The Nation.

[Oct. 18, 1866]

THE IMPEACHMENT.

Some very excellent men, and some who are not very excellent, are talking very loudly of impeaching the President as soon as Congress meets. If we are not greatly mistaken, General Butler has taken the matter up as a labor of love, and will go into Congress, if he is elected, as we have no doubt he will be—charged with the special duty of getting up the articles and pushing forward the proceeding. We think it very likely that diligent agitation carried on during the next two months, combined with the popular indignation of which Mr. Johnson is now the object, will result in creating a strong feeling in favor of having this plan of getting rid of him tried. Our own views of his fitness for the place he fills are well known. His getting into it at all seems at this moment to be really one of the greatest misfortunes that ever befell the country;—seems, we say, because we cannot help hoping that, five or ten years hence, we shall most of us look back on him as a "blessing in disguise." But still we share to the full the heartfelt wish which so many people entertain, that there was some plain and simple and unquestionable mode of releasing him to private life; but our feelings ought not to cause us to support either the plan of impeaching him, or any other plan, without a careful consideration of all that can be said against it as well as of all that can be said in favor of it. The removal of a President of the United States by means of a judicial sentence is an undertaking too serious, too full of peril to the Government, to be lightly entered upon. We see in various quarters a disposition to treat it as rather a happy device for asserting and maintaining certain political principles than as what it would also be—a deplorable scandal, bringing discredit on popular institutions and giving a still fiercer glow to party passions.

A great deal of the talk about it is, of course, silly talk; a great deal more is designing talk; but there is also a great deal which is the talk of able, earnest, and honest men, who see in Mr. Johnson an offender, from whom they feel bound, on the highest considerations of public interest, to take away his power of mischief, by any means that offer themselves, short of revolution. We trust that these, who are the only clamorers for impeachment with whom there is any use in reasoning, will consider fairly the objections which lie to any attempt to put Mr. Johnson on his trial as a criminal for anything he has yet done. In the first place, it would be impossible, no matter what the form of the proceeding might be, to give it the character or secure for it the moral influence of a purely judicial proceeding. It would be regarded by most men, not only in this country but throughout the world, as a party measure, as a mere weapon drawn from the party armory—the Dexterous device of an irresistible majority to get rid of an opponent whom, conscientiously no doubt, they believe to be dangerous to the state. Mr. Johnson has at his back a very large minority of the Northern people, who, think him a not undeserving person. Many even are possessed with the notion that he is a statesman, and it may be questioned if any proceeding, however orderly, or formal, or technically legal, could stamp the character of crime worthy of legal penalties, on acts of which so large a proportion of the population approve. The prosecution would, therefore, by all supporters of Mr. Johnson's policy, North and South, be considered simply a piece of party persecution, which they could not resist but would hope some day to retaliate. The affair would, therefore, become, as Andrew Jackson's dismissal of Federal office-holders for simple difference of opinion has become, a precedent, which we fear all parties would try to follow with fidelity. In times of excitement the disposal of the President by means of impeachment would be part of the programme of the opposition, whenever they saw a chance of securing two-thirds of the Senate and a majority of the House, and the country would be frequently convulsed by a struggle which must, in its very nature, be little short of revolutionary.

Moreover, it ought not to be forgotten that we are all, Congress and public together, in some degree morally responsible for the President's misdeeds. We know what his antecedents were and what his character was when we elected him Vice-President. We chose, from motives of expediency, to forget or to overlook, in consideration of his new-born devotion to freedom, the long years which he had passed in the service of slavery, the violence of his temper, the narrowness of his mind, and the wantonness of his education, and deliberately made him the possible successor to an office for whose vast and varied responsibilities all human virtues and gifts would hardly suffice. He succeeded to it, too, at a period when the public mind had become confused by four years of war as to the proper limits of the Executive authority. Mr. Lincoln fell when in the possession of almost dictatorial power, which those who acted in his name sometimes abused, and exercise of which Congress and the public were disposed, with each succeeding year of communion, rather to applaud than to cavil at. When Mr. Johnson stepped into his shoes, the popular horror and indignation over the assassination were so great, the anxiety as to the future so general, that there did not appear in any quarter the slightest disposition to tie the Presidential hands. When he issued his proclamations appointing provisional governors, and proceeded to the work of "reorganization" single-handed, without waiting for or seeking the advice of Congress, which of us cried "Hold!"—which of us all who now so fiercely condemn him warned him that he was transgressing the bounds of his authority? A wise, cautious, well-trained man, conscious of the greatness of his trust, would have been too deeply impressed with the magnitude of his task to have entered upon it without asking the people, in all reverence and all modesty, what it sought or expected of him—what was the precise nature of the price for which it had spit so much blood and lavished so much treasure. But Mr. Johnson is not a wise, cautious, or well-trained man; he is—well, we all know what he is. He has grossly abused his power. But it was power with which we armed him; and it was technically unlawful power, as we now acknowledge; and in our opinion, if he were tried and condemned for his abuse of it, it would be only a technical condemnation, which would reflect almost as much discredit on us as on him. His abuse of the appointing power cannot be too strongly condemned. Nobody feels more strongly about it than we do; but who taught Presidents the trick which he is now playing? Let the politician who can lay his hand on his heart and say that he has ever made an honest endeavor to raise the public service out of the mire of politics, and to maintain the great principle that office-holders ought to be the servants of the country and not the tools of a party, cast the first stone at him.

But are we, because the wisdom or fairness of impeachment would be doubtful or unwise, to sit down under this man's dictation and let him rule the country if he will? By no means. He has for nine months been carrying on a controversy with Congress under impressions as to his power and duties derived from a state of things which has passed away. The country has been appealed to to decide between them. The verdict has been given against the President. His past course is not only condemned, but he is informed as plainly as possible that he must mend his ways—that he is neither a leader nor restorer, but simply a stop-gap. What we want at this point is statesmen to take up the work of reconstruction, bethought though it be, and complete it on the great principles which the country has once more affirmed. What we do not want is a bevy of sharp attorneys to distract and rend the nation with a tedious and farcical but exciting trial, in which we should wait and fret while counsel wrangled and chopped logic. We have a two-thirds majority in both Houses. We can do whatever we think just and expedient. Let us do it if need be over Mr. Johnson's head. He has now received a solemn warning that he is to execute and not to legislate. Let us see that he executes faithfully. Should he neglect or fail to do his duty now, he will sin against the light, and we can then proceed to punish him, with the consciousness that we have not taken him unawares, and that we have not saddled him with duties to the discharge of which neither his education, nor his head, nor his conscience is equal. To heal the wounds left by civil war and lift millions of people out of bondage and darkness into liberty and light, is the most sublime and awful task which was ever imposed on a legislature. In a moment of weakness, or confusion, or thoughtless.
The Fenian movement proved, we are glad to say, a total failure; and the Republican party is not indebted to it in the least for success. The Irish hatred of the negro is yet stronger than their love of liberty for their kinmen. All Gen. Banks's flaming speeches and war-like measures failed to gain a dozen Fenians in Philadelphia. The Administration placed vast power in the hands of its friends shortly before the election. The navy yard, the custom-house, the mint, and other offices were put under the charge of men who used them with great energy and with no nice scruples of conscience. These influences told heavily upon the vote of Philadelphia, but could not cross the city line. Even in the city, these corruptions had no effect beyond certain districts, and failed to gain a single Congressman, affecting the majorities only.

The result of the elections in all the four States is one which is entirely satisfactory to intelligent politicians. Those who calculated upon retaining the majorities given in 1864 by the aid of the army vote are, of course, disappointed; but the expectation was absurd. Soldiers in the field naturally voted as a class, and yielded to the influences prevailing around them. Their sense of patriotic duty was keenly alive, and their sense of party ties very weak. But on their return home they naturally fell back into their old habits, and voted with their friends and neighbors, as they had done before the war. The home vote is, therefore, the real test by which to judge the gain of either party.

On the home vote at the elections in October, 1864, Pennsylvania gave about 500 Democratic majority. She now gives 15,000 Republican majority. Ohio gave 24,000 Republican majority, which she now increases to 40,000 at least. Iowa gave 24,000 majority; now over 30,000. Indiana alone shows an apparent loss, having given 39,000 Republican majority in 1864, and only 13,000 now. But we can afford to be frank, and acknowledge the fact, notorious at the West, that some 4,000 fraudulent votes were polled in Indiana in 1864, of which 7,000 were given to the Republicans, so that their honest majority was only 13,000. No doubt this admission will be eagerly seized upon by the organs of a party which has just polled thousands of fraudulent votes in Philadelphia, Luzerne, and other counties in Pennsylvania. But we must not expose and condemn fraud wherever it is to be found, regardless of party considerations.

The result, as it bears upon the completion of the next Congress, is all that could reasonably be hoped for. The Republicans carry the same number of representatives that they had in the present Congress, and although the same of these were elected solely by the army vote, and two were awarded their seats only at a late period of the session, and after a doubtful contest before the Committee on Elections. In reality, therefore, the Republicans have made a decided gain. They also gain a senator in place of Edgar Cowan, a peculiarly acceptable change.

Questions of gain or loss are, however, comparatively unimportant. The World has demonstrated, to its own entire satisfaction, after every election for four years past, that the party of slavery was growing and gaining; yet it has been regularly defeated every year, and will be defeated the next Congress if it ever was before. Its gains are like those of Sisyphus, almost too small to accomplish the least practical good. It gained in 1853, and the Congress then chose abolished slavery; it gained in 1864 (as compared with 1863), and was never in such a miserable minority in Congress, which proceeded to extirpate the remnant of slavery; it gains in 1866, and loses four of its twelve senators in Congress. Of course these gains are fictitious, and are only reckoned by comparing with returns of previous years which were unusually disastrous to the party. It is losing strength, and not gaining. Its doom is plainly written, and it vainly struggles to avoid its inevitable fate.

Every true patriot will rejoice over the decision thus rendered. The people have determined that this shall be a government of law, and that law not proceeding from the brain of one man, but created by the legislative department. They have decided that massacre and insurrection shall not be tolerated as part of our political machinery. They have decided that loyal men shall not be crushed under the feet of rebels. They have resolved that no element of disease shall be left in the national constitution which it is in their power to remove.