

REORGANIZATION OF CIVIL GOVERNMENT.

SPEECH OF GOVERNOR PEIRPOINT,

DELIVERED AT

MECHANICS' HALL IN THE CITY OF NORFOLK

ON

Thursday Evening, February 16th, 1865.

A large and enthusiastic meeting of the citizens of Norfolk and Portsmouth was held at Mechanics' Hall, in Norfolk, on Thursday, the 16th inst.

W. T. Harrison, Esq., the President of the meeting, announced that His Excellency, the Governor of the Commonwealth, was present by invitation, whereupon loud calls were made for Governor Peirpoint, who took the stand amid loud and prolonged cheering, and having been introduced to the audience by the President—who prefaced the introduction by a few pertinent and felicitous remarks—said:

There has never been an occasion when I have not felt myself at home among the loyal people of Norfolk and Portsmouth. [Cheers.] Like most of the loyal people of Virginia, you know, by sad experience, what it costs citizens of Virginia, under Confederate domina-

tion, to be loyal to the government of our fathers. You had a military usurpation by the military agents of the so-called Confederate authorities, and, for more than twelve months, loyal men here were the victims of military oppression, from which you were relieved by the gallant blows of the men who strike beneath the folds of our national flag. [Cheers.] You then had for twelve months your own municipal government, which was suspended by the then military commandant here. I have now to congratulate you on the restoration of your civil government. [Cheers and applause.] So far as that military rule was necessary to promote the great object of putting down this wicked rebellion, no loyal man, so far as I know, or believe, objected to it, or refused to uphold it. [Cheers.] All that any loyal man objected to, was the obstruction of the usual operations of the civil government in matters exclusively committed by our Constitution and laws to civil officers.

[Renewed applause.] There never has been, in my judgment, the slightest cause for a difference of opinion amongst Union men upon this subject, or for a conflict, for a moment, between the civil authorities of the State and the military authorities of the nation; and I am happy in being able to assure you here to-night, of my earnest conviction, after a most agreeable, and to me highly satisfactory interview with the gallant officers who have the military command of this department, that there is no fear of any such conflict in future. [Great applause.] I think, fellow-citizens, that so far as the command of this military department is concerned, that we now have got the right men in the right places. They are earnest, *fighting* men, [cheers] and desire to have nothing to do with the civil fund. [Cheers.] When I say that there is no difference of opinion amongst loyal men in regard to the proper distribution of authority between the civil and military authorities, I mean that all intelligent men agree that in times of peace, the military power should be subservient to the civil authority, and in times of war the civil authority should be only so far subservient to the military power as to enable the latter to repel invasion or suppress "domestic violence" and rebellion; for civil government is the natural government of men. When a military necessity exists for the temporary suspension of civil government, loyal and patriotic men yield a cheerful obedience to the military authority; and when the exigency is past, they gladly and gratefully return to the established forms of civil government. I do not mean to say that *everybody* prefers civil to military rule, for we know that in all communities there are men who never do take a common-sense view of any subject. I do not flatter myself that the good people of Norfolk and Portsmouth have no such people amongst them, for they are to be found everywhere.

There are people who think that if they were called to occupy seats in the cabinet of the country they could carry on the Government much better than the President and his con-

stitutional advisers do; and there are other men, some in military garb, and some even who are not, who think that Grant and Sherman and Thomas and Sheridan, mismanage our military affairs; some think these military heroes who have done so much to enhance our national glory and restore peace to the country, don't get men enough killed, whilst others again insist that they get *too many* killed. (Laughter and cheers.) So we have a few men amongst us, who insist that they prefer military to civil rule, and I am inclined to concede that in some instances they have had pretty *substantial reasons* for the preference. (Laughter and applause.) Such men are the natural product of great revolutions. The people of this country, blessed as we were for three-fourths of a century with an unexampled and almost uninterrupted course of peace and prosperity, knew little or nothing of the direful effects of revolution, before we were awakened to a thrilling sense of its horrors and calamities by the breaking out of this wicked and fearful rebellion, which we rejoice to believe, is now, thanks to our invincible armies in the field, and navies on the seas, and their great leaders and commanders, fast staggering to its end. (Loud and prolonged applause.) We all know now something about the sort of men, and the sort of opinions which are produced by revolutions. Some men become illustrious for what they do, or dare or suffer for their country; some are distinguished for their philanthropic efforts to mitigate the calamities, and assuage the sufferings of the victims of war; but there are but too many, who are made selfish, unfeeling, unpatriotic and unprincipled, or have their selfishness and want of principle more strongly developed by revolution. They see destruction and spoliation running riot, as the handmaidens of civil strife, and they lose sight of all the moral landmarks set up by peace and order. Such men as they watch the flood of revolution bearing away the productions of peace and industry, and seize their grappling hooks to draw in and appropriate whatever of the property of their fellow citizens they

can gather from the drift. Such men have no love for the civil magistrate, and no desire to see his functions restored. (Laughter and cheers.) They are no particular friends of any sort of authority, but they prefer military authority if they can only be allowed to "make a big thing of it." (Applause.) But most men who take a common sense view of things, and who are patriotic and loyal, and I am proud to say that within the last few days I have had the very best opportunity to ascertain in very distinguished military circles, that we have just such men at the head of our armies in the field, (applause) who prefer to adhere to the good old maxims of our fathers, in regard to the end and object of Governments among men. I need not repeat to an intelligent audience like this I have the pleasure of addressing, that the civil authority is, and ought to be, the supreme power, in every well regulated Government, [applause,] and the office of the military is to support, uphold and defend the civil government.

When the magistrate is interrupted in the discharge of his duties, he calls in the posse, or power of the neighborhood or county to suppress the disturbance, restore order, and enable him to resume his functions. If the disturbance of the peace is too great to be put down by the posse, the civil magistrate gives way to the military officer, and the civil power steps out of the way. When order is restored, the military power in its turn steps aside, and says to the civil authorities, we have removed the obstructions in your way, and now you may safely perform your duties. [Applause.] Now, according to the theory of the institutions of this country, this terrible and unhallowed rebellion is a great disturbance of the public peace—called in the Constitution of the United States "domestic violence"—a monstrous and unprovoked attempt to interrupt and prevent the due and rightful exercise of civil authority by the civil government of the United States [loud applause]; and the government has called in the military to put down the disturbance. I think they are succeeding pretty well in that undertaking

and I am sure no true friend of civil government—certainly no man who stands by the restored government of Virginia—would for any earthly consideration throw the slightest obstacle in their way. [Long and continued applause.] Now, so far as the people of this section of Virginia are concerned, I am glad to find, upon consultation with the distinguished officers in command of this military department, that they agree with me in thinking that there is no good reason why the functions of the civil magistrates in your midst should not be resumed. [Loud cheers.] And here I may as well advert to an objection to the restoration of the civil government here, which I would pass over as childish and frivolous, but that I hear that it is urged with very great pertinacity by the enemies of the civil authorities. Perhaps this pertinacity proceeds from the want of a better or more plausible argument. [Applause.] We don't want the courts restored here, say these objectors, because we have some magistrates who are not as well fitted for their positions as they might or ought to be. Well, all I have to say about that is, that, if nobody was ever elected to offices in Norfolk or Portsmouth before who was not well qualified to perform the duties of that office, you have been the best governed people that ever existed anywhere. [Laughter and applause.] I know something about municipal authorities, and I do not recollect of having ever heard of a city, town, or State government where there was not a great deal of fault found; sometimes, too, with great justice, and a great deal of complaint about the incompetency of men in office. You hear of such complaints every day in Baltimore and Philadelphia, New York and Boston, and I will undertake to affirm, with as much justice as in Norfolk or Portsmouth. Why, it is no secret that there are plenty of men, even in Richmond, who doubt the wisdom and efficiency of the great high priest of the rebel church. [Laughter and applause.] I think the pages of history will bear me out in the assertion that even where kings claim a divine right to reign, the rulers of the people,

whether civil or military, have not always proven themselves to be the wisest or best of men. Now, as I have said, I will venture the assertion, without much fear of being refuted by a fair investigation, that your corporate authorities will compare favorably with similar bodies in any part of the country. [Applause.] But if it were not so, have you not the remedy in your own hands?

If a majority of the loyal people do not like their magistrates or any one of them,—(and loyal people only have a right to have likes or dislikes in the premises,) why all you have to do is to turn him or them out at the next election and put men you do like in their places. That is the very gist of republican institutions. That is the beauty of a civil government. [Cheers.] I am very well aware that some people make the same objection to the reorganized State Government, that others make to the City Government here. I have no doubt I have made some mistakes, and I can only claim credit for having labored to promote the restoration of a loyal government in Virginia, and the relief of the loyal people of my native State by the suppression of the rebellion within her borders, and that I have performed this labor to the best of my skill and judgment, *and with all my might* [Applause and cries of "That's so Governor."]—At times, I have been so much discouraged by the difficulties I met, that I have felt something like the old hunter in West Virginia did when he grappled with the bear. This hunter was a man of powerful physique, and very proud of his prowess; on one occasion he and two of his companions tracked a bear to a thicket, and he plunged in and soon found himself in the embraces of bruin; he held out manfully for a while but at last called out to his companions,—“Boys, come and take this cussed critter away from me.” But as I had undertaken the work, I resolved to go through with it unless the people could find a better man to do it, and I cannot withhold the expression of my acknowledgements to the patriotic men who have sustained me throughout in the effort to pre-

serve and maintain a loyal State Government in Virginia. The loyal men of Virginia have rivaled the fame of their sires of the days of '76—for they have seen “the days that try men's souls. [Applause] I know something of the feelings of a man who sees his relatives, friends and neighbors rushing madly into revolution, hears passionate appeals to his State pride, and fierce denunciations of the man who refuses to stand by the action of that dear old Commonwealth whose honor and fame is twined as it were around our very heartstrings; [cheers] but we had hundreds of heroes, here upon the seaboard, whose patriotic tones were echoed by thousands amid the mountains of West Virginia hurling proud defiance at threats of death, confiscation or exile from cherished friends and endeared homes, defying imprisonment and oppression in a hundred forms, for the sake of the constitution and the Union they honored and loved. (Loud applause). Such were the heroes who within nineteen days after the treasonable action of the State authorities at Richmond established a new State Government under the Constitution and laws of Virginia and the United States, and Virginia has no prouder record than the history of that time. (Renewed applause.) To these men I owed my first election as Governor of Virginia, and under the auspices of that Restored Government, I sent nearly twenty thousand brave hearted Virginians to fight the battles of the Union. But this is not all. I have the very best reasons for the assurance I give you here tonight, that there were, and are now thousands of true hearted and loyal men within the borders of our Commonwealth still kept down by Confederate bayonets, who regard the rebel usurpation with loathing and detestation, and are eagerly watching for the hour when they can range themselves under the banner of the Union and the Restored Government of Virginia. [Loud applause.] Nay, more, there are thousands of good men who have abandoned their homes and firesides, where some of them were wealthy, and nearly all independent, preferring to labor in exile

for their daily bread, rather than fight against the Union. (Continued applause.) Virginia, as we all know, has rendered herself illustrious by her sacrifices of domain "to promote the common welfare" of the Union. Mindful of her ancient fame, she shrank not from the greatest sacrifice of all, when she unhesitatingly gave Western Virginia, with all its rich valleys and noble population, when the exigencies of the public service called for the sacrifice, and yet, I am sorry to say that this very sacrifice has been made a pretext for the endeavor on the part of some men to deprive us of representation in the National Councils. To such men I have only to say that their loyalty has never been put to the test so nobly met by the men whom they seek to ignore.— (Applause and cries of that's so.) But enough of this; I think there is no further question in regard to our status as a State Government. I don't think it will be very long before, thanks to our brave armies, and the returning sense of loyalty of our deluded people, the State Government of Virginia, under the Constitution and the Union, is recognized by everybody and everywhere. (Renewed applause.)

And now, I must say something to you about my interview with the distinguished officers who command in this department, and the result of the very agreeable interchange of views and opinions between us at that interview. They concur with me entirely in the view that the civil courts should be at once opened to try all cases of controversy between white citizens and offences against the laws of the Commonwealth, and that the municipal authorities should resume their appropriate functions in regard to sanitary regulations, the cleaning and repairing of the streets, &c. [Tremendous cheering.] As Norfolk and Portsmouth will probably have a large number of soldiers on duty here during the war, it is conceded on all hands that the military authorities ought to have charge of the police, and continue to enforce police regulations. [Cries of "good."] A question of great interest and importance, not only to

you, but to all the citizens of the State, grows out of the emancipation proclamation of the President, and the subsequent legislation of Congress upon that subject, and the act of emancipation by your State Convention. I do not mean at this time to discuss the subject of our duties and responsibilities in regard to the African race. The rebellion has abolished slavery. [Applause.] The relation of master and slave exists no longer in Virginia, and the negro is torn loose from his old moorings by the flood of revolution, and he is at present drifting with the tide. What is to be done with him? All agree that for the present he is unfit to take care of himself; he needs to be instructed in the business of taking care of himself; this at least is the case with by far the greater part of those who have been set adrift by the revolution. Many of them are in the army, where they make good soldiers; others have shown their capacity for usefulness in various industrial pursuits; but there is still a large number—the greatest proportion, in fact—who, unaccustomed to the habits and feelings of free men, are little better than nuisances, and will continue so until time and instruction shall have taught them to adapt themselves to their new condition. And here the question comes up as to what is to be done to support the aged, the very young, the sick and the infirm, who cannot support themselves? I understand that the National Government acknowledges its obligation to relieve the State of this burden. The Northern States are equally responsible with us for the establishment of the institution of African slavery; the exigencies of the situation arising from the rebellion required its subversion, and the burden of taking charge of these freedmen must be shared by the whole nation. With these views of the subject, I concurred with the the military authorities in their decision to take charge of Sambo, and thus he is disposed of for the present to the satisfaction of all parties, including, as I hope, Sambo himself. [Cheers.]

Before I close my remarks I must say something to you about your and my duties in re-

gard to the support of the military authorities: I am satisfied that they mean to afford to the civil government all the assistance and protection that will be needed; all good citizens will endeavor on all occasions to afford to the military all the assistance required to correct abuses that are seriously detrimental to the military service. It has been ascertained that a very large amount of the supplies of the rebel army for the last six months have been drawn by way of the Blackwater through this port; and that but for these supplies General Lee would have had to evacuate Petersburg. Now, the commanding General has determined that this source of supply shall be cut off, and to effect this purpose he has, most wisely as I think, determined that there shall be no more permits granted to trade, or take supplies beyond our pickets. No doubt there will be suffering amongst worthy people caused by the enforcement of this regulation, but it can't be helped. Bad men have taken advantage of these permits to make money by supplying the rebels, and on them and their rebel coadjutors must the responsibility for this suffering rest. I hope every loyal citizen who desires the protection of the civil authority will exert himself to see that there shall be no violation of this order, and give prompt information of any and every attempt to violate it. Patriotism will prompt all loyal men to pursue this course, and interest should actuate all business men, if there be any here whose patriotism is sluggish, for if these supplies continue to be furnished to the enemy to any great extent, the ports will have to be closed. I am proud to know that in the searching investigation that has been instituted here to ascertain the parties who have been engaged in this infamous and treasonable traffic, not a single loyal Virginian has been implicated; but the traffic has been carried on by army followers from the North, leagued with rebel sympathisers in Virginia.

(Governor P. was about proceeding when a gentleman who was addressed as Major Davis, late of Gen. Butler's staff, ascended the platform and desired to know whether Governor

Peirpoint meant to charge Gen. Butler or Gen. Shepley with being privy to the abuse of permits to which he alluded.)

Governor Peirpoint. I have not named anybody as connected with these abuses. I have only urged my fellow citizens to be on the alert to prevent their recurrence. I can inform the gentleman, however, that a committee of Congress has been here to enquire into these abuses, and a military commission is now in session in this city charged with a like duty.

Major Davis. I know more about these things than you do.

Governor Peirpoint. I have not the slightest doubt of that. [Cheers and laughter.]

Major Davis. Will you allow me to make a remark or two?

Gov. P. Not till I am done. I was about to close my remarks, but since the question has been brought up in this way I will now say that I have conversed with men who have recently come from Lee's army—reliable men—who say that large supplies of bacon and other provisions came to that army from Norfolk, and that it was a common remark among the soldiers that Norfolk bacon was better than Canada and Nassau bacon; and I do believe and charge that these supplies were furnished with the connivance of some of the late military authorities here. [Applause and cries of "that's so."]

Postmaster Whipple. "It's a damned lie." [Cries of "put him out," and "oh no its only Butler's postmaster."]

Major Davis to Governor P. "If you don't stop I will arrest you on the spot." (Confusion and cries of "try it," "that game's played out," "do try it.") The chairman succeeded in restoring order, and Governor P. resumed. Well, this is a rich joke! I advise the citizens of Norfolk to assist the enforcement of a necessary and proper military order, and I am threatened with arrest, because forsooth some scoundrel who has violated the law may consider it a reflection on him. I don't pretend to say who has been guilty of this violation of the law and afforded such

material aid and comfort to the enemy; but somebody has done it, and those who have engaged in it ought to be punished. [Loud applause, mingled with a few hisses near the door.]

Major Davis. "You shall not bring the military authority into contempt here; if you say so, I will write the order for your arrest at that table."

Governor P. "Well, write away, and I will in the meantime finish my speech." [Laughter and applause.] I have little more to say. As I have already remarked I have as Governor of Virginia sent twenty thousand men into the army of the Union, and commissioned more than forty majors, all of whom went to the field and did their duty there. [Laughter and applause.] That does not look like bringing the military into contempt. [Applause.] And now fellow citizens, I again congratulate you on the restoration of civil authority in your midst, as I sincerely and earnestly hope never again to be suspended. [Loud and long continued applause.] You are blessed here with natural advantages for the prosecution of all the branches of agricultural and commercial industry, which renders this portion of Virginia a most desirable place

of abode. Your climate, your rich and varied scenery and your fruitful fields invite immigration and improvement, and the blessings of peace and union will soon, I trust, enable you to recall your misguided friends and neighbors to the ark of a once loved Union. In the language of the law-giver of Israel to his kinsman, "come with us and we will do thee good." [Loud and prolonged applause.]

Col. Mann, the Provost Marshal of the city, appeared at this stage of the proceedings and observed that he had heard with regret that some attempts had been made to disturb the meeting. He desired the Governor to proceed with his speech. Governor P. returned his thanks to Col. Mann for his promptness in coming forward on hearing of an attempt at disturbance, but said that he had concluded his speech. Col. Mann then said that Major Davis could now be heard if he desired it, but that gentleman replied that he had no more to say.

Resolutions were then unanimously adopted complimentary to Governor Peirpoint, Gen. Ord, and Gen. Gordon, and with three hearty cheers for Peirpoint, and three equally hearty cheers for Generals Ord and Gordon, the meeting adjourned.