

**FOR THE PEOPLE. THE PUBLIC DEPT:
WHAT TO DO WITH IT. AN
EXAMINATION OF THE FINANCIAL
PROBLEMS OF THE DAY, AND A DISTINCT
SHOWING OF THEIR TRUE SOLUTION**

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For the People. The Public Dept: What to Do with it. An Examination of the Financial Problems of the Day, and a Distinct Showing of Their True Solution by Henry Reed

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BY HENRY REED.

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INTRODUCTION.

THE purpose of this work is, 1. To introduce its readers to themselves; 2. To supply them with the implements for communion with each other. In order to arrive at conclusions which are essential to their well-being, it is often needful for men to be informed what they themselves are thinking about, and what they think about it; what thoughts have been conceived in their minds, which have not yet entered the domain of perfect consciousness; and he who, in respect to subjects of vital interest, is able to perform the office of medium or interpreter, between them and themselves, does them a service. Hundreds of thousands of men in the United States, while they give, on all occasions, their formal assent to the proposition that the public debt should be paid, feel, under an oppressive sense of the impossibility of paying it, that there must be, somewhere, a reason, if they could only find it, why it should not be paid. Their interior sense, under the impulse of the instinct of self-preservation, tells them that, in the nature of things, there must be a point where the right and the inevitable coincide; that there must be a principle to justify them for not doing that which to do is impracticable. The object of this essay is to supply an interpreter to that interior sense; to bring the conclusions of the instinct to the surface, by supplying them with appropriate words; to make the outer acquainted with the inner man; so that, by the aid of the higher intelligence he will thereby acquire, he may enter into such communion with other men as is essential to unity of sentiment and corresponding unity of conduct.

It is a bold proposition to lay down, that the evidences of the public debt of the United States do not represent a binding obligation; that the authority to create debts, not being one of the legitimate powers of government, the contracts into which government enters for that purpose are void, and that consequently the question, to pay or not to pay, is one simply of discretion. He who lays down such a proposition, should be morally prepared to bear some temporary discountenance, and intellectually competent to defend it. For myself, I have a right to say, that I have never holden any other opinion, nor advocated any other. The conclusions to which I have arrived, therefore, are no fresh ones, invented for the occasion, or avowed from present economical, political, or party cir-

circumstances; and I would not have chosen this mode of communication with the public had any other been accessible.

But whenever there is a train of thought which it is vitally essential to awaken in the popular mind, there is seldom a stated vehicle of communication. The business of the party newspaper is to hold the edge of the party implement to the face of the party grindstone. Trains of thought which are out of the prescribed track, are unacceptable. There is nothing that is holden by the journalistic code so dangerous as a conclusion drawn from other than party premises. There is nothing in the journalistic orbit so dreaded as an appeal to a fundamental principle. He who looks beyond the party platform, with its narrow planks and little traps for catching voters—who dares to dissent from the dicta of the party sachems, is written down dangerous, and given to understand that he is under suspicion.

There is no form of financial policy now presented to the people, or capable of being presented through the columns of newspapers of any party, which does not start from the predicate that the public debt must and shall be paid. There is, therefore, none which, by any possibility, can either now or in the future afford them the relief they crave, and to which they are entitled. The sole effect of a plan proposed is to sustain, by its antagonism, a plan adopted; and through a discussion of the claims of different schemes, neither of which can do more than perpetuate the evils that exist, keep the people quiet through a confusion of ideas.

The knot of our financial system has become so involved and complicated, so perplexed with conflicting public and private interests, so overburdened and exacerbated by extravagance and mismanagement, that to untie it is impossible. There is but one way, and that is to cut it. Happily there is a principle under which this may be done. When abuses, with their accumulated consequences, have risen to a height so enormous, there are always those who have an interest in their continuance. These must be overcome; and to this end the principle must be set loose to perform its office. It is in exigencies like these that, if the people do but see aright, principles long enshrouded unvail themselves, and, endowed with fresh vitality, point the way to their own application.

It may be—indeed it has been—said that it is too early to lay down the ideas which the following pages are written to advocate; that the public mind is not yet prepared for their entertainment. The objection admits the justice of the ideas in the anticipation of a time when they will be in order. To this it may be answered, that if they are sound now, they are as sound as they will be at any time to come; and that if they are not sound now they will not become so at any time, however remote. Truth is never in order, nor error out of order more at one time than at another. The one is always in order, the other never. What preparation does the public mind need for the entertainment of the largest truth upon the question of the highest importance? Are not the circumstances of the day sufficiently appalling? Was there ever a problem more momentous than that which daily and hourly facts are pressing upon the attention of the American people? Do we need a fresh accession of calami-

ties in order to turn us to our own affairs and compel us to think of them? There is a species of men in the world with whom whatever counsels them to lift themselves out of their indolence, is always too early or too late; whose unripe spring leaps with a single bound into the lap of an overripe autumn, leaving them no summer for action; who, if they were dead, in their graves, would turn and feebly beg the appointed archangel, standing on the crystal battlements of heaven, with the trumpet of the resurrection at his lips, to pause and reflect whether the movement was not a little premature, and whether it was certain that the sleeping myriads were ripe for a change so radical as that which he was preparing to inaugurate; whether it would not be better to devise some plan by which it might be brought about gradually, and thus avoid the shock that too great precipitancy might occasion. It is not for such that these pages are intended. The question is not one of preparation; it is one of capacity; a question whether the people of the United States are endowed with those qualities of mind and heart which enable and entitle them to assume the mastery of their own fate. If they are so in love with the load which they have had cast upon their shoulders, if they are so enamored with that servitude which, in the blind confidence of passion, they have instituted for themselves, there is no more to be said. They are the keepers of their own destiny, and will have little right to complain of that from which, when the way was before them, they did not incline to escape. There are periods in the life of every people, when the alternative is presented to them, to revolt against the dominion of their unwise or unfaithful party leaders, and take the command of themselves, or to suffer the consequences of a betrayal of their most intimate and vital interests. In fact, the history of human progress is the history of alternate enslavements and emancipations; the former resulting from unwarranted confidence which the people have reposed in men whom, upon the presumption of superior worth or wisdom, they permitted to take control of their destiny; and the latter being the effect of the abuse and consequent withdrawal of that confidence, the deposition of their unfaithful leaders, and the temporary resumption by themselves of that authority which they can never safely abdicate. Encroachments being always gradual, always attempted under a pretense of zeal for the public good, and always made at times when the popular passions are awake, and the popular caution asleep, make progress, and become strong and established, before they are detected; so strong and so well established, as to bear almost the appearance of rights, and to require a vigorous effort and an extraordinary exigency for their abolition. The people of the United States are little aware of the extent to which their political free-agency has been invaded. They are scarcely awake to the fact that, as electors, they are little more than implements to execute the decrees of bodies of self-chosen undertakers, who have reduced party management to a science, and learned to direct the movements of party machinery to the sole end of their own personal advantage. They have just passed through the excitements of a party conflict, the effect of which has been, so far as party action is concerned, to commit both parties to the payment of the public debt, principal and interest; one party through the

fact that it was the creator of the debt; and the other through the fact that its leaders needed the contributions of the public creditors to supply the lubricating material essential to the efficient working of the party wheels and levers. The comparative values of the two elements of party force, money and sentiment, as they are understood by politicians, may be seen in the fact that the leaders of the party opposed to the one by which the debt was created placed, at the very head and front of the literature of their preliminary organizations, the declaration that the public debt must be paid. It can not be that they imagined that the surest way to arouse the feelings of the people against those who had imposed this burden upon them was to inform them that, in case they should attain to power, they would do their utmost to make the yoke of the tax-gatherer, under which they now groan, perpetual. It was not simple fatuity, which this would indicate, but treachery. Admitting—which is strictly true—that the average party leader always does the worst thing which the nature of the case will admit, it is almost inexplicable that the leaders of the opposition should have chosen the heaviest load which the other party had to carry, and volunteered to take an equal share of it upon their own shoulders.

And such a rallying cry—such an explosive compound for the generation of popular enthusiasm! To take one of the people—a painstaking man, who seeks no office, demands no charter to enjoy at the expense of others, asks only to live in such comfort as hard hands and honest heart can achieve at the plow or the anvil, and tell him that all parties, by the agreement of their leaders, are pledged to make such servitude as that which he now experiences, the sole inheritance he is to transmit to his posterity, and then ask him to be glad over it—to look in that direction for a millennium—is such an exaggeration of confidence practices as even those who deal in patent safes and sham bills of exchange might be proud to imitate. The truth is, the fact that the country belongs of right to those who create its wealth, who took it at the rough, made it all that it is, and are destined to make it all that it is to be—is the thing which the man who adopts politics as a trade hastens, as fast as possible, to forget.

I confess that seeing such things as these, I am not without very serious misgivings. I confess that there is great reason to fear, not merely that the people are not prepared now, but that they never will be prepared. That they will sooner or later think in conformity with the doctrines here laid down, may be anticipated with reasonable certainty; but the all-important question is, will they adopt them as principles to govern their political action? Will they allow themselves to be amused with palliatives and promises, and party issues between this or that policy—the little financial puzzles with which the times are so unhappily fruitful—until the yoke is firmly fixed upon their necks; until the galls it makes are turned to scars, and the scars to callouses, and the callouses forbid them ever to rise to the form and stature of manhood? Is this to be their history? or will they assert themselves, affirm their inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and insist that nothing shall be permitted

to interpose between them and the immediate realization of that freedom which it is the sole legitimate end of government to promote and protect? They will do well also to remember that encroachments acquire, by sufferance, a semblance and color of right; and that the power to resist diminishes in proportion as the wrong is endured. He who submits to be a serf to-day, will more easily submit to be a serf to-morrow; and the most abject servitude to which humanity was ever subjected, commenced in the toleration of injustice upon some deceptive promise of transient advantage.

The people can expect no release from the burden of the public debt at the hands of the leaders of either party; nor at the hand of any existing party organization, until they themselves have reformed that organization. The condition is the same as if the leaders of the two parties had entered into a mutual compact to make the burden perpetual, and to prevent the question of payment or non-payment from being opened hereafter. All alike demanded of the people to lay aside all other matters, and think alone of the means to decide who is to hold the offices in the gift of the election of 1868; and now, when that has been decided, there will be other issues of a similar character, in favor of which the interests of their confiding followers will be postponed without even the ceremony of a consultation. Indeed, the question of the release of the people from a crushing burden is too large for the party leader to handle. His mind is not accustomed to the consideration of things so weighty. He is not so sure but, for his purpose, his followers are more content and tractable as they are. At any rate, so long as their minds can be amused and occupied with that which relates to his particular interests, why should he trouble himself about theirs? If the people of the United States are wise—if they are not unwise with more than a common infatuation—they will not permit themselves to be taken out of their own hands, and monopolized by any body of politicians, in or out of office. These politicians have no authority to place them where they have placed them upon the great question of the time—the question that directly or indirectly includes every other. It was an act of arrogance for which they deserve to be cashiered; and a voice should go up from every quarter of the land commanding these too officious gentlemen to take down the black flag of endless servitude which, with shameless vanity and inconceivable heartlessness, they have hoisted over this people, or yield their places to such as better comprehend the nature of the service which, with so little fitness, they have rashly thrust themselves in to perform.

If the sentiments contained in these pages shall fail to strike a responsive chord in the popular mind, my regrets will be greater than the mere loss of my labor can occasion. Looking back over my work, now finished, it almost seems to me that I have been idly elaborating a self-evident proposition. If, on the contrary, I am judged to be a preacher of destructive radicalisms, of false and perilous novelties; if I am brought to grief for attempting to teach doctrines at war with that sublime abstraction, the national honor, and subversive of that indefinite quantity, the public morals, I shall be compelled to plead that I was mistaken in the character