

# THE WEEK.

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## A STUDY IN AMERICAN POLITICS.

IN the history of the Republican Party, three facts are important as bearing upon the merit or demerit of the career of that party, and as illustrating fundamental and universal tendencies in the working of popular government.

First, a tenure of power stretching over an unbroken space of twenty-four years is something new in the experience of latter-day constitutionalism. Secondly, the feebleness of opposition during nearly the whole of the long term of office is, in its way, quite as anomalous. Thirdly, the fidelity of the electorate to one party, and one and the same set of leaders, for so protracted a period, is a political curiosity, only explicable by peculiar circumstances in the life or the organisation of the community.

A party in office for close upon a quarter of a century, and invested with practically absolute authority, might reasonably be chargeable with the doing of great things for the public good. Give Mr. Chamberlain or Lord Randolph a strong and constant majority for twenty years, and he will change the social aspect of Britain and compel every Cabinet in Europe to review and recast its policy.

Still, it is doubtful if any leader, or any party, could usefully wield power continuously for twenty years, or even the half of that period, under any real constitutional system. The legitimate birth of a party results from a strong desire in those who engender it to remove some especial evil or introduce some particular good. The specific object attained, the normal and healthful operation of the mechanism of politics requires that there shall follow dissolution and reconstitution. Under the parliamentary system this result is practically, if not ideally, effected; under the Presidential system the operation is dilatory, cumbrous, and inefficient. The difference is fundamental in its origin. The British Constitution takes note of, while the American Constitution ignores, the modern scheme of government by the agency of parties. To say this is not to condemn the American Constitution, or those who made it; but one may question the soundness of all the fine things said of it and them. One may even suggest that the much-lauded conservatism of the American people and their undeniable patience are due to the difficulty of inducing political change after the desire of change has crystallised in the public mind. The Executive is in for a fixed term, and so is the Legislature, and there is no correlation of tenure between them. Members of the House of Representatives are chosen thirteen months before their services are required, and they and the questions involved in their election are often forgotten before they take their seats; but if they were assembled as soon as the conflict should be over, it would make no difference, for on one side of them would be an immovable and equally powerful second chamber, and on the other an Executive completely independent of them. One may conceive of the confusion of British politics should the hereditary chamber begin to turn its nominal functions into realities. Here there is not

confusion, because things have been always as they now are, but there are intervals of stagnation of political thought, and action highly injurious, and sometimes deeply menacing, to the public weal. We proceed to practical illustration.

The Republican Party was brought to birth by men who felt that the time had come, in the public interest, to lay a firm hand upon Slavery and compel it to return to and keep its lawful and natural place in the body politic. It had a legal right to exist within such States as chose to have it within their borders, and it had a natural right to live and prosper, so far as it could, in fair competition with the opposite system of free labour. It had no right of any sort to constitute itself the touchstone, and even the cornerstone, of American politics, and dominate the creeds and morals of the whole country. But the slaveholders, knowing that privilege and not equality was necessary to the preservation of the cherished institution which they deemed essential to their prosperity, resolved to fight for privilege, and this resolution the leaders of the new party met with courage, ability, and success. The cause of the strife having perished in the struggle, it became the right and duty of the Republican Party to bestow a legal status of equality upon the Freedmen, and to arm them with the ballot as the best practical means of protecting them against the resentment and prejudice of their late owners. This done, the mission of the party was fully ended, and its dissolution was desirable by reason of the urgency of great financial and economic questions alien to its origin, and as to which it was equally destitute of training and authority. But the heads of the party were those who had toiled for power in the cold atmosphere of opposition, who had laboured without cease or reward when power came yoked with peril, and they now wished rest and refreshment in the place of ease and greatness, as it had now become through their endeavours. In England, peerages and pensions would have discharged the nation's debt of gratitude; in America it had to go unpaid, or be liquidated at a heavy cost to the national interests.

Glaring with like ferocity upon their natural opponents and such of their followers as favoured moving with the times, the Republican leaders organised the negro voters they had created with good intent into a pretorian guard for themselves, and, to make that vote effective in Federal elections, ruthlessly arrested the returning peace and prosperity of the lately insurgent States by overturning their local Governments and disfranchising the intelligent part of the electorate. Having thus secured the South to their own ends, they turned to the North and fanned into flame there the fast-dying embers of the distrust and hatred that had not unnaturally been kindled by the long and bloody civil war. And thus it came about that a party, whose dawn was glorious and forenoon bright, went to its setting in cold and inky shadow.

During three-fourths of the period of its incumbency, the history of the Republican Party is one mainly of selfishness and corruption. The Civil Service was turned into an army of mercenaries, obstructing the progress of the country and eating out its substance. Questions vital to the general welfare were obscured, ignored, or postponed. The public conscience was deadened and the popular intelligence dulled by a succession of combats fought without principle and ended without result of public good. The political tone of the country continually fell in quality amid such blighting and corrupting surroundings. Few men in public life to-day, or seeking entry to public life, are equipped with reasons, convictions, or resolves that bear upon any question of high concern to the fortunes or morals of the country. The present salvation and future hope of our political system lies in that body of private men who are determined to be of no party till party government is restored to its true lines and limits. The official campaign book of the Democratic Party, besides reciting such passive services as bringing to an end a long catalogue of Republican misdoings, invites the suffrages of the people for the candidates of that party at the approaching Congressional election chiefly upon the ground that the Democratic Administration has granted larger and speedier pensions, appointed more Union soldiers to office, listened more readily to the wishes of "Labour," distributed better seeds among the farmers, is more concerned in promoting trade with North, South, and Central America, and readier to deal with the railway problem of equality of rates for long hauls and short hauls, than can be claimed or shown by the party opposite. What the Democratic Party is prepared to do about such great questions as the double standard of value, the tariff that plethorises the Treasury and starves the people