

Documents

ADVICE FROM MICHAEL C. KERR TO A RECONSTRUCTED REBEL CONGRESSMAN

Edited by

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Both the northern Democrat, Michael C. Kerr of Indiana¹ and the southern Democrat, Lucius Q. C. Lamar of Mississippi,² achieved high positions in the first Congress with a Democratic majority after the war, the Forty-fourth Congress. The Democratic caucus chose Lamar for permanent chairman of the caucus and Kerr for Speaker of the House on the same day of December, 1875.³ Notwithstanding the fact that Lamar supported Samuel J. Randall for Speaker in the caucus contest,⁴ Kerr shortly afterwards appointed Lamar to the important post of chairman of the House Committee on the Pacific Railroad.⁵

Lamar and Kerr had first become acquainted in the Forty-second Congress. Kerr was one of the several northern Democrats whose opinion Lamar valued when he asked

¹ Michael C. Kerr was born in Pennsylvania in 1827, and, after studying law in the Louisville (Kentucky) University, he began practicing in Indiana in 1852. He advanced rapidly in his profession, serving as city attorney, county prosecuting attorney, state representative, and state Supreme Court reporter. He was elected to Congress in 1865 and served, with the exception of the Forty-third Congress, till his death in 1876. *Biographical Directory of the American Congress, 1774-1927* (Washington, 1928), 1178-79.

² Lucius Q. C. Lamar, a native of Georgia, is identified with the history of Mississippi, to which state he moved before the war. Author of Mississippi's Ordinance of Secession, soldier and diplomat for the Confederacy, he made his greatest contribution to the South and the nation after the war through his conservative policies and leadership toward sectional reconciliation and national unity. After years of service in the House of Representatives and the Senate, he became Secretary of the Interior in Grover Cleveland's cabinet, and subsequently associate justice of the United States Supreme Court. He died in 1893. Dunbar Rowland (ed.), *Mississippi, Comprising Sketches of Counties, Towns, Events, Institutions, and Persons, Arranged in Cyclopedic Form* (3 vols., Atlanta, 1907), II, 22-35.

³ New York *Herald*, December 5, 1875; Washington *Capital*, December 5, 1875; Springfield (Massachusetts) *Daily Republican*, December 6, 1875.

⁴ *The Jackson (Mississippi) Times*, December 9, 1875. Considering Randall's long and "spectacular" defense of the South in Congress, it was to be expected that Lamar would support him. See Albert V. House, Jr., "Northern Congressional Democrats as Defenders of the South During Reconstruction," in *Journal of Southern History* (Baton Rouge, 1935—), VI (1940), 66.

⁵ *Congressional Record*, 44 Cong., 1 sess., 250 (December 20, 1875).

how he, a southern congressman, could best advance the cause of sectional reconciliation. Their answers confirmed his own ideas,⁶ the fruition of which appeared in his eulogy on Charles Sumner in April, 1874.⁷ Of the replies Lamar received to his question, Kerr's letter alone seems to have been preserved. It is in the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, and follows here in full:

Washington, D.C.

March 15, 1873

Hon. L. Q. C. Lamar—

My dear Sir—

I come now to redeem my promise, after too much delay, I admit, but yet as soon as I could find leisure. I know you will pardon the delay, under the circumstances, and also my use of this paper, for I have no better at hand.

You needed to offer no apology for writing me as you did, and I accept your inquiries as complimentary to myself, and assure you of my sincere appreciation of your kind Expressions towards me. I deeply fear that I will not be able to make any useful or satisfactory response to your inquiries. But I will reply in the same spirit of frankness & patriotism in which you write.

My feelings of interest & sympathy toward your people and section have for years been Earnest and warm. At ti[m]es⁸ my reflections upon your unhappy con[di]tions have been such as to fill [me with] sadness. Your letter recalls many of [my] thoughts. Its references to the manner in which, your local and national relations, are Environed and Embarrassed by [diffi]culties & dangers, are so truthful [as to] produce real pain.

Many of the evils with which your people & section are afflicted result logically and directly from certain fundamental changes in our institutions during the last decade. It is a truism, under any system of elective and representative institutions that, the body of the representatives will never rise very much above the body of Electors in virtue, intelligence and patriotism. Therefore, whatever tends to debauch or demoralize the body of electors, will certainly bear fruit of like character in the body of representatives. The influence of these principles has been productive of its most Enduring & disastrous results in your section. These are things to be profoundly deplored, but they should not be allowed to Excite unmanly despondency. That, by these Events and influences, the immediate representation in Congress from your section has been to a great Extent robbed of its former high and noble qualities, of its culture and discipline, of its courage and unpurch[a]sable integrity, and of its truly conserva[tive] character, as illustrated in our Early [poli]tics, is matter for most

⁶ Edward Mayes, *Lucius Q. C. Lamar: His Life, Times, and Speeches, 1825-1893* (Nashville, 1896), 176.

⁷ *Congressional Record*, 43 Cong., 1 sess., 3410-11 (April 27, 1874).

⁸ The manuscript is worn and slight mutilated on the corners.

anxious thought [and] apprehension. If such delegations of [sta]tesmen, with brains, virtue, experience [&] power, as were sent up before the war, [wou]ld now be returned, without the dis[ad]vantage of certain tendencies towards strife and disintegration, what a blessed Event it would mark for the honor, welfare and happiness of all sections of our country! Such a boon may not be anticipated for our country in our time, if it come even within half a century.

But, after all, our greatest duties are to be met and discharged with constant reference to the present and the future—not the past, Except as the latter may be appealed to for suggestion & Experience. The evil conditions are upon us, and we cannot go back—we must go forward, whether wisely or not. You, I feel no doubt, in the most keenly sensitive manner, appreciate Existing Conditions and the changed relations they bring in many important respects to public men. You ask me what I, if a southern representative, with my present knowledge of Northern Conditions & sentiments, would do, and how I would direct my conduct. The question is not improper to ask, but is certain[ly] very difficult to answer. If with my [pres]ent Knowledge of Northern feeling [and] political sentiments, I were also in as full possession of the same information touching the South as you are, then [I] could give you intelligent answers. [But] I am unhappily only in possession of *half* the situation, and cannot advise with any desirable fullness of information. Yet during Eight years of Congressional service, I have watched with deepest interest the Conduct of Southern representatives in Congress, and some convictions have resulted therefrom concerning the mistakes of Southern representatives. I may, perhaps, not improperly, resort to this source for some suggestions.

With my views of public duty, I would do as a southern representative just what I would do as a northern representative, save only my action in reference to matters Essentially local—in Contradistinction to matters general, national, or political. Sectionalism, in its real, hurtful, and malign signification, arises not out of devotion in a mere local & now political sense to domestic interests, but also solely out of divisions by geographical lines upon questions [of] public policy which in truth and fact affect in a real and active sense all parts and sections of the country. The latter, not the former, are the political issues which arouse passion, or prejudice, or fears. I am sure you will agree with me that, while our country remains a unit under Existing institutions, the South in any controversy of a sectional Character has infinitely more to apprehend than the North, and has, therefore, more to gain, more good results to secure, and more dangers to avoid, by conduct and policy distinctly national and conservative. As a friend and servant of the South, I would therefore deprecate and Condemn the spirit of sectionalism, and I would discountenance Every attempt among southern representatives to organize in such a spirit for the attainment of any purpose, and I would struggle with steady aim and Energy to Square my conduct as a public officer and law-maker by the rule of the most broad, national, just and conservative principles. I would accept the part,

so far as its results have been incorporated into our system, and look to the future for reform, improvemen[t] and amelioration. I would de[]ly and do right towards all, as far [as] my ability would Enable me to [do.] I would strive to develope [sic.] and [en]courage hope and cheerfulne[ss] amongst my people, and give m[y] Earnest and Effective thought [and] Efforts. to the improvement, moral, intellectual, political, and material, of the body of Electors. This is in truth the greatest field, now demanding most wise and patient culture, that is open to the really true, good, generous and patriotic men of the South. The absence of the needful improvement in these respects amongst your Electors, as now Constituted, is the most fruitful & fatal source of your misfortunes, and of many misfortunes to the whole country. The task is one of almost disheartening magnitude. It cannot be accomplished in a day, or a generation. But it *must* be accomplished before thorough and permanent political reform and regeneration can be secured. It may appear to be a harsh judgment, but it is just and true, that your representative bodies in the south, and many also in the North, and Even Congress itself, are corrupt *because* [the] Constituencies who make the representatives are Corrupt. The reforms [ou]r Entire Country now needs, [to] be Effective, must begin in the [re]form of the people themselves, in the cultivation and practise of higher morality, more honesty, and a general reäwakening of more Enlightened popular Conscience. Moral insensibility now rules the country. Selfish, low, and grovelling aspirations now too often usurp control where manly courage, unselfish patriotism, and incorruptible integrity alone should govern. It is in view of these reflections and facts, that I rejoice to know that you, one man at least, Endowed with the qualities and the Experience which fit you for useful & honorable public service are returned to the Hóuse. I by no means agree that it is a mistake for you to reënter public life. It is Entirely practicable for you, although almost alone, to Exercise such a Wholesome & reässuring influence on the popular mind both of the South & North, as will not fail to be beneficial to both, but most Effectively to your own section. I hope [] Stephens⁹ will so conduct himself [as] to give you hearty coöperation. The restraining influence of a [few] brave, strong, cultured, & true [men] on others unworthily inclined [is] very great, very profitable to the [coun]try, and most honorable to them.

But, My dear Sir, I have written too much, and I fear I have not yet touched the points to which you desired to call my mind. It has, perhaps wrongfully, been assumed by me that you did not Enquire my views on public questions of any Specific nature. You are in a general sense well acquainted with my positions on them, as I am with yours. But if I were to indicate any one question of great national concern, the cultivation and practical Establishment of which is of transcendant importance to the south, I would name the great subject of our fiscal policy—our systems of taxation, and

⁹ Alexander H. Stephens was at the time a member of the House of Representatives.

of robbery under the pretense of protection. They now violate Every decent requirement of honest legislation and Equal laws.

You Express a desire to Correspond, and I shall Cheerfully accept your suggestion & invite you to write to me in the utmost unreserve, & allow me [to] write you in like manner, with the mutual understanding that we write only for private use. I hope you may [fully] regain your health & come to the [H]ouse in December prepared in your [old] habit to grapple successfully with [the] important questions that are sure to meet you [].

I am very Truly Yours
M. C. Kerr

SOME LETTERS OF JUDGE JEREMIAH C. SULLIVAN

Edited by
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Some of the letters of Judge Sullivan, whose career has been sketched in an article in this issue of the *Indiana Magazine of History* seemed too important to be omitted and yet too long to be quoted in an article of this type. Selections from them, together with some parts of less important letters, have been brought together in order that the Judge's character might be seen from his own writings and that the evidence which the letters contain of developments in Indiana and the nation might be more readily available to students of history.

The first two letters have less historical significance than the others, but they do reveal the intense religious nature of Judge Sullivan, while the third contains an expression of religious imperialism which is not often seen. Along with his spiritual earnestness went a hostility towards the theatre, which found expression in the seventh letter. The fear of cholera in the river towns and something of the methods used to combat it are described in letters four, five, and eight. That this fear nor the disease itself did not seriously interfere with the prosperity of Madison, Indiana, in which the Sullivan family lived, is made clear by the sixth letter. Little items of political news are found in the next two selections. Letters eleven to sixteen indicate the reaction to the troubled national situation in 1860 and 1861 as the Civil War began. After these are six letters telling of the entanglement of one of the Judge's sons with the federal government on charges of disloyalty because the son undertook to act as attorney for Confederate privateers