THE PRESENT CONDITION OF THE COAST SURVEY.

The administration of President Cleveland presents no greater enigma than the contrast between the high standards of public fidelity which its head has infused into most branches of the public service, and the unwinding succession of personal quarrels, charges, and counter-charges which he has allowed to discredit the administration of the coast survey, and impair its character and efficiency. The present condition of that work is such as almost to make us forget that there was a time, and that within the memory of every reader, when it was the model branch of the civil service, enjoying a world-wide reputation for the perfection of its organization, the standard of its work, and the character of its assistants, and cited by the advocates of reform as an example of what the civil service might become under an improved system of appointment and tenure of office. One wanting to know on what system a scientific bureau ought to be administered cannot do better than study Bache's administration of the coast survey, and note how he combined the greatest liberality with the most scrupulous regard to the forms of law, the responsibilities of a public officer, and the requirements of a disciplined service.

Fifteen months have now elapsed since this dream of perfection was suddenly interrupted by the alleged discovery of grave irregularities and the forced resignation of a superintendent. Men were not unpunished for the latter fault. It had become widely known that physical and mental idleness, intervening at the end of a long and honorable career in the public service, had incapacitated the superintendent for the proper execution of his office; but wise and thinking men reserved their judgment when they were assailed through the public press that general corruption had eaten into the vitals of the organization, and that the work was abused by Bache because he had become a nest for peddlers of the public funds.

The first set of the administration after hearing of the seemingly demoralized condition of the survey was the appointment as superintendent of the man on whose report of irregularities that office had been made vacant. For such an appoint...
ment there could be but one apology: The President and his secretary of the treasury were responsible in the public for the conduct of the survey; and it was their duty to take every measure for discovering any irregularities which might exist in its administration. A searching inquiry into the past disbursements of the officers and employees was eminently proper under the existing circumstances. Mr. Thorne, as head of the investigating commission, was well qualified for the inquiry; and we may charitably suppose he was on this account, and this alone, that he was made superintendent. Such being the case, the course prescribed by every principle of public justice and governmental policy was quite clear.

An old and reputable branch of the public service was on trial before the President, for grave shortcomings in the conduct and character of its employees. Sound policy required that it and they should be convicted that some right to a speedy trial and a public verdict which no individual enjoys when accused of crime. For more than a year a body of men of high professional attainments and unsullied reputation have felt themselves wounded by imputations on the service to which they belong, of which they once were proud, and of which they sometimes hope to be proud in the future. After waiting so long, they cannot but feel it is public wrong that the head of the government takes no measures and announces no conclusions which will indicate his verdict upon their official characters.

In this connection let me think kindly of Mr. Thorne. No one questions the honesty of his intentions or the purity of his motives. Circumstances not of his own making imposed upon him a disagreeable duty, in the performance of which he has spent more than a year. He has done as well as possibly could be expected of a man without administrative experience, placed in charge of a great public work in the capacity of prosecuting attorney. Gradually compelled by the force of circumstances to conduct the office in accordance with long-established custom, and to trust the men whom his predecessors have trusted, he now sees the very accounts of former administrations, who put him into power, turning against him, and even going so far as to his charges of malfeasance in office with the public prosecutor of the District of Columbia.

In the Washington Post of Monday last we find a statement by him as conclusive of the whole question, that we should doubt its authenticity did it not bear every mark of being given in his own words. At the conclusion of a long reply to the charges we have mentioned, he alludes as follows to the testimony of last year, on which the survey was condemned, and Mr. Bilgert compelled to resign:

"The testimony, which the present proceeding is said to be intended to revive, has been out of my custody and in that of the department much more than a year. It is mainly on paraffin, some true, some false, some mistaken, some since retracted, and more or less wild gossip since disproved. The publication of such material against people who were not concerned with the witness, and did not even examine them nor appear by counsel, and the spreading of it before the public, who can never know of the credibility or motives of any of the witnesses, or of the probable value of their testimony, would be simply an indescribable assassination of character."

Such an admission is most creditable to him, and most justly every lover of purity in the public service. It must require a rare endowment of moral courage and respect for truth and justice to move one to speak thus of testimony which was collected by himself, and which formed the only basis for his appointment to one of the most important offices in the gift of the President. If we accept Mr. Thorne's statement, we shall see why the present condition of the survey tends to denunciation. It is a public establishment, in the prosecution of which the eyes of the world are on it, and the motives of which are so important a factor as it is in the army or the navy. But the revival of the old files is the service is impossible under the conditions which now prevail. The survey is in danger of losing the services of its best men, whose incentive to work is not salary, but professional pride in the honorable character and public utility of the work they are doing. That motives can be filled by means of equal promise under the conditions which now prevail, no one acquainted with the case can for a moment suppose. There will, of course, be a crowd of applicants for every vacancy, but the number really fitted for the places will be small, and will be sure to be passed over by any one but an expert in the selection of men for such a service. A year or two more such as the last will leave nothing worth preserving of an organization which was once the pride of American applied science, and a connection with which was a letter of introduction to similar organizations the world over.