

# The Public

Fourth Year.

CHICAGO, SATURDAY, JANUARY 25, 1902.

Number 199.

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Entered at the Chicago, Ill., Post-office as second-class matter.

For terms and all other particulars of publication, see last column of last page.

The Isthmian canal tangle is one which the ordinary citizen cannot unravel. The solution of the problem depends upon superiority of routes, and over this question even the omniscient and infallible newspapers are in confusion. How can common folks hope to form sound opinions when their great organs of opinion are at a loss?

Such a question can be properly determined, of course, only by experts possessed of special knowledge. Though the people are more competent than any expert to pass upon the desirability of an Isthmian canal, they are not as good judges of details. In this as in all other matters of common concern, an intelligent public opinion is the safer guide as to the general principle involved, the general direction to pursue, the general object to be attained, the general policy to adopt; but experts must be called in to select and adjust the particular means. Right there is the difficulty in the Isthmian canal case. Such vast private interests are at stake that the experts are liable to be influenced, and, at any rate, are distrusted. It is doubtless true that the whole controversy over routes—Nicaragua versus Panama—has been raised and is kept alive by the trans-continental railway ring, which now controls trans-Isthmian commerce and is averse to any undertaking that would open the way for free competition with its continental lines of railway. By bringing on the controversy this ring hopes to prevent the construction of any canal.

The differences between the Nicaragua and the Panama routes are

marked enough to offer an easy problem to disinterested and incorruptible experts. One route is over a mountain by means of many locks, and would require perennial expenditures on a large scale. The other is through a cut at sea level. The former is longer than the latter, from terminus to terminus; and it has not been constructed at all, while its competitor is partially constructed and the whole outfit can be bought for a small sum. If these were the only facts, no expert would be necessary. The Panama route would obviously be preferable, and the people themselves could select. But other factors enter in. There are large political considerations: one route lies in Nicaragua and the other in Colombia. There are peculiar physical considerations: though the Nicaragua canal would cross a mountain, the difficulties of construction would be materially lessened by a river flowing down to the coast and a large lake at the summit. There are considerations of distance: though the Panama canal would be shorter than the Nicaragua, it would be further south and therefore more difficult of access from the world's trade centers. Considerations of the comparative healthfulness of the two locations also enter in, with many less obvious points. All these conflicting considerations make it impossible for any but well-informed experts to fix the route intelligently; but to such experts, those considerations—the corrupting influence of private interests apart—should not present a serious problem. Be that as it may, however, in the nature of the case experts must decide. The people cannot. Neither can congress. That body is no more competent as a body to solve problems of detail than the people themselves would be.

What congress can do and should

do is to pass upon the general questions in the case. As a popular body, representing the intelligence of the people and nothing more, its function is mainly to decide the question of building an Isthmian canal, to determine whether it shall be a private enterprise or a public work, and to fix general limitations. The details it should leave to special workmen, authorizing their employment in a manner calculated to secure fidelity, which can best be done by concentrating responsibility for results where the sense of responsibility is likely to be keenest. These views being sound, the existing controversy over the Isthmian canal ought to be speedily settled. It may be assumed by congress that an Isthmian canal is really wanted. Most of the newspapers say it is wanted; for three centuries or more the subject has been agitated; congress is already virtually agreed that the American people demand it; and the desirability of piercing a strip of land so narrow as the Isthmus, which forces ships plying between the Atlantic and the Pacific to go thousands of miles out of their way around the farthest point of South America, is too evident for serious discussion. The next question relates to the kind of thoroughfare the canal shall be—whether a private lane like our trans-continental railroads, or an open highway like the oceans. That point also is removed from honest discussion. Few favor the private highway, and none defend it for any but private reasons. A private highway is an incongruity, both in words and sense. All that remains, then, for congress to do is to authorize the construction and maintenance by the federal government of a public waterway through the Isthmus, fixing such general provisions as may be necessary or appropriate, and to invest the pres-

ident with the authority and impose upon him the responsibility for the details of route selection and canal construction.

If that were done, the president would be obliged, of course, to rely upon experts. He could not do the work personally. But having the power of employment and discharge he would be responsible for the ability and fidelity of the experts he chose. If they were privately interested, or gave way to corruption, he would be accountable to the people; and the consciousness of this undivided responsibility would tend to the intensification of his own probity and vigilance. There would be danger, to be sure, of corruption, which in some of its subtler forms might penetrate even into the White House. But when the personal integrity of the president cannot be trusted, whose can be? And it must not be forgotten that the danger of corruption cannot be wholly avoided, no matter what is done. So long as we foster gigantic private interests at the expense of public rights, we must recognize corruption as one of the ever-present factors in all public problems. The remedy is not to depart from common sense methods of managing public affairs, in order to head off corrupting influences. The less common sense there is in the method, the easier for those influences to creep in. The remedy really needed is the withdrawal from private and corporate hands of all the public favors which build up private interests in hostility to the legitimate interests of the public.

Consider this point in the light of the Isthmian canal controversy. In normal circumstances there would be nothing to the controversy but the impotent influences of a badly crippled foreign corporation owning the unfinished Panama canal and anxious to sell out cheap, on one side, and on the other the equally impotent influences of a speculative company hoping in vain to be subsidized to build and own a canal on the Nicaragua route.

A typical Tammany alderman could almost be trusted to decide such a controversy for the public good. But note the difference when a powerful railway interest injects itself into the problem. It owns all the highways across the continent. Not only the rails and ties and locomotives, but the rights of way. By this modern species of highwaymanship the ring is supreme in power, when its interests are involved. Its interests are involved in the Isthmian canal project. At present it commands the Isthmus. It owns the Isthmian railroad and it subsidizes the Isthmian steamers. There is, therefore, no competition with it save the insignificant competition of tramp vessels that go around the Horn. But if a public canal were cut through the Isthmus, the shipping of the world would compete for freight traffic with this transcontinental railroad ring. Is it any wonder that corruption is rife, and that powerful influences are at work to prevent the construction of a canal, or if one be constructed to make it a failure?

How simple a thing it would be to annihilate that pernicious influence, not only for this occasion but for all occasions. Its power is due, as we have already said, not to rails and ties and cars and locomotives, but to rights of way. They belong of right to the public. Unless the government owns them the private owners will own the government. Private highways are an anachronism. Let the government take them back for the people to whom they belong and who cannot justly be divested of them. This is even more important than an Isthmian canal, and for other purposes besides the destruction of a powerful corrupting influence. The canal is intended, in the commercial aspects of the project, to make a thoroughfare for competition with the railroads. That would not be necessary if the railroad rights of way were returned to the people from whom they have been taken, for railroad trains would then compete with one another. Just as private vessels may

sail through the public canal, so could private freight cars roll over the public railway. And why should this resumption by the public of the public highways not be made? Can any Isthmian canal advocate explain why it is government business to open and own a water highway across the Isthmus, operating locks if necessary, and not government business to open and own a rail highway across the continent, regulating time tables and operating switches as required?

The effort of the British ministry to manufacture friendly American sentiment just as American feeling is rising over the use by the British army of an American port as a base for military supplies with which to fight the Boers, and upon the heels of the ugly disclosure in a trial at London of the fact that the British postal authorities at Johannesburg were in the habit of turning over the American consul's mail to the British censor—that effort in those circumstances was ludicrously awkward. Observe how awkward it was. An obscure member of parliament asks the ministry to reveal a diplomatic secret of four years' standing affecting the United States with reference to their war with Spain. The request was utterly without visible cause. No related question was under discussion, or likely to be. Yet the ministry hastily made the requested disclosure, thereby indicating that at the beginning of the Spanish-American war the continental powers of Europe were disposed to embarrass the United States, and were headed off by the friendly attitude of the British tory ministry. If there was or could have been any other motive for that parliamentary performance than anxiety to counteract the rising pro-Boer sentiment in this country, a revelation of the mysterious motive would be at least interesting. Done more skillfully, the thing might have succeeded. But thin-skinned though the Americans are, and therefore susceptible to flattery, they are intelligent enough at least to recognize a "jolly"