

## THE GENESIS OF THE PERSONNEL BILL.\*

NOT long after I became assistant secretary of the navy my attention was called, by a number of occurrences, to the fact that there was much friction in the personnel of the navy between the line-officers and the engineers. It was not so much that any one officer, or set of officers, made charges against another, but that the point of view on both sides showed a state of affairs which, if allowed to continue, would certainly be detrimental to the efficiency of the navy. It was very unpleasant to find officers of the highest standing displaying toward brother officers of a different corps a feeling of jealousy, which was emphatically unworthy of a service with such noble traditions, and of officers so single-minded in their devotion to the flag.

This state of affairs demanded investigation, in order to ascertain whether something could not be done to do away with the conditions that had called it into being, and to make every officer in fact, as he already was in desire, an active helper in the upbuilding of the efficiency of the navy.

Consultation with members of the naval committees of the Senate and the House revealed the fact that the trouble was chronic, and had caused serious damage to the navy in Congress, for every congressman who was doubtful as to the policy of upbuilding the navy was apt to be changed into a positive foe of the navy by this "line and staff" fight.

Various measures had been proposed in Congress to

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remedy the evils complained of; but they had always been drawn only from the standpoint of one side or the other, and did not go to the root of the matter; though one or two of them showed exhaustive research and painstaking thoroughness of work, and proved invaluable aids to us in getting up our final bill.

In the early part of the summer of 1897, the Honorable Francis H. Wilson, who had been a member of the House Naval Committee for some time and had just returned from a visit to the Naval Academy, called my attention to a plan, which he had submitted to the board of visitors, for increasing efficiency by educating all the cadets at Annapolis alike, and thus fitting them for duty either as line-officers or engineers. About this same time, Professor Hollis, of Harvard University, formerly a naval officer of distinguished reputation, favored me with his views on this subject, and sketched out a plan which in some respects supplemented that of Congressman Wilson.

As these plans involved the coming together of the previously hostile factions, it was obvious that the next step was to secure the views of officers on the two sides. Accordingly, I requested an expression of views regarding these plans from officers of recognized merit. The mere discussion of the subject disposed both sides to be more reasonable, and a scheme of a bill working out the details of the previous plans was prepared and submitted to a number of officers. The idea was that the matter should be carefully investigated and discussed by large numbers of line-officers and engineers, in order to prepare a sentiment in the service favorable to united and sincere action. The next step was to get a board appointed by the secretary for the special consideration of the organization of the personnel of the navy, in order

that a report might be submitted looking to necessary improvement. It is needless to say that Secretary Long had taken an active interest in the subject from the first, and that but for his cordial approval the matter would never have been pushed.

In November of last year the board, of eleven naval officers, many of whom had national reputations, and all of whom were men of recognized professional eminence, was appointed by Secretary Long. To me was assigned the duty of presiding at their sessions.

These eleven naval officers showed commendable promptness in getting down to business. The views of the two sides were formulated, and on the very first day the essential feature of the Personnel Bill was proposed by Captain Evans, namely, the amalgamation of the line and engineer corps on a basis to be determined after further discussion. This proposition was submitted on Saturday afternoon, and was, of course, of such great importance that it was felt better not to take a vote on it until the following Monday. On that day, after some further discussion, the proposition was adopted. After this, the labors of the board really consisted almost entirely of formulating the details to make this plan workable. At first, each side evidently viewed the other with some suspicion; but, as time wore on, it became evident that all the members of the board were animated by the same feelings of disinterestedness; each desired the highest efficiency of the service, and was willing to make concessions.

The result of the labors of this board, lasting just a month, was the bill which is known as the "Personnel Bill." I propose to discuss it chiefly from the standpoint of the administration of the Navy Department.

The change in the organization of the personnel which

is proposed by this bill seems radical; but this is not the case. It is proposed simply in order that the officer may fit the work; because the work itself has radically changed since the present organization of the navy was devised. The advent of the steam-engine, with the consequent gradual growth of machinery on board ship, is of course the cause of the change. Even as late as our Civil War, sailing-ships were still employed as part of the fighting force of our navy, although the active work was performed by steamers; but it was evident to careful students at the end of that war that the day of sailing-ships had passed as completely as that of the galleys, with which, two thousand years before, the wars for the mastery of the Mediterranean had been waged. Since that time the importance of machinery on board our vessels has enormously increased, while sails have entirely disappeared; and, with the growth of the machinery, the duties of the line-officer have changed, until he has become in fact, although not in name, an engineer. As I stated in my report to the secretary of the navy:

“Every officer on a modern war-vessel in reality has to be an engineer, whether he wants to or not. Everything on such a vessel goes by machinery, and every officer, whether dealing with the turrets or the engine-room, has to do engineer’s work. There is no longer any reason for having a separate body of engineers, responsible for only a part of the machinery. What we need is one homogeneous body, all of whose members are trained for the efficient performance of the duties of the modern line-officer. The midshipmen will be grounded in all these duties at Annapolis, and will be perfected likewise in all of them by actual work after graduation.

“In making this change we are not making a revolution; we are merely recognizing and giving shape to an evolution, which has come slowly, but surely and naturally; and we propose to reorganize the navy along the lines indicated by the course of the evolution itself.”

The reasonableness of this reorganization seems still more apparent if looked at in the light of the lessons of history. About two centuries and a half ago, the navies of the world underwent a radical change. There was then, also, an amalgamation of the man who fought the guns and the man who directed the motive power; or, in other words, the soldier and the sailor were amalgamated. Some of England's greatest admirals of that period were men who had been successful land generals; but their success at sea was not on account of their ignorance of the management of the motive power, but in spite of it. England's victories at that time were won because other navies were as inefficiently organized as hers. The Englishman, like the Dutchman and the Frenchman of that date, had a better “fighting edge” than the Spaniard, and he prevailed; just as, within the last few months, the descendants of the victors of two centuries ago were again the victors over the descendants of the vanquished of that time.

The work of the department in detailing officers for duty will be vastly simpler under the new scheme than it has been in the past, because every officer of the new line will be capable of performing any of the duties which involve the management of large bodies of men, or the control of machinery. The personnel thus becomes very much more elastic, and the task of selecting officers for any duty is made very much simpler. It also means, for the department, an end of an enormous amount of petty bickering, which was inevitable under

the present system, but which has been a cause of much bitterness, and destructive of that unity of feeling which should exist among all officers. The mere agreement upon this bill of the officers concerned has already been productive of the very best results in increased good feeling; and, in fact, I am informed that on a number of ships it has already been partially put into effect, for officers have volunteered for duty foreign to their regular work and have performed it with excellent results. It need hardly be said that, if the mere agreement upon the proposition is productive of so much good, the actual working of the scheme will give still better results. Personally, I believe that it will give us a navy whose efficiency will be far ahead of that of any other country, and I know that this opinion is shared by the very great majority of our naval officers.

Besides this question of reorganizing the personnel so that it would conform to the improved *matériel*, there was another of just as much importance to the efficiency of the service, namely, a rational scheme of advancement whereby the best officers would be retained in the service and would attain positions of responsibility at a sufficiently early age to insure the efficient performance of duty. It might seem to the layman that, with our splendid school at Annapolis, we were sure of getting officers sufficiently well trained to answer any call upon them; but the fact is that the existing system of promotion, if it had been purposely devised to the end of putting a premium on mediocrity, could not have been more successful. At present, no matter what the talents or attainments of an officer, he can only be advanced by the death, retirement, or resignation of those above him. Now, the natural and proper organization of the list of officers necessarily makes the number required for sub-

ordinate duties many times greater than the number in the command grades; so that, if it is expected that all officers are to pass through all the grades by mere seniority promotion due to ordinary natural waste, it is simply impossible that their terms of service in the various grades should be properly divided. Reference to any actuary's tables would enable the non-professional man to predict the very state of things that now exists; for, at present, officers spend four-fifths of their active life in subordinate grades, and then rush through the command and flag grades so rapidly that they have not time to perform adequate service in them. One of the evils of this system springs from the fact, well recognized in all departments of life, that, if a man is to be really successful in positions of great responsibility, he must ordinarily be given an opportunity to assume this responsibility before he becomes too old. Any one who looks on the gray-haired lieutenants and lieutenant-commanders and realizes that many of them will be fifty-five years of age before reaching command rank, will also realize that they may then be too old to make thoroughly efficient commanding officers; for it is almost an axiom of naval life that the successful commander is the one who is willing to take risks in order to accomplish a great purpose. A man who has been a subordinate all his life cannot shake off the habit of reliance on another, when he is suddenly thrust into a position of responsibility at an advanced age.

The remedy for this condition of affairs is obvious in a general way. It must consist in some provision which will enable officers to attain command rank at a reasonably early age, the one fixed by the board being forty-five years. But, when we come to consider the details necessary to carry out this plan, there are several meth-

ods which might be adopted, some of which are actually in use in other navies. Indeed, it may be said in passing that our navy is almost the only navy, worthy of the name, where the proper promotion of officers has been left absolutely to chance.

One method is to take specially talented officers and promote them before others of their date, keeping up this process of selection for advancement in all the grades, so that the result is an aggregation of the best talent in the higher grades at a moderate age. This, however, has the serious disadvantage that it arouses jealousy and discontent, and it tends to accumulate in the subordinate grades a crowd of old men who are not physically capable of performing the duties which fall to junior officers. Moreover, it is difficult to devise a system which in time of peace will result in the best man being chosen; in time of war, the likelihood of the choice being right is far greater.

This method, and that of the British navy, where there is an age limit for each grade, and the best officer is just as likely to be retired as the poorest, were thoroughly understood by the members of the board, and they endeavored to formulate a plan which, while accomplishing the desired result, would avoid defects of other systems.

The idea in the plan recommended by the board is to keep the general average high, by retiring the least desirable officers, provision being made that, when the rate of promotion falls below that which is necessary to keep the ages for the various grades correct, a certain number of officers who have been at least twenty years in the service shall be retired. It has been urged as an objection to this plan that the officers so retired will be disgraced, but that is not a fact. They are not retired



for incompetence, but because, as some must get out of the way for the benefit of the whole service, it is manifestly better that the least desirable should go, rather than that chance should be allowed to set aside the best or the worst indifferently.

The discussion also brought out very clearly the further fact that the choice for retirement of the "least fit" will comprehend all the qualities that go to make up a useful naval officer, and that every part of an officer's record will count in the consideration. Instances are numerous of men of exceptional mental attainments who, in the past, have found themselves totally unsuited to a naval life, and have resigned to become highly successful as scientists, college professors, or business men. Something of this sort will be true of the selections for retirement, and it may often happen that those retired will be men who stand high mentally, but who are lacking in other essential requirements. The retirement will therefore mean, not that the one selected was incompetent or worthless, but that on the whole he was not as useful to the navy as others.

The board's plan, then, retains the best officers, and, like the others, will fill the higher grades with them; it assures young officers for the junior grades, where youthful vigor is a very important element of success; and it leaves no soreheads in the service to impair efficiency by their discontent. Moreover, it puts all choice of officers for retirement in the hands of a board of high naval officers, so as to eliminate as far as possible that political pressure, which, wherever it exists, is the bane of any service.

These, then, are the two vital elements of the Personnel Bill; the unification of the duties of officers, resulting in vastly increased efficiency, due to the greater

elasticity of the system and to the immense improvement in the *esprit*; and the rational promotion of officers, whereby the country is assured that the best men are retained in the service, so that every grade will have officers of the proper age and physique for the highest performance of duty.

One other important feature is the question of pay. This, too, has been a cause of discontent in the navy for many years, and, combined with the slow promotion, has resulted in the loss of many of the most brilliant young officers, whose poor prospects in the service have led them to accept offers of lucrative positions in civil life. The scheme proposed in the bill is to pay the navy at exactly the same rate as the army and marine corps. In these two branches of the military service, the pay is somewhat higher than in the navy, which doubtless results from the fact that the navy pay table was arranged some thirty years ago, when conditions as to promotion were very different from what they are now, and when probably it gave a result about equivalent to that of the army. No valid reason can be assigned why public servants performing almost identical duties, which require the same order of ability, should not receive the same rate of pay. Indeed, naval officers claim, with good reason, that owing to their enforced absence from home and family, and their voyages in foreign countries, their expenses are materially greater than those of their brothers in the army. Surely, the American people will not grudge this act of justice to the men who fought under Dewey, Sampson, and Schley, and who made all Americans forever their debtors.

I have seen the statement in the papers that prize-money in the navy was intended to offset this difference

in pay, but that is simply absurd. Until this spring, there had not been a war for over thirty years, and, even in the war which has just closed, the number of naval officers who received prize-money is a very small fraction of the entire list. The practice of giving prize-money is one which is repugnant to modern ideas, and there can be little doubt that naval officers would offer no objection should the whole system of awarding prize-money be abolished by Congress.

The limits of space forbid my dwelling upon the features of the Personnel Bill relating to bettering the condition of the enlisted men, which are worthy of high commendation, and which will undoubtedly receive favorable action by Congress. But the vitally important part of this particular bill is that relating to the officers who train the men, and on whose efficiency that of the whole navy depends. It is useless to spend millions of dollars in the building of perfect fighting machines, unless we make the personnel which is to handle these machines equally perfect. We have an excellent navy now; but we can never afford to relax our efforts to make it better still. Next time, we may have to face some enemy far more formidable than Spain. In my judgment, the Personnel Bill will markedly increase the efficiency of our already efficient officers; and its enactment into law is of interest to the whole country.