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The Sins of Government

Hugh Owen Pentecost

March 13, 1890

I am aware that in delivering a number of addresses with the object of persuading you that government by physical force is the real cause of poverty and the slowness of human development mentally and morally, I am opposing preconceived opinions, prejudices and superstitions even stronger than are aroused by open declarations of Atheism. Political superstition is more deeply rooted than religious superstition. Multitudes of persons have ceased to believe in Jehovah who are loyal to Queen Victoria, Emperor William or the person chosen by a few of our own people to decorate or disgrace the President's or the Governor's mansion.

Almost everyone in this country understands clearly enough that the government personated by the Czar is guilty of many sins; they understand that Victoria is merely an expensive figurehead, and that it is wicked to tax poor people to support the Prince of Wales in luxury and splendor. But they do not see how the same principle applies when it is, as with us, a question of supporting executive officers, judicial functionaries, and military people, who are pushed forward by a few cunning politicians and elected by a very decided minority of the people. If among the sixty million people in the United States there are twelve million voters, six mil-

lion and one can elect a President, who has been selected as one of two candidates by, perhaps, a hundred politicians; selected because with him the best bargain for a division of the tax money with them could be made. If there are a thousand inhabitants in any one election district, about one hundred and one of them could put a man in office. And such is the nature of the “science” of politics that it is only by the happiest chance that the best man for the place, or even a good man, is chosen, because anyone with a decent sense of self-respect could not submit to the moral sacrifices that are usually necessary in order to become a political candidate for office. I never talked with a political candidate in my life who did not tell me that he was ashamed of himself.

What I have been describing is what is commonly called government “of the people, by the people, and for the people.” But it is not even government of the minority by the majority. It is the government of all the women, all the men under twenty-one years of age, all the children, and a minority of the white voters, by a few politicians who manage to beg, buy, frighten, and steal votes to the number of a trifle over one tenth of the population in any given election district. It is government of nine tenths of the population by a little more than one tenth. It is the government of the people by the politicians for “boodle”¹ and offices. Our people see clearly enough that it is wrong for a monarch and his friends and the army to rule a people, but they think it is right for a few professional politicians, who are necessarily bad men, to use a trifle over six millions of men, many of whom are bummers of the worst type, and the military power, to enable them to govern nearly fifty-four millions of people. If that is not superstition, neither is it superstition to believe that it is right for God to damn non-elect infants, or that the Pope is the real vicar of such a man as Jesus of Nazareth.

Most of our people believe that this kind of government is the best conceivable kind, and they would lay down their lives for the

physically free as long as you believe in an arbitrary Government that sends its tax gatherers to rob you, that gives over the fruitful earth to man-starving speculators, that puts the circulation of the life-blood of society -- money -- under the control of merciless, conscienceless plunderers, that can take your children away from you, open your letters to see what you write and search your book cases to see what you read, that can dog you with detectives and hang you for no crime.

It may be your delight to bow down and worship the shameful politician, but it is not mine. I know him too well for that. It may seem sacrilege to you to attack the system of laws for which our forefathers died, but it is not to me. When I know, as I do know, that the constitution of the United States and the constitutions of the separate states are the subtle instruments by which bread is snatched from the mouths of poor men and women and turned into gold in the hands of idlers, I have no more respect for these instruments than I do for the Westminster catechism. The catechism asks me to believe in a bad God or be damned, and the constitutions ask me to believe in a bad Government or be damned, but I know that we all are damned as long as we believe in either.

¹ Bribery.

be had, then there is not the slightest danger that any other money would run it out of the market, and therefore, there is no sense in prohibiting other money. If our present money is the best money, why not let it survive as the fittest always will in a fair field with no favors? May not the people be trusted to decide what kind of money they like best, just as they decide what kinds of plows and stoves and carpets they like best?

The truth is that the bankers, and the whole class of persons who get their wealth by handling money, use the Government for the purpose of monopolizing money, for if money were not monopolized there would be no such thing as interest, and if there were no such thing as interest these people who now live by plunder would have to work for a living. One of the things the Government is for is to create and maintain a class of rich idlers. The “four hundred” are produced by the Government. They hoard or squander money that the Government authorizes them to wring from laborers for nothing in return. That is the reason why they are so patriotic.

I am not claiming that poor people should be allowed to take anything from the rich people. I am only trying to show that all our money legislation is special legislation for the purpose of robbing the poor of the millions upon millions that pass from hand to hand every year under the name of interest.

In my next address upon this subject, I intend to explain to you some other sins of the Government that may be more easily apprehended than those upon which I have been speaking. I know what opposition I am meeting in many of your minds, but I know also, that I am not addressing a mob, incapable of thought. I know that you are seeking for the truth in these troubled days, when men feel their wounds but cannot locate the point from which the poisoned arrows come. I know you are ready to listen to any reasonable person who thinks he has discovered the way out of our troubles.

I think that most of you already believe that you can be mentally or morally free while you believe in an arbitrary God, and I hope that you will come to see that you cannot be mentally, morally, and

privilege of being governed in this way by Blaine and Brice and Quay and Wanamaker and Hill and Dudley,² and the bank monopolists, and the gin mill toughs who run the machinery of municipal politics.

They admit that there are evils in the Government, but they insist that government by this or some other method, involving the use of physical force, is necessary as long as human nature is what it is.

Now, what I want to show you in the course of these addresses is that all such government is not only unnecessary, but that it is an evil, and that it cannot be purified. It will not injure you to listen to what I have to say, and if it is illogical and untrue I hope you have brains enough to reject it. If, however, you cannot show wherein I am wrong, I hope you have honesty and moral courage enough to add your testimony and labors to that of others and mine in attempting to live down the Government.

Many expedients are proposed by “reformers” as remedies for the acknowledged injustices of our social and industrial life, all of which leave government by physical force intact. I wish to show you that nothing will avail to liberate poor men and women from their present bondage as long as a military power exists by which they can be taxed and prevented from exercising what should be their rights. I wish to show you that every cause of poverty and degradation is directly authorized by Government, and that this is what the Government is for.

And now for an example. Henry George says that the arrangement by which the present monopolistic value of land — rent — goes into the pockets of individuals is the cause of poverty. And the pockets of individuals is a cause of poverty. And I am quite con-

² These are famously corrupt political figures of the day: Secretary of State James Gillespie Blaine; US Senator Calvin S. Brice (Ohio); US Senator Matthew S. Quay (Pennsylvania); the Philadelphia merchant John Wanamaker, then US Postmaster General; New York’s Governor David B. Hill; and Tammany Hall lawyer David Dudley Field.

vinced that what he refers to is a cause of poverty. We cannot be too thankful that Mr. George took up this idea and put it in a book that has been widely read as *Progress and Poverty*, and that the idea is being seized by the people. The monopoly of vacant land is one of the two great evils that horribly afflict the race. And I wish you to see that this gigantic monopoly was created and is maintained by the Government. The Government legalizes the infamous paper titles by which land is held out of use; the Government prevents, by force, the people from using vacant land wherever they find it. And by doing so the Government becomes the enemy of the landless.

Mr. George proposes, as a remedy, that rent be collected by the politicians instead of by the landlords, or rather, that it shall be collected by the landlords as it is now, and that the politicians shall take away about nine tenths of it from the landlords. But what is to be gained by this? The curse of the poor man is not that he has to pay rent to the landlord, but that he has to pay it at all. It is the same to him whether the landlord gets it all or whether the politicians get nine tenths of it. It all comes out of his labor in either case.

The manifest thing to do in this instance is not to change the Government into a landlord, but to get rid of the Government. If men want to become owners of vacant land let them do so, but do not put all the power of the Government behind them to enable them to drive starving men and women off their vacant land. Let them stake out or fence in their vacant land if they like, but let them keep people off that land themselves. They never could do it. If it were not for the National and State Governments, the people would swarm out upon the vacant land as they overran Oklahoma and will overrun the Cherokee strip when it is opened for settlement.³

Now, mark you. This is not saying that poor people should be allowed to steal what belongs to the rich. It is saying that rich people

³ In what is now Oklahoma, two million acres of land had been stolen from the already-displaced Cherokees, and in 1866, there was a strong popular movement to settle the "Unassigned Lands" against the orders of the federal government.

should not be authorized by the Government to steal what belongs to the poor. There should be no such thing as property in vacant land. Vacant land should not be owned by anybody -- no more by the Government than by the individual. This is one of the sins of the Government: that it authorizes landlords to steal and stands in with the thieves.

Now take another example: the Greenbackers⁴ are all agreed that the national bank money monopoly is an evil, and what they say is perfectly true. It is the grossest kind of injustice to allow one set of individuals in the community to issue money and forbid everyone else from doing so, as is done by taxing all but Government and national bank money ten per cent of its face value. But as the Single-taxers⁵ want the rent monopoly to be transferred to the Government but not abolished, the Greenbackers want the money monopoly transferred entirely to the Government, but not abolished. But what I want you to see is that rent, as we now know it, is the result of the monopoly of vacant land, which I have already shown you is authorized and enforced by the Government, so interest, as we now know it, arises from the money monopoly by the politicians and the bankers. And as the rent robbery would disappear with the governmental interference with landholding, so the interest robbery would disappear with the cessation of governmental interference with the issue of money.

It is not a sin for the Government to issue money, nor for the national bank to issue money. Both should have that right. But it is a sin for the Government to use the law courts and the police to prevent other individuals or associations of individuals from issuing money.

The existing money monopoly is justified by the argument that our present money is the best we ever had. If it is the best that can

⁴ The Greenback Movement, which called for the issue of paper money that was not backed by silver or gold, existed between the end of the Civil War and 1884, and in its later years was headed by the Greenback-Labor Party.

⁵ Followers of Henry George.