

SOME CIVIL WAR OBSERVATIONS

OF

WILLIAM HENRY BRISBANE

After serving for several months as Chaplain of the 2d Wisconsin Volunteer Cavalry Regiment, Brisbane was appointed by Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase, a Cincinnati friend, as chairman of the U.S. Direct Tax Commission for South Carolina.

Impatience with generals

Being a federal civilian official in a military occupied territory, some conflict between the two roles might be expected. After a frustrating confrontation with Brig General William Birney, despite having been a abolitionist associate in Cincinnati, the tax commissioner wrote this in his journal for 29 March 1864:

"It is too true that these Generals are too apt to interferences with matters that they have no business with and oft times in direct contravention of law and right. We may well learn from this war what a monarchy would be." As he was so writing, Birney visited and stayed until mid-night. Brisbane presented his perspective and Birney agreed to reconsider.

Perspective on war strategy

While in his New York office on 21

July 1864, he reflected in his journal on the course of the war:

"The President has called for half a million more men. I hope this will end the matter but I fear greatly. I have not from the first of the war deemed it a wise policy to have such an immense Army in the field. If the Militias had been thoroughly organized & trained for the defence of the North, and the borders had been well garrisoned with strong works along the Patomac & the Ohio River, the ports of the South blockaded & garrisoned, a comparatively small army in the field would have been all that was necessary. That army should have been of flying artillery, Cavalry & light infantry to have passed rapidly from point to point through the interior of the Southern states. We ought to have gone upon the assumption that the war would be a long one; but the fatal mistake was made that the South could not hold out long. We have therefore multiplied men and made a tremendous debt; and if this last call should not succeed in the suppression of the rebellion I do not see how it will be possible for the country to sustain the load of debt & consequent heavy taxes. There is too little trust in God; too much commercial avarice among the people, and too much anxiety about getting & holding offices among the

politicians for the true interests of the nation to be sustained. God Almighty have mercy upon our land!"

On General Sherman and his troops

General William T. Sherman and his forces had moved up from Savannah and were in Brisbane's territory early in 1865. On 18 January he wrote:

"My colleagues are at Hilton Head to lease at auction the plantations there. I had too much here to do to go there with them. I met my boat at the ferry very much injured by the soldiers who took it by force from my boatmen. Sherman's army has a great many very bad fellows in it who seem to be perfectly lawless.

On 23 January he met Sherman personally:

"This evening I called upon Genl Saxton & took supper there. General Sherman & Howard are staying with him & I had quite a pleasant time.

His relatives, whom he had not seen for some years and whose persistence in slavery grieved him, were also affected by Sherman's march. On 5 February he noted:

"Negroes who have come in from the neighborhood of Robertville & Lawtonville have given us some intelligence of the condition of our relatives who have recently fled before Sherman's Army. I am truly sorry for them. O, that those who have rebelled would return to their allegiance to our Government! O Lord, unite us again as a nation & give us a ...peace!"

Return to Charleston

Shortly after this, the Union forces captured Charleston and he was able to extend the work of the tax commission there. It had been eighteen years since he was in this city where he once published the South's first Baptist periodical and where he had attended medical school. He reflected, with poignantly mixed emotions, on his first visit to the liberated city on 4 March:

"Alas! the retribution that has come upon this rebellious city. It is sad to look upon it. And yet I cannot but rejoice that I can now pass through her streets without apprehension of lynch law, as was the case the last time I passed through it, which was in 1847. I thank God I have lived to see the day when there is no slave walking the streets of Charleston, but under the flag of my great country. I who used to be threatened with violence for my advocacy of human rights can now feel at liberty to express my full heart on that grand idea of the right of all men to life, liberty & the pursuit of happiness. God be praised! Bless the Lord O my soul & all that is within me bless his holy Name!

Brisbane's heart-felt desire for his native South

While on a brief visit to his farm in Wisconsin, he recorded (on 18 July 1866) facts that demonstrate the profound influence he had, through the Treasury Department, upon national affairs. He also summarized his motive and goals in the tax commission work, so strangely different from both his religious ministry and medical practice:

"I went to the Village this forenoon &

read the President's veto of the Bureau bill; but I saw also that it is a law notwithstanding & that with my amendment to it disposing of the Sea Island land in St. Helena & St Lukes' Parishes. I thank God for this and pray to him that the result may prove a great blessing to that portion of the country. If so my life is not entirely fruitless of blessings to my fellow men. Nothing but God's grace & love to me could have put it into my heart & given me the faith necessary to my planning & carrying through this humane work. I rejoice that whether I live or die my work is now to proceed by the law of the nation. Personally I would prefer to leave it now to other hands; but I cannot yet convince myself that it is not my duty to attend to its accomplishment or at least to continue until it is evident the work can be done as well without me as with me & I can secure an appropriation to former owners."

□ edited by Wallace Alcorn

