
Pin and Principle

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In the far-away southwestern Pacific ocean, lies a group of islands known as Samoa, or the Samoan group. These islands are situated on the line of commerce between the United States and Australia. Some years since, the government of the United States deemed it prudent to enter into negotiations with the government of Samoa, for the establishment of a "coaling station" on one of the islands. Permission was granted and the United States obtained certain rights, which, by the action of German authorities at Samoa, have been placed in peril, and the circumstance has led to much talk about the possibility of war between the United States and Germany.¹

We have stated the case in a nutshell for the purpose of referring to an interview with Admiral Porter,² of the United States Navy, upon the subject. The views of Admiral Porter are entitled to great weight. He knows all about war, its costs and sacrifices. He does not talk at random. He weighs his words. A war with Germany would require, he thinks, the immediate outlay of at least \$250 million for ships and guns and other munitions of war. As a preliminary step he would have the government purchase all the big guns England and France may have for sale. After all, he thinks, for a time, that Germany, as she has the best navy, would have the best of the fight, but that ultimately the United States would destroy her commerce and sink her navy. Admiral Porter does not think that it would be child's play to

¹ The United States and Germany stood at the brink of war in early 1889, with three warships from each country facing off amidst a civil war in an incident remembered to diplomatic history as the Samoan Crisis. The armed standoff was abruptly terminated when a March 15 hurricane wrecked five of the six ships involved. The international dispute continued until the signing of a tripartite convention between Germany, Great Britain, and the United States in 1899, resulting in a partition of Samoa by the three imperialist powers.

² **David Dixon Porter** (1813-1891), the son of a naval hero of the War of 1812, was promoted to the rank of Admiral, top officer of the US Navy, in 1870.

have a war with Germany. This much is said to introduce an expression of Admiral Porter worthy of all commendation. After discussing the possible losses and gains of war, he said:

A pin is worth fighting for if a principle is involved.³

In that declaration we find the keynote of every song of liberty and independence that was ever sung since God said "Let us make man." There is no slobbering about cost and sacrifice. The question is, is there a principle involved? A principle of right, of justice, of truth, of independence. In that case a "pin is worth fighting for." Is war to be declared at once? Not necessarily. What should precede war? Manifestly, negotiation, discussion, arbitration. If failure follows, then war. If not war, degradation. But says some weak-kneed, spineless, white-livered croaker, "You might get defeated, then what?" Simply submit to the inevitable and "pick your flint" and try it again at the first opportunity. The difference between courage and cowardice is as the difference between the truth and a lie. A coward is no more like a courageous man than a Digger Indian⁴ is like an arch angel. The courageous man fights, the coward runs or hides.

See you those two houses around which crowds of men, women and children are assembled? Do you ask the reason for such motley gatherings? It is easily told. In the night burglars assailed them. At No. 1, the husband and father, hearing the midnight marauder and murderer rushed to the rescue of his home with such weapons as were at his command, and having saved his home, fell dead on his door-sill, with a bullet in his head.

At No. 2, the dwelling was robbed of its treasures, and at the sound of danger the husband and father took shelter under the bed, and from his covert was dragged forth limp as a dishrag, a poor driveling wretch, whom it would be a compliment to call a cur.

The man of home No. 1, dead, lives, by virtue of courage, in the affectionate memory of wife and children for whom he died, and his

³ Perry made the statement in an interview with the Washington, DC *Evening Star* published on March 12, 1889. In his full statement he indicated that the American Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the Mexican-American War, and the American Civil War had each been fought over matters of principle, with each armed conflict ultimately netting positive results to the American republic.

⁴ "Digger," derived from "root diggers," was a pejorative for various native American peoples of California, who were the subject of a particularly brutal 19th Century stereotype as filthy, malnourished dwellers in squalor.

heroic devotion to his family becomes the subject for ceaseless laudation, and a monument is built to perpetuate his memory and his courage. His example is inspiring. Old men and young men, matrons and maidens fair, love to recite the story of his devotion and his deeds. The verdict is, "Well done."

The man of home No. 2 is universally scorned. He lives, but it would have been better for him if his cowardice had killed him. His name becomes a synonym of all things pusillanimous, dastardly, and poltroonish. The mastiff, the rat terrier, even the vagrant hound that bays the moon is of more value in the world than such a degenerate specimen of humanity.

The question of strikes is constantly up for discussion. Strikes are subjects for statisticians. We are treated to the number in a year, the number of persons engaged in them is given. We are told how many succeed and how many fail, losses in dollars and cents are stated, but those who supply the statistics never refer to any principle involved. They magnify money and advise workingmen not to strike. They advise workingmen to work and submit, take what they can get and be silent. They would have workingmen see the shadows of gloom gather around their homes without protest, they would have workingmen see their pay reduced until every comfort in life is relinquished and destitution sits gaunt and haggard upon their doorsteps and hearthstones, without a murmur; the immortal words of Admiral Porter, that "a pin is worth fighting for if a principle is involved," they would regard as rank treason to the soulless corporations which amass millions by their inhumanities to man.

It is not to be assumed that every strike involves a principle any more than it is to be assumed that every war involves a principle. There have been unwise wars and unnecessary strikes. In such matters it is not difficult to discover the principle if a principle exists, and when found, a courageous man will fight for the principle. A coaling station on a Samoan island is an exceedingly small matter, in itself considered, and thousands have said, "Who would go to war for such a trifle? What nation with a modicum of common sense would spend millions and sacrifice life for what at most is worth but a few thousand dollars?" But that is not the question. Is there a principle involved? If so, a pin is worth fighting for.

In a vast majority of strikes a principle is as sharply defined as that involved in the rights of the United States to a coaling station in the Samoan Islands. It was so in the fight on the CB&Q, and every man

that did battle in that strike, and every man who helped to sustain that strike won imperishable renown. Did the CB&Q. win that battle? Yes, just as the British won the battle of Bunker Hill, but they didn't want any more such victories, nor does the CB&Q. What was the influence of the Bunker Hill defeat? It taught the colonists that they were equal to British regulars, and this England learned to her sorrow in the long run; and though Warren⁵ and hundreds of his compatriots fell on Bunker Hill, fighting for a principle, their example was a ceaseless inspiration to the handful of colonists, and Bunker Hill, where the colonial militia was defeated, has become one of the sacred mountains of the world. And as certainly as that tides ebb and flow, the wrecked condition of the CB&Q. will deter other corporations from engaging in a similar folly, and in this fact the strikers on the CB&Q, and all who, with heroic devotion, sustained them, may see, if they will, their defeat (?) expand to a continental victory, and learn to admire the immortal words of Admiral Porter, that "A pin is worth fighting for if a principle is involved."

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⁵ **Joseph Warren** (1741-1775), although commissioned as a Major General of the Massachusetts Militia, fought at the June 1775 Battle of Bunker Hill as an ordinary soldier, where he was killed in combat atop Breed's Hill.