

## THE EVENING NEWS.

Tuesday, November 21, 1873.

## THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AND THE TELEGRAPHIC SERVICE.

The report of the Hon. David A. Wells, late special commissioner of revenue, made at the request of the Western Union Telegraph Company, upon the relations of the Federal government to the telegraphic service of the country, and laid before Congress for its consideration, is a document of great interest to the people of the whole Union.

Mr. Wells, in the outset, reviews the origin, development and present condition of the telegraphic system of the United States, and clearly establishes the following important facts:

First, that unlike the railroad system of the country, the telegraph in the United States, with the exception of a small congressional appropriation to enable Professor Morse to test his invention, has received substantially no favors from the public or the Federal government, but, on the contrary, in opposition to the practice in all other countries, has been subjected from the very first to heavy taxation.

The taxes paid the Federal government alone from 1865 to 1870 have been in excess of a million and a half of dollars.

Second, that having been thus left exclusively to private enterprise, telegraphic development has occurred more rapidly and to comparatively greater extent than in any other country; there being one million wire in every 22 persons in the United States as compared with one in 331 in Europe, while the rates for messages transmitted are as one to every three persons in the former and one to every nine in the latter. As illustrating furthermore what the telegraph is under a free government system, attention is asked to the fact that if at the present time we were to compute all the news matter delivered by the American telegraph to the American public, and were to add to it that transmitted by each paper, it would comprise and aggregate equal to all the dispatches of every kind sent over all the telegraphs of the world within a given period selected for the comparison.

Third, that since the consolidation of the various lines in 1869 to the former Western Union, not a single year has elapsed in which there has not been a marked reduction in rates by this company, the most recent official statement of the Postmaster General to the contrary, so that at the present time the average sum charged for the transmission of messages does not exceed half that required in 1866 for similar service. As a contribution to economic service attention is asked to the circumstance that the average charge at which telegraphic messages are now transmitted in the U.S. for the public, is less than the average cost of labor and materials in 1866, although since that period there has been a marked advance in the wages of employees in almost every department of the service, and a great increase in the cost of wire, telegraphic poles, and other material.

Fourth, the value of telegraphic stock investment is shown by the fact that from 1866 to 1872 the aggregated dividends paid by the stockholders of the several companies have amounted to two per cent per annum. During the last financial year, the apparent net profits of the Western Union Company were \$2,700,000, or less than seven per cent on the capital, but out of this net gain or profit the company constructed or purchased over sixteen thousand miles of wire additional, all of which was nearly essential to the accommodation of the business and local interests of the country. There was also expenditure not included in the expenses of \$200,000 during the same year for the maintenance and repair of lines previously existing, and if it be replied that the amount thus derived from receipts and expended for improvements and construction represents profits equally with dividends paid directly to stockholders, it is sufficient to answer that, if it be so, the profit, up to the present time, is not due to the public, and not to the stockholders, but that for an indefinite future a large annual expenditure for similar purposes will be absolutely indispensable.

Coming to the consideration of the question of Federal interference with the telegraph, Mr. Wells submits the following points. Under the head of direct cost he shows a probable immediate expenditure to be made by the nation in excess of from \$0 to \$10 millions of dollars. The authority of the mail committee submitted by the Post-master General in the recent report that the existing lines in the country could be replaced for about twenty million dollars, is shown by the fact that fully that sum has been expended for so much of the existing telegraphic system of the United States as has been constructed since 1866, and that the cost of such labor and materials as would be required for any present construction, should since experienced a decline, but on the contrary, in some respects, has been augmented. To meet this necessary large expenditure a new national loan would probably have to be authorized and the Government be again placed in the position of a borrower, the whole necessitating a new issue of bonds, new syndicates and specious partisans of Federal influence supporting the measure and a further continuance of that interference with the financial interests of the country which has already given to the treasury department a power and influence which the framers of the constitution never anticipated nor intended, but that the idea of making the telegraph any more than the service of supporting in the hands of the government does not merely enter into the plans of those who advocate the scheme of Federal interference. It is to be called to mind that in one of the earliest bills brought before Congress and earnestly advocated, it was seriously proposed that the government construct telegraph lines and work them in connection with the post office at a uniform rate of three cents per message, a proposition then, equally with the one now advocated, which is to say that the money raised for affording the people of the United States cheaper telegraphic service is imperative and apparent, and to the demand that the government annually add to the already heavy burden of taxation a large additional burden, in order that this desirable result may be effected. If it does not seem to have occurred to these gentlemen, whose bosom is well soothed with ideas of government philanthropy, that the government has never anything to give to the people in the way of pecuniary aid or bounty other than it has previously taken from the people under some form of taxation, with some eight per cent. additional to pay for the cost of taking. Again, that it is an accepted principle of our national policy that the government furnishes the public such things as are necessary, and it is necessary to remember that such service should commence with those things which are prime necessity rather than those which are secondary, and that food, raiment, shelter, and education belong to the first class, and telegraphic service to the latter. It may be, however, that an addition of some six to twelve millions to the present annual expenditures of three hundred millions will appear insignificant in comparison with the results produced or anticipated.

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