

# LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation - - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor  
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Number 1198

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

March 24, 1952

## THE INEVITABLE CIVIL WAR

On the very day following the concluding struggles in the battle of Gettysburg, July 4, 1863, Oliver Wendell Holmes delivered an address before the city authorities at Boston, Massachusetts, which he entitled "The Inevitable Trial."† After some introductory propositions setting forth the affirmation that the Civil War was no momentary uprising, but the result of "long incubating causes," Holmes presents the premise of his argument in this forceful declaration, "The struggle in which we are engaged was inevitable; it might have come a little sooner, or a little later, but it must have come. The disease of the nation was organic, and not functional, and the rough chirurgery of war its only remedy." When perusing some heroic epic written by this man of letters one's choice and arrangements of words seem meagre indeed as a vehicle of intelligents thought, when compared with Holmes' superlative prose.

Many of our outstanding modern historians have been advising us how the Civil War might have been averted. One of the most recent books featuring this thesis is *The Years of Madness* by the late W. E. Woodward.\* He attempts to reveal "the utter and cruel absurdity of the war," and at the same time point out "how it could have been avoided without loss to any American citizen." Most present day writers who have elaborated on this theme have struggled with one particular ounce of prevention but Woodward claims that "even after the war began there were numerous occasions when it might have been ended with satisfaction to both sides."

There seems to be little attention paid to the observations of equally intelligent men of historical inclinations who lived at the time the war was in progress and during the preliminaries that led up to it.

The school of thought which most strenuously opposes Holmes' proposition that the Civil War was inevitable argues as Holmes put it: "If this or that man had never lived, or if this or that other man had not ceased to live, the country might have gone on in peace and prosperity." Holmes further illustrates the thinking of this school in these words:

"If Mr. Calhoun had never proclaimed his heresies; if Mr. Garrison had never published his paper; if Mr. Phillips had never uttered his melodious prophecies; if the silver tones of Mr. Clay had still sounded in the senate-chamber to smooth the billows of contention; if the Olympian brow of Daniel Webster had been lifted from the dust to fix its awful frown on the darkening scowl of rebellion—we might have been spared this dread season of convulsion."

This personality exhibit is concluded by Holmes in this trite statement about the group of exponents believing the war could have been averted. "They little know the tidal movements of national thought and feeling, who believe that they depend for existence on a few swimmers who ride their waves. . . . The antagonism of the two sections of the Union was not the work of this or that enthusiast or fanatic. It was the consequence of a movement in mass of two different forms of civilization in different directions, and the men to whom it was attributed were only those who represented it most completely, or who talked loudest and longest about it."

An account of the interesting historic evolution of the episodes leading up to the inevitable trial leads Holmes to conclude, "The wise men of the past and the shrewd men of our own time, who warned us of the calamities in store for our nation, never doubted what

was the cause which was to produce first alienation and finally rupture . . . a simple diagram, within the reach of all, shows how idle it is to look for any other cause than slavery as having any material agency in dividing the country."

It is not likely that the modern historian who feels that the tense situation would have cleared away if more time had been allowed for compromises, will find himself very much in agreement with Holmes who sustained this position: "Few will suppose that anything we could have done would have stayed the course (slavery). . . . It is a delusion and a snare to trust in any such false and flimsy reasons where there is enough and more than enough in the institution itself to account for its growth. Slavery gratifies at once the love of power, the love of money, and the love of ease."

Following the general trend of these diverse movements, north and south, Holmes gives further emphasis to the final clash in these words: "With the hereditary character of the southern people moving in one direction and the awakened conscience of the north stirring in the other, the open conflict of opinion was inevitable and equally inevitable its appearance in the field of national politics. And if at last organized opinions becomes arranged in hostile shape against each other, we shall find that a just war is only the last inevitable link in a chain of closely connected impulses."

At no time, however, does Holmes in his essay waver from this interpretation of the primary purpose of the war as he states, "The war in which we are engaged is for no meanly ambitious or unworthy purpose. It was primarily, and is to this moment, for the preservation of our national existence . . . not to have fought would have been to be false to liberty everywhere, and to humanity. . . ."

Abraham Lincoln is brought into the picture by Holmes in a paragraph on tyranny. He states that there are those who hold that the government is becoming a "mere irresponsible tyranny" and that "our present chief magistrate means to found a dynasty for himself and family." Holmes reacts to this theory by referring to Lincoln's famous letter of June 12, 1863, to Erastus Corning and others in which according to Holmes, "He (Lincoln) unbosoms himself with the simplicity of a rustic lover called upon by an anxious parent to explain his intentions. The face of his argument is not at all injured by the homeliness of his illustrations."

This scholarly and analytical presentation of Oliver Wendell Holmes on "The Inevitable Trial" is brought to a close with this classic paragraph:

"War is a child that devours its nurses one after another, until it is claimed by its true parents. This war has eaten its way backward through all the technicalities of lawyers, learned in the infinitesimals of ordinances and statutes; through all the casuistries of divines, experts in the differential calculus of conscience and duty; until it stands revealed to all men as the natural and inevitable conflict of two incompatible forms of civilization, one or the other of which must dominate the central zone of the continent, and eventually claim the hemisphere for its development."

\**Years of Madness* by W. E. Woodward. 1951. G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York.

†*Soundings from the Atlantic*. 1864. Tichnor and Fields. Boston, also *Pages From an old Volume of Life*. 1883. Houghton Mifflin, Co. Boston.