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Something New

Every great enterprise has been ridiculed in the outset. Everything that is worth doing has had the fate of being regarded as chimerical – only common projects meet at first with public confidence – indeed the great difficulty in the way of accomplishing theses great designs that require the combination of numbers and the exertion of higher powers is not so much any inherent obstacle, as want of public faith.

When we look back upon the inventions and discoveries to which so much of the power and comfort of civilized man is attributable, and consider the public incredulity which they at first encountered, we are ready to ask the question, what is the true rule to act upon in this matter, how shall we steer between a blind credulity which would adopt the probable & impossible together, & defeat all our powers by not distinguishing what is within their reach from what is not – and between that incredulity which makes man unable to do any thing , by the belief that he can do nothing!

We answer that the true rule is that – Never to reject any scheme because it seems difficult, at first view, but listen with patience to the means that are proposed to accomplish it. Then only can we know whether the plan is practicable when we have compared its difficulties with the means of overcoming them. It is obvious that a great and useful project deserves more public attention than one of a trifling character.

Every great object is surrounded with difficulties – and if we expect to accomplish any thing of magnitude without difficulty, we must select some other place of action, than this earth....

Perhaps no age ever distinguished itself like the present, but its contempt of difficulties – from what has been done it would seem that all things are possible to him that believeth. Cicero said that he had rather think wrong with Plato, than right with any other philosopher. The expression is hyperbolical – but we may safely say that it is nobler to fail in a great undertaking, than to succeed in a small one.

We may all recollect with what incredulity the project of the Erie Canal was received – the public did not distinguish between what is great and what is impracticable – the uniting of the Lakes with the Ocean was a great undertaking, but there was no reason to think it could not be done – indeed if people would have investigated before they condemned, they would have found

¹ The date for this issue is Feb. 8 rather than Feb. 6 as has been suggested. This weekly newspaper changed its name several times, but at this point was known simply as "The Emigrant."

it as it turned out, easy enough. Now that the Lakes are united with the Ocean, we wonder at past incredulity. But this did not prevent multitudes from saying that the Baltimore and Ohio rail road was quite visionary, utterly impracticable!

But how is this impossible thing turning out! It is now certain that the Ohio and Chesapeake will soon be united by this most rapid and comfortable of all communications – already it offers the longest railroad in the world. This is the work of one state as was the *Erie Canal*. What we have now to propose is for the United States or for a Company existing through the Union.

Let the reader look far west, let him pass his eye over the Map of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, let him behold the forests & prairies, the rich alluvial land which the plough or ax has never opened to cultivation – because there is no market. Let him go still further west – pass up the valley of the Missouri, examine its immense and fertile bottoms – how many years must pass away before its capacities will be improved by the husbandman! Let him pass over the Rocky Mountains, not by that difficult and northern route which Lewis and Clark first essayed, but that more moderate and pleasant one called the "*southern pass*."

Let him descend into the plains of the Oregon, a country fertile and healthy, offering a fine, rich, pasturage of clover and herd-grass, as uncultivated as luxuriant – a climate where the rigors of winter and the sultry burnings of summer are alike unknown. Let him follow the course of the Oregon until the Pacific rolls at his feet. He has passed through an immense country, not only rich in furs but in its capacities for agricultural improvement – he is now within six thousand miles of India – of that India which has enriched the nations who have traded with her – whose commerce has been the object of contention ever since she was known to Europe.

The Egyptian, the Arab, Genoese, Venetian, the Portuguese, the Dutch & English have successively fattened upon her riches – sometimes that wealth has been carried by the Caspian and Black Seas, sometimes by the Persian Gulf, and the Tygris [sic], sometimes by the Red Sea, and at last the Venetians were interrupted in the midst of their prosperous commerce by the discovery of the passage round the Cape – since which the commerce of India has been the prize of the most powerful at sea. Situated as the United States are, with the Atlantic on one shore and the Pacific upon another, she might be the first maritime nation in the world, and it will be our fault if we are not.

It is in our power by the same effort to open an immense interior country to market to unite our Eastern and Western shores firmly together, to embrace the whole of the fur trade, to pour those furs into India and in return to enrich our interior with the spices and silks and muslins and teas and coffee and sugar of that country. It is in our power to build up an immense city at the mouth of the Oregon, to make it the depot for our East India trade & perhaps for that of Europe – *in fact to unite New York and the Oregon by a rail way* [sic. Italics in the original text] by which the traveler leaving the City of New York shall at the moderate rate of ten miles an hour, place himself in a port right on the shores of the Pacific.

We are perfectly aware that many will laugh at this and display their wisdom by condemning it without examination.

The distance between New York and the Oregon is about three thousand miles – from New York, we would pursue the most convenient route to the vicinity of Lake Erie thence along the south shore of this lake and of Lake Michigan, cross the Mississippi between forty one and forty two of north Latitude, cross the Missouri about the mouth of the Platte, and then on by the most convenient route to the Rocky Mountains near the source of the last mentioned rivers – thence to the Oregon, by the valley of the south branch of that stream called the southern branch of Lewis' river.

The Illinois, the Mississippi, and the Missouri might be crossed by Ferries, most of the other streams by bridges.

This as we have said would be about three thousand miles, and might occupy about a fortnight from New York to the Pacific, at the moderate rate of ten miles an hour.

We hope that the United States will not object to conducting this national project....view the improvement of the interior – increasing the value of the public domain – binding the east and west together – raising the Oregon at once to importance – and making it, what it can hardly be other ways, an efficient part of the Union – the interests of commerce, agriculture, and manufactures would be essentially advanced – in fact our Western coast brought into life and being. Nothing could contribute more to prosperity at home and reputation abroad than a magnificent effort like this.

The expense of it would not surpass one year of war.

It might be completed within six years – and if expense were the only obstacle, three years would be sufficient.

But if the United States would not do this – Congress would not we presume, object to the organization of a company, and a grant of three millions of acres for this purpose. Authority might be given to purchase of the Indians the lands necessary for the route.

At the rate of ten thousand dollars per mile, it would cost thirty millions – which with the land would be divided into shares and thrown into the market.

It might cost four times as much as the Erie and Champlain canals – but how infinitely more important!

It is one of those great projects which none but a great nation could effect – but peculiarly adapted to the enterprising character of the people of the United States.

We shall examine this subject more in detail in future numbers.

[Transcribed by Larry Mullaly, August 20, 2006]