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Contact:

Archives & Special Collections
Waidner-Spahr Library
Dickinson College
P.O. Box 1773
Carlisle, PA 17013

717-245-1399

archives@dickinson.edu

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Hamilton

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The Congress of Panama

In the year 1825 a call was made by the Republic of Colombia for a congress of the American States to meet at Panama. The main object of it was the adoption of a code of international law, for the government of the Republics in their intercourse with each other, and the peaceable adjustments of all difficulties which might at any time occur between two or more of the contracting parties. The proposition excited much interest, both on account of its novel character and from the important results to which it might lead. A few of the governments acceded to it, and the Congress was organized at Panama on the isthmus of Darien. Owing to the confused and revolutionary condition of South America at that time, the assembly after one short session was dissolved, and with its dissolution, "the hopes which had been excited failed to be realized." Recently an attempt has been made to revive the measure on a firm basis, and in a form somewhat improved. Every modification, however, and in fact the whole matter from beginning to end, has a very decided tendency towards bringing about a general prevalence of peace throughout the continent.

The question now to be discussed, and decided, is, shall it again fail? And if so, why? Is there any necessity for a failure? Is it impossible to be carried out in practice? The history of the past authorizes no such conclusion. Did the Amphictyonic council,

with no more power than that proposed to be vested in this Congress,
almost of itself preserve ^{for fifteen centuries?} the liberties of Greece to a degree of splendor,
unharralled among surrounding nations? Were not these things
done by measures in the main, pacific? Did this council have the light
of Christianity, to shine upon their deliberations? Had they the experience
of ages to guide their feet? Have not we the history, and the fate of
this very council in our favour? Were a hundred independent cities
in the heart of Europe held together for ages by the Hanseatic league?
True! but how does one end of Europe or the heart of Europe, or how do
both together compare in extent with the American Continent? A forcible
objection to be sure - But do not the light of revelation, history, the
progress of science, and the perfection to which the principle of
Representation has been carried, within the last century, render it
comparatively futile? Must the chord which now binds together Maine
and Louisiana, necessarily break if extended beyond the St
Lawrence or the Gulf of Mexico? That man knows little of the powers
of the human mind, who thinks that this measure cannot be carried
out in practice. Let the American people feel that it is their
interest, to attend to this question. Bring it before them in a tangible
form, not by means of merely idle reports, not ^{as} mere matter of
speculation, not as a fit topic of conversation, with which to while
away an hour ⁱⁿ the parlor: but present it to them, in your legislative halls,
and through the ballot box, if need be, appeal to self - that main-
spring of all human action - and actual experiment will show that
this Congress can be established. Why should it not be? Not because
there is any thing to be lost by it: not on the other hand because

there is no likelihood of gain! But only because it is not brought fairly and fully before the American people. To America belongs the glory of having first published to mankind the glad tidings of self-government. On her soil rests the broad basis of the temple of Freedom. Shame on our apathy! Shame on our imbecility, if we cannot now crown the last pillar of our political fabric with the capital of peace. After having climbed almost to the very top of the ladder of political science, shall the giddy heights of the last round make us afraid? After gross ignorance and a want of philanthropic enterprise have kept the nations of the earth rolling on the billows of destruction for ages, shall we fear the shores of peace because of a few breakers which line the coast?

But why should America take the lead in this matter? Why not leave it to Europe which is both older and wiser? Why not have the proposed Congress, to meet at London or Paris, where the trappings of royalty might add dignity to its deliberations and influence to its decisions? Because it concerns America. Because America has a right to the glory of the achievement, if she but make it her own. Because Europe has had centuries at her disposal, and yet has failed to make a beginning. Because from the Mediterranean to the North Sea, and from the Ural mountains to the Atlantic ocean (one or two governments only excepted) Europe is fettered in the chains of despotism and cannot do it. Because if we wait for Europe, we may wait forever.

One of the main objects of this Congress is to practice as far as may be, the principles of peace. But in Europe the sceptre is wielded

by those who seldom, perhaps, ^{ever} see a battle-field - who but too often wage war for the sole purpose of "getting rid of a redundant population". The poor subject who is marched off at the sound of the drum and the file to shoot an enemy whom he never saw - and then perhaps to be shot himself, cannot say "my voice is still for peace". That remains for others. While the people bear the risk, and endure the hardships, to a few haughty rulers only, who reap whatever benefit may accrue and enjoy all the glory, belongs the sovereign power of declaring peace and war. But in America this remains with the people, and with them rests the responsibility of exhibiting to the nations of the earth an example worthy of the name of freemen. A way with that spirit which would teach us to walk in the same beaten track in which our fathers trod. We mean to improve from the errors of the past. We mean to show to others the blessings flowing from the practice of peace, despite the obstacles which European jealousy may cast about our path. Too long has the old world watched us with suspicion. Too long have we been the sports of that suspicion. Too long has Europe marked American prosperity, and sought to check it, by fostering discord and dissension. Too well has she succeeded. This perhaps may be more applicable to the Spanish Republics, but still they are American States, and it is both our duty and our interest to put an end to it.

Hitherto, for want of a common centre of public intelligence, the governments of America have acted separately, and with different systems of foreign relations. Thus they have at times adopted measures opposed to their interests. Is there any necessity for the

longer continuance of this state of affairs? Can there be shown any reason for it save pure obstinacy? Must our true interests, be forever at the mercy of Stubbornness? It is to be hoped not. Establish the proposed Congress on a firm foundation, and your "wilderness and your solitary places shall become glad." your forts and barracks shall be converted into churches, and your almshouses shall cease to be crowded with the "maimed and halt and blind." The arts and sciences shall flourish, Commerce shall prosper, and America shall ^{be} indeed and in truth "the land of the free and the home of the happy." Pass this measure and an electric shock shall dart around the whole of this globe. The sound of liberty, shall roll over the nations of the earth, like a tide of glory. The fate of monarchy shall be sealed. The thrones of despotism shall be hurled among the wreck of things that were. The rotten fabrics of governments which have been falling from the beginning of time, shall then all fall; and from their ruins shall arise systems founded on the immutable principles of justice.

Religious toleration, which is alternately the parent, and child of freedom, shall then demand her rights, which for so many ages have been wrested from her by the hand of persecution. Then shall commence a contest, such as this world has never yet beheld. Truth and virtue shall engage error and vice, and the battle shall be fought on the open plains of reason and revelation. Long and severe may be the struggle. But the shouts of an impartial world, will assign the victory to truth and virtue. Error and vice shall be banished

to the outskirts of the Universe, there to take up their abodes with
the offscourings of creation—their own horrid progeny.
Then shall christianity sow thick the seeds of future happiness,
and ^{all} this earth shall become one vast nursery for heaven.

James L. Hamilton
Dickinson College
July 11. 1834

Bates

Commencement Oration of James G. Hamilton, Class of 1839
Transcribed by Sarah-Hazel Jennings, May 2008
Edited by Tristan Deveney, June 2008

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In the year 1825 a call was made by the Republic of Columbia for a congress of the American States to meet at Panama. The main object of it was the adoption of a code of international law for the government of the Republic in their intercourse with each other, and the peaceable adjustments of all difficulties which might at any time occur between two or more of the contracting parties. The proposition excited much interest, both on account of its novel character and from the important results to which it might lead. A few of the governments acceded to it and the Congress was organized at Panama on the isthmus of Darien. Owing to the confused and revolutionary condition of South America at the time, the assembly after one short session was dissolved and with its dissolution, “the hopes which had been excited failed to be realized.” Recently an attempt has been made to revive the measure on a firm basis and in a form some what improved. Every modification, however, and in fact the whole matter from beginning to end, has a very decided tendency toward bringing about a general prevalence of peace throughout the continent.

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