

EDITORIAL

LINCOLN'S INSTINCT.

By DANIEL DE LEON

A MUCH more valuable contribution than organs to churches is the contribution made by Andrew Carnegie towards the proper appreciation of Lincoln by making public a certain incident of the Hampton Roads Conference. At that conference, held during the civil war between representatives of the South and representatives of the North, the wily Stephens of the South proposed peace “upon the terms of the Restoration in King Charles’ time—no punishment or fines and the rights of property safeguarded.” Lincoln, suspecting that “rights of property” in man were intended, promptly ended the discussion by saying: “Seward is the historian of my cabinet. He knows all about the restoration of property, finance, etc. All I know about Charles is that Cromwell cut his head off.”

The Charles of the Restoration was not the Charles whose head Cromwell cut off. Lincoln was probably ignorant of this detail, and, probably, Stephens sneered internally at Lincoln’s ignorance. Nevertheless, whether assumed or intentional, the “ignorance” of Lincoln was the garb in which a correct instinct was clad—the instinct that, at the time of the Hampton Roads Conference, the only reminiscence worth recalling, in connection with Charleses and Restorations, was that the head of feudalism was cut off by the incarnation of on-coming capitalism, and that that memory was the only appropriate answer to the representative of that vestige of feudalism in America—chattel slavery.

Knowledge is power—provided the fuel is not too much for the fire. If it is, it puts out the fire. A smaller quantity of fuel, but enough for the fire that it is thrown upon, will produce a stronger blaze than a larger quantity of fuel, if it be too much for the fire. It is no uncommon thing to meet, in these days of revolutionary ferment, people with slight intellectual fire who have actually extinguished that fire with the loads of fuel they have dumped upon it. These people call themselves

“intellectual.” The fact is the hearths of their minds are cold. Others, on the contrary, with less fuel have actually heated the same with the fire of their intellect, and what they yield is of value. The “intellectual,” accordingly, talks nonsense in well-rounded and grammatical periods; the so-called unintellectual, at whom the “intellectual” sneers, talks sense in however broken a set of phrases, and however ungrammatical.

The correct instinct is what tells—in these days as in those of Lincoln. Aided with the fuel of knowledge, such instinct becomes all the more powerful; whereas no amount of acquired knowledge can substitute the instinct. The correct instinct of the class interests of the proletariat may to-day blunder, as Lincoln did in the matter of the Charleses, but it will know enough to know, as Lincoln did, that no salve will do where social amputation is requisite, and the head of a Charles is to be cut off by a Cromwell.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.
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