

Promise and Performance

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What I propose to impress upon you to-night is, in the first place, before making a promise think of what you are doing, of what you say you will do; and, in the next place, do it. Each of us tends to think more or less of his own profession. For the time being my profession is politics, and what I am going to say to you has large reference to public life. Do not deceive yourselves. Do not think that in this republic, under this government, which is a government of and by and for the people, that the people can hold themselves guiltless if the government goes wrong. It is an easy thing to try to make a scapegoat of others; it is an easy thing to try to save our own consciences when we have been guilty of shortcomings by seeking to lay the blame on others; it is an easy thing to say the people are sound, the fault lies only with the politicians; but in the long run the government in a country like ours must respond to the will of the people. If you wish your government to be good, it will be good. You have it in your power to make it good, but you cannot make it good without trying. I do not mean that you should wish it at home in your own parlor. I do not mean that you should get together in little bodies once a year and wish that other people were as good as you. I mean that you should take the same trouble in regard to politics that you take in your own private affairs.

Is it a credit to the men of education, to the men who have sufficient means to give them the little luxuries of life, that the actual hard work of politics should be done by those who make it a profession? Most emphatically, No. Lowell said, you will remember, "Freedom is not a gift that tarries long with cowards." It is true that liberty, real self-government, is not a gift that tarries long in the hands of supine, indifferent men, who do not care to take

the trouble to guard and keep that gift which has been given to them. In too many communities we see, on the one hand, the growth of a class that does not care for decency, and does care for viciousness, and on the other hand, the growth of a class of men caring for decency but in whom the tendency to achieve self-government has got into a state of atrophy, who seek to do what cannot be done, who follow to their own destruction fantastic theories, who demand the impossible good and yet permit to exist the bad which it is entirely possible to eradicate. Now that is the kind of thing I want to talk against. I want you to cultivate in yourselves the habit of demanding, not the impossible, but the best possible, and then insisting that when a promise to do the best possible has been given, it shall be lived up to.

Do not say, if you are a politician, that I am defending you for not doing what is straight. I am not. I am demanding that you should go straight. Do not say, on the other hand, that I am lowering the ideal. I am putting the ideal high, only I am demanding that when you fix your eyes upon the stars you remember you have your feet on the earth. The best way to understand what I mean is to read history, to read of our great men as they actually did their work, and remember that they had to work with the implements that were ready at hand, but tried to do their work well with those implements. Now there never existed, and does not exist now, in the most corrupt, rotten city government in this country so hideous an evil as slavery was on the 4th day of March, 1861, when Abraham Lincoln was inaugurated as president. He did not recommend on that day the abolition of slavery. Against the wishes of the extremists, he stood firm and inflexible, refusing to issue an emancipation proclamation until, after nearly two years had elapsed, the stern purpose and resolve of the people had been aroused. Consequently, when he promulgated his proclamation setting free the slaves on the first of January, 1863, he had the people of every loyal state behind him. Now at the time those who wished him to act more quickly denounced him as not having a sufficiently high ideal. They claimed they were better than

he was. They were not; they were more foolish than he was; that was all. Now you must face difficulties as Lincoln and men like him have faced the great difficulties of the past. You will not be excused if you fail to do the best possible; and, on the other hand, you are not to be excused if you fail to do anything because you do not think the best possible is really the best.

See to it that you know what can be done; see to it that those who are your representatives say that they will do it, and then hold them to the sharpest accountability if they fail to make good their words. No man is to be excused if he does not do in office what he said he would do before he got into the office, and you have the right to make the closest, most careful scrutiny to see to his making good the promise, and to distrust any man that is not true to his promise, any man whose performance does not square with the promise. Do not seek to delude yourself with the thought that a part of the body politic can be corrupt and the rest be uncorrupted. Do not think that public life can be allowed to get rotten and private life remain what private life should be. I ask for virtue, for honesty, for decency; I ask for courage; I ask of you that practical common sense which will make decency, honesty, courage of avail in actual political life as they are of avail in private life.