

(Speech before the New York GAR circa 1903)

By GAR COMMANDER IN CHIEF, JOHN C. BLACK

Commander and Comrades:

I have heard, and I believe it, that the highest human wisdom consists in knowing when to do a thing; and the next grade of human wisdom is knowing when not to do a thing. I am wise at least in the second grade, because it would be absurd after your term and turmoil through the night and day and at the very end and conclusion of your affairs to undertake to make a speech to you that bore any serious relationship to the affairs of the Grand Army of the Republic. You have almost done your work in this 38th annual encampment: you have listened to the addresses: you have kept your camp fire: you have cheered your favorites: you have voted your will; and nothing remains now to do, as they say at election, except to “join in the hollaing.” I guess that vanquished and victors alike, in the friendly contest I which you have just engaged, will strive to outdo each other in the question of applause, and that after the discussion which has been had as to the choice of favorites, your reunited ranks will present a common and well-aligned front to that old enemy of all soldiers, encroaching Time. We have not the time nor the leisure, comrades, to carry forward beyond this threshold, any feeling of triumph over comrades or any feeling of depression, because you, or you, or you, may not have been successful. What is to do, is to declare and enforce as far as you can, the ascertained and legally declared will of the great Department of New York. I don’t think that it was necessary for me to have said this, but coming in at the time that I did, and at the moment in your deliberations that I did, I have had a little bit of embarrassment as to what I should say. You had done your work, and you did not need any advice from me as to that; the work that is to come, you are all united about; you don’t

need any advice from me on that point. I found myself something in the predicament of the friends of the Kentucky sport. You may have heard the story. He had been a hard one; sort of a “Billy Wilson Zouave” if you please. When his time came to die, and be buried, his family gathered at the bier; they were strong; and they were quick of trigger; no man wanted to antagonize them. On the other hand, no minister residing in all that section of the country wanted to stultify himself by uttering a eulogy over the dead man. So, they gathered about the coffin on the day of the ceremonies; and a great silence prevailed, until one brave man among them arose from his chair and looked about; what could he say in the presence of the late lamented? It occurred to him that he ought not to be laid away without some words of eulogy: so he began; he could not describe him as a Christian gentleman, for he hadn’t been one; he could not describe him as a man of parts; because he was not one; he had not done a thing that might make him dear to mourning hearts; so he said “he had chickens, and he fit them; he had horses and he runned them; he had cards and he played them; he had whiskey and he dranked it; And of such is the Kingdom of Heaven.”

Whatever may have been the effects of your gathering here you are certainly a great and mighty factor in that great army whose temporary chief, by your suffrages and favor, I am; and to you from them, wherever I have been, I bring the greeting of warm and devoted comradeship. It has been a mighty thing, Commander, representing the Grand Army of the Republic as I have, bearing for a little time in feeble hands, its baton of command, to go East and West, North and South, in the name of fraternity, charity and loyalty, and to see all these elements for good in the midst of this great Republic. This Order is anomalous, not alone in the fact that it has limited its own duration, but in the mighty purpose to which it has pledged itself, which in all the years since its creation it has solemnly kept. It has driven from its midst and from its activities those

who would have led it astray; not by devious paths, but by aligning itself and dressing itself on the old guards and guides, it has proclaimed, as it proclaims today, that the Grand Army of the Republic exists in order that the republic and their fellow citizens may be better and stronger and higher and further advanced and more deeply set, because there is and has been a Grand Army of the Republic.

It has been my fortune to travel to the furthest South and almost within the sound of the waves of the Gulf, and further to the South than the wide stretched sings of our great army swept, to see what has been done in the forty years, almost, since the combat closed. And there in the public streets, on the private residences, on the state capitols, aye, Commander, in the wakening hands of our former adversaries themselves, I have found the American Flag which the Grand Army bore so many years, lifted higher and higher for the guidance and admiration of the American people. As your representative, they have greeted me; as your representative they have listened to your story and to the story of the flag; they have applauded the echo of the highest sentiment that a grand army man could speak of the flag and the country. Throughout all the West, the same story is told: until today, from every camp fire, I am able to bring you of New York the great greeting that you heard ring along the sentinel line in the shadows and darkness, in order that the assurance might come, "all is well with the Republic." In all its borders no hostility; in all its borders no famine; in all its borders no estranged and unreconciled men; but American citizens united together as one in united devotion to the country, whole and united from the lakes to the gulf.

They don't see all these things just as we see them. They have their differences about temporal policies; they have their questions about leadership; but today, from Saratoga Springs to where the water of the Mississippi roll into the Gulf, there is but one American people. They

are fast outgrowing all wounds and estrangement of a most virile past; they are outgrowing all resentment and bitterness that belonged to the period of the great war; and are today thankful that the God of battles decided the mighty trial of arms in behalf of the Union and all that the Union represents. And wherever I have been, in the lands that were naked and unoccupied territories when we stacked our arms and hung our flags in memorial halls, or in the thickly populated settlements of the East, wherever I have been, I have found in the Grand Army councils such men as sit in these seats before me, on whose countenances deliberation is engraved, where the fires of youth have burned out and the sober warmth of middle and maturing years has come, all proud in the mightiest achievements that ever an army wrought; and achievements due not alone to the magnificence of their arms, not alone to success in battle, but due also to that great, kindly spirit which spoke its final word from the top of Mt. McGregor through the lips of your mighty, dying chief. A chief in war; a chief in peace.

I thank you for this audience. I will not trespass longer upon your time. I want you, each and every one of you who can, to take wife and child, and go up on the 15th and 16th of August coming, to the great encampment which Boston and Massachusetts are preparing for you. It is going to cost some money, yes. And maybe you know some comrade who has not been quite so successful in the course of life as you have been, who is not able to afford from his little fund or his little savings to pay the expense of the trip there. In such a case as that, pass a ticket over to him and the two of you go down and make his old eyes glad with the sight of our fluttering ensigns as they are tossed in the winds of the Atlantic that blow above the pathway of the Mayflower and around the slender shaft of Bunker Hill Monument; there where Washington organized his army, there where great principles were proclaimed upon which the Republic was founded, there where in the hour of emergency, the Sixth Massachusetts sprang to the front, and

side by side with the Seventh New York, close and kept open a way for the power of the Nation to the salvation of its Capitol; go there you New York men and join your Boston Comrades in their mighty jubilee. It will pay you to do so. Why, men who are rich search the galleries of Europe and all the stored-up works of ancient genius in order that they may hang on their walls and put in their galleries and studies the old pictures, and old carven marbles and bronzes that tell of things that happened thousands of years ago, either in fact or in fancy. But these men gaze upon these pictured scenes and think that they are enjoying the highest pleasure of artistic life. Maybe they are; maybe they are; but what is all the pleasure of the connoisseur who gathers dead gems of a perished art compared with the joy and glory and rejuvenating freshness that will pour over us from the heavens, of every comrade of the Grand Army of the Republic who in August next joins that mighty array and sees above the representatives of a million and a quarter of men of whom you are the survivors, the storm-tossed, battle-riddled flags of the great war who will see limping along the line those whom the hard bullet touched, whom the sabre lamed; who will see there little children greeting their patriotic sires and defenders; who will see there those men who periled all that life might be preserved to the Republic and liberty kept to humanity; who will listen there to the tap of the drum sounding to feet that echo on its pave, and echoing from forty years back the splendid story of triumph and of strife; who will see there the hues of heaven emblazoned on our flag; who will see there on every hand the starry splendors of our Nation's banner unfurled; who will see there all the display that a great people can make for their defenders and their saviors; who will see there marching in increasing thousands down those long lines to greet our comrades from East and West, from North and South, united in one triumphant mass, who without a single word of hate or animosity rejoice even as the redeemed are said to rejoice, at the great things that have been done by the Grand Army of the Republic.

Go, don't miss the chance that will be a picture to hang in the walls of your memory that no wealth can buy; that will be music in your heart that no magician can summon or bestow; that will be an hour of triumph and ecstasy; you will have borne the flag of freedom from the Golden Gate of the Pacific to the granite shores of the Atlantic in triumph and in peace.

And so I hope that when this encampment shall adjourn and you go back to your Posts, you that are from the Empire State and its mighty organization, guards of the Grand Army of the Republic, you that are the representatives of an army almost as great as that with which Napoleon undertook the subjugation of Europe, you that sent more than one-fifth of all the fighting men of the nation to the front, you that set the banners of New York on the heights of Missionary Ridge and bore them and upon the terrible scenes of conflict at Vicksburg and Gettysburg, you decide that this year that you will join in the mighty jubilee which awaits us.