

THE CONSULAR SERVICE AND THE SPOILS SYSTEM.

THE following letter was addressed by the editor of *THE CENTURY* to a list of ex-ministers of the United States without regard to their political associations or supposed opinions on civil-service reform; with the letter were sent the resolutions of the National Board of Trade. We publish the replies received.

DEAR SIR: We are intending to publish a group of brief opinions—a few paragraphs by ex-ministers—on the proposition to take the consulships out of the spoils system, and possibly some of the minor offices of the diplomatic service. May we ask the favor of a few words from you on this subject, within a short time?

Yours sincerely,

THE EDITOR.

RESOLUTIONS ADOPTED BY THE NATIONAL BOARD OF TRADE, January 23, 1894.

Resolved, That the National Board of Trade heartily approves the action of the Boston Merchants' Association and the Boston Chamber of Commerce, in agitating for a reform of the consular service of the United States, and believes it to be the duty of this national organization and its constituent bodies to take up and push the good work in utter disregard of all party feeling, party prejudices, and party affiliations.

Resolved, That to this end a special committee of seven be created, to whom shall be committed all plans, methods, and recommendations designed to place this great national service on a footing corresponding to that of other nations, removing it from the spoils system.

EX-MINISTER TO CHINA.

THE duties of consuls may be described as, first, notarial—certifying to the genuineness of papers, especially of invoices of goods to be shipped to this country; second, judicial—settling controversies between officers and crews of our vessels in foreign parts, and trying civil and criminal cases in Oriental lands; third, protective—caring for our destitute seamen, and sending them home; and fourth, collecting and reporting information of value to our merchants and manufacturers. It needs no argument to show that men who are to discharge such duties should have some natural aptitude for them, and should have some special preparation for them. They should have a familiarity with our business methods in manufactures and commerce. Some knowledge of law, a command of the language of the country in which they serve, and the faculty of making themselves agreeable and welcome in the society in that country, are obviously desirable.

That these qualifications are best secured by having a permanent body of trained men is the conclusion to which most nations have been brought by long experience. That the conclusion is sound I have no doubt.

I am equally convinced that our secretaries of legation should be men prepared by special training for their duties.

We ought also to provide for a body of interpreters for our consulates and legations in China and Japan. Years ago a bill was framed providing for consular clerks, who were to be paid small salaries while preparing themselves

in China for the duties of interpreters. But the appropriations were not continued. Our consuls, who are sent to China with no knowledge of the Chinese language, have sometimes had to depend on Chinese who had learned a little "pigeon English," or on missionaries, for interpreters. The former have often proved to be dishonest. There are serious practical objections to employing the latter.

The British maintain a special establishment at Peking for training young Englishmen for the work of interpreting. These young men gradually rise to the positions of vice-consul and consul. One of the reasons for the success of British trade in the East is the thorough equipment of their consular service.

I believe it would be of great service to our commerce to take the offices of consul and secretary of legation out of politics, and to make special provision for training interpreters for service in China and Japan.

James B. Angell.

EX-MINISTER TO SPAIN.

CONSULS, being commercial agents, special qualifications are needed to fit them for the discharge of their legitimate duties. Their appointment should be preceded by diligent inquiry as to their fitness, or by a thorough and appropriate examination. A corps of consular clerks, trained in the State Department, with occasional visits to the best consulates, would furnish excellent material for consular service.

Secretaries of legation are invaluable to a

minister or ambassador, and should not be removed with every incoming administration, or at the will or whim of the minister. Occasionally, as rewards for special or superior competency, they should be promoted to higher places. A diplomatic career, such as is recognized by European governments, is not in accordance with our political theories. My observation and experience did not convince me of the need of such a special class. A comparison of our ministers—appointed for fitness, and not as rewards for partizan services, or to atone for defeat by the people in elections—with foreign ministers who have achieved places step by step in a “career,” does not show an inferiority on the part of American representatives.

J. L. M. Curry.

EX-MINISTER TO SPAIN.

AN American consul is judged and graded by the people to whom he is accredited according to his intelligence and ability, just as the business agents of other countries are judged and graded. They recognize his good points, and are keen to take advantage of those wherein he lacks. He comes in contact, socially and commercially, constantly with the trained agents of other countries, and unless he is their equal in equipment, he goes to the wall as surely as does the raw, unarmed recruit before the veteran soldier. A consul is a commercial agent, and what house would consider it good business to send an agent to Spain, for instance, who did not understand Spanish? Such a man would be at the mercy of his Spanish clerk, whose price to an exporter, for obtaining a signature to an ad-valorem invoice, would not be above one dollar, unless he were exceedingly high-priced, and then it might be two dollars.

I believe that the best material from which to choose our consuls would be found among those who have been educated by the Government at West Point or Annapolis, and who are either supernumerary in the army or navy, or have been retired for some slight disability. These men have the necessary qualification as regards languages. They have been obliged to acquire more or less business method in their study of the quartermaster and commissary departments; they have deep patriotism, and a keen sense of national and personal honor; they would make public servants, of whom every American at home and abroad would be proud and whom every foreigner would be obliged to respect.

A good consul is a better consul every year he is at his post. He knows his ground better, and is more known and appreciated by those with whom he has to deal. Once appointed, he

should not be removed except for misconduct; and there is no more common sense in the people of the United States discharging their consuls every four years than would be shown if all the merchants of New York discharged their chief clerks because Gladstone has resigned.

Edward Burd Grubb.

EX-MINISTER TO AUSTRIA AND TO GERMANY.

IN 1864, Mr. Seward being Secretary of State, the administration desired authority for the appointment of thirteen consular clerks, at a small compensation, to be assigned, and transferable, to different consulates at the discretion of the President. As a member of Congress from Iowa in his first term, and not yet corrupted by the spoils system then prevailing, I had some innocent and childlike conceptions of what was due to good government, and of the fitness of things. After some struggle I secured the adoption of the following regulation as a part of the proposed legislation: “Before the appointment of any such consular clerk shall be made, it shall be satisfactorily shown to the Secretary of State, after due examination and report by an examining board, that the applicant is qualified and fit for the duties to which he shall be assigned; and such report shall be laid before the President. And no clerk so appointed shall be removed from office except for cause stated in writing, which shall be submitted to Congress at the session first following such removal.” (Rev. Stat. U. S., Sec. 1705.) So far as I know, this was the first legislative attempt to abolish any part of the spoils system by act of Congress; and was the informal and unpretending beginning of civil-service reform through Congressional action.

The purpose of this provision was, first, to secure to the consular service at least this number of young men who would acquire the language of the country to which they were assigned, and the regulations and usages of the consular system. Second, by this knowledge, increasing always with the lapse of years, to save each new representative of the spoils system from the errors, blunders, and inefficiency which must always attend ignorance and inexperience of foreign affairs and foreign methods. Third, to build up a trained corps of consular experts, who, assignable to any post in special emergencies, would also be available for regular consular appointments by way of promotion.

While the system adopted was generally successful in results, it wholly failed in the last named object. This, for two reasons: all

desirable posts were strongly held by successive administrations for distribution under the the customary rules of political spoils; and these clerks, even when growing old in service under meager pay, were afraid of being promoted to an office from which the spoils-men would probably drive them with the next change of administration, and so leave them wholly destitute.

Consular reformers may, nevertheless, find in Sec. 1705 of the Revised Statutes, and our experience thereunder, a text which is prolific of suggestions for the reconstruction of our consular service. The subject requires an article, not "a paragraph," for its development. I will only add here that no candidate for a consulate who respects himself, and wishes to make the office respectable, will disdain an examination by a competent board into his qualifications for such foreign service; and no patriotic administration can object, after some equalization of appointments between two administrations of different politics, to a limitation of the removals from consular office to causes which they are willing to report to Congress. The commercial interests of our country, as well as the protection of the tariff revenues by an honest enforcement of the laws, require a better qualified consular service for the prevention of fraud.

The wisest and most practicable method of securing this reform demands the concurrence of Congress with a President friendly to reformation. This method can be comprised in any ordinary paragraph of legislation, or in a brief joint resolution of Congress, without trenching upon the constitutional rights of the President in respect to appointments and removals.

John A. Kasson.

EX-MINISTER TO ENGLAND.

I AM earnestly in favor of the inclusion in a permanent civil service of all employees of the Government who themselves perform the routine duties of the public service, and I think that ordinary consular officers are among those in respect to whom it is specially for the public interest, as a matter of mere business, that their tenure of office should depend only upon their efficiency. The principal duties of an American consular officer are to report to his government upon the industries and business in his district, and, by his knowledge of those industries to prevent frauds upon the customs revenues through undervaluations of products exported to the United States. It needs no argument to show that until adequate knowledge is acquired by a new officer, he cannot really perform his principal duties, and that much time

must be taken by each new appointee in acquiring such knowledge in a foreign country, if he ever does so. Thus our prevailing custom of frequently putting wholly inexperienced men in such places results, in fact, in an equal number of periods, of greater or less length, of mere pupillage (often, indeed, in the very language he must use in his daily transactions) and business inefficiency. It must be considered also that the uncertain and usually short tenure of office, and the too prevalent view of the place being only a reward for petty political service, rather than one of important duties, tend to make the incumbent think it hardly worth his while to make a serious effort to qualify himself for his duties. The result is, I think, that at the more important places the public work, both that of discretion and that of routine, is usually done, after a fashion, by old employees of very inferior position and pay, frequently natives and subjects of the foreign country; and at the less important places, where there is no provision for such employees, the quality of the public service rendered cannot fail to be greatly injured, often and for prolonged periods, by the inexperience of the incumbent. The business of a great private establishment could not be carried on under such a system as that prevailing, but happily not universal, with respect to our consular officers; they are merely our practical business agents abroad, and should, in my opinion, be chosen and retained upon the same considerations that would affect a private employer of large affairs.

Robert T. Lincoln.

EX-MINISTER TO SPAIN.

As to the proposition "to take the consulships out of the spoils system," by which is meant, I imagine, to create a consular service where there should be no change save for cause, I would say that I doubt very much whether the service would be improved thereby, from the fact that men secure in their places would lose in animus while they might gain in knowledge. Under our present system men of superior adaptation to their places have been retained through several administrations of different politics—notably the Hon. Ramon O. Williams, Consul-General at Havana.

Again, I do not believe that efficient service should be the only aim of our Government, but that individuality should be encouraged in every reasonable way. To that end it should be the privilege of every American to aspire with some hopes of success to any place within the gift of his country. Furthermore, too long a residence abroad denationalizes a man. It is well that he should come home once in a while, touch elbows, breathe the atmosphere, and live

the life of an American. We have been well served under the present system; why change?

T. W. Palmer.

EX-MINISTER TO AUSTRIA AND
TO GERMANY.

WITHOUT caring at this time to make such a sweeping statement as to other branches of the public service, where I have had less experience, I am ready now to say that I am sure that the consular service ought to be freed from all influences based on the party affiliations or party services of its personnel; equally sure that it requires such training and experience as makes that career almost a professional one.

William Walter Phelps.

EX-MINISTER TO COLUMBIA AND
TO VENEZUELA.

THERE are only three branches of our public service that can be said to be out of the "spoils system." The officers of our army and navy, and the judges of our national tribunals, hold their commissions for life or during good behavior; and when they become too old and infirm for efficient service, are decently retired on pensions. So long as these officers faithfully discharge their duties, and otherwise comport themselves properly, they feel secure in their positions, no matter what political changes take place; and they feel equally sure of a modest competency in old age. They can thus give their entire time and talents to their official duties, and are removed from temptations to dishonesty which might otherwise beset them. Men of all political parties recognize the wisdom and justice of this policy, and he would be a reckless man indeed who would now seriously propose to change it for the "spoils system," and thus to destroy discipline, stimulate official corruption, and hopelessly degrade the judiciary to the low level of our partizan politics.

But all the reasons usually urged in favor of keeping the military, naval, and judicial service out of politics will apply with equal force to our diplomatic and consular service. It is quite as important a branch of the public service as either of the three named. It is hardly less technical in character, and it requires even a higher order of talents supplemented by more extensive and varied learning. As civilization advances, nations seek higher methods of adjusting their differences than those usually adopted by the ants and beetles. Friendly arbitration takes the place of war, and the services of the professional soldier are discounted by those of the trained and skilful diplomat. To

be an efficient consul, a man must have a thorough knowledge of commercial and maritime law; and in pagan and Mohammedan countries where, in addition to his purely consular duties, he is called upon to exercise judicial functions, he needs to be well versed in all the technicalities of the legal profession. In addition to these attainments, it is very little less necessary that he should be able to speak at least two of the modern languages besides his own. When he is thus equipped for his work, and proves himself honest and faithful, it is extremely detrimental to the service, and to our interests abroad, to dismiss him for some half-educated and vulgar politician who claims the office as a reward for work at the primaries. It is not a whit more absurd in principle, nor less demoralizing and damaging in results, than it would be to dismiss a district or circuit judge in order to provide for some needy political henchman.

Another consideration, though of infinitely minor importance, merits attention. We have about three hundred consulships, the salaries of which average about \$3000 per annum. When the quadrennial "clean sweep" takes place, the newly appointed consul is allowed thirty days at home on full pay before departing for his post of duty; and the average time allowed for making the transit, after he begins his journey, is about thirty days more. When he finally arrives at his post, and relieves his predecessor, the latter is entitled to thirty days' time for making the transit to his home in the United States—thus making a total of ninety days during which both men are drawing full salary. Here, then, is an unnecessary expenditure of \$750 on a single consulate—making an aggregate loss of \$225,000. In the short period of four administrations, covering only sixteen years, our "spoils system," as applied to the consular service, thus costs us \$900,000, an amount equal to the aggregate of all the salaries for one whole year. Or, to change the phraseology, we pay for seventeen years' service in order to get sixteen.

Our commercial interests as a first-class power, to say nothing of the scandals incident to our present methods, demand that our consular service at least be taken entirely out of the spoils system; and it would greatly augment our influence and prestige abroad, if, like all other first-class powers, we could take our diplomatic service out of politics as well.

William L. Scruggs.

EX-MINISTER TO RUSSIA.

THE reform of the consular service is one of the urgent public questions of the hour. I am clearly of the opinion that this service should

have more permanence and stability, and that it should be more surely based upon approved fitness and qualifications. My experience and observation abroad, though limited, were sufficient to deepen this conviction. I am not prepared to accept the view that our diplomatic service — so far at least as relates to the chiefs of missions — should be grounded on the principle of longer or permanent tenure. It would be enough to let this become the accepted and recognized rule for the secretaries and minor officials, as is now somewhat the case in actual practice. But as to the consular service, there can be no shadow of doubt about the incalculable gain that would accrue from a reform which should make fitness the sole test of appointment, and efficiency the sole test of continuance. The changes which come with every new administration are an unmixed evil. It takes time to learn the business of the consul, to know the community to which he is sent, to understand the elements of its trade, to measure its resources and capabilities, and to comprehend the influences which may promote commercial intercourse. Under the present system it often happens that the consul has just begun to feel at home in his place, and to be capable of useful service, when he is recalled, and another green man is sent to go through the same difficult experience, and to be dismissed as soon as he gains the same degree of qualification. We sadly need a reform which will lift the service out of these manifest evils, and will make the first consideration in the consular office the promotion of the interests of the country rather than the reward of political claims.

Charles Emory Smith.

EX-MINISTER TO TURKEY.

DIPLOMACY not only precedes war, but its highest functions are to prevent it. The diplomat is the peaceful arm of a nation. He extends the hand of friendship, and by him differences are adjusted and rights maintained. The consul is the commercial representative, and the higher his qualifications the better will he discharge his duties. In all countries excepting ours there is a fixed tenure of office in the diplomatic and consular service dependent upon good behavior, and the service is entirely separated from the change of parties in the home government. This is as it should be. The conflicts of parties should end at the border of the country. For a nation to recruit its diplomatic and consular service with men untrained for their duties is bad enough, but to duplicate this method every four years is the greatest error conceivable, and this is virtually what we do.

We require our consuls to furnish reports

on commerce, manufactures, etc., in various countries. A careful inquiry would doubtless disclose that many of such reports are prepared for, instead of being prepared by, the consuls purporting to make them. It requires time and experience in order to possess adequate knowledge for the collection of facts in the preparation of such reports in one's own country; the difficulties are much greater in a foreign country. Uncertainty of tenure is the most glaring disadvantage to which our consular service is subjected. I know men who would have applied themselves diligently to fit themselves adequately for their duties, and to acquire the language of the country, but the uncertainty of tenure hanging over them discouraged such effort.

First and foremost, let us have a fixed tenure, dependent upon good behavior; secondly, more adequate compensation; and thirdly, some standard of qualification based upon fitness for office. I know of no better way to obtain these results than by bringing these offices under civil-service regulations. I should prefer not to include the heads of missions; I should leave their appointment as now, placing them in that respect in the same category as the President's cabinet. There are in all about 775 consular offices, of which about 325 are principal offices. The rest are consular agencies which are subordinate to the principal offices within the jurisdiction of which such agencies come. The rapidity of communication between countries within recent years has brought nations nearer together, and their commerce into closer and more active competition. The commercial interests of our country would be largely promoted by having a trained corps of consular officers. This can be attained only by having a fixed tenure of office, so that persons entering the service will be encouraged to make a career of it, and to qualify themselves for the better discharge of their duties. It is not to be expected that men who have made repeated failures in their own private affairs would thereby be qualified to become consular officers, and yet it is from this class that many of our consuls are selected. No one who has been in our service abroad can have failed to recognize the disorganizing effect of a change of administration upon our foreign service; pending negotiations drop, advantages gained and rights secured are often lost with the coming of new and inexperienced men. Let us place the service under civil-service regulations; thereby we will relieve the President and the Department of State from a considerable pressure for office, will improve the service, and will make it more creditable and beneficial to our country.

Oscar S. Straus.

EX-MINISTER TO CHINA.

THERE is no question of graver import than civil-service reform. Appointments in pursuance of this policy mean essential fitness and special training. Valuable in all public stations, it is invaluable in the consular and diplomatic service. In diplomacy we may stumble upon an exceptionally competent man, without antecedent experience—like Franklin, who introduced the youngest of civilizations into the family of nations; or Burlingame, who did the same office for the oldest of civilizations. These exceptions do not invalidate the rule. Moreover, Franklin and Burlingame were surrounded with circumstances beyond the ordinary range of diplomacy.

I have a personal knowledge of most of our American legations—all in Asia with the exception of Persia; and all in Europe outside of St. Petersburg, and The Hague. The result of my observations is the conviction that in no branch of public service does the present system do more harm than in the management of our relations with foreign nations.

As I have had, however, an official experience with our consuls and legations in the East, I will, with your permission say a word regarding them. My observations in China emphasized the conviction that appointments to Oriental posts should be governed by strenuous rules of civil service. I use the term "Oriental" as embracing China, Corea, Siam, and Japan. Our interests in those countries are unique. They require special study, and their own methods of administration; assuredly so, if we look toward an American policy, with its splendid possibilities, in the Pacific.

No one can study our El Dorado empire on the Pacific, with its impending, imminent future, and what may be achieved with wisdom and courage, without feeling that our influence should be paramount at all points between San Francisco and Singapore. The definite step toward this will be found in a consular and diplomatic service carefully educated for the work, its members familiar with the language, customs, superstitions, traditions, and history of extraordinary races of men. This service should be a permanent one, for the reason that the qualities and attainments requisite in Oriental countries would impair usefulness at other posts. The ethics of success in the East would have questionable value in Western nations.

England, ever wise in the conservation of her empire, is especially wise in Asia. The career of an English official in the East is as a rule permanent. Sir Thomas Wade spent his public life in China; was many years Her Majesty's minister at Peking, and retired only when too old for public employment. Sir Harry Parkes, who died while English minister at Peking, had served, as he told me, forty-three years in the East. Beginning as student-interpreter in China, he passed through all the grades until he became envoy to Japan as well as to China. Sir Robert Hart, now at the head of Chinese customs, and the most powerful foreigner in the Chinese empire, has held that post for a generation. This policy of unmenaced consecutive service results in an earnest, logical, determined policy, and its effect is seen in the steady growth of English prestige—a prestige that should rest with the United States. We had it under Burlingame. We have lost it as among the wretched consequences of the political methods which govern our public life.

Appointments to these Eastern points should be made from college graduates as far as possible—from the best material open to executive selection. The standard of choice should be high. Candidates should be taken in their youth, at a cadet age, and be submitted at their posts of duty to a rigid elementary training, becoming at first student-interpreters. We should take as much pains in fitting them for this peculiar work as we do with our cadets at Annapolis and West Point. All higher appointments should be made from this class, and promotions should be the reward of experience and merit. There should be a bureau in the State Department charged with Oriental interests, dealing with China, Corea, Siam, Japan, and perhaps Hawaii, as a distinct branch of the government economy. Years would pass before this system would have full fruition. It would come, however, and be of inestimable value.

It was my privilege, as it was my duty, to urge this policy upon the Arthur administration when I had the honor of serving it as minister to Peking. My regret that it was not adopted deepens with experience. I am persuaded that civil-service reform would have made America paramount in the East. I am afraid we have lost the opportunity, and that in the coarse and greedy lust for patronage we have, "like the base Indian, thrown a pearl away richer than all his tribe."

John Russell Young.

