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LINCOLN'S NEW YEAR PROBLEMS IN 1862

Disloyalty in the Cabinet, murmurs of English intervention, and inactivity on the part of generals in his army were some of the New Year's problems which confronted Lincoln in 1862. Some unpublished letters of John P. Usher now in the archives of the Lincoln Historical Research Foundation throw further light on the difficulties facing the chief magistrate during the early months of the Civil war.

Usher, whose home was in Terre Haute, Indiana, was first Assistant Secretary of the Interior under Caleb B. Smith, who was also a Hoosier. He later succeeded Smith as Secretary of the Interior and served until after Lincoln's assassination. The correspondence which he carried on with Richard W. Thompson, of Terre Haute, Indiana, a close friend of Lincoln's, reveals much that took place in the cabinets and official circles in Washington that has never been published. This is the first of a series of exhibits which will appear in Lincoln Lore during the year.

It will not be possible to print in full all the documents to which reference is made, but an occasional complete letter and excerpts from others will furnish sufficient evidence to convey the main theme of the correspondence.

In a letter written to Mr. Thompson on December 26, 1861, Usher sets forth the conditions existing in Washington at the close of the old year. He says:

"There is a growing impatience here that cannot be much longer restrained. —I hear that the Senate Naval Committee have unanimously petitioned the president to remove Wells, and I think they will yet be as decisive with Mr. Cameron. . . . The longer the delay in the movement of the army here the more are the people disposed to criticize General McClellan. His position is now an extremely critical one. If he does not achieve success he is a ruined man, and he must move in the next twenty days or there will be decisive action against him in Congress."

On New Year's day he writes to Thompson again and his letter carries the same tone of concern about Mc-

Clellan and the added fear of England's entrance into the conflict.

. . . Everything in the way of change of action by McClellan seems to be dead, and when it is spoken of at all, it is in derision. In the meantime the most threatening demonstrations against the existence of the government is made by England and it appears as though we are to be forced into a war with that government in spite of ourselves. I saw a private letter in the hands of C. B. Smith written by a person in England to a friend on this side saying that at a dinner party in London about the twelfth of December one of the principle clerks in the foreign office said it was the purpose of the British Government to have a war with us and that Lord Palmerton wanted to bring it on at once while we are unprepared. . . .

The letter which Usher wrote to Thompson on January 20, 1862, is so full of interesting data directly associated with Lincoln that it is printed in full.

Washington, D. C.,
January 20, 1862.

R. W. Thompson, Esq.,
Dear Sir:

Should Trumbull's bill for the reorganization of the Supreme Court become a law, it is arranged that Smith shall be the justice of our circuit, Browning for the Illinois circuit court, and I think Chase will be appointed to the Ohio circuit. I suspect that the cabinet will be entirely reformed, for it now appears that Fremont will be restored in triumph over the Blairs. Jessie has produced some fifteen of their letters which it is said overwhelm them all. They call for higher prices for their friends, speak disrespectfully of Lincoln, and are full of lofty ambitions. I therefore suspect that Blair may have to go, too. However, we shall know all in a few days when the report of the Committee is made.

It may be that Trumbull's bill will not pass, and opposition may arise from the fact that the places are filled in advance, and will not be surprised if Trumbull himself finally opposes the bill to defeat the combinations made.

But if it does pass, and Chase goes upon the bench, then it is probable that Judge Davis, of Illinois, may be called to fill his place, which will be very well, for he is honest and capable, and a true friend of Lincoln's, which he has not yet had about him.

The Interior department I desire shall every time to be filled by an Indianan, and as Colfax and his friend made so showy a fight for him, Lincoln, I suspect, will first turn to him. Now he will not suit us as well as some others would, and I would like to have

you have the place if you incline to it, and will be glad to aid you what I can, though I cannot say to what extent my influence may go. You have a better idea than myself its extent. Some of my very partial friends here have suggested that I should stand in for the position, but I assure you that I have no ambition that way and recoil from the conflict, which if successful must be accompanied with many mortifying incidents, but I have argued that if you determine to decline to make an effort for the position for yourself, and think after careful reflection of the whole subject, that it is proper and important in any respect that I should try to get it, I will with your aid try for it. It appears to me quite preposterous to engage in such an undertaking on my own account, but when I reflect that I may without arrogance believe that I am as competent as some of the incumbents, and that it is not possible to be more dishonest. I feel the less delicacy in the undertaking.

I shall be home in a few days, but may remain long enough to hear from you, and if you consent to have your name used in connection with the position write to me, and I will do all I can to set you afloat to the best advantage, in which event I think you had better to come on and do what you can for yourself.

I have nothing further from the Chiniqui. The whole affair is before Mr. Jordon upon a report written by Mr. A. Thompson, which he hopes the _____ will adopt as his own.

Dole left yesterday for Kansas with J. H. Lane, for the purpose of putting Indiana in the field, but I suspect when you see the list of commissions and quartermasters for that army you will think some others are to be put in the field with the hope of a harvest, but I suppose it was with them as any others. The war will never end as long as there is anything to steal.

Three days since I thought there would be a general battle by this time. I do not know or have any reason to think now that there will ever be any battle in this vicinity. There is only one thing that now appears to be certain, and that is that there is no danger of a military disputation growing out of the military action or heroism of General McClellan. No one is likely to run crazy after him.

Truly yours,
J. P. Usher.

While Usher was not a member of the Lincoln cabinet at the time these letters were written he was in very close touch with one member of the Cabinet especially. What he here records might be regarded as information from one who had inside evidence as to what was taking place in Washington.