

KEYNOTE PHI ALPHA THETA SPEECH

"MEMMINGER OF CHARLESTON: A MAN AND HIS HOUR"



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Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. To our Phi Alpha Theta initiates, congratulations on your auspicious day.

My remarks focus on Charleston and Christopher G. Memminger, who is best known as Secretary of the Treasury of the Confederacy in the American Civil War. To the modern tourist, Charleston appears frozen in time. But Charleston was never a static mono-lith. Always there have been elements of diversity and change. My subject reflects diversity in at least two ways – in his personal origins and in his life.

My subtitle, A MAN AND HIS HOUR, bears the burden of an argument that has long divided historians. What is the role of "great" people in history? Or to put it another way, to what extent is the "great" person a free agent, or a product of his or her hour, his or or place.

I just mention this: I will not attempt an answer today.

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, *but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past.*

--Karl Marx

It is impossible to extricate oneself from the questions in which your age is involved. You can no more keep out of politics than you can keep out of the frost.

--Ralph Waldo Emerson

The conflicts that have been so much a part of the Southern experience have occurred . . . between Southerners and within Southerners,

as much as between North and South. 1
--Charles G. Sellers

The first half of the nineteenth century wrought profound change in the United States. Geographical expansion through war, purchase, and annexation doubled the size of the young republic. The population, formerly settled on the Atlantic, increased six-fold and jumped the Mississippi River as a revolution in canals, railroads, and telegraph lines tied the continent together, immigrants from Europe filled places and jobs in industrializing Eastern cities, and a great internal marketplace arose with a growing predominance of wage labor. Meanwhile, the rise of Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln to the top heralded a more democratic political process and a prolonged religious revival waxed and waned, at once denying materialism absolute ascendance in the American heart and mind and stimulating movements of benevolent and moral reform, including demands for the complete abolition of slavery.

No section of the United States was untouched. But in 1840 it was clear that to the Southward, polity, economy, society, and mindset were far closer to old norms than elsewhere. Most damaging to national unity, the Southern states kept one-third of their people in a condition of bondage, chattel slavery, thus exposing themselves to a rising din of protest from the northern
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and western states.

II

When Southerners at the cross-roads of these decades

addressed questions about the future of America and the particular destiny of their own section, they did not, as sometimes thought, speak with one voice. There were, of course, men like John C. Calhoun and Robert Barnwell Rhett, both South Carolinians and sometime residents of Charleston, but agrarians at heart who set their faces against "modernization" in all its forms: urbanization, industrialism, free labor, free immigration, democracy, even commerce beyond a bare minimum, to say nothing of free love, free education, and tariffs. They believed (and argued) that critics of traditional ways were deluded. What **they** called "progress" was backwardness: modern society was a breeding place of crime and vice, industrialism discredited by blighted environments, wage labor cruel and irresponsible exploitation, producing class conflict and a permanent threat of revolution. Backwardness (so-called) was good and the Old South an antimodernist utopia: a rural world of hospitality and easy elegance, where the institution of slavery joined capital and labor in a happy organic mutuality of master and servant which not only provided for the needs of both but produced in the masters the highest type of human nobility while it permitted true liberty and fraternity among white men. This "Carolina doctrine" was advanced with what appeared complete assurance. Yet the historian might well conclude that such *aggressive defensiveness* - Admit no weakness in oneself or virtue in the other camp. Meet the opposition at the frontiers. Go headlong into secession (and war) - *suggests unspoken doubts*.

The doubts passed from other lips. Of opposition to slavery

there was none in the South after the rise of antislavery in the North in the 1830s. But dissent from other parts of radical-conservative doctrines long remained possible. Between the Calhoun-Rhett radicals and a small group of absolute dissenters from regional norms who were driven, like Charleston's Angelina and Sarah Grimke, to take up residence outside the South, emerged spokesmen of a third persuasion. These moderates were often townspeople.⁴

III

Inhabitants of Southern towns, however much they might take for granted certain aspects of Southern culture (like slavery and staple agriculture) had to find the idea of a "fortress South" troublesome. Indeed, to have accepted radical-conservative arguments as a whole would have been to deny themselves. For towns, especially seaports, represented the deepest penetration of just those "alien" influences doctrinaire Southerners condemned: (mere) moneyed wealth, immigrants, visible poverty, disputes between capital and labor, vice, and crime. Problems which people like Calhoun and Rhett wished away townspeople had to live with or ameliorate or suppress. For some of them, at least, the preferred remedy was community action, reform.⁵

Perhaps the most important of these urban activists, if not the best known, was Christopher Gustavus Memminger. He was born into a middle class household in Nayhingen, in the duchy of Wurttemberg, Germany, in 1803, in the midst of war and revolution. His father died a soldier against Napoleon; his mother and maternal

grandparents and he himself were uprooted and propelled to America; his mother died of yellow fever in Charleston; and his grandparents consigned him to the Charleston Orphan House and moved to Philadelphia: all before the boy was four years old.

"The German boy," as he heard himself called, never saw his grandparents again, never learned German, never in later times attempted to reclaim his German roots. He was assimilated. At eight years (in 1811), he was adopted by Thomas Bennett, Jr, a rising businessman - pioneer industrialist - emerging political leader - Jeffersonian Democrat - governor of South Carolina in 1820 and zealous Christian layman. Educated at the South Carolina College, Memminger was introduced to the writings of the German Romantics - emphatically rejected their nationalism of blood and turf in a student oration on the *brotherhood of man*. Graduated second in his class, he studied law in the offices of a foster-uncle and was drawn into politics, a fairly common course for lawyers of ability and connections like his new self. He was elected to city council in 1833 and to the state legislature in 1836: there he became a fixture as Chairman of Ways and Means and was continued by his Charleston constituents year after year through the 1850s.

Although Memminger came to feel real affection for his adopted city and state, his patriotism always comprehended (in words he used in the college oration) "nations, dynasties, and empires" - or at least an extended region. In the first great crisis of the American union triggered by federal tariff policy in 1832, he was

aligned with his foster-father (and most other notables of the Charleston mercantile and legal communities) in vehement opposition to the Calhoun-Rhett party of "nullification," contributing a pamphlet to the Unionist cause that attracted wide attention and may be said to have launched his political career.⁷

From that beginning to the very evening of the Civil War, Memminger was consistently the peacemaker and adjuster. In 1852, after slavery emerged as the primary sectional issue and South Carolina Democrats debated whether to remain in the national party or go, he described a course that epitomized his approach -

. NATIONALLY, seek redress of grievances within the political system in cooperation with Northern men of good will;

. AT HOME, make use of time gained to build Southern unity and economic and cultural self-sufficiency. If a policy of "cooperation" fails after a good-faith effort, South Carolina may leave the Union with a just claim to the support of all Southern people and indeed all fair-minded people everywhere, and it will have earned a fair chance of creating a viable new political and economic union in an independent Southern confederacy. Right up to the election of Lincoln, Memminger rejected separate secession as he rejected the wisdom of haste, for his hopes for the future rested not exclusively on South Carolina, but on the South as a whole - and an "updated" and improved version of that.⁸

IV

Central to the history of China's relationship with Europe and the West during the period of initial modern contact in the nine-

teenth century was a cautious reform effort under the aegis of Chinese officials and literati captured in the expression, "self-strengthening." It involved the idea and practice of utilizing selected elements of (materially-superior) Western societies like military and industrial technology to the end of *preserving* basic Chinese culture, the ideological and institutional base in
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Confucianism.

The approach is similar to - if not precisely - the style of the group of pragmatic men including Memminger, who, appearing earlier, achieved a brief ascendancy in Charleston in the 1850s. Adopting the premise that the "frame" of Southern society - including slavery (their moral blind-spot) - was sound, they were too intelligent not to realize that in certain respects, especially in wealth and political power, the South lagged behind the Northeast, as Charleston trailed New York. Calhoun and Rhett and their ilk loudly claimed for the South an exemplary social harmony. As one "Laertes," in a letter posted in Rhett's paper, the Charleston **Mercury**, put it in 1858, the South abounded in people "of the highest moral and intellectual culture" and possessed all the natural elements that constitute "the wealth and power of a nation." For Christopher Memminger and other reformers talk was
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not enough.

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"Save Charleston, or whatever is left of it . . . [Dredge] the harbor and build multitudes of railroads. Charter steamboats and send shiploads of the populace away to liberalize their minds . . .

.” So wrote E. J. Pringle, a native of the city removed to California, to William Porcher Miles, another native still residing in the old city and a candidate for mayor in 1855. At the heart of the matter was Charleston’s change in fortune. One of the nation’s great cities when Pringle and Miles and the newcomer Memminger walked its streets as boys – the fourth city in size and third seaport, and ambitious for still more wealth and power – she experienced serious difficulties after 1820, most relating to economic woes directly attributable to the relative decline of local wealth in, and population supported by, rice, cotton, and ocean commerce. When Memminger moved into a public role in the 1830s Charleston had not become the run-down pile visited by Henry James, who wrote of a place of faded pretensions in 1905. But for Memminger and others who lived through these decades the fact of declension was clear enough. At 1850 Charleston was dwarfed by upstart New Orleans, to say nothing of New York, Philadelphia, and Boston, her peers in 1800. That common white citizens, non-slaveholders who lived by their own labor – mechanics, stevedores, carpenters, and the like, including a growing number of Irish and German immigrants – showed signs in sporadic labor strikes of the 1840s of developing a class consciousness which could override racial solidarity, simply provided another reason *not* to hold blindly to the status quo.

In 1854, Memminger and W. Jefferson Bennett, his foster-brother, were appointed by the state legislature Commissioners of Free Schools for the Charleston parishes, with Memminger assuming

the chairmanship. In 1855 William Miles, lately a professor of mathematics at the College of Charleston, was elected mayor, joining the great merchant Henry Gourdin on a city council momentarily united in the intention (as Miles put it) "to sweep away the remains of old fogyism" and get on with the tasks at hand. They launched a remarkable reform effort, one might almost call it a mobilization of human and material sources analogous to efforts of total war, based on what was in that time and place a radical allocation of power to government. Using ideas, administrators, and teachers drawn from the best school systems in New England and New York, Memminger and Bennett transformed the old free schools from inferior schools for the poor into modern public schools, adequately funded and designed to enlighten, energize, and unify the white community as a whole, males and females, regardless of class. Meanwhile, Miles and the city council enacted laws and undertook measures to infuse new blood into the port, develop more rail links between Charleston and the interior and direct trade between Charleston and Europe, enhance public sanitation, improve streets and park grounds, provide separate correction for problem children and better care for the needy, and (adapting an innovation of London) create a modern police department.

Despite a number of achievements, the chasm between the reformers' aspirations and their accomplishments was substantial. Sidetracked by shortfalls in funding, intercity rivalries and conservative opposition, a railroad that was supposed to connect

Charleston and the Mississippi valley at Cincinnati was not completed until the 1880s. A private company chartered to build two steamships to ply between Charleston and Liverpool, England, produced one steamship; when it was discovered the boat could not traverse the shallow Charleston bar under load, it was sold and the effort was abandoned. The project into which Memminger put most of his energy, the public schools, fared somewhat better--but for how long?

VI

"In organizing the Charleston Free Schools, the other day, a troop of Northern teachers was imported, when no one doubts there are sons of the South sufficient for the work." ¹⁵ This passing comment from **DeBow's Review** during 1857 was part of a general radical-conservative attack on the new school system. It had only been five years since a writer in another Charleston magazine had expressed very grave doubts about the wisdom of intermixing or "leveling" classes as Memminger insisted on doing. The common white people did not need education beyond the humblest: indeed, they might be unfitted for their common labor and would certainly acquire ideas about playing an independent political role, when for the good of all "the privileged few must govern." "The diffusion of education in New England," this author had written, "is likely to effect the dissolution of the Union." In 1857, traditionalists rushed into public disputation with adjectives like "wild" and "utopian" and predictions that popular education led inevitably to perdition.

The most persistent complaint was the claim that Memminger's

schools were a alien transplant, a presumption (seemingly) clinched by the presence in Charleston of a "troop" of "imported" educators including the superintendent. Memminger himself would much rather have hired local people, for he knew the importance of the moral and political side of education and certainly wished to encourage Southern self-sufficiency. But he had discovered that expertise in the most modern education techniques was not to be easily found among Southerners. And unlike the radical-conservative critics, he believed there were people of good will in the North who could be trusted to teach Southern children.

Memminger's *expectation* was that Charleston should in a reasonably short time develop its own educators and have no further need for outsiders. However, the final crisis leading to the Civil War intruded. After South Carolina's formal secession in December 1860, Charleston became a closed city: outsiders would not be tolerated, whether in Fort Sumter in the harbor or in the offices and classrooms of the new city schools. Inevitably, the Northern accents of many of Memminger's teachers drew increasing complaint. An anonymous correspondent of Rhett's Charleston **Mercury** wrote with an acid comment: "I sincerely regret that Charleston should be presented to the world in so humiliating a light as to acknowledge her unfitness to educate her children by her own people." Defended by Memminger and others against the imputation that they constituted a source of sectional humiliation and, even worse, sectional danger - "wolves in sheep's clothing"- the Yankee teachers hung on until the spring of

1861 and the battle of Fort Sumter, then departed for the North, leaving their schools and pupils in native hands: new-minted graduates of the new girls' high and normal school.

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VII

Memminger got his wish--that if secession came the South - or most of the region - should go out together. He went on to become Secretary of the Treasury of the Confederate States of America and to learn the full extent of the new nation's backwardness. The school system collapsed before the war ended and had to be rebuilt from scratch after the fighting stopped.

The judgment of historians has most often been that all this was inevitable, that the reformers' ends and means were hopelessly tangled - that reactionary critics like Rhett were right: modern ports and public schools do not mesh with chattel slavery and agrarianism, "moonlight and magnolias." Yet many modern societies, including China and the United States, show very well that societies can embrace incongruous elements. Of deeper significance than the Southern reformers' several failures, perhaps, were their assumptions and their program, which both reflected the dominant spirit of the age and anticipated the civic boosterism of later-day Progressivism and the "New South creed."

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ENDNOTES

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4. Carl Degler, The Other South (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 13-96; Carl Bridenbaugh, Cities in the Wilderness (New York: Ronald Press, 1938); Constance M. Green, American Cities in the Growth of the Nation (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), passim; Richard Wade, "The City in History--Some American Perspectives," in Werner Z. Hirsch, ed., Urban Life and Form (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1963), 59-79.
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7. Capers, Memminger, 107, 490-493, 569-599.
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9. Paul H. Cohen, Between Tradition and Modernity: Wang Tao and Reform in Late Ching China (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1974); Frederic Wakeman, Jr., Strangers at the Gate: Social Disorder in South China, 1839-1861 (Berkeley: University of California, 1966).
10. Craven, "Why the Southern States Seceded," 75; Letter to editor, Charleston Mercury, May 18, 1858.

11. Pringle to W. P. Miles, November 3, 1855, Miles Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

12. Charles R. Schultz, "Hayne's Magnificent Dream: Factors which Influenced Efforts to Join Cincinnati and Charleston by Railroad, 1835-1860" (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Ohio State University, 1966), 13n, 20, 48-49, 54-55; John van Deusen, Economic Bases of Disunion in South Carolina (New York: Columbia University Press, 1928), 225-226, 236-237.

13. Charleston Daily-Courier, November 29, 1855; Alfred Huger to W. P. Miles, September 8, 1855; Miles to Huger, November 10, 1857, Miles Papers, UNC Chapel Hill; Mayor's Report on City Affairs, 1857 (Charleston: Walker, Evans, 1857); Laylon Wayne Jordan, "Police Power and Public Safety in Antebellum Charleston: The Emergence of a New Police, 1800-1860, South Atlantic Urban Studies, 3 [1979], 130-133; Laylon Wayne Jordan, "Education for Community: Christopher Memminger and the Origination of Common Schools in Antebellum Charleston," The South Carolina Historical Magazine, 83 (April, 1982), 100-111.

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15. "School Books," DeBow's Review, XXII (1857), 556.

16. "Instruction in Schools and Colleges," Southern Quarterly Review (1852), 467-469; "Slavery and Freedom, *ibid.*" (1856), 62-63.

17. "The value of each individual member of society depends more - much more - upon his moral training, his principles, than upon his intelligence. If superior intelligence be directed to evil ends, it becomes only a more efficient instrument of evil," Memminger declared upon the occasion of the opening of the girls' high school. See Charleston Daily-Courier, May 24, 1859.

18. Charleston Mercury, December 6, 1860. See also Steven Channing, Crisis of Fear: Secession in South Carolina (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974).

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