day for all union veterans of the civil war."

Mr. President, that convention also, by a unanimous vote, nominated me as the party's candidate for the position I now hold. I accepted that nomination, fully advised as to the declaration of principles theretofore made by the convention, and without hesitation or mental reservation agreed that, if elected, I would honestly and faithfully do what I could to carry out my party promises.

That convention was not made up of mere politicians, but was composed for the most part of earnest, serious-minded men from every walk of life, who for the time had left the plow, the anvil, the shop, the office, and the store and assembled to declare their political faith, to express themselves upon public questions, and as patriotic citizens organize their party for the contest for better government and more equal and beneficial laws.

The platform declaration for a dollar-a-day pension was not made as a mere empty promise to catch votes—a promise to be ignored and violated in the event of party success, but an expression of the conscientious conviction of that great body of men that such legislation as that promised was justly due to the survivors of the war not only as a mark of gratitude, but as an act of plain and simple justice to the men who in time of national stress and peril had proved their love of country by offering their lives in its defense.

It was in line with the promise of "generous pensions" made in the last democratic national platform adopted at Denver in 1908 and with the promises made in the platforms of all political parties since the commencement of the civil war.

Every delegate in that Indiana state convention at the time he cast his vote for that platform declaration had in mind scores of his neighbors who had served their country in the hour of its distress now grown so old and infirm as to be unable to win bread by their labor and anxious and distressed because of their inability to provide for their necessities.

They knew that the pensions of eight, twelve, and even twenty dollars per month doled out by the government with sparing and cautious hand to these veterans were utterly inadequate to provide for their actual wants, and recognizing, on the one hand, the great value of the services of these men to their country, and, on the other hand, the vast wealth and great ability of the nation to deal generously with its defenders, could see no reason why the few remaining years of these men should not be made at least tolerable by granting their request for a pension of a dollar a day.

The republican state platform of the same year declared with the same unanimity that "we believe the time has come for the enactment of what is known as a dollar-a-day pension

plan for the relief of the necessities of civil war veterans."

It will be seen that in the great central state of Indiana, which contributes its full share of taxes toward the support of the national government, there is absolute unanimity of sentiment on the question of full and ample justice to the veterans of the civil war, so that in advocating the Sherwood pension bill here I am representing no party nor faction of a party but the whole people of a great commonwealth, who, without regard to political differences, demand that the obligations of the government to its defenders be fully, amply, and generously discharged.

And yet, Mr. President, our people are in favor of economical government, and unalterably opposed to extravagant and needless appropriations of the moneys collected from them by any form of federal or state taxation. But in Indiana we do not regard any appropriation as extravagant which is necessary to maintain the honor of the state or to discharge its honest obligations.

It has sometimes happened that the burdens of taxation became onerous and oppressive when appropriations were necessary for the payment of our state indebtedness and the interest thereon; but when it was known that the honor of the state was involved there was no murmur of discontent, and no man thought of charging extravagance to the legislature making the appropriation.

Then, again, the taxes levied for the purpose of providing for the care and education of our unfortunate people—the blind, the deaf and dumb, the soldiers' orphans, and others of that class—that their lives might be brightened a little, seemed heavy and burdensome, but they were paid cheerfully, because the common instincts of humanity required it.

And so here, whether the claim of the old soldiers rests upon the contract obligation of the government or upon the ground of gratitude and common humanity, our people can never be brought to the belief that there can be extravagance in any appropriation of public moneys for the purpose of providing for the necessities of the old men whose services in that great war between the states made disunion impossible and the union perpetual, and made possible that great development of the material resources of our country which has made us the richest and most powerful of all the nations of the earth.

AN OBLIGATION OF HONOR

Measured by its dealings with other creditors, this government has utterly failed to carry out the plain provisions of its contract with the soldiers of the civil war.

The armies of the union were made up almost entirely of poor men. Business men, as a rule, remained at home and made money while clerks and employees went to war. Men who owned farms, especially those who owned large farms, operated them with great profit throughout the struggle, while the tenants and farm hands were urged to volunteer. Great fortunes were made by many of those who took no part in the conflict, for the necessities of the government were great and the opportunities for making money unparalleled. Contractors for supplies of every kind waxed fat, and the manufacturers who were subject to war taxes were given special tariff legislation, enacted for the avowed purpose of offsetting the amounts paid by them for the support of the government, but for the real purpose of enriching them at the expense of the people.

The government promised to pay the soldiers \$13 per month, which was afterwards increased to \$16. The contract was to pay them in dollars. They were paid in currency so depreciated as to be worth on the average less than 50 cents on the dollar, so that instead of receiving the contract price of \$13 and \$16, they actually received from about \$6 to \$7 per month. Prices for the necessities of life were correspondingly high, and as a result the families of the soldiers in many instances were supported largely by public and private charity.

Sir, we heard much in a recent campaign about 50-cent dollars and the infamy of a government that would discharge a contract obligation calling for the payment of dollars with money worth only 50 cents on the dollar. The mere prospect or prophecy that government creditors would be compelled to receive silver

dollars in payment of their claims stirred the financiers of the nation into frenzied action, and resulted in a great crusade in behalf of the national honor, which was at once grotesque and tragic. On every stump and through the great newspapers it was declared that the payment of a just debt in depreciated money was the acme of national perfidy.

Yet today these same financiers, with the same earnestness and zeal with which they shouted for national honor in 1896, are denouncing as a raid on the treasury a proposition to pay to old soldiers who saved their country for them the pittance of a dollar a day, that they may have food and shelter in their old age, and that some measure of justice be done them because in those dreadful days of civil war they were paid dollars worth less than 50 cents for their heroic work.

Mr. President, during and at the close of that war there were two general classes of government creditors—the holders of the government bonds and the men who had given up the best part of their lives on the march, in camp, in prison, and in battle for the restoration of the union. The first class had remained at home engaged in the pleasant pursuit of money making, while the second class had endured during all those long years all the privations incident to the greatest war of modern times. The bonds issued by the government were, for the most part, bought with greenbacks. The bonded debt of \$2,049,975,700 cost the purchasers of the bonds at the time they were issued only \$1,371,424,238 in money of gold value, the kind of money in which they were paid. There was no question but that the bonds for which greenbacks were paid were payable in the lawful money of the country.

John Sherman so held, and the republican party of Indiana, then led by Oliver P. Morton, so declared in its state platform in 1868. And yet, sir, the government was so jealous of its honor that in March, 1869, by the famous coin act, all such bonds were made payable in coin, thereby giving to the bond-holders a clear profit of more than \$678,000,000—a naked speculation—something for nothing.

When, a little later, a measure was offered in congress to protect the national honor by paying to the soldiers the difference between the amounts which the government agreed to pay them and the amounts actually received by them from the government, it failed of a respectful hearing, its author being denounced as a demagogue for bringing a proposition so preposterous into the halls of national legislation.

Mr. President, I now call upon all those men who were so solicitous for the national honor in 1896, and whose consciences were so quickened at the mere prophecy of 50-cent dollars, to rally to the support of the Sherwood pension bill to the end that the old soldiers of the union who made hundred-cent dollars, or dollars of any kind, possible in this country, and who were paid for their gallant services in 40-cent dollars, may have before they die some measure of justice at the hands of a government penitent for its one act of debt repudiation.

It was in June, 1825—mark the date, for it is important—that the cornerstone of the Bunker Hill monument was laid. The ceremonies were so impressive and imposing that the event has been ever since regarded as one of the most notable in our history. La Fayette, flushed with such a series of welcomes never before or since accorded to any foreigner coming to these shores, was there, the guest of the nation, participating in the ceremonies. A vast concourse of patriotic people had assembled. The wealth and the learning of New England were present, and so it seemed were all the people. But the seats of honor were occupied by the old survivors of the revolution, the men who had followed Washington and his generals in that war for independence, and some of whom had witnessed with swelling hearts the surrender of Cornwallis. Daniel Webster was the orator of the day. The day, the place, the occasion, the audience, the surroundings! What inspiration for the greatest of all American orators! And Webster rose grandly to the occasion and delivered an oration that will live as long as men and women who love liberty read our language. Who has read his words addressed directly to the venerable men of the revolution, recounting their sacrifices in the cause of liberty, and expressing the everlasting gratitude of the beneficiaries of their valorous deeds, without such emotions as bring the tears unbidden to the eyes?

And the sentiments he expressed touched a responsive chord in every heart in that great