



*Yours sincerely,  
Leonard F. Parker.*

LEONARD F. PARKER, A. M.

Professor of History in Iowa College, Grinnell, author of "Higher Education in Iowa," 1893, etc., etc.

## PRESIDENT GRANT'S DES MOINES ADDRESS.

BY PROF. L. F. PARKER.

President Grant's speech in Des Moines, September 29,\* 1875, at the ninth annual meeting of the Society of the Army of the Tennessee, was a very remarkable one. The report of it, which was most widely circulated, was no less remarkable. "The silent man" made his longest speech on that occasion probably, reading it from a hastily penciled manuscript. No one anticipated that he would address his late comrades in arms in words of warning of a possible conflict in the near future between American "patriotism and intelligence on the one side and superstition, ambition and ignorance on the other," or that he would urge the public support of common schools as an essential safeguard against such an impending evil.

The report of it which slipped into type and was then telegraphed over the country was strangely inaccurate, also. Its most serious error represented the President as adjuring his hearers to oppose the educational policy which the nation had entrenched in the ordinance of 1787 and which had become popular in the states. He was made to say, substantially, "support common schools and none above the common schools."

That this part of the report was an utter misrepresentation was suspected by few, and they found it difficult to explain, even to themselves, how such a complete uniformity should exist in the reports of the speech made by many writers, or why no word of objection should be uttered by Grant himself who remained in the city till sometime after the address was in print and in the hands of possibly thousands of readers.

It seemed reasonable, then, that a college president, who

---

\*The date was not "October 6" as it has often been given unless the *official* report is incorrect.

was making an argument against higher education by the state, should introduce that speech into it. He said: "A turn of the tide is at hand." "Gen. Grant thinks he sees that popular education must unload the upper tiers of institutions which have been piled upon it of late years, in order to save common schools from Catholic assaults." The present writer could neither believe that Grant intended all he was reported to have said or that "a turn of the tide" against all public education above common schools was "at hand." He accordingly prepared a paper for the State Teachers' Association on that subject. He entered upon his work chiefly to prove that there had been no change in public sentiment concerning the wisest educational policy, but felt obliged to speak as follows of Grant's speech as it had reached the great public:

"Without considering the report that that speech was fashioned in Des Moines or that an unpresidential hand introduced a few words into it which the speaker did not notice and would not approve, the speech itself does not seem to sustain these extreme and positive declarations. Only a single sentence in all the speech can by any possibility be tortured into opposition to all education by the state except that in common schools, and that one is sandwiched into an argument against sectarian education and made a part of it. It was this sectarian education, and this only, as we believe, at which he aimed all his blows. However, it must be conceded that no man competent to weigh words fairly and resolved to state his convictions honestly, could affirm that the intention of the speaker in the use of the words in question is absolutely unquestionable. If he intended all the hostility to higher education by the state which his words could mean, they are curiously out of place; if he did not, they are certainly infelicitous."

Before I read that paper in public I concluded to settle the question of Grant's intention, if possible, without regard to the words he used. To make the effort more certain of success I induced the then governor of the State to subscribe the letter of inquiry which I had prepared. Gen. Grant's reply was as follows:

EXECUTIVE MANSION, WASHINGTON, }  
 NOVEMBER 17th, 1875. }

HON. S. J. KIRKWOOD, Iowa City, Iowa:

DEAR SIR—Your letter of the 4th inst. was received about the time I was starting for New York City, one week ago yesterday. I expected to answer it immediately on my return, but permitted the matter to escape my mind until this time.

What I said in Des Moines was hastily noted down in pencil and may have expressed my views imperfectly. I have not the manuscript before me as I gave it to the Secretary of the Society. My idea of what I said is this: "Resolve that the State or Nation, or both combined, shall furnish to every child growing up in the land, the means of acquiring a good common school education," etc.

Such is my idea and such I intended to have said.

I feel no hostility to free education going as high as the State or National government feels able to provide—protecting, however, every child in the privilege of a common school education before public means are appropriated to a higher education for the few. Yours truly,

U. S. GRANT.

Thus it was made clear as the sun that Grant's thought was but an echo of a well-settled, long-cherished American idea. It was worthy of the man and of his office. But the distortion of his meaning had flown swifter than the wind to every quarter of the land and was staining pages of current history in every hamlet of the Nation. That letter was caught up eagerly everywhere from Boston to San Francisco. It relieved the President of the odium of being esteemed a blundering thinker on an educational topic, but not entirely from the suspicion of having been a blundering speaker.

Thus, "What did Grant *say* in Des Moines?"—became an inquiry of the curious, and especially of those who had occasion, at times, to study remarkable and successful falsifications of public speeches or of important public documents. Some were inclined to think that this was a striking instance of a blunder by a soldier who was more accurate in the use of his sword than in the construction of his sentences. Others deemed it a case of artful forgery. The present writer maintained a sort of intermittent interest in that manuscript, and took a step occasionally to ascertain what it did actually contain. These efforts have been somewhat minutely detailed in his monograph on Education in Iowa which was published by the National Bureau of Education. The result was a demonstration (if any fact of history can be demonstrated) that Grant *wrote* exactly what he intended to

say on the point we are considering. The evidence, in brief, was as follows:

1. The printed report of Gen. L. M. Dayton, the secretary of the society before which the address was delivered, indicates it.\* Gen. Dayton wrote me that he put it in type with the utmost care and directly from Grant's manuscript.

2. A member of congress examined that manuscript in the White House and gave me his certificate that the paragraph under discussion agreed exactly with Sec'y Dayton's report.

3. Gen. W. W. Belknap, Grant's Secretary of War, sent me a photograph of Grant's pencilings which he had caused to be taken. Col. Fred D. Grant wrote me that his father, on his death-bed, pronounced the Belknap photograph (which I had sent him) an accurate reproduction of his Des Moines speech. (That photograph appears in fac simile on accompanying pages in this number of THE ANNALS )

The proof of what Grant *intended* to write and of what he *did* write is thus unnecessarily abundant.

How was it possible, then, that the falsified report should secure a place in type so nearly universal that few writers have ever seen the address in any other form? It was delivered in Des Moines twenty-two years ago and it is said that not a single non-falsified copy of it which was printed there can now be found! One reporter is confident that it was printed correctly in his paper, but the number in which it was supposed to have appeared can not be discovered in any public or private file in the city. But the change was easily made. The report, as printed in *The Iowa State Register*, contained interpolations of two or three letters and three words which effected the falsification. Printed slips of that report were then used in sending telegrams to the great dailies, and these became the trusted authorities of writers of magazine articles and of bound volumes.

Such an error in a semi-state paper, and one of such persistent vitality, is legitimately an object for searching examination. Shall we class it with literary frauds, with

\*Reunions of the Society of the Army of the Tennessee, 1872-'78, p. 385.

Isidorian Decretals in ecclesiastical history and with Roorbacks in politics? Prof. Hammond, a learned Iowa writer, some years ago, classed it among "frauds of the most surprising character."\*

The gentleman who made that report for *The Register* now tells us that the error crept into his notice after the copy left his hand and escaped correction by careless proof reading. It is to be regretted that this explanation was not given and emphasized some years ago, and so emphasized that best informed Des Moines writers should have been altogether unable to make any serious mistake in 1897 as to this sentence on common schools. Perhaps those most familiar with the possibilities of grave errors in the rush of newspaper offices will be most inclined to pronounce this simply an unlucky accident. Surely, none will be anxious to insist on giving it the worst possible construction. All have a right to expect that Des Moines pre-eminently and Iowa especially, will take such pains in calling attention to the accurate reproduction of that speech that it shall be impossible for the twentieth century to perpetuate the libel on Grant which the last quarter of the nineteenth has so persistently repeated. Grant's educational views were as wise as the strategy which culminated at Appomattox.

Americans cannot afford to do Grant a grave injustice.

---

\*Hammond's Lieber's Hermeneutics, p. 74.

Comrades

It always affords me much gratification to meet my old comrades in arms of 10-14 years ago, and to live over again the trials and hardships of those days, in the <sup>hardships</sup> ~~impulse~~ for the promotion & perpetuation of our free <sup>institutions</sup> ~~government~~. We believed then, and believe now that we had a government worth fighting for, and if need be dying for. How many

of our comrades of those  
 days paid the latter price  
 for our preserved Union.  
 Let their ~~names~~ <sup>names & sacrifices</sup>  
 be ever green in our memory.

Let not the results of  
 their sacrifices be destroyed.  
 The Union & free institu-  
 tions for which they fell  
 should be held more  
 dear for their sacrifices.

We will not deny to  
 any of those who fought  
 against us any privilege  
 under the government  
 which we claim for



we receive. On the contrary  
 we welcome all of <sup>such</sup> them  
 who come forward in  
 good faith to help build  
 up the waste places, and  
 perpetuate our institutions  
 against all enemies as  
 brothers in full interest  
 with us in a common  
<sup>But we are not</sup>  
 invitation. It is to be hoped  
 prepared to apologize for the part  
 that <sup>we took</sup> later trials will never  
 befall our country. In this  
 sentiment no class of  
 people can more heartily  
 join than the soldier

who submitted to the dangers, trials & hardships of the Camp & the battle field, on which ever side he may have ~~been found~~ <sup>fought</sup>. No class of people are more interested in guarding against a recurrence of those days. Let us then begin by guarding against every ~~stronger~~ enemy threatening the perpetuity of free Republican institutions. I do not bring into this

Assemblage politics, certainly not partizan politics. but it is a fair subject for the deliberation of soldiers to consider what may be necessary to secure the prize for which they battled. In a Republic like ours when the citizen is the sovereign and the official the servant, when no power is exercised except by the will of the people it is important that the sovereign - the people - should possess intelligence

The free school is the promotor  
of that intelligence which is  
to preserve us, <sup>as by our Nation</sup> If we are to  
have another contest in  
the near future of our  
<sup>national</sup> existence I predict that  
the dividing line <sup>will</sup> ~~is not~~  
to <sup>not</sup> be Mason & Slaxens  
but between <sup>patriotism &</sup> intelligence on  
the one side & Superstitions  
Ambition & ignorance on the  
other. Now in this Centennial  
of our <sup>national</sup> existence,  
year, I believe it a good time  
to begin the work of <sup>strengthening</sup> ~~preparing~~  
the <sup>foundation of the house</sup> ~~house~~ <sup>commenced</sup> ~~to stand~~ <sup>erected</sup> which  
<sup>has</sup> ~~is~~ <sup>seen</sup> by our patriotic forefathers been

~~Resolved~~ to have, one  
hundred years ago at  
Concord & Lexington Let  
us all labor to add all  
needed guarantees for the  
more perfect security of Free  
Thought, Free Speech, a Free  
Press, Pure Morals, Unfettered  
Religious Sentiment, and of  
Equal Right & Privileges to  
all men irrespective of  
~~sex~~ Nationality, Color or  
Religion. Encourage free  
schools and resolve that not  
one dollar of money ap-  
propriated to their support

no matter how raised, shall  
be appropriated to the sup-  
port of any sectarian school.  
Resolve that within the state  
or Nation or both combined  
shall support institutions  
of learning, <sup>sufficient to</sup> ~~that will~~ afford  
to every child growing up  
in the ~~land~~ <sup>land</sup> the opportuni-  
ty of a good common  
school education, unmixed  
with sectarian, pagan or  
atheistical tenets. Leave  
the matter of religion to  
the family, unto the church  
& the private school supported

entirely by private contributions  
Keep the Church and state  
~~separate~~ forever separate,  
With these Lifeguards I believe  
the battles which created us "the  
Army of the Tennessee" will  
not have been fought in  
vain

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.