

ADDRESS OF GENERAL BLACK

(In 1888 to President Grover Cleveland, General Sherman and veterans of the Army of the Potomac)

Mr. President and Comrades of the Army of the Potomac: Your partiality has assigned to me the pleasure of responding to the toast of “the President of the United States.” The office is one which for a hundred years has endured in the government and is today stronger and firmer than at any previous time.

After and during the revolutionary period, it was found that a congress alone could not execute the will of the people. It was found that Congress alone could not efficiently transmit that will to the public, and hence upon the formation of the federal constitution the people of the United States who had learned during that seven years of struggle, of sorrow, of mingled disaster and glory to lean upon the stronger right arm of Washington, considered that there should be created for him – and it is well for us citizens of the republic that occasionally an element of strong personalism should enter into the creation of the institutions of free men – it was considered by them that an office should be created, founded upon the deeds, upon the reputation, upon the record and upon the achievements of the immortal chief of the first armies of the republic, and hence the office of President was established and Washington was elected thereto. Into his hands at that time was given power which was little understood. It was a third of the power of the free men of the entire republic, measured and gauged by the standards of law. It was all of that power in certain directions. As a matter of fact, so great was the gift of the people to this office that it has never been found necessary by constitutional enactment to add to that power, but attempts have been made to shackle the executive arm of the people, and from the day of the adoption of the constitution until now the whole executive intelligent power of the

people of the United States, grown from three to sixty millions, has been transmitted, has been interpreted, has been declared, has been put in force by the President of the United States.

It is a great office; greatest of all that have ever been created among men. Think of consul and pro-consul and of the tribune; or those who held the whole power of the free men of the then greatest republic of the world; and if you please of the King and the Emperor who possess arbitrary power, but I saw from the time man began to organize government until today, no office has been organized equal in power and results upon the destiny of man to that of President of the United States. (Applause)

For what does this President stand? He stands, gentlemen, in the first place for your and my privileges. He stands for all that has been achieved through a hundred years of triumph and battle. He stands for all that has been wrought by the patient labor of men in pursuit of constitutional freedom. He stands for us the shield against all efforts at aggression. He stands with the trumpet at his lip that proclaims the will of the American people to all the world. He stands with the sword in his hand to enforce against every opposition all that the American people demand as their right.

He stands for more than this. He stands for the execution of the law in every part of the country. He stands for the protection of the citizen wherever he may be found. If the courts fail him, if his person be in danger, then the office of President of the United States seeks him and give him refuge.

Mr. President, in a hundred years, this great office has known no descent. As receding years withdraw, one character after another has passed from this office to assume place among the American people. But around each one of the American draws the kindly veil of forgetfulness of human faults and loving affection records their manly virtues.

I speak to the Society of the Army of the Potomac as representing that army called into existence in 1861 in the middle of the most tremendous agitations, not by act of Congress or by decree of a court, but by the order of a President who summoned seventy-five thousand men to the front in pursuance of his constitutional right. I stand in the presence of a society that continued and perpetuated itself when in 1862 that same President called five hundred thousand more from the ranks of the people and enrolled them under the flag of the republic. I stand in the presence of a society that never wavered in any change of commanders in any disasters, but was ever true in its devotion to the country and to its commander-in-chief, the President of the United States. I stand in the presence of a society whose army enjoyed I believe, with one exception, and possibly without any exception, the signal distinction of having been the only army that ever received within its intrenched lines a President of the United States. There is no man in the army of the Potomac who does not regard the great office of President of the United States (Applause). You cannot make me believe that these men who from Bull Run to Appomattox crowded the flag forward at the order of the President of the United States can dishonor him in peace.

General Sherman, ----

(here the speaker was interrupted by three cheers being proposed and given for the General, after which General Black continued): ----

You were in our western country when St. Louis was the frontier mark of this republic and when the shadow of foreign interposition rested upon the western half of this great continent. At that time a President of the United States without the interposition of Congress and without waiting the decrees of courts called the armies again into existence and marched the volunteers to the Rio Grande. The result was that vast territory that stretches along the Pacific coast was brought into the United States. Wherever, fellow citizens, the history of the American President

is examined there it is found to be great in the important results achieved for the people and the republic. Neither now nor in any other age has the President of the United States been found faithless to the great interests of the American people. The President represents no faction, no class, no degree, no party. He represents the splendid procession of American States, which from ocean to ocean and clime to clime constitute the mighty republic of the great northern continent; and I say to you that whatever other men may have fallen by the way, whatever other disaster may have happened to the republic, the President, from the time George Washington wrote his first proclamation until our own day, has never brought disasters upon the United States.

It may be, fellow citizens, that for a time temporary passions may obscure our views of these great men, but in the end, they form the links that bind us to our birth place and mark our noblest achievements. Let us give them manly judgment. They are after all men. The ancient world when a man had achieved success made him a demigod. We do no such vain thing. We simply write their names high among the annals of the republic. Let it be so with all of them.

But, fellow citizens, the office is not a bed of roses. The office of President of the United States means, as I have myself seen, personal sacrifice, the toil by day that robs the sunshine of its beauty and lays the yoke of the official slave upon his neck; the toil by night that brings sorrow and age before their time. It means that from the early morning to the latest night he who would be President of the whole people must be the worker and toiler for the whole people.

It means that he who is devoted to the office must lean upon the arms of those who are about him. It means that he who brings to the discharge of his office the finest determination and noblest record, must lean upon and trust to those about him to assist him in his mighty work.

I said to you that it was not a bed of roses. Since the beginning of this republic and its life, my friends, is very short in comparison with other nations, two of your Presidents have died by overwork and assiduous care. Two of them have fallen because murder was incited by the voice of fanaticism, and assassination made its bloody way through the walls of life. Others, poor and old and broken in the public service, have finished at last their little span of life in poverty and obscurity. It is not a bed of roses, and in finishing my response to this sentiment, I wish to say that when the republic builds its mausoleum, when it rears its highest arch of fame, when it shall call its architects of genius to typify its will, when it shall rear the walls that shall stand for countless ages, when every panel shall be written with the story of your victories and every niche filled with the names of illustrious dead – at the front of the swelling procession of American citizens so memorialized will appear every one of the Presidents of the United States. (Applause).