

To Charles Sumner

Nov 1861

Dear Mr Sumner

I need not explain how thankful we are to you for your help on poor Anderson's behalf, nor how earnestly we shall look for the issue of the attempt. I have written to Lord Shaftesbury, & he writes that he will try to keep the poor fellow patient. All parties are heartily grateful to you & your aiding friends.

I have to thank you, too, for your speech at Worcester.¹ It is very interesting, both in itself & as marking what I take to be the great crisis of the struggle. Seeing what you say about Ld Shaftesbury's view, I feel that I ought not to have sent you his letter: but I quite supposed you would, understanding his point of view, enter into it. I must say I think his view is not only reasonable, but the only one possible here. Remember, I entreat you, that of all the American citizens, newspapers & letters that we see here, ninety-nine in a hundred insist, loudly & persistently, that the war is not for the abolition of slavery; & that it is fully intended not to abolish it.² Look at the action of the Government at Washington, all professedly based on the determination to uphold the pro-slavery constitution, – their most recent action known here being the removal of Fremont from his command, on the ground of his proclamation. It is true, – such a step on Fremont's part cd not have been taken without some strong ground of belief that the Northern citizens were prepared for revolutionary action, – either against the Government, or in order to drag the Government into it. Whether the grounds were strong enough to warrant the revolutionary step remains to be proved. It is clear that the Government thinks not. I trust the Government is wrong: but the peoples of Europe must judge the case by its action, up to this crisis, if not henceforward. Whenever the anti-slavery view is adopted & acted upon at Washington, or in any preponderant way, you will have no reason to complain of coldness on this side the water. Our suffrages will be like the Northern recruiting, – apathetic or hearty in proportion to the demonstrations against slavery.³ I need not explain that I, with my American friendships & sympathies, am eager & constant in speaking up for what you & I consider the right, & in trying for the best: but the paltering at Washington is infinitely damaging here to your cause.

There is an odd mistake prevalent in U.S. about the respective action of our Government & the French. I know that our Cabinet has had, & still has, the utmost difficulty in preventing the French & Spanish governments from breaking the blockade. Of the French people I do not speak; for they are repressed in speech as much as your fellow-citizens, South & North: but those who are responsible for the national action wd have broken the blockade long ago, but for the vigorous action of our Ministers, who have strained their influence to the utmost to prevent it. No doubt, Mr Adams must be well aware of this: & I

trust he will avow it, when the time comes for doing so. – As for me, I have never supposed that the long habit of guilty complicity on the part of the majority of Northern citizens could at once give way to a pure patriotism; & I have therefore constantly looked forward to the split which now seems to be imminent. Neither have I ever believed in the unanimity of the South; & I see that a doubt of it is now entering the minds of the most ignorant observers here (the Times among others.) It therefore seems to me that the issue, whatever it may be, will probably be independent of the war; & the duration of the struggle may accordingly be incalculable from the date of the war. Meantime, every mouth confirms our certainty of a supply of cotton from our own dependencies, & the Confederates must see that they have nothing to hope from any need of ours in that direction. There is no evidence here that cotton-considerations have affected English action at all. Your countrymen made up their minds before hand that they would, & they have misinterpreted the case accordingly: but, beyond the alarms of a very small party in Lancashire, there has been no sign of a desire to interfere at all, – & certainly not for the protraction of slavery. The French ruler does not respect freedom, nor international morality, as England does: & the unfortunate act of the Orleans princes, in taking part in a civil war, has given the French Government the advantage of the general European condemnation of that act (pardonable in stray princes so young) & strengthened the case of the South at the Tuileries. We regret it very much.⁴

We of “Daily News” do our best, – & with good effect, I am sure, – to keep our public informed, & straight in sentiment & action. It is not easy, amidst the dreadful barbarism of the war on both sides. The barbaric character of the warfare of an unmilitary & democratic nation renders sympathy difficult in any European country. There is the profoundest pity for the victims of the general inexperience & want of discipline, & want of knowledge of military civilisation: but sympathy is difficult. One sketch (in the “Illustrated London News”) from the camp, – of Punishment Guard, – does more to alleviate sympathy than any number of leading articles can do to obtain it. Citizen soldiers who can submit to such degrading punishments, & officers who can order them, can find no place in English hearts, – in the army or out of it. It is all most dreary & revolting; – & the only consolation is in the belief of the [?] is virtually abolished. You & your abolitionist friends have done what men (& women) can do towards this blessed issue: & your share will be for ever remembered.

Florence Nightingale & I have been sending to Mr Cameron what we hoped might be useful in saving somebody’s life & health; – not only our Reports on Military Sanitary organisation, but our War-office Regulations in that department. We would gladly furnish these regulations (the best in existence, & in great request by European governments) to every army in the world: & I thought

I might try with the only foreign army I am ever likely to be able to reach. I hope they have arrived safely.

Thank you, – I am in much the same [health as] when I had the pleasure of seeing you here. My niece Maria remembers that visit with much pleasure, & would, I know, send her best regards if she were here. She is paying her annual visit to her father's house; & in her absence, a dear old cousin is with me, who has the warmest interest in your cause.

I am, dear Mr Sumner, most truly yours

Harriet Martineau.

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1. Charles Sumner, 'Union and Peace. How they shall be restored', 1 October 1861 speech at the state Republican convention at Worcester, Massachusetts.

2. As Civil War increasingly seemed inevitable, abolitionists like HM were appalled that preservation of the Union – not abolition of slavery – was the motivation for war.

3. Lincoln called for volunteers for the Union army, first in April 1861 and again in summer 1862, for an additional 300,000 in total.

4. As North and South vied against each other for European support, a commonly held suspicion was that the need for cotton, particularly in Britain, would dictate political alliances. Ultimately, Britain aligned with the North and France with the South – their relative border interests (Canada and Mexico) contributing to these complex issues.