

DAILY PEOPLE

VOL. 11, NO. 253.

NEW YORK, FRIDAY, MARCH 10, 1911.

ONE CENT.

EDITORIAL

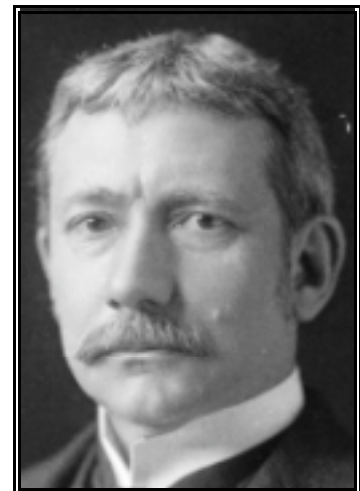
ELIHU ROOT'S CORRECT INSTINCT.

By DANIEL DE LEON

AMONG the debates, recently held in the Federal Senate, that every militant in the Movement should read, was the debate on the proposed amendment to the Constitution whereby the election of Senators shall be by direct, by a general vote in each State. Valuable as historic flashlights though most of the speeches were, the speech of the New York Senator, Elihu Root, easily ranks highest.

Senator Root opposed the amendment. Long was his speech and yet short. Its lengthy part was "fillings"; its short portion was of the essence. It consisted in a short "text" of not more than twenty words, prominently placed, and tersely supported. The text was: "It is not wise that the people of the United States should contract the habit of amending the Constitution."

Whether Senator Root did so consciously or not, he drew the sap for his text from a philosophy that both ancient wisdom and modern wit have illumined.



ELIHU ROOT (1845-1937)

Tacitus, the profound Roman historian, condenses in a short observation the significance of the election to the Caesarship of Galba, then at the head of an army in Spain, whereas thitherto the election of the Caesar had attended to by the army or armies which happened to be bivouacked in Rome. Tacitus observes "the secret being out" that the Caesar could be elected outside of Rome, as well as inside, every army, wherever located, thenceforth assumed the privilege thitherto supposed to be vested in the armies at Rome only. Artemus Ward, the glory of American humor, tells the tale of a man who was fifteen years in prison, when one day a bright thought struck him: he opened the door and walked out. The point made by the two

writers is the same; and Senator Root either “took the hint,” or his own instinct supplied it.

Superstitious reverence is the cornerstone of Despotism, on the one hand, and of its supplement, Slavery, on the other. The superstition that presence in Rome invested an army with a political privilege not shared by others palsied, so long as the superstition prevailed, the political power of the other armies; the superstitious notion that the unlocked door of his cell was locked unbrained, so long as the notion held sway, the prisoner of Artemus Ward. The instant the superstition regarding the special political privilege of the armies in Rome dropped, the equal political power of all the other armies leaped into existence; the instant the superstitious notion concerning the state of the door of his cell came to an end, the imprisonment of the fifteen years prisoner came to an end with it. In the one instance and the other “the secret was out.” Correctly do the Interests, whose apprehensions Senator Root voiced, desire to keep from getting out the secret that the Constitution can be amended.

Sacred things are of all time and for all time. They are not tinkered with: they may not be tinkered with. For the purposes of Despotism it is all one whether a thing is sacred, or whether it is held sacred. The policy, accordingly, is to promote the superstition, in behalf of a principle useful to Usurpation, that it is sacred. No better means to that end than the one outlined by Senator Root—to avoid allowing the people to “contract the habit” of tinkering with the principle.

The Constitution of the United States—ample for its purposes at the time of its enactment, and expected to guarantee the people’s aspirations to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness—is, due to the progressive economic revolution that has since taken place, proving itself more and more inadequate to its original purpose. To speak, not irreverently of a great Document, but with historic accuracy, the Constitution of the United States has become a misfit. The body social has outgrown it. Yet, such is the exceptional merit of that Document, that, first of its kind, it proclaimed the mutability of social conditions, and foremost of all of its kind, it incorporated in itself the people’s right and duty to change it, and adapt it to the altered conditions, according as to them may seem fit. The amendment clause in the Constitution is the legalizing of Revolution. Nothing more alarmful to the Top

Capitalist than just that. The amendment clause in the Constitution makes powerfully against all attempt at turning the Constitution into a thing sacrosanct. It has been tinkered with in the past; alack the day! All the more strenuous the effort to prevent all modern tinkering. What is done once may be done again. The habit once contracted, there is no telling where the thing may end.

It matters not that Senator Root's instinct is at fault in believing that by preventing an amendment to the constitution he is "taking a stitch in time." His warning to his fellows that "it is not wise that the people of the United States should contract the habit of amending the Constitution—that bespeaks an alert instinct, backed by a full grasp of the fact that the element, whom the Interests he represents are at war with, is none other than "the people of the United States."

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official website of the Socialist Labor Party of America.
Uploaded January 2012

slpns@slp.org