

Document 10.2 Henry Whitney Bellows, "Speech in Philadelphia" (1863)

As the war progressed, civilians began to recognize the inefficiency of volunteer organizations rooted in the local level. While the efforts of local leaders and volunteers were appreciated, they often miscarried. One common complaint concerned the waste of resources, such as food, clothing, bedding and medical supplies, which were meant for the soldiers, but languished in railroad depots. Inspired by the thought of the men deprived of the basic necessities, a group of northern elites led by Henry W. Bellows organized the United States Sanitary Commission. At the height of its powers, it spread across the North and Midwest acting as a clearinghouse for soldiers and for medical supplies, becoming the largest and most highly organized philanthropic activity that had ever been seen in America. Addressing a large crowd in Philadelphia, at the Academy of Music, the organization's president describes its work.

I am glad that I am here not to advocate any forlorn cause, or to seek to invite your confidence in an enterprise towards which your affections are already slack or cold. I know, on the contrary, that so far as that ministry which I have the honor here to represent – so far as that institution, the United States Sanitary Commission, is concerned – the probabilities are that you have all had an exaggerated estimate of its usefulness rather than the reverse. I am not here, therefore, to plead with any particular earnestness, a cause towards which you are indifferent. I am simply here for the purpose of telling you, with some authority, what it has done, and how it does its work; not how much it has done, but how it works a silent return for the contributions to the cause which Philadelphia has given. Has she not given \$70,000 already to the general treasury of the cause? And has she not in a thousand other ways, not immediately acting through us, but through her own local methods, contributed to the work of mercy? Today I have been mostly employed in visiting, under the kind guidance of a citizen of yours – one who has distinguished himself alike in this service of mercy, and in his support of the Sanitary Commission, and more latterly by supplying the public with certain views, "How a free people can conduct a long war," – who has done as much as any loyal man of the land to encourage and strengthen the public heart – under the kind and skillful guidance, I say, of this gentleman, I have been this morning visiting those scenes of mercy and usefulness which the local zeal, industry and energy of this community have adopted, to testify its interest in the cause of the sick and wounded soldier, and not only of the sick and wounded soldier, but of the tired and the hungry soldier, who, when he reaches the city of Philadelphia, finds it a friendly city and a welcome home, and its citizens anxious to heap upon him all sorts of luxury, devotion and gratitude. Those three hundred and fifty thousand soldiers whom you have fed in your Volunteer Refreshment Room – these and others whom you have received on their way back from the wars, and tended in your temporary hospitals, – no doubt every man of them having the stamp of this city on his heart – all testify that you have done everything in your power, to assure the soldier of your ardent sympathy and entire and perfect devotion. I doubt, indeed, whether any city in the country has had so great an opportunity as you have had, to testify this spirit of gratitude and devotion to the loyal soldier. You have been nearer to the seat of war, and more directly in contact with the great highway to the army. Every soldier almost who has been to the war, at least in the Eastern Department, has been obliged to cross your threshold. Here he meets his first welcome. Your men and women, your workingmen and professional men, people of all classes, have hastened to give him God speed – not merely to say to him, "Be ye fed," "Be ye warm" – but to fill him and warm him, and send him rejoicing on his way.

The object I have before me more particularly at this time, is to explain in some detail the operations of that Commission over which I have the honor to preside, – an honor which I fully appreciate and value, – and I wish here to say how small a part belongs to me of the credit of placing this Commission in a position of so much usefulness; how numerous and admirable have been the co-workers assembled about this cause; how fortunate we have been in securing men of loyalty, fidelity, and skill, to aid us in this work; how we have not been obliged to put up with eye-servants, but have been able to secure the services, again and again, of men who have filled the most important offices in civil life, but who at the call of duty, took upon themselves the work of this Commission, than which no work was ever before so blessed in the devotion, ability, and skill of those whose sympathies, intellects, and affections have been contributed to its patriotic and philanthropic service.

When I speak of the Sanitary Commission, therefore, I speak of a work that has had the sympathy of hundreds of thousands of men and women; which has been under the guidance and direction in a large part of the whole civil

medical practice in this country; which has been able to gather about it all the leading spirits in every great community, and the aid and support of the people of every loyal State in the Union, of all its cities and its villages; which has been enabled to concentrate as in a burning focus, the affections, the understandings, the counsel, and the advice of the loyal and devoted people of the land.

When this war began, the care of our sick and wounded soldiers was, of course, in the hands of the Medical Department of the United States Army. That department consisted at that time of one hundred and fifty excellent surgeons and assistant surgeons, who had been in charge of our military establishment of 20,000 men. It was an admirable department, strong from the knowledge gained in previous wars, during which there had been accumulated valuable statistics. But what were one hundred and fifty medical men? What was the medical staff of the United States Army, when compared with the exigencies into which the country was then flung when not merely 75,000 men were called out, but 250,000 more, then 250,000 more, and then 250,000 more, till our army was expanded to 800,000 men? And how was the medical staff to be recruited? Of course, it had to be recruited from the civil medical service of the country. Just as the military arm had to be recruited from volunteers, generally unskilled and untaught in military arts, so the medical department had to be recruited from the civil medical service. Now you will understand what our difficulties were in a military point of view. Those difficulties have not been mainly due to a want of professional skill in our generals, or to the military defects of the regular army of this country, which in most respects, I doubt not, equals any military service on the globe, but to the fact that it has been compelled to be recruited by a class of men, not lacking courage, patriotism, or manly qualities, not unfit to claim the peerage in intelligence, zeal, and endurance with any regulars, but because of their inevitable unskilfulness in military arts, due to that long-continued peace with which our country was blessed. We had at once, therefore, to extemporize an enormous army, and extemporize the officers in that army. The wonder is with me, not that we have not done more, but that we have been able to accomplish, in spite of all misgivings and criticisms, in the period of time in which we have been engaged, more than any power on the face of the earth could have accomplished in the same period of time. You must understand that our medical men were in the precise condition of our military men; unskilled in the arts of military life, and of medico-military practice. Now everybody knows that an army must be subjected to the discipline of rigid machinery; a state of things upon which we have looked up to this time with a kind of jealousy. And now I am almost ready to say, in the face of a general reverse of opinion, that our army has not been so much lacking in leadership, as it has been lacking in those details of discipline and soldierly subordination, which are necessary for the organizing of a great military power in such a manner, that under the lead of a few persons, a vast body of men may be hurled as one man and one soul, at the bidding of one great leading mind, against the enemy. Soldiers are not to be extemporized. They may be called out in a day, but it will take a considerable length of time before they become soldiers.

A soldier is a man who has not merely a willingness to obey, but a habit of obedience, – one trained and disciplined, not by tactics, but by time and experience, in the character and qualities of mind that make him in his very blood and bones like a machine.

Now in the Medical Department of the army, this is just as essential as in any other department. All the difficulties connected with the treatment of the sick and wounded, are due to the fact that the Medical Department of the United States Army, while it has enjoyed the very best ability of the civil medical service from all parts of the country, nevertheless, in a military point of view, was necessarily diluted by the addition of 3000 medical men, with great hearts in their bosoms, and great determination and devotion to duty, but without that particular knowledge of all the regulations and details of army life, that render them able first to understand, then to carry out the wise and admirable regulations already subsisting in the medical service of the United States. Can you wonder that under these circumstances, we have had a thousand defects to contend with in the administration and application of those rich means, which the Government has supplied to meet the wants of our sick and wounded men? Can you wonder at the failures and defects, belonging in part to the nature of war, which have in some measure attended our operations? What less can you expect, when it is a part of the strategy of an enemy constantly to baffle all the expectations of his opponent. When he knows you mean to have your supplies at this point, and to have a battle here, he will take the greatest pains that the battle shall be not where your supplies are, but where they are not, and thus all the plans you may make to meet the exigencies of the case are upset, by that which it is his skill to make the most favorable to himself, and most unfavorable to you. And when you understand that to these

difficulties you are obliged also to superadd the rawness of our forces, and the rawness of our officers in the medical department, difficulties for which nobody is to blame, but which have grown out of the mighty blessings of a long-continued peace; can you wonder that a Government, the most generous in the world, in its efforts to meet the necessities of its sick and wounded men, a Government which feels that the people demand of it to do the utmost that humanity can prompt, to render to the suffering soldier as efficient assistance as circumstances will permit; can you wonder that such a Government, which has increased its expenses from 500,000 to 10,000,000 of dollars, for the benefit of the sick and wounded soldier, which has reinforced the medical service of the country, until every possible man that could be spared from medical civil life is now in the army; which by its courts of inquiry, has sifted the medical practice of most of its imbeciles and incompetents; I say, can you wonder that such a Government, so generous, so humane, and so laborious, as it has been in the cause of the sick and wounded soldier, has yet nevertheless found itself continually baffled, continually dependent on the exterior support and sympathy of the public; on having its industry and efforts eked out and supplemented by the benevolence of the public at large?

I know there is a constant wonder on the part of the public, that this great Government, with all its forethought and with all its means, has been compelled to depend so largely and so long upon the benevolence of the public.

Again and again I am asked, how long is this to last? Why does the Government not do this thing and that thing? The answer is, not that the Government does not know its duty, not that it is not anxious to do its duty; but let the Government do all it does or can do, you cannot have 800,000 men in the field, under the circumstances in which our men are in the field, without there being (even after all that public and private benevolence combined can do), a large margin of want and misery, which can only be partially alleviated, I tell you, therefore, on the responsibility of one who under the most favorable circumstances has been studying this matter for two years, you need not fancy there can be by any possibility, any stoppage in the demand upon your sympathy or support, so long as this war lasts. Every loyal woman in this country, every generous merchant, every noble-minded physician, every man who loves humanity, every man who loves his country and our noble cause, has got to put by a certain portion of his time, and a certain portion of his money and industry, and a large portion of his heart and affections and sensibilities, for the benefit of the sick and wounded soldiers. No matter how generous the supplies, no matter what amount of money the Government may spend, no matter how earnest and active and generous may be the labors of the women of the land, there will still remain in force that Scriptural maxim, "The poor ye have always with you," – the sick and wounded soldier will always be with you; and after all the Government and public and private benevolence may do, your hearts will be torn and your dreams haunted by the fact that there still remains a large and frightful amount of unalleviated disease and sorrow and want. Now, I ask you to discharge from this moment from your minds all notions to the contrary of this statement, which is vouched for on the authority of a Commission which has been now nearly two years studying the question. But let me tell you that all that private or social benevolence can do for the army in the field is invisibly small, compared with that which the Government is able to do, being in possession of all the lines of transportation and master of all the facilities, and compelled to exclude the larger portion of the public from the actual scene of war. You have between you and the soldiers the military lines which you cannot pass; the soldiers are principally to the front, out of your immediate reach, away from your own eyes and beyond the easy reach of any comforts you may send them. The great channel by which to reach them must be the Government itself; and let me tell you, that to sustain the Government you must encourage and support the medical force of the army itself. Everything possible should be done to make the medical force strong in its efficiency; not to interfere with the regulations adopted by the army surgeons, but in every way to sustain and encourage them in the great work committed to their charge. This is your only chance of being very useful to the soldier, except in particular, irregular, and exceptional cases. You must not suppose that because in this loyal city of Philadelphia, as your soldiers come and return, and you have them under your eye, you can take care of them here, that any similar state of affairs exists near the scene of conflict. There, a different state of things arises. The suffering of the army is on the field of battle, or in the actual camp or general hospital. The general hospital must be for the most part solely under the eye and sympathy of the United States Army Surgeons. If those who have this business for their official duty are not encouraged and sustained, all that you can do in irregular ways is as a drop in the bucket. Let me say, therefore, and I desire to say it in correction of an error which I fear prevails largely, that notwithstanding these natural defects which proceed from the want of official training, you may place a general reliance in the personal character, in the devotion and the patriotism, and in the medical skill of the surgeons in the field. There has been a prevailing impression that these medical men, to a large extent, have

been the riff-raff of the profession; there has been an extraordinary notion, that although they have been culled out of Christian society, they have been suddenly converted as by a moral contagion into barbarians and demons. I suppose that an ordinary percentage of imbecility and lack of moral principle and of ignorance of medical science, prevails in the medical profession, in the army and among the "volunteer surgeons", as it prevails in every class of society. But, I presume to say, that it is an atrocious libel, that as a class, the surgeons are not a self-sacrificing, earnest, devoted body of men, and I may add, the hardest worked class of men connected with our army service. After a very general experience of them, I think it is high time to say, that the country ought to have a general reliance, confidence and trust, in the essential worthiness, devotion and admirable character of the medical staff of the army now in the field.

Let them, then, be sustained. After a while they will learn the rules, regulations, and method. They found at first, that the army regulations were a little annoying. They went into the field with a prejudice – not unreturned – against the regular officers; but they began to see, after a while, that army regulations were very wholesome things, – consisting, indeed, of those methods and rules which experience has proved to be the shortest road to efficiency. If anything is now plain, it is that unless you have method and rule, and pretty rigid method and rule, in the army, you can have no success.

And if there be anything that volunteers learn in the medical or other service, it is, after a short time, an increasing respect for army regulations; a desire to be under officers that understand these regulations; to be under surgeons who are familiar with all those minute rules, that tie up in safety and security, for purposes of method, order, and success, the conditions under which relief is to be supplied. I know nothing more foolish and insane, than that universally popular cry against "red tape." Permit me to say, that in the army, red tape is as essential to men, as white tape at home is to women. I need not say, that it is an equal folly to attempt to do without the one, as to do without the other. Instead of decrying "red tape," all my experience has taught me to believe that the principal difficulties connected with the humane administration of army affairs, are due to the neglect of "red tape." If you could have real "red tape," not that kind painted on barbers' poles, which ties up nothing; if you could only have real rule, method, and habit carried out to the death even, you would have the surest way of attaining to the best results in military affairs. And that is a matter that ought to be more generally understood among the women and the men in the land.

Source: Speech of the Rev. Dr. Bellows, President of the United States Sanitary Commission, made at the Academy of Music, Philadelphia, Thursday Evening, Feb. 24. 1863 (Philadelphia: C. Sherman, Son & Co., Printers, 1863), 6–15.