

Zachary Taylor on Jackson and the Military Establishment, 1835

WILLIAM D. HOYT, JR.*

A RECENT biographer of Zachary Taylor, discussing the period during which he was in command at Fort Crawford, Prairie du Chien, Michigan Territory, says that "he had been favorably disposed toward the Jackson Administration early in 1829 but now vehemently sympathized with the opposition."¹ The latter part of this statement is fully documented by a letter from Taylor to John J. Crittenden,² dated at Fort Crawford, November 17, 1835. The original letter, filling six pages, is among the miscellaneous collections of the Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, and has not been published previously.

The entire statement is interesting for its light on the state of public affairs and military matters in the 1830's and on Zachary Taylor's views on Jackson, Cass, and Van Buren before he himself became a national figure. A general in the field who wrote such a letter today would spend the rest of his military career hoping that the discretion of the recipient would consign its text to the archives to be found, like this one, over a century later.

FORT CRAWFORD PRAIRIE DU CHIEN
MICHIGAN TERRITORY November 17th 1835

DEAR SIR,

In consequence of a number of remarks made during the last session of Congress, by different members of the house of representatives, in relation to the officers of the Army, when the bill for equalising their pay, & those of the officers of the Navy, or rather for increasing the pay of the latter, was under discussion, particularly by the honl. Mr. Mann a member from New York,³ as well as several resolutions introduced by him, which resolutions met my approbation, at any rate, so far as related to doing away the office of general in chief, or major general commanding the Army, has induced me, althoug[h] I have not the honor of a personal acquaintance with Mr. M., to communicate with, & give him my views

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¹ Holman Hamilton, *Zachary Taylor, Soldier of the Republic* (Indianapolis, 1941), p. 111.

² John Jordan Crittenden (1787-1863), of Kentucky, serving the second of four nonconsecutive terms in the United States Senate, 1835-41.

³ Abijah Mann, jr. (1793-1868), member of Congress from New York, 1833-37.

in favour of a reorganization of our military establishment, recommending a change of the present mode of compensating the officers, as well as several other matters connected with the same; all or the greater portion of which, will I presume be brought before the house, of which he was, & still is a member, at the approaching session. Under which expectation I have taken the liberty of forwarding to you, a copy of my communication to him, with a request, should you coincide with me, in any of the opinions therein contained, that you will give them such support as you may consider they are entitled to, should the whole or any portion of those subjects, be brought before the Senate.

Judging from the manner our national affairs have been managed for the last two or three years, without any prospect or even hope of a change for the better, I consider it not at all improbable, but a great struggle will take place, & at no distant day throughout the country, in which I fear the sword will decide, whether the constitution, or the will of the chief magistrate of the nation, is to be the supreme law of the land; In which event the army, small as it is, will be of much greater importance to which ever side it espouses, than is general[ly] supposed; and there is not a doubt in my mind, but a large portion of the officers attached to it, particularly of the higher grades, & the whole of the rank & file, in that case, would be found arrayed on the side of the latter. It therefore appears to me, that it would be good policy, on the part of those in favour of the constitution & laws, as heretofore interpreted & administered, to cut down the military establishment, as far as they could do so, to the smallest number possible, consistent with the wants of the country. And after duly considering the subject, I am clearly of the opinion, that 5,000 rank & file, appropriately officer[ed], would be ample for every purpose or contingency, during peace, as well as to add to or build on, in the event of war, which from present appearances, is not likely soon to occur on land, unless among ourselves, in which case, it strikes me, the fewer regular troops we have the better. The for[e]going considerations among others, induced me to transmit to Mr. Man[n], the communication in question, under the impression that the irregularities & abuses, pointed out could be much more readily corrected, if measures for doing so, were brought forward & supported, by those who sustained, instead of the opponents of the measures of the administration.

After the statements made in the Senate by Mr. Clay & Mr. Calhoun, as well as othe[r] distinguished individuals of that body, when in debate, in relation to certain acts of the presidents, which were, that "reform or revolution must be the inevitable consequence of his course if persevered in"; Entertaining such opinions, in which no doubt they were sincere, I was not a little surprised, at their contributing by their votes, to augment the military establishment of the country, by creating an ordnance corps or department, & raising a regiment of dragoons; neither of which in my humble opinion was wanting, or was at all necessary, for the public service; as by so doing they aided in strengthening the executive department, physically, as well as by increasing the patronage of the same; which appears to me under all the circumstances of the case, would have been better, had they opposed such augmentation to the utmost; at any rate, after making the statements refer[red] to; This too during a state of profound peace, with the exception of some little difficulties of minor importance, with our Indian neighbours, brought about by the imbecility of the secretary of war, & the general at the head of the Army.⁴ Mr. Clay also stated in the Senate at, I think, the session before the last,

⁴ Lewis Cass (1782-1866), of Michigan, was Secretary of War from 1831 to 1836. Maj. Gen. Alexander Macomb (1782-1841) was commanding general of the United States Army from 1828 to his death thirteen years later.

when animadverting on some acts of the chief magistrates, that he "consider[e]d the army sound to the core"; which statement I do not believe he would now make, or would have done, since the proceedings of the court of inquiry were promulgated or made known, in the case of Lt. Lane, in consequence of his attack on Mr Ewing a member of the house of representatives from Indiana;⁵ which court was composed of three general officers; as their proceedings & opinions, in regard to the same, to my mind evidently were made up & given, principally with the view & intention, of pleasing the incumbent of the white house. The merits of the case it seems to me, were in a great measure, if not entirely lost sight of, or overlooked by the court; and I have not a doubt had Lt. L— assaulted any other member of the opposition, under the same or any other circumstances, he would have been protected, if not justified, by said court, for fear had they done otherwise of the presidents displeasure. It is therefore time for such members as do not support the measures of the administration to be looking about them, at any rate they should be at all times prepared, to protect themselves from similar outrages —

Besides should Mr. Van Buren succeed the present chief magistrate, which I greatly fear will be the case, it is quite likely there will not be another election directly by the people at large; as he will appoint his successor, who will be brought into that office, by the same influence & means, used to secure to him the succession; & which will likely continue to be the case, until there is a great revolution of some kind or description, throughout the nation, which may not be a bloodless one; as he Mr. V— will mainly owe his success, to the expressed wishes, influence & exertions of the present chief magistrate in his favour, aided by the whole patronage of the government; As I truly & sincerely believe, every department of which, is now managed, more with a view to that object, than for the good of the country; at least such being the case as relates to the war department; the foregoing state of things, being fully carried out by the head of the same, from the commanding genl. down to the situation of sutlers. Individuals who had filled the latter situations, for many years, possessing character, as well as capital, who gave perfect satisfaction to both officers & soldiers, for whose accommodation they ought to be appointed, and against whom no complaints were ever made, so far as related to the manner they discharged their duties, have been turned out of those petty offices, by the war minister, to make way for political partisans, who have neither credit, capital or character, to recommend them; and who are thus rewarded, for abusing those that have, at any rate the latter, because they would not right or wrong, hurrah for the present chief magistrate, & the would be heir to his office. In some instances as those individuals cannot procure the necessary supplies for the troops they are appointed to settle for; in which case they farm out the privi-

⁵ John Ewing (1789–1858), member of Congress from Indiana, 1833–35, 1837–39. On the evening of February 26, 1835, while Ewing was walking to his boardinghouse after adjournment, he was attacked by John F. Lane, a lieutenant in the Army and son of Amos Lane, member of Congress from Indiana. A blow from an iron cane with a leaden head was Ewing's first notice of the affair, and before he could defend himself, there were several other violent blows which disabled him temporarily. Ewing, in a letter to the Speaker of the House apologizing for his absence from his seat, said he supposed the cause for the assault was a heated discussion with the elder Lane in a debate on the floor of the House several weeks before. Gales and Seaton, *Register of Debates in Congress*, XI, 1565–66. A select committee of seven was appointed by the House to investigate the assault on Mr. Ewing. Hearings were conducted in the presence of Lt. Lane, who was allowed to cross-examine witnesses and to introduce testimony. Witnesses revealed that Ewing had a sword cane and drew it, but was parried by Lane, and that Lane grabbed Ewing by the hair before administering the second and successive blows. Dr. John B. Blake testified that Ewing's wounds were severe, including cuts on his forehead and cheek and a swollen forefinger. No cause for the attack, other than Ewing's original supposition, was developed by the committee. *House Reports of Committees*, 23 Congress, 2 session, No. 135, Feb. 28, 1835.

lege, in some cases for twelve or fifteen hundred dollars pr. annum, which is an indirect tax, on the officers & soldiers, & reside where ever it suits their inclinations or convenience, generally where they can be most conspicuous at elections in favour of the powers that be; One of those gentry who was forced on this command (who died a short time since) took up his residence in Philadelphia, & devoted himself to politics (after farming out his right to settle for fifteen hundred dollars) in support of course of all, & every act of the administration, & was quite conspicuous, so far as making a great noise would render him so, against the recharter of the U.S. Bank, as well as in favour of a removal of the deposits from the same. During the excitement on those subjects, he was quite active in getting subscribers to a memorial, to be laid before congress approving the cours[e] of the president, on those & no doubt, every other occasion, as well as to shew that said measures, had not been the cause of producing any distress among the market. Which memorial, he was deputed to carry to Washington, & lay before Congress then in session, & the president; at which time, he could not on his debts, have paid a cent on the dollar, nor independent of his pension (raised from the troops) could he have gotten credit for a meals victuals, where he was known. Another individual of pretty much the same character & description, a certain Mr. Stambaugh, who was twice rejected I think by the Senate, as an Indian agent, has recently been appointed by the Secretary of War, as sutler to that portion of this regiment, stationed at the mouth of the St. Peters river, near the Falls of St. Anthony; which appointment was doubtless given to reward him for his zeal & services in the good cause; after it was found the Senate would not confirm his nomination, to any situation that required their sanction; which was done I may say at the expense of the command at that remote station; as by so doing they displaced the best sutler I have ever known attached to any portion of the Army, since I joined it. Mr. S— I learn from good authority, is in close correspondence with the honl secretary, & I make no doubt is authorised or directed by him, to report on the character of the officers, at any rate so far as relates to their political opinions; If so it is to me a perfect matter of indiff[er]ence; for I have & will continue to express my opinion of public men & measures, as I conceive they merit, let the consequences be what they may; even should it be the cause of my being reformed; which if done, would give me but little concern, under the present management of the military establishment. I look on Mr Stambaugh & Mr Cass, pretty much in the same light, & consider them fit associates & correspondents, worthy of each other; and consider the president most fortunate in the selection of his War Minister (who was no doubt recommended to him for that office by Mr V. Buren) as he could not in my opinion have found an individual in the country, who would have been more compliant in conforming to his wishes, or more zealous in carrying out his principles, & executing his plans for the elevation of his favourite; for I do not believe he possesses one particle of firmness, independence, political or moral honesty; and is therefore qualified to act "well any part," that may be assigned him, particularly as he can do so, under the mask & appearance, of great forbearance, humility, temperance & perhaps religion also. I make no doubt by observing his acts closely for a short time, we shall not differ widely in our opinions as to his character.

I do not know whether your friends ought to rejoice or regret most, your going into the councils of the nation at this time, as matters & things, as regards the government of the same, appears to me to be disjointed & very much out of sorts, & the temper of the people in every section of the country, from Maine to Louisiana, appears to be in a state of great excitability, never before witnessed,

at least since my recollection; how & when all this is to end, it is impossible to foresee; time alone will shew -

I am well aware you can, & ought not to carry into the Senate, any feelings of respect, personal or political, towards the present chief magistrate, as it is impossible that you can approve many of his acts, which we must consider "errors of the heart, & not of the head," at any rate his removing individuals from office, on account of their political opinions, or rather to make way or provide for his own, & the creatures of Mr. V-Buren; In fact carrying out as far as he could well do so, the Spoils System of the New York politicians. At the same time, I know you possess too much magnanimity, prudence & good sense, to oppose all his measures on party principles; as I feel confident you will give to every thing of the kind, coming from that quarter, the proper considerations, & will then act in regard to them, for the good of the country; In fact I consider it would be well during such a state of things as exist at present, rather to yield somewhat as regards our opinions until the minds of the people had become more composed, & our institutions brought back to their former state of order &c, than to be too tenacious in our opposition to matters of minor importance. It seem[s] to me that the friends of the Constitution & laws, in the Senate, have rather injured the cause, in some instances, by carrying their opposition too far, as for example in rejecting the nominations of Mr. V-Buren & Mr. Stephenson, as Ministers to England -

But I may be obtruding on you my opinions & advice beyond what I am warranted from our acquaintance in doing, particularly on subjects that you are so much more capable of deciding on, than I can possibly be; but flatter myself you will attribute the liberty I have taken in doing so, to the interest I take in every thing that concerns your well doing, as I feel confident you have but few if any friend (if I may be permitted to use that term) who feels greater solicitude for your prosperity, & advancement than myself.

I greatly fear that I have drawn too largely on your time as well as patience, in troubling you with this long & I fear uninteresting letter, as well as the copy of the communication to Mr M—, but you can lay them aside until you are perfectly at leisure to glance them over, if not altogether. Nor do I wish you to give yourself the least trouble, as regards any matter embraced in the letter, unless brought before the Senate in some shape or other form from the house of representatives, or in some other way -

I may have taken up erroneous impressions in relation to the state of the country, as well as the management of our National affairs, but have come to the foregoing conclusions from my personal knowledge as to the management of the military establishment; and from the public journals or news papers, in relation to the management of the other departments of the government. Great allowances however should be made in regard to my opinions on the subjects in question, as I have been constantly on duty, at a remote & frontier station in the Indian country, for near four years without leaving the same but once, & then only for sixty days, on leave of absence.

With considerations of great respect & esteem I remain

Truly your Friend

Z- TAYLOR

Honl. J. J. Crittenden
U. S. Senator from Ky.

PS As I have taken the liberty of refer[r]ing to the opinions & acts of Mr Calhoun, when secretary of war on several occasions, in the document transmitted to Mr Mann, I should be pleased if perfectly convenie[n]t, & proper, if you would submit the copy in your possession to him.

* * * * * *Reviews of Books* * * * * *

General History

A HISTORY OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY AND ITS CONNECTION WITH POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CIRCUMSTANCES FROM THE EARLIEST TIMES TO THE PRESENT DAY. By *Bertrand Russell*. (New York: Simon and Schuster. 1945. Pp. xxiii, 895. \$5.00.)

In his preface the author states the purpose of this volume as follows: "My purpose is to exhibit philosophy as an integral part of social and political life: not as the isolated speculations of remarkable individuals, but as both an effect and a cause of the various communities in which different systems flourished. This purpose demands more account of general history than is usually given by historians of philosophy" (p. ix).

It cannot be said that this purpose is effectively carried out. It is true that a good many pages are devoted to general history, or to generalizations about it and about social and political conditions in the periods covered. But in the first place, these accounts are unequally distributed: they are considerable in length for the first period, Greco-Roman antiquity; they make up a very large proportion of the pages devoted to the medieval period, so large indeed that medieval philosophy is treated rather sketchily; but in the modern period, and progressively as the present is approached, there is little about social and political life. Presumably the author would defend this distribution on the ground that modern readers know more about modern society and politics than they know about the Middle Ages. But it is unlikely that modern readers understand how philosophy is an integral part of the society they live in, and certainly it cannot be supposed that modern philosophers are in fact less dependent on society than Plato or Thomas Aquinas. In the second place—and this is a more serious criticism—the accounts of general history do not contribute much to an understanding of the philosophy or the author's comments on it. The historical accounts are for the most part quite distinct from the exposition and criticism of the philosophies. Possibly these philosophies really were the speculations of remarkable individuals; at any rate, it is only in the vaguest sense that the author exhibits them as an integral part of social and political life.

This result is not an accident. It is inherent in Russell's conception of philosophy and his interest in it. He defines philosophy as an intermediate ground between science, to which belongs all definitely ascertainable truth whether arrived