

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CIVIL SERVICE REFORM.

[Delivered at the dinner of the Massachusetts Reform Club, in Boston, Mass., on February 11, 1898, by Hon. Sherman S. Rogers, of Buffalo, New York.]

GENTLEMEN: A somewhat extended perusal of the literature furnished by the Fifty-fifth congress in the columns of the Congressional Record has awakened in my mind a powerful desire to find something concerning the subject of my discourse tonight that may be regarded as settled. Possibly, that desire may not be gratified.

I did think that the spoils system was so generally and so thoroughly discredited that no man who claimed the right to influence anybody else by his opinion or who cared to be thought either intelligent or patriotic, or both, would have the courage to defend it in the congress of the United States or elsewhere. I have to confess frankly that no greater mistake could have been made.

There seems to be a chivalric contention in the house of representatives as to who shall declare in loudest tones and with most applause from the galleries, "Mr. Chairman, I am a spoilsman."

I confess, too, that I had a strong impression that the republican party, one of whose humblest members I claim to be, was so fully committed to the civil service reform that no one who recognized party obligations in their true and honorable sense would raise his hand against a law which it was the party's boast had been "placed on the statute book" by itself, and against a reform system that it had solemnly declared should be extended to all the grades of the service to which it is applicable.

But here again I found myself mistaken. It is true that I do not find many of the responsible leaders of that party avowing open hostility to the law; but of the minor members, so to speak, there has been such an outcry against this system as to make its more timid friends fear that the entire pack was upon it, and would pull down and devour it bodily. The rhetoric of all the spoils orators of past years has been repaired and supplemented; and the party has been threatened with destruction, with being "torn and scattered by a cyclone of public indignation, born of justice and love of liberty," unless it relinquishes its worship of what, in the language of one of the most perfervid of these declaimers, "has done and is doing more to debauch our politics and destroy the efficiency of those in the civil service of the United States than all the other influences combined since the organization of the government—the so-called merit system."

But, gentlemen, let me say at once that, while I do not underrate the

strength of the spoilsmen in congress, I do not fear them. Their assault, however, justifies a consideration of the present condition of the civil service reform and a presentation anew of its claims upon the people.

A very brief *resume* of the history of the reform, therefore, may not be inappropriate.

When the men who led in the movement for the reform of the civil service in the United States began their work, they entertained no light opinion either of its importance or of the difficulty of achieving success. They knew that the pernicious system whose overthrow they sought was entrenched in every election district in the land; that the great body of the people had grown up under it, and regarded it as essentially a part of the American system of government. They knew that its home was in the public offices, and that the setting on foot and administration of the reform must be entrusted mainly to officials who had been nurtured from their earliest infancy in applied politics, upon ideas and practices to which the new system was radically hostile.

It was in 1867 that Mr. Jenckes, of Rhode Island, from the joint committee of congress on retrenchment, submitted his memorable report, accompanied by a bill to regulate the civil service of the United States and promote its efficiency.

In their report the committee said of the bill:

"It is conceded that this will work an entire change in the mode of appointment to and the tenure of office of the subordinate civil service of the government."

These notable words may be commended to the members of the Fifty-fifth congress who profess to believe that under the present law the classified service has been extended far beyond its original intent.

Before the great bill which makes the name of Mr. Pendleton immortal was passed, there had been ample opportunity to test the situation. In March, 1871, a brief section was inserted in the appropriation bill authorizing the president "to prescribe such regulations for the admission of persons to the civil service as might best promote its efficiency, and appoint suitable persons to institute inquiries touching the matter, and to establish regulations for the conduct of appointees."

Mr. Jenckes, the earliest champion of the reform, had prepared a bill, in connection with his report of 1867, in which a competitive system of appointment was carefully outlined, and made it compulsory; but this could not pass, and the brief provision in the appropriation bill of 1871, to which I have just alluded, was all that could even at that time be obtained from congress.

It was under this authority that President Grant appointed George William

Curtis and six other gentlemen to conduct inquiries and report regulations for the president's approval; in other words, to prepare and report a working plan for the establishment of administrative reform.

The next ten years were years of education. I have no time to speak of them with much detail. Looking back upon them, we can see that they were years of needful preparation. They disclosed the reluctance of politicians of all parties to treat the attempt to regulate and promote the efficiency of the civil service with fairness or even with respect. They presented the spectacle of a house of representatives refusing a meagre appropriation to carry on the work of the commission, so that President Grant, who was the sincere and had been the pronounced friend of the reform, became convinced that congress was opposed to it, and ceased to urge its claims.

They disclosed, however, such a growth in popular sentiment that both of the great political parties in 1876 vied with each other in the strength of their platform declarations in favor of civil service reform. Then followed the excitement of the Hayes-Tilden campaign and the election of Mr. Hayes. His four years witnessed a slightly lessened though more complicated scramble for spoils, but in the federal offices in New York experimental tests were successfully made of the reform system. Mr. Hayes was loyal to his pledges, but congress was still hostile to the reform.

Mr. Garfield was elected upon a platform that in terms adopted the declaration of Mr. Hayes, that the reform should be "thorough, radical, and complete," and which demanded "the co-operation of the legislative with the executive department of the government."

It cannot be doubted that the assassination of the president aroused the country to the dangers attending the distribution of the federal offices—and rightly too. The scramble had become wild, almost insane, dominating the entire political life of the time. In the party quarrels of the day, which had no substantial foundation but personal jealousies and the distribution of the offices, the president was thought to incline favorably toward one of the great republican factions and the vice-president to the other. It did not seem to occur to the people that it was possible that in this conflict a president's life might not be sacred, no matter how desirable his removal might be to many more or less dangerous citizens who were seeking office; but I myself remember hearing a prominent politician in my own city, speaking of a recent and unlooked-for appointment to our principal federal office, declare with emphasis that the president "ought to be shot" for making it. The speaker was not a bad man, and what he said was intended only as a rough figure of speech; but it fairly