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THE CONTEST IN
AMERICA

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The Contest in America

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The Contest in America:

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John Stuart Mill

The Contest in America

THE CONTEST IN AMERICA

The cloud which for the space of a month hung gloomily over the civilized world, black with far worse evils than those of simple war, has passed from over our heads without bursting. The fear has not been realized, that the only two first-rate Powers who are also free nations would take to tearing each other in pieces, both the one and the other in a bad and odious cause. For while, on the American side, the war would have been one of reckless persistency in wrong, on ours it would have been a war in alliance with, and, to practical purposes, in defence and propagation of, slavery. We had, indeed, been wronged. We had suffered an indignity, and something more than an indignity, which, not to have resented, would have been to invite a constant succession of insults and injuries from the same and from every other quarter. We could have acted no otherwise than we have done: yet it is impossible to think, without something like a shudder, from what we have escaped. We, the emancipators of the slave – who have wearied every Court and Government in Europe and America with our protests and remonstrances, until we goaded them into at least ostensibly coöperating with us to prevent the enslaving of

the negro – we, who for the last half century have spent annual sums, equal to the revenue of a small kingdom, in blockading the African coast, for a cause in which we not only had no interest, but which was contrary to our pecuniary interest, and which many believed would ruin, as many among us still, though erroneously, believe that it has ruined, our colonies, —*we* should have lent a hand to setting up, in one of the most commanding positions of the world, a powerful republic, devoted not only to slavery, but to pro-slavery propagandism – should have helped to give a place in the community of nations to a conspiracy of slave-owners, who have broken their connection with the American Federation on the sole ground, ostentatiously proclaimed, that they thought an attempt would be made to restrain, not slavery itself, but their purpose of spreading slavery wherever migration or force could carry it.

A nation which has made the professions that England has, does not with impunity, under however great provocation, betake itself to frustrating the objects for which it has been calling on the rest of the world to make sacrifices of what they think their interest. At present all the nations of Europe have sympathized with us; have acknowledged that we were injured, and declared with rare unanimity, that we had no choice but to resist, if necessary, by arms. But the consequences of such a war would soon have buried its causes in oblivion. When the new Confederate States, made an independent Power by English help, had begun their crusade to carry negro slavery from the

Potomac to Cape Horn; who would then have remembered that England raised up this scourge to humanity not for the evil's sake, but because somebody had offered an insult to her flag? Or even if unforgotten, who would then have felt that such a grievance was a sufficient palliation of the crime? Every reader of a newspaper, to the farthest ends of the earth, would have believed and remembered one thing only – that at the critical juncture which was to decide whether slavery should blaze up afresh with increased vigor or be trodden out at the moment of conflict between the good and the evil spirit – at the dawn of a hope that the demon might now at last be chained and flung into the pit, England stepped in, and, for the sake of cotton, made Satan victorious.

The world has been saved from this calamity, and England from this disgrace. The accusation would indeed have been a calumny. But to be able to defy calumny, a nation, like an individual, must stand very clear of just reproach in its previous conduct. Unfortunately, we ourselves have given too much plausibility to the charge. Not by anything said or done by us as a Government or as a nation, but by the tone of our press, and in some degree, it must be owned, the general opinion of English society. It is too true, that the feelings which have been manifested since the beginning of the American contest – the judgments which have been put forth, and the wishes which have been expressed concerning the incidents and probable eventualities of the struggle – the bitter and irritating

criticism which has been kept up, not even against both parties equally, but almost solely against the party in the right, and the ungenerous refusal of all those just allowances which no country needs more than our own, whenever its circumstances are as near to those of America as a cut finger is to an almost mortal wound, – these facts, with minds not favorably disposed to us, would have gone far to make the most odious interpretation of the war in which we have been so nearly engaged with the United States, appear by many degrees the most probable. There is no denying that our attitude towards the contending parties (I mean our moral attitude, for politically there was no other course open to us than neutrality) has not been that which becomes a people who are as sincere enemies of slavery as the English really are, and have made as great sacrifices to put an end to it where they could. And it has been an additional misfortune that some of our most powerful journals have been for many years past very unfavorable exponents of English feeling on all subjects connected with slavery: some, probably, from the influences, more or less direct, of West Indian opinions and interests: others from inbred Toryism, which, even when compelled by reason to hold opinions favorable to liberty, is always adverse to it in feeling; which likes the spectacle of irresponsible power exercised by one person over others; which has no moral repugnance to the thought of human beings born to the penal servitude for life, to which for the term of a few years we sentence our most hardened criminals, but keeps its

indignation to be expended on "rabid and fanatical abolitionists" across the Atlantic, and on those writers in England who attach a sufficiently serious meaning to their Christian professions, to consider a fight against slavery as a fight for God.

Now, when the mind of England, and it may almost be said, of the civilized part of mankind, has been relieved from the incubus which had weighed on it ever since the *Trent* outrage, and when we are no longer feeling towards the Northern Americans as men feel towards those with whom they may be on the point of struggling for life or death; now, if ever, is the time to review our position, and consider whether we have been feeling what ought to have been felt, and wishing what ought to have been wished, regarding the contest in which the Northern States are engaged with the South.

In considering this matter, we ought to dismiss from our minds, as far as possible, those feelings against the North, which have been engendered not merely by the *Trent* aggression, but by the previous anti-British effusions of newspaper writers and stump orators. It is hardly worth while to ask how far these explosions of ill-humor are anything more than might have been anticipated from ill-disciplined minds, disappointed of the sympathy which they justly thought they had a right to expect from the great anti-slavery people, in their really noble enterprise. It is almost superfluous to remark that a democratic Government always shows worst where other Governments generally show best, on its outside; that unreasonable people are

much more noisy than the reasonable; that the froth and scum are the part of a violently fermenting liquid that meets the eyes, but are not its body and substance. Without insisting on these things, I contend, that all previous cause of offence should be considered as cancelled, by the reparation which the American Government has so amply made; not so much the reparation itself, which might have been so made as to leave still greater cause of permanent resentment behind it; but the manner and spirit in which they have made it. These have been such as most of us, I venture to say, did not by any means expect. If reparation were made at all, of which few of us felt more than a hope, we thought that it would have been made obviously as a concession to prudence, not to principle. We thought that there would have been truckling to the newspaper editors and supposed fire-eaters who were crying out for retaining the prisoners at all hazards. We expected that the atonement, if atonement there were, would have been made with reservations, perhaps under protest. We expected that the correspondence would have been spun out, and a trial made to induce England to be satisfied with less; or that there would have been a proposal of arbitration; or that England would have been asked to make concessions in return for justice; or that if submission was made, it would have been made, ostensibly, to the opinions and wishes of Continental Europe. We expected anything, in short, which would have been weak and timid and paltry. The only thing which no one seemed to expect, is what has actually happened. Mr. Lincoln's Government have

done none of these things. Like honest men, they have said in direct terms, that our demand was right; that they yielded to it because it was just; that if they themselves had received the same treatment, they would have demanded the same reparation; and that if what seemed to be the American side of a question was not the just side, they would be on the side of justice; happy as they were to find after their resolution had been taken, that it was also the side which America had formerly defended. Is there any one, capable of a moral judgment or feeling, who will say that his opinion of America and American statesmen, is not raised by such an act, done on such grounds? The act itself may have been imposed by the necessity of the circumstances; but the reasons given, the principles of action professed, were their own choice. Putting the worst hypothesis possible, which it would be the height of injustice to entertain seriously, that the concession was really made solely to convenience, and that the profession of regard for justice was hypocrisy, even so, the ground taken, even if insincerely, is the most hopeful sign of the moral state of the American mind which has appeared for many years. That a sense of justice should be the motive which the rulers of a country rely on, to reconcile the public to an unpopular, and what might seem a humiliating act; that the journalists, the orators, many lawyers, the Lower House of Congress, and Mr. Lincoln's own naval secretary, should be told in the face of the world, by their own Government, that they have been giving public thanks, presents of swords, freedom of cities, all manner of heroic honors

to the author of an act which, though not so intended, was lawless and wrong, and for which the proper remedy is confession and atonement; that this should be the accepted policy (supposing it to be nothing higher) of a Democratic Republic, shows even unlimited democracy to be a better thing than many Englishmen have lately been in the habit of considering it, and goes some way towards proving that the aberrations even of a ruling multitude are only fatal when the better instructed have not the virtue or the courage to front them boldly. Nor ought it to be forgotten, to the honor of Mr. Lincoln's Government, that in doing what was in itself right, they have done also what was best fitted to allay the animosity which was daily becoming more bitter between the two nations so long as the question remained open. They have put the brand of confessed injustice upon that rankling and vindictive resentment with which the profligate and passionate part of the American press has been threatening us in the event of concession, and which is to be manifested by some dire revenge, to be taken, as they pretend, after the nation is extricated from its present difficulties. Mr. Lincoln has done what depended on him to make this spirit expire with the occasion which raised it up; and we shall have ourselves chiefly to blame if we keep it alive by the further prolongation of that stream of vituperative eloquence, the source of which, even now, when the cause of quarrel has been amicably made up, does not seem to have run dry.¹

¹ I do not forget one regrettable passage in Mr. Seward's letter, in which he said that "if the safety of the Union required the detention of the captured persons, it would

be the right and duty of this Government to detain them." I sincerely grieve to find this sentence in the dispatch, for the exceptions to the general rules of morality are not a subject to be lightly or unnecessarily tampered with. The doctrine in itself is no other than that professed and acted on by all governments – that self-preservation, in a State, as in an individual, is a warrant for many things which at all other times ought to be rigidly abstained from. At all events, no nation which has ever passed "laws of exception," which ever suspended the Habeas Corpus Act or passed an Alien Bill in dread of a Chartist insurrection, has a right to throw the first stone at Mr. Lincoln's Government.

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