Article

No 30

Subject
Sec Court-Defenses

Sea Coast Defense

Dear Sir: As promised you are welcome to a few of my thoughts on Coast Defense.

Of course there is very little prospect of war with Italy just now; yet the rumors of war and the firm stand that our statesmen take when any new complication arises, show us plainly that we ought to have our lines of defense well arranged & in place. The fishery embroglio; the Behring Sea controversy; the strikes made by the slavs, Poles & other foreign people who have been bred to fight against all organized authority; the dynamite anarchists; the [illegible] that abominable old good government combined with recent unreasonable attacks aimed against our army & navy, - mis-

-ing that the agency of war be abolished, these must make all thoughtful men ask what are our means of defense? # The village or city has its police; the State its militia; the court-districts their marshals, their sheriffs and their posse comitatis; but what Defense has the Nation which is called upon to meet & deal with other nations on equal terms of dignity & sovereignty? What are the practical means of defense on which the President and his Cabinet in emergency can rely?

Certainly this is no time to reveal to a nation disposed to provoke or guard our strength or our weakness; but it is a time for being

The Situation.

reasonably prepared, at least for a defensive attitude. # In a report made to the War Department years ago I said:

> The prevalent statement that under all circumstances numbers of brave, true men are a sufficient defense to any country, is a palpable mistake. It is certainly inviting attack to present a rich and beautiful city to the greed of nations that assuredly are not yet wholly governed by benevolent considerations.

Brave defenders not enough. Modern armament.

And we now see that other nations than the greed of other nations may tempt somebody to attack, endanger our seaboard-towns and imperil commerce: Secretary Greble in an article in a letter to me five years ago presented some facts that gave you the information you were seeking today. He says:

present ships running past the heavy shore batteries; to hold them, in fact, long enough under land fire to insure their destruction. It is true that a harbor heavily planted with submarine mines would be safer from attacks than if it had no obstructions in it; but if that harbor becomes of importance to the enemy, his ships would soon blast a channel through the mines and take possession of it. The few forts there are in San Francisco harbor were built to withstand what is now obsolete ordnance. The 200-pounder Parrott gun and the old 10 and 13-inch smooth-bore guns were the heaviest pieces brought against such works. When we think that these guns were carried by vessels totally unarmored, or so nearly so that they could not remain long enough under the fire of land batteries to make their own fire destructive, we see why granite forts with eight foot walls were considered strong enough to protect our harbors. Now, when the iron armor of war ships has increased from four to thirty inches, and their armament consists of guns ranging up to 17½-inch calibre, weighing more than 100 tons, and throwing projectiles weighing 2,000 pounds, fired with 700 pounds of powder, having a muzzle energy of forty and fifty thousand foot tons, and capable of penetrating twenty-five to thirty inches of wrought iron nearly a mile away;—of course the old forts cannot stand against the new engines of war. Since 1872 heavy ordnance has increased wonderfully in power and size, and equally great improvements have been made in powder and projectiles. Foreign nations have spent millions in developing and perfecting heavy guns and vessels to carry them. Now, guns are afloat which send a ton of metal some nine miles with accuracy enough to hit a city, and carrying some seventy-five pounds of nitro-gelatine. In August, 1884, a steel projectile, weighing 400 pounds, was fired from the 20-ton Whitworth steel gun through eighteen inches of wrought iron, thirty-seven inches well packed sand, one and a quarter inches of steel, some heavy balks of timber, and then sixteen feet more of sand; the projectile was recovered practically uninjured. The 80-ton gun will penetrate twenty-five feet of granite and concrete masonry, or thirty-two feet of best Portland cement concrete. At Spezia, in May, 1880, the Armstrong 100-ton breech-loading rifle, 17.7-inch calibre, fired a projectile through forty odd feet of sand into the rock behind, and the Italian 100-ton gun sent its projectile, weighing 2,205 pounds, forty-six feet into the sand. In 1863 armored vessels cost about two hundred thousand dollars apiece, now they cost seventeen times as much as the ships our forts were built to fight against, and with this increased cost comes, of course, proportional increase in offensive and defensive capabilities. England has a navy of fifty-seven ships, all heavily armored sea-going vessels, carrying the most powerful armaments. In case of war with this nation the greater part of this navy could be sent against any one of our sea-coast cities. To defend our coast with a navy alone, as some people suggest, is impracticable, as it would require a navy equal in power to that of Great Britain in the harbor of each of our large cities; this would be necessary, as we could not foresee against what point the attack would be directed. Our only safety is by building forts capable of mounting heavier and better guns than those afloat, and having iron or steel armor for these forts sufficiently thick to protect the guns and gunners from naval fire.

(the 200 pdr Parrott) #

better than rules of comity, easily broken by nations not expecting retaliation. Recent wars have shown us cities bombarded, and if the non-combatants are given a reasonable time to leave the city it is all that humanity can expect. We will suppose that the naval commanders across the waters are humane enough to give the women and children time to leave the city. The two ships are lying outside the harbor, south of Point Lobos, within seven miles of the City Hall. Suddenly a roar is heard, followed by another and another; soon the screech of the shells is followed by the crash of falling buildings. Shells fall in every part of the city, buildings are shattered, and fire is breaking out in a hundred different places. The fire department and citizens are helpless against this dual danger. The socialist and anarchist revel in the wholesale destruction, and lend their energies to strip and burn the buildings which have escaped the enemy; the Chinaman, long suffering and patient, sees a speedier way than is his wont to accumulate wealth and return rich to China, and he takes to burning and pillage. The whole city is on fire, men are now looking for means to save themselves, trusting to Providence to take care of the few things

I wish to emphasize that last sentence - viz: "build forts capable of mounting heavier and better guns than those afloat and having iron or steel armor for these forts sufficiently thick to protect the guns & gunners from naval fire!"

Experiments have been going on since and there are guns carrying projectiles that exceed in penetrating power those which Sir Geo Goble has sighted.

Arbitration not yet prevailing.

It is not wise to argue the proposition that the United States will for many years be always liable to war. Arbitration may come & be universal among civilized & Christian peoples. God hasten that time! Europe, however, does not present that attitude today. As in the Turko-Russian conflict and in the Franco-Prussian war, war comes in latter times like a

thunderstorm. The cloud begins in a comparatively clear sky. Swelling to enormous proportions, soon expends its fury & quickly subsides. The death rate is terrible, the expenses frightful. The Creator ~~nation~~ nation is made to stagger for years under a heavy burden of debt to defray the war charges — and years & years it must swallow its chagrin while it pays up its debt & recuperates its energies.

Suppose the war cloud to burst up from any point of our horizon — what could we do to hold our own & avert calamity & loss?

In answer, < Practical measures.
Ships & Batteries.
What I once said in a paper published by the American Magazine concerning San Francisco will apply to New York or any other of our large cities on either coast:

Considering the importance of our good navy in performing its true and appropriate work, no one will begrudge the money expended in the construction of naval vessels and armament; and, of course, it is wise to have them equal or superior to anything they may encounter.

It is, ~~perhaps, after all that has been said,~~ well to plan wherever practicable, for substantially three lines of defense for a harbor like that of San Francisco: an outer one of war ships, a second of torpedo boats, and a third of fortifications, including, when necessary, floating batteries.

To resist an enemy approaching the Golden Gate or its vicinage from the sea, it would afford great satisfaction to the defenders, and probably more to the defended, to have, as we did in our great battles, a good observing force and abundant reserves; yet with our present naval strength, San Francisco should not depend on the outward line; but rather upon the proposed torpedo boats well equipped and manned, the essential floating batteries, and most of all upon the several permanent fortifications, to be well located and well constructed, and kept in good working order. Upon these San Francisco may rely, as she does upon her good police, her superb fire department, and upon her arrangements for water, sewerage and light.

Our Navy has been much increased and much improved since the above statement was made. The Torpedo Boats & the whole Torpedo System have been slowly & surely developing. The experimental mortar

-firing so as to land shells within forts or upon the decks of approaching vessels has been constantly advancing and many good guns of long range are in existence. Our outer forts can be put in order upon both approaches to New York Harbor; so that I ~~doubt if~~ do not believe Italy with her best iron clads - could get past our Naval Squadron, our torpedo arrangements and our shore batteries into any offing that would enable her to practice upon the Brooklyn bridge or the World building.

This item of news from Chili is apropos — and indeed a demonstration of the present value of defensive works properly located & manned.

A recent demonstration in favor of coast-defense.

A LIVELY CHILIAN NAVAL FIGHT.

SEVERAL VESSELS KNOCKED TO PIECES AND A NUMBER OF MEN KILLED—THE REBEL FLEET SHORT OF COAL.

San Francisco, April 1.—Private advices from Valparaiso state that the ironclad Blanco, belonging to the insurgents, recently attempted to blow up the armed Government tug Florence with a fish torpedo. The torpedo missed the tug, but struck a big floating dry dock in the harbor, blowing it to pieces. The Blanco was thereupon treated to a hot fire of shot and shell from every gun in the forts and steamed out of the harbor.

The same night a torpedo boat and the tug Florence stole out to attack the Blanco. The ironclad was in company with the sloop-of-war O'Higgins. Both ships compelled the Government vessels to return to the harbor and followed in hot pursuit. A heavy shell from the Blanco struck the Florence, blowing her entirely out of the water, and every one of her crew of seventeen men was either killed or wounded. A broadside from the O'Higgins knocked the torpedo boat all to pieces. The two insurgent vessels then turned their attention to the forts and a lively battle ensued. A shell from the forts struck the O'Higgins and went clear through her. Another shell caused a gun on her quarter deck to explode. When the smoke cleared away the deck was found to have been literally torn out of the vessel, and nine men out of the gun crew of twelve were blown to atoms. The sloop was at once taken out of the range of the guns in the forts.

The forts first drove an iron-clad out of the harbor — Again the next day one ~~rebel~~ vessel was disabled & the other badly damaged & driven beyond

range by the defending forts.
Here are the three lines of defense that we must employ against a foreign enemy, viz: the ~~navy~~ men-of-war, the torpedo boats & floating batteries, and the permanent works properly located & well equipped.

It rejoices my military heart that one regiment of New York Artillery is forming as part of our National Guard. The more skilled artillery men you have the better.

The offensive is best defense.

I may end my letter by saying that Grant's & Sherman's method of defense is the best: it was to take the offensive as often

as possible.

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Our navy is not yet large. We cannot divide it up too much. It can take the offensive very readily. We remember that the little Monitor slew the giant Merrimac. The pluck of our naval men is equal to any emergency that may come on the open sea. This is not boasting; it is part of my faith. If we are attacked, the cause will not be that we mean to cover up crime, — but to defend our Republican way of righting wrongs. They had defend the right so far as to keep us from all war. Yours truly

Oscar Straus