

**OUR FOREIGN RELATIONS:
SPEECH OF HON. CHARLES
SUMNER, BEFORE THE CITIZENS
OF NEW YORK, AT THE COOPER
INSTITUTE, SEPT. 10, 1863, PP. 3-75**

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CHARLES SUMNER

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OUR FOREIGN RELATIONS:

SHOWING

PRESENT PERILS FROM ENGLAND AND FRANCE; THE NATURE AND
CONDITIONS OF INTERVENTION BY MEDIATION; AND ALSO BY
RECOGNITION; THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF ANY RECOGNITION
OF A NEW POWER WITH SLAVERY AS A CORNER-
STONE; AND THE WRONGFUL CONCESSION
OF OCEAN BELLIGERENCY.

S P E E C H

OF

HON. CHARLES SUMNER,

BEFORE THE

CITIZENS OF NEW YORK, AT THE COOPER INSTITUTE,

SEPT. 10, 1863.

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1863.

S P E E C H .

FELLOW-CITIZENS,—From the beginning of the war in which we are now engaged, the public interest has alternated anxiously between the current of events at home and the more distant current abroad. Foreign Relations have been hardly less absorbing than Domestic Relations. At times the latter have seemed to wait upon the former, and a packet from Europe has been like a messenger from the seat of war. Rumors of Foreign Intervention are constant, now in the form of Mediation, and now in the form of Recognition; and more than once the country has been summoned to confront the idea of England, and of France too, in open combination with Rebel Slave-mongers battling, in the name of Slavery, to build an infamous Power on the destruction of this Republic.

It may be well for us to turn aside from battle and siege here at home—from the blazing lines of Gettysburg, Vicksburg and Charleston—to glance for a moment at the perils from abroad; of course I mean from England and France, for these are the only Foreign Powers that thus far have been moved to intermeddle on the side of Slavery. The subject to which I now invite attention may not have the attraction of waving standards or victorious marches, but, more than any conflict of arms, it concerns the Civilization of the age. If Foreign Powers can justly interfere against Human Freedom, this Republic will not be the only sufferer.

There is always a natural order in unfolding a subject, and I shall try to pursue it on this occasion, under the following heads;

First—The perils to our country from Foreign Powers, especially as foreshadowed in the unexpected and persistent conduct of England and France since the outbreak of the war.

Secondly—The nature of Foreign Intervention by Mediation, with the principles applicable thereto, as illustrated by historic instances—showing especially how England, by her conspicuous, wide-spread and most determined Intervention to promote the extinction of African Slavery, is *irrevocably committed against any act or policy that can encourage this criminal pretension.*

Thirdly—The nature of Foreign Intervention by Recognition, with the principles applicable thereto, as illustrated by historic

instances—showing that by the practice of nations, and especially by the declared sentiments of British Statesmen, there *can be no Foreign Recognition of an insurgent Power where the contest for Independence is still pending.*

Fourthly—The moral impossibility of Foreign Recognition, even if the pretended Power be *de facto* Independent, where it is composed of Rebel Slave-mongers seeking to found a *new* Power with Slavery for its declared “corner-stone.” Pardon the truthful plainness of the terms which I employ. I am to speak not merely of Slave-holders; but of people to whom Slavery is a passion and a business—therefore Slave-mongers; now in Rebellion for the sake of Slavery—therefore Rebel Slave-mongers.

Fifthly—The absurdity and wrong of conceding *Ocean Belligerency* to a pretended Power, which, in the first place, is without a Prize Court—so that it cannot be an Ocean Belligerent *in fact*—and which, in the second place, even if Ocean Belligerent *in fact*, is of such an odious character, that its Recognition is a moral impossibility.

From this review, touching upon the present and the past; leaning upon history and upon law; enlightened always by principles which are an unerring guide, our conclusion will be easy.

[I.]

PERILS FROM FOREIGN POWERS.

The perils to our country, as foreshadowed in the action of Foreign Powers since the outbreak of the war, first invite our attention.

There is something in the tendencies of nations, which must not be neglected. Like individuals, nations influence each other; like the heavenly bodies, they may be disturbed by each other in their appointed orbits. This is apparent even in peace; but it becomes more apparent in the convulsions of war, sometimes from the withdrawal of customary forces and sometimes from their increased momentum. It is the nature of war to enlarge as it continues. Beginning between two nations, it gradually widens its circle, sucking other nations into its fiery maelstrom. Such is human history. Nor is it different, if the war be for Independence. Foreign Powers may for a while keep out of the conflict; but the examples of history show how difficult this has been.

The Seven United Provinces of Holland, under that illustrious character, William of Orange, the predecessor and exemplar of our Washington, rose against the dominion of Spain, upheld by the bigotry of Philip II., and the barbarity of his representative, Alva; but the conflict, though at first limited to the two parties, was not slow to engage Queen Elizabeth, who lent to this war of Independence the name of her favorite Leicester and the undying

heroism of Sidney, while Spain retorted by the Armada. The United Provinces of Holland, in their struggle for Independence, were the prototype of the United States of America, which I need not remind you, drew into their contest the arms of France, Spain, and Holland. In the rising of the Spanish Colonies which followed, there was less interposition of other nations, doubtless from the distant and outlying position of these Colonies, although they were not beyond the ambitious reach of the Holy Alliance, whose purposes with regard to them were so far thwarted by Mr. Canning, backed by the declaration of Mr. Munroe—known as the Munroe doctrine—that the British Statesman felt authorized to boast that he had called a New World into existence to redress the balance of the Old. Then came the struggle for Greek Independence, which, after a conflict of several years, darkened by massacre, but relieved by an exalted self-sacrifice, shining with names like Byron and Bozzaris, that cannot die, at length challenged the powerful interposition of England, France and Russia. The Independence of Greece was hardly acknowledged, when Belgium, renouncing the rule of the Netherlands, claimed hers also, and here again the Great Powers of Europe were drawn into the contest. Then came the effort of Hungary, inspired by Kossuth, which, when about to prevail, aroused the armies of Russia. There was also the contemporaneous effort of the Roman Republic, under Mazzini, which when about to prevail, aroused the bayonets of France. And lastly we have only recently witnessed the resurrection of Italy, inspired by Garibaldi, and directed by Saviour; but it was not accomplished until Louis Napoleon, with his well-trained legions, carried the imperial eagles into the battle.

Such are famous instances, which are now so many warnings. Ponder them and you will see the tendency, the temptation, the irresistible fascination, or the commanding exigency under which, in times past, Foreign Nations have been led to take part in conflicts for Independence. I do not dwell now on the character of these various interventions, although they have been mostly in the interest of Human Freedom. It is only as examples to put us on our guard that I now adduce them. The footprints all seem to lead one way.

But even our war is not without its warnings. If thus far in its progress other nations have not intervened, they have not succeeded in keeping entirely aloof. The foreign trumpet has not sounded yet; but more than once the cry has come that we should soon hear it, while incidents have too often occurred, exhibiting an abnormal watchfulness of our affairs and an uncontrollable passion or purpose to intermeddle in them, with signs of unfriendly feeling. Of course, this is applicable especially, if not exclusively, to England and France.

Perils from England.

(1.) There is one act of the British Cabinet which stands foremost as an omen of peril—foremost in time—foremost also in the magnitude of its consequences. Though plausible in form, it is none the less injurious or unjustifiable. Of course, I refer to that inconsiderate Proclamation in the name of the Queen, as early as May, 1861, which, after raising Rebel Slave-mongers to an *equality* with the National Government in Belligerent Rights, solemnly declares “neutrality” between the two *equal parties*;—as if the declaration of equality was not an insult to the National Government, and the declaration of neutrality was not a moral absurdity, offensive to reason and all those precedents which make the glory of the British name. Even if the Proclamation could be otherwise than improper at any time in such a Rebellion, it was worse than a blunder at that early date. The apparent relations between the two Powers were more than friendly. Only a few months before, the youthful heir to the British throne had been welcomed every where throughout the United States—except in Richmond—as in the land of kinsmen. And yet—immediately after the tidings of the rebel assault on Fort Sumter—before the National Government had begun to put forth its strength—and even without waiting for the arrival of our newly-appointed Minister, who was known to be at Liverpool on his way to London, the Proclamation was suddenly launched. I doubt if any well-informed person, who has read Mr. Dallas’s despatch of 2d May, 1861, recounting a conversation with the British Minister, will undertake to vindicate it in point of time. Clearly the alacrity of this concession was unhappy, for it bore an air of defiance or at least of heartlessness towards an ally of kindred blood engaged in the maintenance of its traditional power against an infamous pretension. But it was more unhappy still, that the good genius of England did not save this historic nation, linked with so many triumphs of freedom, from a fatal step, which, under the guise of “neutrality,” was a betrayal of civilization itself.

It is difficult to exaggerate the consequences of this precipitate, unfriendly and immoral concession, which has been and still is an overflowing fountain of mischief and bloodshed—*hac fonte derivata clades*;—*first*, in what it vouchsafes to Rebel Slave-mongers on sea and in British ports, and *secondly*, in the impediments which it takes from British subjects ready to make money out of Slavery;—all of which has been declared by undoubted British authority. Lord Chelmsford—of professional renown as Sir Frederick Thesiger—now an Ex-Chancellor—used these words recently in the House of Lords; “If the Southern Confederacy had not been recognized as a *belligerent Power*, he agreed with his noble and learned friend [Lord Brougham] that, under these circumstances, if any Englishman were to fit out a privateer for

the purpose of assisting the Southern States against the Northern States, *he would be guilty of piracy.*—But all this was changed by the Queen's Proclamation. For the Rebel Slave-monger there is the recognition of his flag; for the British subject there is the opportunity of trade. For the Rebel Slave-monger there is fellowship and equality; for the British subject there is a new customer, to whom he may lawfully sell Armstrong guns and other warlike munitions of choicest British workmanship, and, as Lord Palmerston tells us, even ships of war too, *to be used in behalf of Slavery.* What was unlawful is suddenly made lawful, while the ban is taken from an odious felony. It seems almost superfluous to add, that such a concession, thus potent in its reach, must have been a direct encouragement and overture to the Rebellion. Slavery itself was exalted when barbarous pretenders—battling to found a new Power in its hateful name—without so much as a single port on the ocean where a prize could be carried for condemnation—were yet, *in the face of this essential deficiency*, swiftly acknowledged as *ocean belligerents*, while, as a consequence, their pirate ships, cruising for plunder in behalf of Slavery, were acknowledged as National ships, entitled to equal privileges with the National ships of the United States, also for the building of ships, *to be used in behalf of Slavery.* This simple statement is enough. It is vain to say, that such a concession was a “necessity.” There may have been a strong temptation to it, constituting, perhaps, an imagined necessity, as with many persons there is a strong temptation to Slavery itself. But such a concession to Slave-mongers, fighting for Slavery, can be vindicated only as Slavery is vindicated. As well undertake to declare “neutrality” between Right and Wrong—between Good and Evil—with a concession to the latter of Belligerent Rights; and then set up the apology of “necessity.”

(2.) It was natural that an act so essentially unfriendly in character and also in the alacrity with which it was done, should create throughout England an unfriendly sentiment towards us, easily stimulated to a menace of war. And this menace was not wanting soon afterwards, when the two rebel emissaries on board the Trent were seized by a patriotic, brave commander, whose highest fault was, that, in the absence of instructions from his own Government, he followed too closely British precedents. This accident—for such it was and nothing else—was misrepresented, and, with an utterly indefensible exaggeration, was changed by the British nation, backed by the British Government, into a *casus belli*, as if such an unauthorized incident, which obviously involved no question of self-defence, could justify war between two civilized Nations. And yet, in the face of a positive declaration from the United States, that it was an accident, the British Government *made preparations to take part with rebel slave-mongers*, and it fitly began such ignoble preparations by keeping back from the British people, the official