

## Letter from Rev. J. Whitney—No. 2

WASHINGTON, JAN. 11th, 1862

BR. AUSTIN:—I trust that our friends of the *Ambassador* will not be offended, if while I am here at the seat of Government, I offer a few observations on the *moral aspect* of the war. I say *moral aspect*, for I am not a politician, and do not pretend to meddle with politics. This is not a political contest, but emphatically a war of ideas, and the moralist must have an undoubted right to speak upon it. When I listen to the debates of Congress and look upon our Mammoth Army, there is nothing that presses with such weight upon me as the doubtful policy of our Administration, and it is upon this that I wish to speak, as involving the moral aspect of the war. It would indeed be quite different if the Government *wished* to fasten upon us a debt of twelve hundred millions, instead of half that amount, in order to strengthen and bless our descendants with habits of national economy and enterprise! But we know that it aims to make the public debt as small as possible, and in this it discovers to us the utter indefensibility of its hesitating policy.

We are in the midst of a struggle for national existence, and it does seem that we should search out the best principle on which to operate. Every body understands that the Rebellion has attained the dimensions of a regular war, and also that there is *one act* within our reach, which would end it and give us a complete victory—and that act is one of real justice and humanity. Let the people speak forth the decree of emancipation, and it must be obeyed; but if we wait for this till we are thrown upon it as a necessity, it may be too late to save us as a great and prosperous nation. I believe that procrastination will soon place it beyond our control. God has doubtless arisen to the distress of his suffering children; he has spoken the decree, and the South will speedily carry it out, if we of the North refuse to do it; and then we shall have lost the opportunity forever. Just as in the case of a fatal [gangrene], if we refuse to amputate, the virus will spread itself over the entire system, so we, as a nation, may refuse to emancipate, till the extreme malignity and madness of the South has made it impossible to preserve our national existence. If on our present dubious issue we prove too mighty in arms for the rebels—as we probably shall—they will in their violent but definite policy, emancipate their own slaves to get the upper hands of the Yankees, that they hate with a perfect hatred, and to secure the desired recognition of foreign powers. In that event the opportunity is lost to us forever, and we shall stand before the world a dishonored, cowardly and degraded people. If we do not perform this act of humanity till it becomes a dire necessity, it will probably be too late, since God will have from us a whole heart or nothing. In view of this I tremble for my country.

The rebellion can be subdued, if we only understand our duty as friends of justice and civilization. If we have the nerve to crush out the vitality of

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the insurrection, by the confiscation of the insurgents' property, they will come to themselves and obey us, just as we, in that case, shall have come to ourselves and to God. But what impiety it must be in us, to hold in reserve a moral and religious duty, only as a last resort to save our nation from utter ruin. And has it come to this with Americans, that *justice* must be kept back in reserve as a last resort! We should remember that we are accountable to God for greater blessings than any other nation has ever enjoyed, and that we should therefore step in and become the natural keepers of freedom for the rest of mankind.

Insanity is the *immediate* cause of the war. The slaveholder believes he could not preserve his peculiar institution in the Federal Union—and it was equally true that he can not preserve it out of the Union; but the gods had made him just mad enough to suppose that he could. The *legitimate* source of the rebellion—the *efficient* cause—is slavery, and, in my opinion, war can never terminate while this source remains. The cause, I believe, is soon to be removed; but who shall do it? If we do not remove it, the *South*, in their extreme hatred of Abolition Yankees, will remove it themselves. As a nation, we are now required by the force of circumstances, to take one or the other horn of this dilemma. And the reason is this: Foreign nations will soon deem it necessary, in commercial matters, to withdraw from their position of neutrality between the contending parties. They are suffering even now from our Naval operations, and in their wisdom and magnanimity, they are only restrained from actual interference by the consideration that we need *time* to crush out such a formidable rebellion. But we cannot expect them long to favor us with neutrality, after discovering fully that we have only a sort of ambiguous policy, which fails to reach and meet the magnitude of the rebellion.

The policy I speak of may be explained in a few words. We claim that the slave holders are engaged in a *rebellion*, and they claim that they are engaged in a *regular war*. If our claim is right, they are subjects of our Government and liable to all the losses and pains of treason; but we are precluded from exercising the functions of our Government by the immense proportions of the rebellion. If their claim is just, we may of course exercise all the rights of a belligerent power; but we are precluded from the prerogative of treating them as rebels and traitors. Under these singular circumstances we are involved in a *national quandary*, and like the drunkard we are looking at things double. We claim that they are traitors and must take the consequences of treason; but ignoring the magnitude of the contest, we fail to conduct it in the only practicable way. The whole strength of the rebels lies in their slave property, and we dare not take it from them for fear of hurting or offending somebody!

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The physician can never cure without removing the cause. He admits this, and acts accordingly. But unlike the skillful doctor, we lack the nerve to carry out our own claim in the confiscation of the enemy's property, which, according to the law of nations, is always included in the penalty of treason. And we have reason to fear that the evils resulting from such a policy, will be troublesome in our commerce with other nations. It is well understood by foreign, as well as American statesmen, that this movement cannot be both a regular war and a rebellion, and either one side or the other of our policy—if we have any—will soon be recognized as having no foundation in the law of nations; so that on the restoration of peace, when our cause is brought before the proper tribunal for adjudication, perplexities and troubles will arise to work the distress and ruin of numerous individuals.

All legal decisions—as we are told by lawyers—must be found to rest upon matters of fact, instead of fancy, and no discretionary power of the President or other tribunal can be accepted as a substitute. If we would be true, and just, and wise as a nation, we must strike at once upon the cause of the war; we must abandon the idea of double dealing—of dubious policy. We all agree that the strength of the Rebellion in the Slaves of the South, and it is equally evident that we can only restore our suffering nation by removing the cause of the disease.

Not only *our* nation, but all other nations, are laboring for self-preservation, as the first law of nature; and this fact should admonish us to avoid anything that can involve us in a foreign war. In the selfish policy of nations, they will not be restrained from collisions by considerations of mere delicacy; but will soon begin to think of self-preservation and self-interest, especially if they see us pursuing a vacillating and timid policy. The Southern movement, though nothing but a wicked conspiracy, has reached the consistency and dimensions of a regular war, and it is high time for us to look it square in the face, and nerve ourselves to the responsibilities and consequences of this terrible conflict.

Yours Truly,  
J. [Rev. Jacob] WHITNEY

*Christian Ambassador*, Auburn NY, Sat. 1 Feb 1862

Transcribed on 2 Feb 2008 by Karen E. Dau of Rochester, NY