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CONGRESS.

House of Representatives.

FRIDAY, *Nov.* 18.

Debate on the bill fixing the SALARIES of certain Officers therein mentioned.

(Continued.)

MR. SANFORD said the information imparted by the gentleman from Virginia had enabled him to give a correct vote on this subject; before he did which he should trouble the House with a few observations. His ill state of health had not permitted him to attend to the progress of the bill before the committee, and when he before rose he was new to the subject. But from the remarks which had dropped from different gentlemen in the course of this debate he had found no reasons that satisfied his mind of the propriety of a reduction of the salaries of the officers contemplated in this bill. He, on the contrary, believed those salaries were at present full low enough. It was a maxim with him, unless good reasons were offered for the reduction of salaries, to be in favor of continuing them; and no such reasons had he heard. It had been stated by a gentleman from Pennsylvania (Mr. Clay) that the wages of a member of that House amounted only to about the rate of 800 dollars a year: that statement was incorrect; calculating for the year at the rate *per diem* they would amount to about 2,100 dollars a year, and in the case of members, living remote from the seat of government, to about 2,500 dollars. He would ask the House to recollect the difference between his services, and those of a head of a department; and yet he received more than half of the compensation made to the highest officers under the government, excepting the President and Vice President. Mr. S. said he was clearly of opinion, for these and other reasons, that the salaries should continue to stand as they then did.

MR. SKINNER rose, and made some preliminary remarks not distinctly heard. He then said, his opinion was that this place was more expensive than any within the United States. Comparing the expences here with those in the East wing of the continent, they bore no proportion. Gentlemen say these are war salaries; and is there not now a state of war in Europe? Would it then be wise, when these salaries were formed under circumstances arising out of war, to reduce them at the commencement of another war before its effects are known? He drew, in his mind, a distinction between increasing salaries, and continuing them after such increase. At the time these salaries were increased, it had been stated as a reason for the increase that we were about removing the seat of government to this place; but he believed it had been opposed on this ground, that it would be best to wait until the government was removed, when, being here, the necessary expences could be better ascertained.

Much has been said of economy. Mr. Skinner said he had never been for fixing the compensation of officers so low as not to admit the highest talents. True economy, in his opinion, consisted in saving unnecessary expences; and this would be effected by filling the first offices of the government with the best men in the union. Let it be recollected too that these officers have been arraigned before the public until the weapons of slander had broken harmless at their feet. Was this a time to reduce their compensations? Such a measure would surely be most indiscreet, as it might produce an impression of demerit on their part. It would also be an act of ingratitude to the people. Mr. Skinner stated his belief, that, so far as related to his constituents, the present salaries were deemed no greater than the officers merited and not more than sufficient to support them. He said he was against continuing useless systems that involved expence; but he would be one of the last to reduce the salary annexed to an office of the first importance. He had never been in the habit of contemplating a deduction of these salaries, or of relying upon the patriotism of officers. He believed the best way was to give salaries to the public officers that would enable them to live comfortably. Suppose the patriotism of the gentlemen now in office should not induce them to continue in place at reduced compensations, would we be able to select men of the first talents to supply the vacancy? He did not believe they would. He should, therefore, vote for the highest sum.

The question was then taken on filling the blank with 5,000 dollars, and carried—Ayes 78.

On motion of Mr. J. Randolph the blank respecting the salary of the Secretary of the Treasury was filled with 5,000 dollars.

Mr. J. Randolph then moved to fill the blank respecting the salary of the Secretary of War with 4,500 dollars, which was carried—Ayes 75—as was a similar motion respecting the Secretary of the Navy with the same sum.

On a motion to fill the blank respecting the Attorney General with 3,000 dollars, Mr. J. Clay asked for information; the reasons in favor of the salaries allowed to the other officers, did not, in his opinion, hold good in this case. He moved to fill the blank with 2,000 dollars.

MR. J. RANDOLPH. The gentleman from Pennsylvania asks for information, and professes ignorance of the duties of the attorney general. I believe those duties are prescribed by law. As to his compensation, the first act, passed under this government, gave him 1500 dollars. In 1792, 400 dollars were added; and in 1797, 500 dollars more were added, making in the whole 2,400 dollars. By the act of March 1799, this salary, with the others, was raised to 3,000 dollars. It appears to me that these progressive additions made to the original salary of this officer, furnish proof that it has heretofore been too low. The gentleman proposes to make the salary 2,000 dollars; when before the passage of the act of March 1799, it was 2,400 dollars. In my turn let me ask the gentleman from Pennsylvania, and it is the first enquiry I have made of him, his reasons for reducing this salary below that fixed previously to 1799? I understand him as willing to put the salaries generally on the same footing on which they stood before the passage of the act of 1799. This salary was then 2,400 dollars; it then was increased with the rest, and having been encreased proportionally with them is a reason with me that it is not exorbitant and does not require diminution. I have no other reason to offer. The gentleman asks if the important officers at the head of the state and treasury departments receive only 5,000 dollars, why we give 3,000 dollars to an inferior officer. For the plainest reason on earth. We must give him a salary that will enable him to live in a comfortable manner. I agree with the gentleman, if we were to remunerate our officers in the ratio of their merits, and were to give the comptroller 3,000 dollars, we ought to give to the head of the department at least 50,000 dollars—I speak as to the offices, not as to the men that fill them. But this is impossible. It is, however, proper that every man should live in some style; however we may reason on this point, the feelings of men will decide it. This is my reason for giving the attorney general 3,000 dollars. If I am asked, why give our clerk 2000, or his chief clerk 1,300 dollars, I have no other reason. There is no doubt, if we give our door keeper 800 dollars, 5,000 dollars is not competent to the secretary of state; but it is necessary, nevertheless, to give our door keeper enough to live on, that we may insure his daily faithful services.

While I am up, I will take the opportunity of making an explanation, which will shew how far I have been misunderstood by the gentleman from Pennsylvania. I did not state, as represented by him, that the contingent expences of the departments were profuse, or that any reform could be made in them. But I went over the list to shew that, if the object of gentlemen really was to make a saving of the public money, it was in them that it was to be made, and not in the salaries of particular officers. I stated that in the department of the treasury, whose whole expences are 100,000 dollars, it was idle to attempt an economical reform by curtailing a few salaries. I could not have stated that I considered the departments as conducted with profusion, for I do not believe it.

I also stated that gentlemen who wished to save money should resort to the marine and military departments, and that they were the two great sinks of nations; but I did not state that they were the sinks of this nation. Did the gentleman ever hear of a nation ruined by its civil list? I do not, however, mean to say that abuses should be tolerated in the civil list; but that in great pecuniary reforms, we ought to begin with the marine, the army, diplomatic expences, and then come to the civil list, thus embracing a full enquiry into the expenditures of the government.

MR. SKINNER said he was for continuing the salaries as they stood. If he were disposed at all to alter them, he should be in favor of raising that of the attorney general. The reason at first, assigned for the smallness of the salary of this officer was the residence of the government at a commercial city, where he could discharge the duties of his office without sacrificing his professional pursuits. This reason had ceased.

MR. J. CLAY merely rose to answer one question of the gentleman from Virginia, who had asked why he was in favor of reducing this salary—Simply, because the services rendered by the officer were more than adequately compensated.

MR. NICHOLSON observed that the gentleman from Pennsylvania was mistaken in saying that the attorney general was more than compensated for his services. Mr. N. could not say, with precision, what these services were. But he knew that there was scarcely a law in relation to the revenue that did not come under the view of this officer for his advice and opinion. He knew that he was frequently called upon by the heads of the departments for his opinion of the construction of laws. He was also a member of the Cabinet, and was bound to give an opinion in writing to the President, whenever required. It was, therefore, absolutely necessary that this officer should be a man of the first talents and integrity. Mr. N. was of opinion that he ought to be a man of equal talents and integrity with those at the head of the departments. Not however being obliged to relinquish all professional pursuits, it was not necessary that he should have an equal salary with them.

For some time it had been the practice of the government to compensate the attorney general for extra services. For such services, performed under the British treaty he had been allowed 600 dollars. His salary, with this additional compensation, had never been heretofore considered as more than sufficient. It was true that his duties were not so arduous as those of the heads of the state and treasury departments, but they require equal talents and integrity; and if the officer should be brought from a distance, he ought to be enabled to live comfortably.

Mr. GODDARD asked if the 600 dollars, alluded to by the gentleman from Maryland, did not make part of the salary of 3,000 dollars given the attorney general, although the services for which the 600 dollars were allowed were at an end.

Mr. NICHOLSON replied that the gentleman was mistaken. The attorney general had received 3,600 dollars since the year 1799, when the salary was raised to 3,000 dollars.

Mr. GODDARD said he considered the augmentation of the salary from 2,400 to 3,000 dollars as having arisen from the temporary duties of that officer, which augmentation was made by a temporary law.

Mr. NICHOLSON. By an act passed in 1797, an additional compensation of 600 dollars was allowed this officer. In 1799 his salary was fixed at 3,000 dollars. He accordingly received thereafter 3,600 dollars, until his temporary duties under the English convention were completed.

The question to fill the blank with 3,000 dollars was then carried in the affirmative—Ayes 69—Noes 30.

The remaining blanks in the bill were thereupon filled, as we have already stated.

MONDAY November 21.

Debate on the passage of the Bill.

MR. TAGGART.—Mr. Speaker, I rise for the purpose of stating some reasons for the vote which it is probable I shall give on the passing of the bill now before the House. I feel no hostility to the principle of the bill in general. I am not certain that any of the specific sums contemplated as salaries are too high. With the official duties of several of the departments I am unacquainted; and therefore consider myself as not being a competent judge.—With respect to some of them however, when we bring into view the great importance of the trust to the United States, the high responsibility of the respective officers, and the talents necessary for the prompt discharge of their duties, I am persuaded the salaries are not too high. This I view to be particularly the case with the secretaries of state and of the treasury. I believe, Sir, that where an office is of such high trust and responsibility as to require men of the first characters for talents and integrity to fill it, it is the truest economy for government to give such encouragement as shall be adequate to the calling forth of those talents. Though the time has been in our country (and possibly may again arrive) when there was a loud call upon the patriotism of individuals to make important sacrifices both of their own property and ease for the public good; yet in a time of profound peace and national prosperity—when we are blessed with a regular government—a productive revenue—and, a full treasury, adequate to all necessary expences, for a man to abandon the superintendence of his domestic concerns; and, for a great proportion of his time, the comforts of domestic life—and, as is frequently the case, the emoluments of a lucrative profession, and embark in the public service without an adequate compensation, is a species of sacrifice which the public has no right to expect from individuals. I make no doubt but the highest departments of state may be filled for a less sum than the one contemplated in this bill. But to starve the departments by rendering the salaries inadequate to the calling forth the first talents in the nation, is the way to have them either filled with men unequal to the trust, or to force worthy men, who have it at their option to follow other honorable and lucrative employments, frequently to abandon the public service, thereby exposing the department to such frequent changes and resignations as must be highly injurious to the public. By saving in this way three or four thousand dollars we may run the hazard of losing millions, by having the business pass into inexperienced and unskilful hands, while, had an adequate compensation been allowed, the man of real talents and integrity would have felt an honest pride in continuing in the public service, and discharging the duties of his office with promptness and fidelity. Some have in this House spoken warmly of the merits of the gentlemen who fill the respective departments. I have no disposition to detract from their merits. But I apprehend, Mr. Speaker, that this is not a principle which ought to have the least influence in fixing the quantum of salaries for the several departments; and I trust is not the motive with any gentleman on this floor. Perhaps these departments never have been, and never will be filled by men for whom every member of this House has an equal esteem. Perhaps there never either was or will be a time when, if the members of this House were to consult their own feelings of personal attachment, they would not, some of them at least, be led to make a discrimination in the several heads of departments. But the feelings of private esteem and friendship ought, in my opinion, to have no influence whatever in fixing the quantum of salaries. The only principles by which, as I apprehend, the House ought to be governed in making the specific appropriation, are the importance of the office itself to the United States, the responsibility of the respective officers, and the talents necessary for the discharge of their high trust. In this view of the subject I do not know that the salaries are too high, and shall not oppose the passing of the bill now before the House. But to the passing of the bill in its present form I still have objections, arising chiefly from the amendment introduced by my colleague from Massachusetts, (Dr. Eustis.) Having formed a high opinion of the candor, and having been several times witness to the accuracy of that gentleman upon the floor of this House, conjecture has been busy in enquiring what could possibly be his motive for introducing, and what possible advantages the bill could receive by being incumbered with the above amendment? If the bill cannot stand on the footing of its own intrinsic merits it ought to be abandoned. Why then shall we attempt in an indirect way to prop it? For myself I can conjecture only two reasons for which a clause of this kind should be introduced. Either it must be adapted to the circumstances of those who were members of this House when the law of 1799 was passed, and who opposed the enacting of that law, to come forward in an indirect manner and practically own that their opposition to that law was wrong. If this is meant, I can certainly have no objection to gentlemen confessing an error; though the confession should be made in an indirect manner. I conclude, however, that this is not the intention, therefore does not the language of the amendment, apparently at least, amount to this? We have a secret conviction that the law in question is not quite right, but we do not wish to disoblige our friends by lowering the salaries, and we do no more than the majority of both Houses did in 1799, to oblige their friends, and in order to shew that we do no worse, we will allude to that law, and make it the basis of the present, thereby making it the scape goat to bear our transgressions. But should this be intended I think it will by no means answer the purpose. Reformation, particularly with regard to salaries, as well as other expences, was what was called for and expected. It will not satisfy that expectation to say we have done no worse than the Congress of 1799. As I had not at that time, the honor to be a member of this House, and consequently can have no confession to make, and as I feel a willingness that the law should stand upon the footing of its own intrinsic merits independent of the law of 1799, which has already once died a natural death, and after being again revived, is upon the point of expiring, I feel opposed to this amendment. But, Mr. Speaker, I have still a farther objection to it. By means of this amendment the bill, which was before sufficiently plain to the meanest capacity, becomes perplexed, and apparently at least, at variance with itself. The bill now before the House proposes to fix the salaries of certain officers, agreeably to a law of 1799. But this law did not fix the salaries of these officers. It was only a temporary grant for three years. I do not understand that any permanent law was ever made for fixing the salaries of these officers; only the law of 1789, which fixed the salaries of the two secretaries of state and of the treasury at 3,500 dollars each, and the others in proportion. The object of the present bill is to fix permanent salaries. But professedly to fix these upon the principles of a law which did not fix, and never was intended to fix them appears to me to render the bill completely inconsistent with itself. I humbly conceive therefore that the amendment introduced by my colleague from Massachusetts is not only needless, but tends to destroy the force and consistency of the bill itself; and for these reasons, though not opposed to the general principles of the bill, I cannot in its present form give it my vote.

MR. HASTINGS—Mr. Speaker, I am one of those, who are willing to allow to every public officer a reasonable, just and honorable compensation for his services. I am for annexing to the great and important offices of our government such salaries as shall be sufficient to induce persons of suitable and proper talents to fill them. I am not disposed to pay our public officers grudgingly for their labors—but I think the salaries we propose by this bill to grant are too high.

By the law of 1789, the salaries of Secretary of State and Secretary of the Treasury were each fixed at three thousand five hundred dollars, and the salary of the Secretary of War, at three thousand dollars, I would ask if these salaries did not then command the first talents of the country? Was not Mr. Jefferson the first Secretary of State under the present government? And did he resign that office because the compensation was insufficient? I believe not. I have never understood that this was the cause of his resignation. As to the first Secretary of the Treasury (General Hamilton) when we consider his great professional talents as a lawyer, and the great profits he might have made by the exercise of those talents (probably to three or four times the amount of his salary as head of the Treasury Department) we cannot I think be surprised at his resignation; it must be more a matter of surprise, that he should have ever accepted of the office; or after having accepted it, that he should have continued in it so long as he did. Did the first Secretary of War, (General Knox) resign because his salary was insufficient? I have never understood that to have been his only reason for resigning—but admitting, that the insufficiency of salaries was the only reasons, which induced those gentlemen to resign their offices, I then ask was there any difficulty in finding persons of suitable talent to fill those offices for the same compensations allowed to their predecessors? This I believe will not be pretended. What then were the reasons for augmenting the salaries of those officers in 1799? The reasons have been stated in the course of the debate—a war had been raging in Europe for four or five years; and one of the effects of that war upon this country was to advance the price of provisions and most of the necessaries of