

"PRACTICAL POLITICS," AS EXPERIENCED BY AN  
IOWA PIONEER LEGISLATOR

Daniel Kerr

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Johnson Brigham,<sup>1</sup>

My dear friend:

Your very kind letter of the 16th came to hand Saturday. I am seventy years old today and it was a pleasant surprise to receive your letter, and there are very few living from whom such a letter would have been a greater pleasure. You had about as fair a chance to examine my record and to judge of my motives as any one and hence your commendation is a sincere pleasure. In looking back over my life, I mean my political life, in view of the recent reawakening of the public conscience, I sometimes almost wonder where I got the impulses that determined my action, and I think a sentiment my mother often gave me as a rule had as much influence as any other, namely: "Avoid the appearance of evil."

In my first legislative session as a member of the Illinois legislature a gentleman who was president of a mutual insurance company which had been changed to a stock company said to me that they desired some amendments to their charter, and that if I would assist them to have them made he would be pleased to favor me with some stock in the new company. I was under some obligations to the gentleman as he was president of a school board and had given me a position in a city school, and as examiner had given me a certificate some years before, but I said to him that if they were proper amendments I would be glad to favor them but that I would not think of taking any stock for my services. He told an old friend, the editor of the *Alton Telegraph*, that he was afraid he had offended me, but he never mentioned the matter to me again. I had many offers to introduce bills for charters in which my name was proposed as one of the members, but in every case I refused and would introduce no such bills unless assured that it was to accomplish some good public purpose, and none in which I was named as a member.

I never used a dollar in a way that I was not willing it should be

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<sup>1</sup>Johnson Brigham, state librarian since 1898, was editor of the *Cedar Rapids Republican*, the leading newspaper of the Fifth District, during Mr. Kerr's political career, and was, as indicated in this letter, a loyal supporter of the Congressman. Mr. Brigham kindly allows the *ANNALS* to publish this letter.—Editor.

published. One very disturbing case occurred. I was informed by the editor of the *Belle Plaine Union*, then editing the paper at Dysart, that a certain man in Geneseo Township, Tama County, had been hired to work for the Democratic candidate for judge and for Congress, but that if fifteen dollars was given him he could be bought off. I said I would use no money for any such purpose, but the rascal changed about ten votes and the Republican candidate for judge was beaten by only three majority. In my first campaign in Illinois I was told if I did not treat I would be beaten, but I said I would not pay any such penalty for an election, and was elected over an old Democratic politician who spent money in all the saloons, by about 1200 majority in a close district. The man I defeated had been senator before and was subsequently a member of the House. In all my experience I never asked a man to vote for me, and never suggested any one as a delegate for me in any convention, nor made any pledge except such as was implied by my public profession of principles. I never asked for a railroad pass and never used one except those sent me when I was a member of the legislature.

I never had any great anxiety to be in public life, and still think that a long tenant in office gradually comes to be a representative and easily develops into a boss, some of course more easily than others. One of the choicest recollections of my public life was this: John W. Ross, a nephew of General Ross of Illinois, was a member with me in the Illinois legislature. He was the youngest member and I was the next youngest. We were both favored by being made members of the Judiciary Committee. One evening we were sitting on the steps of the Leland Hotel. I said to him, "Mr. Ross, I think you intend to be governed by high and pure motives in public life and wish to bear an untarnished name, and if you do you had better vote against the Lake Front Bill" which I had learned was being aided by bribery, and he did vote against it. I had not ever heard of him for years, but he had gone to Washington, and he called on me and said, "I have always thought of your talk with me on the steps of the Leland Hotel." He was made postmaster at Washington by Cleveland and had such a fine character and record that President Harrison made him president of the district government.

It did not break my heart to retire from public life, and fifteen years after I don't feel as if my mental vigor is impaired. I have often regretted that I did not carry out my purpose to retire from the contest for governor because I was morally certain that Wheeler would be nominated. I had got some letters strongly urging me to run, and among them one from Phil Schaller who went so far as to say he would not vote for Wheeler; also a letter from Mr. Farwell of Jones County in which I was promised his support, but told him not to commit himself to me, a letter which somehow he did not understand, for I counted him one of my most valued friends. I was fearful that the candidate

for lieutenant governor would be offended because I did not retire, but I met Mr. Poyneer afterwards and I found he did not care.

Thanking you again for your kind remembrance, and also again for the uniform support you gave me while in public life, and wishing for you many years of life and usefulness, I have the honor to be

Very truly yours,

DANIEL KERR.

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GOVERNOR GEAR WRITES HIS PRIVATE SECRETARY

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Washington, D. C., February 10, 1894.

Wm. H. Fleming Esq.

Des Moines, Iowa.

My Dear Fleming:

I am in receipt of the three copies of the paper with sundry articles, evidently written by yourself. Wm. Thompson of the First Cavalry was never anything but a major. Fitz Henry Warren was its first colonel.

Apropos of the election between Miller and Thompson, you may have forgotten that the poll books of the Kanesville precinct were stolen and a contest ensued for the seat. Charles Mason, late Chief Justice of the Territory, was counsel for Thompson. In a discussion in a law office in Keokuk on the case the question was raised "What has become of the poll books?" Mason had on an overcoat and in rising from his chair a bundle dropped out. On investigation it proved to be the stolen poll books. Such is the truth of history.

I notice the flags are to be moved to the State House and put in cases prepared for them. I wish that you would write an article to Lafe Young's paper, calling attention to the fact that if it had not been for the six months' hard work of my wife those flags would not have been in a state of preservation at this time. You know all about it.

Yours truly,

JNO. H. GEAR.

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