

Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War



PATRIOTIC RECOLLECTIONS



What if We Had Failed?

**From the GAR department of Kentucky Yearbook 1914-1915
Dept. Historian Cyrus Edward's Report**

Brother Edwards is speaking of the war and presented the question ... what if we had failed?

If we had been fought to a standstill, and if at the close of the year 1865, or a year or two later, our supplies of men and money had failed, and - with both sides exhausted, industry prostrated, mountains of debt on every hand, general bankruptcy both public and private, with more than half of the young men in the land dead and an army of cripples and women and children to care for - we had been compelled to give up the conflict for our united country, what sort of peace could have been arranged that would have lasted any longer than when we could have been able to fight again? How long would the eleven seceded states have been able to agree among themselves when released from the military despotism set up by the Confederacy during the war? Could they have disbanded their armies while surrounded by the bitter enemies of human slavery, and with the loyal mountain country of East Tennessee and North Carolina extending like a wedge into the interior of the Confederacy? Glorious old East Tennessee - the Helvetia of America; with a people whose veins are filled with the best blood of the whole world; a people who may be overrun by numbers, and will suffer every form of hardship and persecution cheerfully for conscience sake, but who cannot be conquered or reduced to slavery, and who never could have been held in even a nominal subjection in their mountains without the constant presence of an overwhelming military power.

The dream of Jeff Davis and a few other leaders of secession of building up a strong slave empire around the Gulf of Mexico would have failed, as, even while the war was in progress here, the European powers had taken advantage of our division and set up an empire in Mexico, presided over by an Emperor of the house of Hapsburg, and upheld by foreign bayonets. This empire would have been a standing menace to Texas and Arkansas, and hostile to any expansion of the Confederacy westward - firstly, from selfish motives, and, secondly, from opposition to the spread of human slavery, which had then become, or was fast becoming, a moral stench in the nostrils of the whole world professing any sort of pretensions to Christianity; this opposition arising only partly from humanitarian motives, and largely from an economic-labor point of view. The Confederacy had issued hundreds of millions of bonds which were held in Europe, and if it had achieved its independence the bondholders would have demanded payment and their governments would have upheld their demands with armies and navies. The South, utterly worn out by war, with no navy, no money or credit and no friends (for their pretended friends during the war were only friends for the purpose of breaking up our

government) would have been at the mercy of these combined foreign powers. Being unable to pay their bonds and other debts in Europe they would have been compelled to grant commercial privileges, and perhaps free ports, to foreigners, which would doubtless have developed later into colonies or protectorates, as has been the usual course in the history of similar cases. The government having been founded on the principle that any state could withdraw at will from the others, could not have held long together. The interests of the different states would soon have clashed and separations would have followed, and several weak, feeble states or confederacies would have been in existence - all burdened to the breaking point by taxation and dominated more or less by foreigners.

So much for the South. If we had failed what would have been the condition of the rest of our country and its people? They would at first have been in nearly the same condition of physical and financial exhaustion of the Southern states - burdened by a mountainous debt demanding a ruinous rate of taxation. They would have held together longer - not recognizing the right of secession - and would have had some advantages over the South in an incomparably better labor system, a large seafaring population, a much shorter coastline to defend against foreign aggression, and the boundary of the great plains to the west, but would have been subject to many ills enumerated for the South, only perhaps in a less degree. The Pacific States would have been taken from us at once, and probably all beyond the great plains would have gone with them. Our fishing rights would have been taken away and our commerce destroyed, and possibly we could have preserved our independence only by withdrawing mostly from the Eastern coast and living comparatively isolated in the interior, with a hostile Canada on the North and the unhappy Southern Commonwealths somewhere to the South, and with all the monarchical governments of the world anxious for, and willing to assist in, our destruction.

But now comes the worst of all, and it is something that would have been a weight upon one section only; where would have been the first division line?

Could it ever have been so drawn as to remain fixed and respected? On which side would Missouri have been placed, or how could that great Commonwealth have been divided? How would Maryland have stood, and what of our now beautiful Capital City? Where would Kentucky and West Virginia have been placed? If the line had been drawn along the Ohio River what rights and privileges would we GAR men enjoy here, or would we be here now? If the line had been drawn along our southern border how would our Confederate brethren enjoy the situation, or would they even be with us now? If the State had been divided where would the line have been drawn? If divided along Green River or Rolling Fork or any other possible way would anybody have been satisfied for a single day? How could the fugitive slave question have been handled otherwise than as was the right to property along the English and Scottish border for five hundred years? What would property be worth here, and what would our social condition be here now, after a half a century of border wars and reprisals, wherever the line might have been drawn? If we had failed we on the border would no doubt have been, and would now be, in about the same unsettled and unhappy condition that the unfortunate inhabitants of the valleys of the Rhine and the Danube have been for seventeen hundred years or more - from the reign of the Emperor Trajan even to this day. We would have no security of life or property; no power to protect our citizens abroad, or even on the frontiers of our own land; no power for good in the world and but little hope for ourselves in the future: and if this, the latest experiment of national self-government by the people, had failed, then perhaps it had been the last, and successful government of the common people, by the common people, for the common people, would possibly have been at an end for ages to come.

A mountainous country of small extent, with a hardy and warlike population, and little wealth to invite conquest, may possibly preserve its independence among more powerful nations, but if it is worth the attention of a conqueror it is idle to talk or think of a small nation of people maintaining their nationality long against powerful and aggressive neighbors with whom their interests clash. Among monarchical or military governments honor, truth, treaties solemnly entered into and all other moral obligations are thrown to the

winds when they clash with self-interests. It has always been so, and probably always will be so unless a change in human nature and national conscience shall be brought about by the Creator of all things. Look at Palestine, Poland, Grenada, Bohemia, Silesia, Holland, Belgium and Mexico, and see what would be our condition if we consisted of half a dozen or more little hostile states instead of the Great United Republic that we are.

We can in this world only protect our liberties by force - by armies and navies when it comes to the pinch - the treaties and peace societies and Hague or other tribunals are and will be worthless as factors for peace or for national protection, beyond the range of the big guns of our forts and ships of war, and it is well to remember that if we had failed half a century ago our country would not now be the wealthiest, freest and most powerful nation of the earth - able to maintain itself against all the world that lies beyond the three thousand miles of ocean that lies to the Eastward, and would to God that ocean might be ten times as wide as it is and the crossing bad at all seasons.

In view of the unnumbered woes that would probably have been visited on our country in case we, who met the storm, had failed to make good in the time that tried men's souls, and of the present happiness and contentment of the people of our land - so far above the average of the condition of mankind - and of the prestige and power to which our united country has attained, and of the impetus given to the cause of liberty and free government in the whole world, because we did not fail, it would seem that we were favored above all others in being permitted to take an active and useful part in the great events that laid the foundation for, as we hope and now believe, the permanent prosperity and union and happiness of our people, and the few of us who lived through those awful years of war and hardship and apparent ruin, and have been mercifully permitted to grow old in peace in the land, for the welfare of which and its free institutions, we staked our lives, should be proud, and we are every one of us proud, that in the days of our youth we stood up for our convictions of right like men; that we stood firm in the awful shock of battle; on the weary marches, in the heat of summer and in the cold and ice of winter; in the mud and the snow; in the darkness of night and storm on lonely picket posts; in hunger and thirst and pain in hospitals and prisons, and that we stood ready during all of that dreadful time, if it had been our lot, to "give the last measure of our devotion" to our country rather than that our cause should fail.

Respectfully presented in F., C. and L.,

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