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CONGRESS.

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES.

THURSDAY, MARCH 6.

DEBATE

On Mr. GREGG's resolution.

(CONTINUED.)

MR. N. WILLIAMS. The subject now under consideration 'calls for a display of all the knowledge and experience of commercial men and statesmen: And although I do not profess to be of either class, yet if I should chance to bestow a mite of information upon a subject of such vast importance to this country, it will no doubt be favorably received by this honorable committee.

The resolution now under discussion has for its principal object the protection of the active commerce of our country; it therefore becomes us perhaps, before we enter into the merits of the measure proposed, to enquire whether commerce is of itself so important to us, as to demand our protection. This first enquiry might seem unnecessary, and even extraordinary, had we not witnessed so recently upon this floor, the very light and trivial manner in which the commerce of this country has been treated, and had we not heard the very strange opinion, that it ought to be left to take care of itself.

It is possible that the agricultural class, which embraces a very great and respectable part of the population of our country, will look for some evidence of the benefits to be derived to them from the protected enterprize of our merchants. Those benefits, however, are so obvious to an attentive observer, that very little need be urged to render them apparent. It has been justly said that agriculture and commerce are handmaids to each other. Indeed their interests are strongly and durably interwoven. Commerce has a direct tendency to raise the price of the product of the farmer's labor, by seeking in every part of the world the best markets for our articles of export, and by bringing back and scattering through the country that circulating medium, which cherishes industry, and sweetens the toils of the labourer. If we had not an active commerce among our own citizens, it is evident that foreign merchants and nations only, would be enriched by the profits of our agriculture, would convert us into mere diggers of the soil for their benefit, and would thereby gain the means of insulting and degrading us more abundantly. The price of our produce will lessen in the proportion that we curtail the means of transporting it to the best foreign markets, and the means will assuredly be curtailed if we withdraw our protection from the enterprize of our citizens upon the ocean. Declare to foreign nations that the active commerce of this country meets no longer the fostering care of government, and you will soon hear of their tenfold insolence upon the seas; and our vessels frowned from the enjoyment of their rights there, will find an asylum in our harbors only, where they will be left to rot. The produce of our country must share a similar fate, unless we consent to dispose of it to foreign merchants and speculators, at any price they may please to offer for it. But what is not less important, if we have a regard for morals and happiness, a horrid picture here presents itself; that moment you stagnate the vent of your grain, an extensive inland country will be inundated with whiskey and the destructive vices which flow from the free use of it.

Although important, this is far from being the most important view which may be taken of this subject. It is a conceded point, that our government must by some means or other have revenue. The greatest statesmen and patriots of this country, have united, I believe, in considering commerce as our most natural and most fruitful source of revenue and riches. It presents a mode of fiscal exaction, the most in unison with the spirit and feelings as well as the interests of the American people, that of indirect taxation. By this mode the consumers of articles of foreign growth and manufacture, contribute freely and copiously to the support of our government, and to that fund which is destined to the payment of the national debt, and this too without feeling in a great degree the weight of the contribution. But the moment, sir, we give up this source of revenue, or expose it to the cupidity and rapacity of foreign powers, a resort to modes of taxation less congenial with the spirit of freedom must be inevitable. Let those who are for giving up this, look about and see what other sources of revenue our country can furnish. Experience, that mother of wisdom, has already instructed us, that excise laws are too odious in many parts of our country, to be borne; indeed this source of revenue would at best be trifling. Personal property is of a nature too occult and too liable to shift and change to become a safe and permanent source of revenue. The sale of the public lands, relied on by some, is an expedient, which on many accounts will be slow and inefficient; but if the sentiment prevails of leaving commerce to take care of itself, and my notions are correct that such a measure will paralise the industry of the farmer, it may very justly be doubted, whether our wild lands will meet with a ready market. What then I would ask, remains, but a land tax, to supply a fund to meet the necessary calls of our government; a tax so odious in many parts of our country, as to be one of the powerful causes of the overthrow of one administration, and if again resorted to, may possibly produce the destruction of another.

Should considerations like these, thoroughly pursued, prove insufficient to convince gentlemen, that the commerce of this country is worthy to be shielded by her protecting arm, I may despair of doing it perhaps, by any further arguments within my power to adduce. But it is certainly deserving the remembrance of this honorable body, that our government by the course it has taken, has long since pledged itself to support the rights and interests of our merchants upon the ocean. Aside of the immense revenues drawn from their enterprize and industry, we may consider the measures alone, adopted by our government to protect and guarantee their interests, by compacts with foreign nations and armaments for their defence, as having the direct effect of luring them to embark their property upon the seas with the most implicit security, and with almost a certain assurance that this protection should be continued. In short, I do not see, how it can be denied, that these privileges are as much entitled to the protection of government, as those, equally, though not more sacred, which are enjoyed by our fellow citizens upon land. To relinquish any of them would be taking a step towards a dastardly abandonment of our independence as a nation—and would be announcing to every people on earth, that we have become so tame and submissive that we are willing to be converted into simple tools and instruments for their use and profit, and to desert the defence of our own sacred rights. Whatever course policy or wisdom might have dictated to this nation *a priori* respecting commerce, it is evidently too late now to retrace our steps; nay, we cannot do it, short of treachery towards the mercantile interest, and without rendering ourselves a subject of derision and contempt to all Europe. If we shrink on the present occasion from that bold and energetic course which the times seem to call for, what a respectable figure we shall cut in history! This will be our story. 'The American nation finding her commerce in the Mediterranean pestered by the petty barbarous powers surrounding that sea, blustered and talked manfully like Bobadil in the play. Now this hero was invincible, or he would not have talked so valiantly. "Twenty more, kill 'em! Twenty more, kill them too!" But the moment their rights upon the ocean were assailed by a nation at once respectable and powerful, they meanly shrunk from the contest, and in vain did their admired executive endeavor to rally the representatives of the people, in support of the firm and dignified measures which he recommended.'

If therefore it is clear, as I trust it is, that commerce is the great supporter of agriculture, that it is at the same time the most rational and most prolific source of revenue and riches to our country, and if in addition to this, government has pledged itself to a vast body of respectable citizens in every part of the U. States, to protect their property legally employed in commerce; to say that this commerce shall now be left to take care of itself, of all the insulting mockeries ever offered to this nation, this appears to me the most insulting. But with many, and I do not suffer myself to doubt, with a great majority of this committee, this question may be considered as at rest—commerce is worthy of our protection. Our natural situation and the laudable enterprize of our citizens, which leads them into every sea and to every land, have made it ours, and we cannot abandon it without being guilty of the most palpable folly.

Should any gentleman here really believe, notwithstanding the volumes of evidence which have loaded our tables to the contrary, that our commercial rights have not been injured or insulted by the British nation, I confess I should feel myself at a loss how to address him. If he will discredit what all our merchants, all our statesmen, and the best writers upon the law of nations declare to be true, I should consider him as irrecoverably lost in the region of doubts, where I should be disposed to leave him in the undisturbed enjoyment of his own gloomy imagination. Indeed, so clear does this subject appear to me, that I fear it would be wasting time even to state a grievance so well known to all. G. Britain has for many years stiled herself mistress of the ocean. And in truth it cannot be denied that she has erected upon that element a colossus of power which overlooks and would overawe all the nations on the globe. 'Rule Britannia' is an old song of her singing; and I have somewhere read that the ballads of a nation go far to pourtray, if not to form the spirit and propensities of a people. Consequently jealous of every other commercial nation, this haughty queen would naturally endeavor to suppress the rapid and lofty soaring of the American Eagle. This jealousy has of course given rise to those principles which she attempts to interpolate into the laws of nations, and of which we now complain; such as—That a trade opened to neutrals by a nation at war on account of the war, is unlawful: That a vessel on her return voyage is liable to capture, on account of having carried, on her outward voyage, contraband articles to an enemy's port. To these may be added the right which she daringly assumes and cruelly executes, of impressing persons from American bottoms, sailing under the American flag upon the high seas; and other principles not less important tho' totally destitute of any legal or equitable foundation, and against which this nation ought to lift up her hands to Heaven by way of solemn protest. And what is alarming to all reflecting men is, that the courts of G. Britain, which have hitherto stood high in the estimation of all civilized nations for integrity, and for legal and political knowledge, have been found of late servile enough to attempt to weave into the code of nations, any principles which have been recommended by that government as favorable to her interests. Now it appears to me, sir, that that the question is not so much whether we shall surrender to that nation those particular branches of the carrying trade, which have given rise to our disputes with her, or whether we shall be allowed to retain any free commerce upon the ocean at all. For all must see that although that nation is slow and cautious in its progress to absolute maritime sovereignty, yet her strides are firm and determined; and nothing is more certain than this, that whatever rights we resign with tame submission are gone forever. It is alarming to hear it said, as it has been upon this floor with a kind of triumph,—What! shall we quarrel with a powerful nation for so trifling an object as the carrying trade? Such blindness is to me astonishing. That nation and her courts have not till lately insisted with any hope of establishing, upon the principles now contended for. It is now an experiment only. She will either advance or recede according to the spirit with which we meet her usurpations. This is only one step in the ladder, and this ladder reaches round the globe. A nation which makes convenience and power the only rule of right and justice, will find no end to her pretensions. To day she finds it convenient to prohibit our carrying the surplus colonial produce in our markets to foreign countries: to-morrow she will find it convenient to prohibit the carriage of our own produce, in our own bottoms, to foreign markets; and she always has power to enforce the dictates of her convenience. No, sir, I would not surrender one single right which our interest and honor call upon us to defend: and more especially, if by receding one step, we jeopardize all the fair features of our commerce, let us boldly contend for every vestige.

This I hope and trust we shall attempt to do, by every means which God and Nature have so abundantly placed in our power. Means, which if applied with firmness and energy, will doubtless produce the desired effect. But what are these means is the question. The proposition now under consideration, or something similar in principle, meets, I am told, the approbation of our greatest and wisest statesmen. Those in this House who will take a calm survey of our situation, I am strong in the belief, will also approve this measure, or one not much unlike it. The wisdom and penetration of the British cabinet will soon perceive, that such a measure, if adopted, is calculated to raise up among them at home and in the West-Indies, a host of hungry and clamorous advocates for our rights, and they will soon see the policy, if not the necessity, of treating us with justice. But without taking some step which discovers firmness and decision on our part, I would ask what privilege we can expect to preserve, except that alone which is seldom denied to the weak & contemptible, the privilege of being plundered and insulted without reserve. To talk of offensive war is unnecessary, it is childish. The weapons within our reach are not at present warlike, though capable of wounding deeply. Some however are of opinion that this measure will lead to war. I think differently. It will in my opinion preserve peace and our commerce at the same time. We have a right surely to say to any nation that injures and offends us, that we will stop all intercourse with her, until she consents to do us justice.

But this project is to lead to measures of defence, and to a loss of revenue! This in a degree is true. And with those who weigh national rights and honor in the same scales with dollars and cents, this may prove an insurmountable objection. But I have calculated, that our ports and harbours will not be left in their present exposed situation, even though this measure should not be adopted. I do hope at any rate that we shall find patriotism enough here to preserve us from this national disgrace. As to a loss of revenue, it will be but temporary. But our economical system forbids even this loss! Shall we suffer ourselves to be seduced by this plausible and popular, this sacred word—economy? I love economy as much as any body. But let us remember the object of this measure. Shall we, for fear of losing a few millions of dollars devoted to the sinking fund, jeopardize that sinking fund itself? Those who are solicitous, and none can be more solicitous than myself, to pay the national debt, will prove themselves willing, I hope, to pursue the means, and the only rational means of doing it. Let economy be embraced as far as it can be, in consonance with honor and safety. This is true economy. Another sort may be popular, but I pronounce it dangerous.

I do not pretend to have entered into a detailed account of the loss or gain of revenue, which will follow the adoption of this measure. It would be difficult to do it with accuracy, and viewing the subject as I have done, it is unnecessary. It is sufficient for me to know that the loss will be but temporary, and such as we can bear, and that the gain will be durable and honorable to our country. With respect to the various resolutions laid upon our tables relative to this subject, I have some difficulty in deciding which I would prefer. Those which affect specific articles, by laying a duty upon them, are not clear of difficulties. You cannot make a selection without materially affecting certain sections of the union. The resolution now under discussion cuts deep, but I think it deserves a preference.

It is unfortunate, sir, that any gentleman upon this floor should attempt to raise up distinctions among our citizens, or to hold up to the odium of the community a class of men so numerous & respectable as that of our merchants. If mercantile men are avaricious, agricultural gentlemen, I take it, are not totally destitute of greediness. They both labor no doubt, to preserve their profits, and the honorable gentleman from Virginia himself told us the other day, that he had not yet sold his tobacco.

MR. MASTERS. I shall not deny that Great Britain has insulted us by impressing our seamen, neither shall I deny that that nation has committed wanton aggressions and depredations on our commerce, and that commerce ought to be protected. That the resolution under consideration, is the best course to be pursued for the interest of this nation, I shall contend against.

Restraints and prohibitions between nations have always arisen from two circumstances, the first to promote their home industry or manufactures. The liberal price of wages, joined with the plenty and cheapness of land, which induces the laborer to quit his employer and become planter or farmer himself, who rewards with the same liberality which induces his labourers to leave their employment for the same reasons as the first—therefore it is impossible for manufactures to flourish in this country in our present situation.

The case in most other countries is very different, where the price of labour is low, and the rent and the profit consumes the wages of the laborer, and the higher order of people oppress the inferior, which I hope never to see in this country.

It may rationally be calculated that some of the eastern and middle states will eventually become manufacturing states; some of those states are nearly filled with people, and many individuals have large capitals employed in foreign commerce, to the amount in many instances of two and three hundred thousand dollars cash. When peace takes place in Europe, and things come down to their natural standard, and they can no longer employ that capital to advantage in commercial speculations; they will withdraw the same from that employment; they must make use of those capitals some where; they cannot vest them to any advantage in our public funds, bank stock or other corporations beyond a certain extent; they therefore by the aid of water works and machinery, will naturally employ those capitals in manufactures, & I trust the time is not many years distant. That is not now the case, & can have no bearing on the present question; indeed it is hardly contended that the resolution is brought forward for that purpose, it must therefore be brought forward for some other purpose.

The other circumstance, which gives rise to prohibitions between nations, arises from the violence of national animosity, which generally ends in war. This circumstance has brought this resolution into existence, the preamble speaks warlike language, and the whole taken together is a prelude to war with a nation who has two hundred ships of the line, four hundred frigates, besides gun brigs and other armed vessels, whose revenue is between forty and fifty millions sterling, who can go to war with us without any additional expence to themselves, who will sweep the ocean of American commerce, amounting to nearly one hundred million of dollars. What then will be the situation of your carrying trade? what then will be the situation of your commerce and your country?

But the honorable gentleman from Massachusetts (Mr. Crowninshield) has told us "if we go to war we can do G. Britain the most injury." The navigation of their merchant vessels is principally carried on under convoy, or some individuals may fit out a few privateers & capture now & then a vessel, and put some prize money in their private pockets, it cannot be of any advantage to the nation which will groan under poverty and distress.

It appears to me a matter of great deliberation how far we ought to adopt the present resolution by prohibiting the importation of British manufactures; in every country it ever was, and always must be the interest of the great body of the people to buy whatever they want of those who sell it cheapest. We cannot procure the same articles so cheap elsewhere; even should the measure not involve us in a war, prohibitions and revenge naturally dictate retaliation, and nations seldom fail to do it. The hon. mover of the resolution, (Mr. Gregg) asks us, "how it is to be inferred, we cannot abide by and execute this system." It is to be inferred from retaliation, and observation of nations who have preceded us. When France in the year 1667 laid discriminating duties on Holland, the Dutch retaliated by the prohibition of French wines, brandies and the like: a war followed, and the peace of Nimeguen regulated their commercial disputes. About that time the English prohibited the importation of lace manufactured in Flanders; the government of that country, which was then under the dominion of Spain, immediately retaliated and prohibited all importation of English woollens. Soon after this the French and English mutually began their heavy duties and prohibitions, and have ever since been in commercial disputes, quarrels, and hostilities; and we with our eyes open are going into the same system. The same hon. gentleman has also said it will attack Great Britain in her vitals, in her manufactories and warehouses—it seems a bad method of compensating injuries done to us, to do another worse injury to ourselves, which I believe will be the case by adopting the present resolution; it will have a natural tendency to retaliation and revenge.

It is very problematical whether the carrying trade is advantageous to this nation. Our merchants in that employ transporting foreign produce from Batavia, and the West Indies to the United States, and storing the cargoes for some time in warehouses and reshipping the same to Holland, the Hanse towns, Antwerp in French Flanders and other ports, and in some instances taking the avails of those cargoes and proceeding to China, from whence they return with teas, in other instances proceed to England and lay out the avails in British goods, and then making circuitous voyages of two and three years, with those large capitals out of our country, and before they can realise those cargoes so as to purchase our domestic produce.

My worthy colleague from N. Y. who has just sit down, (Mr. Williams) has observed, "that commerce is essential to this country and agriculture naturally goes with it." This proposition taken abstractedly I shall not deny, and then asks us "where is the revenue to support government." I will answer that gentleman, by asking him the same question, Where is the revenue to support government when nearly one half of that revenue is derived from G. Britain and her dependencies? I would ask that gentleman where is to be the market for 25,000,000 weight of cotton annually exported, (it is not to be presumed they will not retaliate in every particular) where is to be the market for your tobacco, potashes, flaxseed, provisions and other domestic produce, exported from this country to G. Britain, the British East and West Indies, and Newfoundland to the annual value of between 20 & 30,000,000—rely on it if you adopt this measure, you will embarrass all the operations of government, all the operations of the community, and must have recourse to direct taxation on the farmer, who will be unable to pay, for the want of a price for his produce; your merchants become bankrupts and you distress the agriculturalists.

The same hon. gentleman from Pennsylvania, has further observed "it will be such a shock upon G. Britain, she will not be able to endure it." Let that gentleman reflect on the wealth and maritime power of that country. Ever since my memory, the approaching ruin of G. Britain has been frequently foretold, after all the anxiety, after all the vain attempts, they yet regulate the commerce of the world. I must confess, I have but little faith in undertaking commercial regulations with that nation, and I believe we shall shew a very pretty figure in the attempt, and be obliged to recede with disgrace, and I cannot vote for the present resolution.

[To be continued.]