

THE PALIMPSEST

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VOL. LI

ISSUED IN JANUARY 1970

No. 1

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The United States in 1869

The passing of the decade of the 1960's has been viewed with mixed emotions by most Americans. The decade has been dominated by a war costly in blood and money that was far removed from this Nation. It has been marked by strained relations with Castro's Cuba. It has seen the United States, unquestionably the greatest Nation after World War II, grope and stumble as it attempted to wear the mantle of World Power held by England over a long period of years. It has been confronted by wars, and rumors of war as two great ideologies—Communism and Democracy—seek to gain mastery throughout the world, a world in the throes of political, economic, social, and religious revolt.

Although the generation of the 1960's may have felt an over-emphasis of foreign affairs in their life, the situation has many parallels to what was happening throughout the world a century ago. A glance through Iowa newspapers of the 1860's reveals the United States involved in numerous

incidents, some of which were held in abeyance during our Civil War. Thus, the Maximilian Affair in Mexico had alerted the American people to the danger of allowing a powerful foreign nation like France to become entrenched on their southern border. Historians have advanced the theory that the Reconstruction Period might have taken a different turn had North and South united and joined forces against a common foe—France and its royal puppet, Maximilian. Certainly, the waving of the “Bloody Shirt” would not have been so successfully resorted to by politicians seeking office had an outbreak of war taken place at that time between France and the United States.

The United States was constantly in danger of being embroiled in a war with Spain as hot-headed sympathizers tried to get the President of the United States to recognize the insurgents in Cuba. President Grant was continually confronted with this problem but preferred attempting to secure a naval base on Santo Domingo rather than extending recognition to Cuba and thereby antagonizing Spain.

The Alaska Purchase consummated by Secretary Seward in 1867, had caused as much comment, pro and con, in the press of Iowa, as it did in Eastern newspapers. For many Iowans back in 1869, as they looked forward to 1870, were destined to learn what they already must have realized as a fact, that the Frontier Line of 1870 still lingered

in the Hawkeye State, and included all of Lyon, Osceola, Sioux, and O'Brien counties. And much of the area sixty miles to the east and south of these counties was sparsely settled.

Iowans a century ago were well aware of the world about them. A study of Iowa newspapers for the period showed a goodly amount of space devoted to foreign affairs. Perhaps the most concise account of the international scene was summarized in the *Iowa State Register* (Des Moines) of January 1, 1870. In a New Year's editorial entitled "The Old and the New," the *Register* records:

Into the path that opens before our feet to-day let us all proceed with courage and faith. We all have work to do. The year 1869 was one which will be marked and famous in the history of all time. During its days wonderful progress was made and mighty works accomplished. In the Old World there has been in one, almost a hundred of years progress. In Spain liberty has driven a queen from her throne, and given the people a government too nearly a Republic to be called a despotism; while in France, Austria, and Prussia, monarchs have saved their scepters by concession. China, for forty centuries undisturbed and despotic, has felt the progress achieved in 1869, and now trembles in revolution. In Britain great reforms have been accomplished, which have made the people freer and the queen much less a queen. Fed by the fires on the mountains of neighboring nations, uneasy France dreams again of liberty, while the Pope rules with religious tyranny in Italy only by license of French bayonets and the shelter of the French flag. Nearer home,

Cuba is almost free, and South America cannot quiet the revolutions within her States any more than she can smother the powers of her volcanos. In our country, 1869 has accomplished, and leaves only for 1870 to ratify, the grand measure which will make all the men of America complete in full citizenship.

Just as newspapers placed the Space Program and Man's Landing on the Moon at the head of the list for 1969, so the *Iowa State Register* took note of the great achievements that had been accomplished a century ago. According to the *Register*:

In works and achievements, some of those of 1869 must stand as the mightiest of deeds yet accomplished by man. The Pacific Railroad, that stupendous work which ribbed the Continent with iron, and married the oceans in commerce; the Suez Canal, the mighty achievement that has added a new world to trade, and brought the past and the present together; the laying of another Atlantic Cable, again subduing the great sea to the mastery of the quick shuttle of civilization—are the three mighty triumphs accomplished in the year just gone. It would seem impossible for as much to be accomplished in the year we are now upon. But we may do more. Surely there remains more to be done. We must keep step to the march we have begun, and with brain and brawn work bravely on to make every year greater as it comes.

The parallels existing in the world in 1970 are just as crucial as those outlined by the *Iowa State Register* a century ago. Vietnam, India versus Pakistan, Israel versus the Arabs, Communist China versus Taiwan, North Korea versus South

Korea, Nigeria versus Biafra, and a score of others, have kept the world teetering on the brink of eternity. Although there was no atomic bomb a century ago, the newly-created trench warfare, the bitter hand-to-hand fighting, the fierce cavalry charges, the long sieges, were fraught with intense hardship, suffering, starvation, and death. The 30,000 Iowans killed, wounded, or missing in the Civil War almost equaled the losses sustained by the United States in the Vietnam struggle. And both have been called "useless" and "needless" by their contemporaries.

One difference does appear, namely the absence of the so-called "generation gap"—a non-existent chasm conceived by perplexed Americans to explain the conduct of their misguided youths. Actually, the forebears of these "misguided youths" managed to come through a devastating Civil War, eleven years of Reconstruction, and a cataclysmic economic panic and recession without their elders conjuring up the expression "generation gap." No generation in America would have been more entitled to excuse themselves because of a so-called "generation gap" than the youth living in the period between 1860 and 1880.

Then, as now, and of course in varying degrees resulting from the passage of a century of time, Iowans were confronted with problems involving race, color, creed, and sex. In 1857 it was the Dred Scott Decision that led the Nation (and

Iowa) into one of the darkest periods in its history. In 1954 a Supreme Court decision sought to achieve what the Civil War and the 14th and 15th Amendments had failed to achieve. Almost a score of years have passed and the Nation is still in turmoil over the problem of "Equal Rights," the elimination of "Second Class Citizens," and the rights of such minority groups as the Amish and the Tama Indians to have their own schools. Sometimes, it would seem, the best educated, and presumably the most broad-minded and tolerant, assume a pose eclipsing the most despotic fascist of the 20th Century.

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