

is the permission in both branches of using written essays instead of making actual speeches in debate.

In the beginning of the government, and for many years thereafter, the habit of speaking from a manuscript in either branch of Congress was unknown. On every important measure that came before Congress, on the expediency of which members differed in opinion, there was an actual debate, in which positions were affirmed and contested with off-hand speech. In every conflict of this kind the members were, as a rule, in their seats, many taking part, and the mass so interested as to sit continuously through the debate.

The habit of speech is greatly changed. At this time any one who will take his seat in the gallery of the Senate, as the senators assemble, will be interested during the "morning hour," which is often marked by what may be called a sharp debate; but when the "morning hour" expires, and the "regular order" is announced, the spectator will very probably see a gentleman rise and unfold a mass of manuscript and begin to read.

He will next see, out of the eighty-eight senators, probably seventy-five, and possibly more, if the Senate be full, absent themselves from their seats and retire to their committee rooms to write letters and transact both public and private business, until the pages shall inform them that the reading of the manuscript, in progress when the senators left the chamber, is about to close.

In the House of Representatives, the spectator, when he seats himself in the gallery, will probably see repeated, as nearly as the analogy of the proceedings will allow, all that has been said of the Senate, with the addition of a habit, which is not extensively, if at all, practiced in the Senate, viz.: the permission to print speeches, not one word of which has been delivered; and also the setting aside of odd afternoons, generally Saturdays, for debate only, which means that some one deputed by the Speaker will preside, with the understanding that no business is to be done, and that any member who chooses can come there and deliver a speech upon any subject he may select, whether it is pending before Congress or not.

The essays which are thus read on a single Saturday would often fill a large sized octavo, more extended in point of matter than a volume of Bancroft or Motley.

Few have reckoned the magnitude of the increase in the reports. The general presumption is that it comes from the increased membership of both branches of Congress. This accounts for part of the increase, but is not a sufficient cause for the whole.

The Senate is larger than fifty years ago by a little more than one-half—fifty-two then, eighty-eight now. The House today is not one-half larger in membership than it was fifty years ago. But the volume of the reports of either house today, compared with those of fifty years ago, is prodigiously great.

The reports of proceedings in the Twenty-sixth Congress—March 4, 1839, to March 4, 1841—take scarcely one-sixth of the space given to the reports of the Fiftieth Congress.

But if we go back only half of fifty

years, a striking illustration will be found. Take both houses of Congress from 1861 to 1865, embracing the Thirty-seventh and Thirty-eighth Congresses, and covering the entire period of the war. One would suppose that the proceedings in two Congresses, with an extra session in one of them, during such a period as 1861-65, would be extraordinarily voluminous.

Both houses were filled with remarkable debaters, and the subjects that were continually before each branch were so absorbing in interest that almost every senator and every representative desired to be heard.

As the form in which the proceedings are reported has changed since that time, the comparison of different periods can be made with approximate exactness by stating the proceedings in uniform pages of one thousand words each. From March 4, 1861, to March 4, 1865, the number of pages filled by the proceedings was twenty-five thousand four hundred. Twenty-six years afterwards the Fiftieth Congress convened. It lasted from March 4, 1887, to March 4, 1889, and the report of proceedings filled twenty-eight thousand three hundred pages.

In an uneventful period, then, with nothing especially to excite or disturb the country, the number of pages filled by the proceedings of a single Congress is greater than during the whole period of the war, with all its mighty issues at stake.

In an earlier era of the government the contrast would seem still stronger. Take the first eighteen Congresses, from 1789 to 1825—thirty-six years—from the inauguration of Washington to the inauguration of John Quincy Adams. All the discussions on the subject of setting the Federal Government in motion, which were very able, and at that time supposed to be very long; all the proceedings on funding the National debt; all the discussions of the famous Jay Treaty; all the debates during the stormy administration of the elder Adams; all the debates for the periods of Jefferson and Madison, on the Embargo and the War of 1812; all the proceedings for the ten years following the treaty of Ghent; in short, the entire proceedings of Congress, under Washington, John Adams, Jefferson, Madison and Monroe are recorded in 23,000 pages, actually less by two thousand three hundred than were recorded in the debates of both sessions of the Fiftieth Congress, and very little more than the words of the first session of the Fifty-first Congress, which adjourned on the first of October last.

Other comparisons of interest may be made readily. One of the most exciting Congresses—supposed to be the most important ever held in the antebellum period—was the Thirty-first, beginning March 4, 1849, and ending March 4, 1851. The compromise measures of 1850, involving all the phases of the slavery question as it then existed, called forth a debate which for thoroughness and ability has perhaps never been equalled, certainly never surpassed, in the history of the government.

Men who naturally belonged to a former period—Webster, Clay, Calhoun, Benton, Cass—were there in full vigor; and the younger men of prestige and power—Seward, Douglas, Chase,

Jefferson Davis, Rusk of Texas—were also there in all the strength of mature manhood.

Four years later, the Twenty-third Congress convened, extending from March 4, 1853, to March 4, 1855. It was, if possible, even a more exciting and excited body than the Thirty-first. It was the Congress which repealed the Missouri compromise—a measure which led to unparalleled acrimony and recrimination in debate. All the deep feeling which had been exhibited on the slavery question in the Thirty-first Congress was greatly intensified, and the debates lasted on this single question for many months.

The first session of the Thirty-first lasted until September thirtieth, and that of the Thirty-third until August seventh, and the proceedings of both Congresses filled only twenty-three thousand pages, less by one thousand four hundred pages than the record of the proceedings of the first session of the Fifty-first Congress.

To make a comprehensive and most suggestive comparison, let it be stated that from the inauguration of Washington, in 1789, to the close of the Civil War, in 1865, the report of the proceedings of Congress, for the entire seventy-six years, filled one hundred and seventy-seven thousand four hundred and ninety pages. From the close of the Civil War in 1865 to the first day of October last, being twenty-five years, the number of words employed in reporting Congress was two hundred and eighty-one million.

Hence the Congressional reports for the last twenty-five years contained one hundred and three million five hundred thousand words more than all the reports from 1789 to 1865.

It should of course be said that the reports of the seventy-six years were not throughout in as full detail as the more recent and current reports, but that is the very thing that makes the first class valuable, and practically ruins the second class to the ordinary reader by its inaccessibility. The annals of Congress in the first thirty-six years named are readily accessible, easily handled, and well indexed, and give an accurate report of all the proceedings and of all the speeches that had special value.

If the proceedings of Congress for the next thirty-six years from this time are reported upon the increasing ratio that has distinguished the reports since the close of the war, the aggregate will probably require four hundred large volumes, or six hundred million words—equivalent to a library of more than twelve hundred volumes of the ordinary octavo and duodecimo editions.

This evil has grown to such gigantic proportions that every one will admit a reform is not only necessary but inevitable. As to the various phases of that reform, much might be said. At the same time, it would involve personal criticism, not of individuals but of classes; and if the reports are limited to readable dimensions, the remote, if not the immediate, effect would be to reduce the list of eligibles for effective service in Congress.

The methods of reform might, therefore, better be left to the day when Congress is ready to enter upon the work. It is sufficient at present to call attention to the abuse, and to illustrate its magnitude.