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OF THE GREATEST IMPORTANCE.
The Opinion of a Representative American.

The Present Effort to Build an Isthmus Canal.

SAN FRANCISCO, July 31, 1884.

To the Editor of the *Chronicle*: Sir: Having been interested some years ago in the canalization of the American isthmus, and, indeed, personally engaged in a survey for that purpose, I naturally felt anxious to visit the isthmus of Panama, where, as is well known, a canal has been commenced under the auspices of M. De Lesseps and a French company.

I spent two weeks upon that part of the isthmus, gathering all the information I could obtain of purely official sources—for it will be readily understood that information furnished to the world by parties directly interested in the success of this stupendous undertaking is more or less tinged with partiality.

The reports of Lieut. Rodgers and Rear-Admiral Cooper of the United States navy, while the most reliable yet published in the United States, have apparently been compiled from facts and figures furnished by the officials of the canal company, while their conclusions are mildly drawn, as perhaps they ought to be in an official report.

But the interoceanic canal question is one of vital importance to the United States, the people of which have a right, as far as they may feel an interest, to know the present condition of the work and its prospects in the future.

In expressing my own opinion I do so frankly, but without any desire to reflect upon the character or ability of those engaged in the undertaking. As I understand it, M. De Lesseps, after a very hurried and imperfect study of the isthmus, formed a company with a capital of \$120,000,000, to dig a through-cut canal across the isthmus of Panama, and promised his stockholders that it should be constructed for that amount of money and furnished by January 1, 1888. He calculated the cost of excavation at 50 cents per cubic meter and of labor at 80 cents per diem, and estimated the amount of excavation at 12,000,000 cubic meters; how much of it was earth and how much rock, he apparently did not know then, nor does he absolutely know now.

The work was commenced on the 1st day of February, 1881, and thus, at the present moment, three years and five months of the promised time have elapsed.

In this period contracts have been made for the excavation of 25,000,000 cubic meters, out of the 122,000,000 cubic meters estimated, but only 5,000,000 cubic meters have actually been done. Thus it appears that only one fifth of one fifth of the work has actually been performed, while nearly one half of the time has been consumed. And a more thorough study of the work has developed the fact that, as it progresses, it not only becomes more difficult, but the amount of excavation increases by each succeeding estimate, until it is now conceded that instead of 122,000,000 cubic meters it will reach the startling figure of 200,000,000 cubic meters, while the contract price at many points reaches as high as \$1.90 per cubic meter and labor has gone from 80 cents per diem to \$1.50 and \$1.75.

MISTAKEN ESTIMATES.

It is stated that \$60,000,000 has already been expended, or one-half of the capital stock, and \$40,000,000 is asked for the expenditure of the present year. Under these circumstances and without taking into consideration the many difficult problems which present themselves from day to day in the progress of the work, not the least of which is the control of that uncontrollable river, the Chagres, it is very evident that neither the estimated time nor the estimated money will be adequate for the undertaking, and, judging for the future by the testimony of the past, five times the amount of money and at least twenty years' time will be expended before we shall see even the beginning of the end.

If it is true, as stated, that M. De Lesseps has but recently reiterated his promise to complete the canal by 1888, or if it is expected to complete it with the amount of money already subscribed, then I consider there is an imposition being practiced upon the credulity of mankind, equalled only by the Southsea bubble.

The work already done is seen more particularly at Aspinwall, where the Fox river has been dredged out, widened and protected by a *terre plein*, until it exhibits a capacity, with more dredging, of becoming an excellent harbor at the entrance of the canal.

The work performed by the American Dredging Company of which much has been said, has been the digging through the morass of a space 100 feet wide, eleven feet deep and one and three quarters miles long. This may be said to be the commencement of the work itself, but when it is remembered that the canal is to be 200 feet wide and thirty feet deep, we can readily see how insignificant the work accomplished is in comparison with that remaining to be done by these dredges, their contract being for seven miles of the canal at its full width and depth.

At the exit of the canal at Panama nothing at all has been done, and at the divide at Culebra, where it will be necessary to cut down through earth and rock more than 500 feet, no work of any consequence has been accomplished.

It is said that \$20,000,000 has been expended upon the material and plant now upon the Isthmus, and that this must be regarded as part of the assets of the company, but how much of it may be utilized, and how much destroyed by the action of the climate is impossible to say. At present much of it may be seen upon the line of the canal entirely exposed to the weather and rapidly deteriorating.

CONCLUSIONS DRAWN.

There may be some slight mistakes

in these estimates, but the main facts can be fully sustained. From these and from other reasons I draw the following conclusions, satisfactory to my mind: First—That the canal cannot possibly be built in the time specified, nor for the amount estimated. Second—That the confidence of capitalists will be exhausted before the work can be finished, and in this connection I state again what I have written before, that in my opinion no canal can be made across any part of the American isthmus without national guarantees. Third—That even granting the possibility of controlling the Chagres now and diverting its channel, it is financially impossible to dig a through-cut canal, not only down to the sea level, but thirty feet below it, across the isthmus of Panama; while I believe a lock canal can be constructed as to accommodate the commerce of the world, and obviate the necessity of a canal at any other point.

My impression is that the present company will exhaust itself in a very few years, and that the time will then be opportune for any country to purchase the franchise, with the advantage of all the labor already expended. Whether the United States, in the maintenance of its undoubtedly right to exercise a controlling influence upon this continent, will then assert its prerogative remains, of course, a question for the future.

THE MONROE DOCTRINE.

But there are other questions in connection with the isthmus of Panama of interest to the people of the United States. Our government, by virtue of a treaty with that of Colombia, has guaranteed the isthmus transit. The Panama Railroad company has virtually sold its franchise to a company in Paris, identical in point of fact with the canal company. By this transaction the Panama railroad comes under the control of the Panama Canal company; indeed the director general of the canal company has on more than one occasion asserted his authority over the railroad; and, although at the present moment it may be considered impolite to interfere with the transit of freight and passengers across the isthmus, yet when the power is claimed, and the emergency may arise, it can easily be seen that the railroad will be subordinated to the canal. Should this occur, the question arises as to the duties of the United States government of Columbia in reference to the treaty before mentioned. Shall we quietly permit the treaty to be ignored and consent to the ascendancy of an European company over that part of the continent which we have heretofore considered to be under our immediate protection? Increasing lawlessness upon the Isthmus, originating in various causes—as the antagonism of races; the natural tendencies of the laborers to the excessive use of strong liquors in that trying climate; the absence of any adequate police force to control so large a body of men—will render necessary, sooner or later, the intervention of some foreign government. Will it be considered the duty of the United States to accept this position when in point of fact its citizens will have little or no interests to be protected? If not, will the people of the United States acquiesce in the possession of this important point on the American continent by an European power? This question must be answered at no distant day. The coming congressional and presidential election may indicate the popular will on this point. Latterly we have been prone to think the mere business interests of the country paramount to the other, and, as I think, greater problems of the day.

IS THE CANAL NEEDED?

If the Panama railroad will lay a double track and extend the road to islands in the bay of Panama, then the completion of the canal may be remanded to the distant future and M. De Lesseps may either live to the age of Methusalem to see its completion, or be born again into a world which will accept faith without works, in the meanwhile the demands of commerce will be measurably filled.

As with individuals, so with nations. It is not all of life merely to live, and I shall regret to see the time when our country shall become so absorbed in the pursuit of gain as to forget her responsibility to the world at large and particularly to her sister republics upon this continent. No nation can be truly great which fails to recognize the broad fact that she belongs to the family of nations and that she has duties to perform and rights to protect beyond her own borders.

If congress in its wisdom had thought fit to complete the five double-turreted monitors which for years have been straggling, for completion over all the abuse which could be heaped upon them, I should have no fears of European intervention in any affair which pertains to the American continent. The Isthmus of Panama has not yet passed out of American politics.

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