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## Debate in the Senate.

### Speech of Mr. Clay

Upon his resolutions concerning the fiscal and other great subjects of public policy.

March 1, 1842

The resolutions having been read—

Mr. CLAY rose and addressed the Senate nearly as follows: Mr. President: The resolutions which have just been read, and which are to form the subject of the present discussion, are of the greatest importance, involving interests of the highest character, and a system of policy which, in my opinion, lies at the bottom of any restoration of the prosperity of the country. In discussing them I would address myself to you in the language of plainness, of soberness, and truth. I did not come here as if I were entering a garden full of flowers and of the richest shrubbery, to cull the tea rose, the japonicas, the jessamines and woodbines, and weave them into a garland of the gayest colours, that by the beauty of their assortment and by their fragrance I may gratify fair ladies. Nor is it my wish—it is far, far from my wish—to revive any subjects of a party character, or which might be calculated to renew the animosities which unhappily have hitherto prevailed between the two great political parties of the country. My course is far different from this; it is to speak to you of the sad condition of our country—to point out not the remote and original, but the proximate, the immediate causes which have produced and are likely to continue our distresses, and to suggest a remedy. If any one, in or out of the Senate, has imagined it to be my intention, on this occasion, to indulge in any ambitious display of language, to attempt any rhetorical flights, or to deal in any other figures than figures of arithmetic, he will find himself greatly disappointed. The farmer, if he is a judicious man, does not begin to plough till he has first laid off his land, and marked it off at proper distances by planting stakes by which his ploughmen are to be guided in their movements; and the ploughman accordingly fixes his eye upon the stake opposite to the end of the destined furrow, and then endeavors to reach it by a straight and direct furrow. These resolutions are my stakes.

But before I proceed to examine them, let me first meet and obviate certain objections, which, as I understand, have been or may be urged against them generally. I learn that it is said of these resolutions that they present only general propositions, and that, instead of this, I should at once have introduced separate bills, and entered into detail and shown in what manner I propose to accomplish the objects which the resolutions propose. Let me here say, in reply, that the ancient principles and mode of legislation which has ever prevailed from the foundation of this government, has been to fix first upon the general principles which are to guide us, and then to carry out these principles by detailed legislation. Such has ever been the course pursued, not only in the country from which we derive our legislative institutions, but in our own. The memorable resolution offered in the British House of Commons by the celebrated Mr. Dunning is no doubt familiar to the mind of every one—that "the power of the Crown (and it is equally true of our own Chief Magistrate) had increased, was increasing, and ought to be diminished." When I was a member of another legislative body, which meets in the opposite extremity of the capitol, it was the course, in reference to the great questions of internal improvement and other leading measures of public policy, to propose specific resolutions going to mark out the principles of action which ought to be adopted, and then to carry out these principles by subsequent enactments. Another objection is urged, as I understand, against one of these resolutions, which is this: that by the constitution no bill for raising revenue can originate any where but in the House of Representatives. It is true that we cannot originate such a bill; but, undoubtedly, in contemplating the condition of the public affairs, and in the right consideration of all questions touching the amount of the revenue and the mode in which it shall be raised, and involving the great questions of expenditure and retrenchment, and how far the expenses of the government may safely and properly be diminished, it is perfectly legitimate for us to deliberate and act as duty may demand. There can be no question but that, during the present session of Congress, a bill of revenue will be sent to us from the other house; and if, when it comes, we shall first have gone through with a consideration of the general subject, fixing the principles of policy proper to be pursued in relation to it, it will greatly economise the time of the Senate and proportionably save a large amount of the public money.

Each person better can be pursued, if discussing the resolutions I have here submitted to present, than to take them up in the order of their arrangement, as I presented them to the Senate, after mature deliberation.

The first resolution declares—

"That it is the duty of the General Government, for conducting its administration, to provide an adequate revenue within the year to meet the current expenses of the year; and that any expedient, either by loan or treasury notes, to supply, in time of peace, a deficiency of revenue, especially during successive years, is unwise, and must lead to pernicious consequences."

I have heard it asserted that this resolution is but a truism. If so, I regret to say that it is one from which this government especially has departed during the last five years. Has an adequate revenue been provided within each of these years to meet the necessary expenses of those same years? No; far otherwise.

In 1837, at the called session, instead of imposing the requisite amount of taxes on the free articles, according to the provisions of the compromise act, what was the resort of the Administration? Treasury notes. And the same expedient of Treasury notes was ever since adopted, from year to year, to supply the deficiency accruing. And, of necessity, this policy rests upon the Administration succeeding an unascertained unliquidated debt, inducing a temporary necessity on that Administration to have resort to the same means of supply.

I do not advert to these facts with any purpose of vituperation or recrimination. Far from it. For we have reached that state of the public affairs when the country lies bleeding at every pore, and when, as I earnestly hope and trust, we shall, by common consent, dispense with our party prejudices, and agree to look at any measure proposed for the public relief as patriots and statesmen. I say, then, that during the four years of the administration of Mr. Van Buren, there was an excess of expenditure over the income of the Government to the amount of between seven and eight millions of dollars; and I say that it was the duty of that Administration, the moment they found this deficient to exist in the revenue, to have resorted to the adequate remedy by laying the requisite amount of taxes on the free articles to meet and to supply the deficiency.

I shall say nothing more on the first resolution, because I do hope that, whatever the previous practice of this government may have been, there is no Senator here who will hesitate to concur in the truth of the general proposition it contains.

The next three resolutions all relate to the same general subjects—subjects which I consider much the most important of any here set forth; and I shall, for the reason, consider them together.

The second resolution asserts—

"That such an adequate revenue cannot be obtained by duties on foreign imports without adopting a higher rate than twenty per cent., as provided for in the compromise act, which, at the time of its passage, was supposed and assumed as a rate that would supply a sufficient revenue for an economical administration of the Government."

The third resolution concludes—

"That the rate of duties on foreign imports ought to be augmented beyond the rate of twenty per cent. so as to produce a nett revenue of twenty-six millions of dollars—twenty-two for the ordinary expenses of government, two for the payment of the existing debt, and two millions as a reserved fund for contingencies."

The fourth resolution asserts—

"That, in the adjustment of a tariff to raise the amount of twenty six millions of revenue, the principles of the compromise act generally should be adhered to; and that especially a minimum rate of ad valorem duties should be established, from which there ought to be as little departure as possible."

The first question which these resolutions suggest is this: What should be the amount of the annual expenditures of this government? Now, on this point, I shall not attempt, what is impossible, to be exact and precise in stating what that may be. We can only make an approximation. No man, in his private affairs, can say, or pretends to say, at the beginning of the year, precisely what shall be the amount of his expenses during the year: that must depend on many unforeseen contingencies, which cannot with any precision be calculated beforehand: all that can be done is to make an approximation to what ought to be, if what may be the amount. Before I consider that question, allow me to correct, here, an assertion made first by the Senator from South Carolina, (Mr. Calhoun) and subsequently by the Senator from Missouri near me (Mr. Linn.) and I believe by one or two other gentlemen, viz: that the Whig party, when out of power, asserted that, if trusted with the helm, they would administer this government at an amount of expenditure not exceeding $13,000,000. I hope, if such an assertion was actually made by either or all of these gentlemen that it will never be repeated again without resorting to proof to sustain it. I know of no such position ever taken by the Whig party, or by any prominent member of the Whig party. Sure I am that the party generally pledged itself to no such reduction of the public expenses—none.

And I regret very much I must, before such assertion is repeated, the proofs will be adduced. For in this case, as in others, that which is asserted and reiterated comes at last to be believed. The Whig party did promise economy and retrenchment, and I trust will perform the promise. I deny (in no offensive sense) that the Whig party ever promised to reduce the expenditures of this government to thirteen millions of dollars. No; but this was what they said: during the four years of the administration of Mr. Adams the average amount of the public expenditure was but thirteen millions, and you charged that administration with outrageous extravagance, and came yourselves into power on promises to reduce the annual expenditure; but having obtained power, instead of reducing the public expenses, you carried them up to the astounding amount of near forty millions. But, while the Whigs never asserted that they would administer the government with that ern millions, our opponents, our respected opponents, after having been three years in power, instead of bringing the expenses below the standard of Mr. Adams's administration, declared that fifteen millions was the amount at which the expenditures should be fixed. This was the ground taken by Mr. McLane, when he was at the head of the treasury. I have his report before me; but as the fact, I presume, will not be denied, I forbear to read from it. He suggests, as the fit amount to be raised by the tariff he had proposed, the sum of fifteen millions of dollars as sufficient to meet the wants of the government.

I hope now I have shown that the Whig party, before they obtained power, never were pledged to bring down the public expenses either to thirteen or to fifteen millions. They were pledged, I admit, to retrench unnecessary expenditures, and to make a reasonable deduction whenever it could properly be made consistently with the public service; that process, as I understand, is now going on in both houses, and I trust the fruits will be seen before the end of the present session.

Unpledged, therefore, as the Whig party was, as to any specific amount, the question recurs, at what sum can the expenses of the government be now fixed?

I repeat that the exact amount is difficult to be ascertained. I have stated it in the resolution I now offer at *twenty-two millions;* and I shall soon show how I have arrived at that amount. But, before I do that, allow me to call the attention of the Senate to the expenditures of the preceding administration; for, in attempting to fix a sum for the future, I know of no course but to look back upon the experience of the past, and then to endeavor to deduce from it the probable amount of future expenditure. What, then, were the expenditures of the four years of the past administration?

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| In 1837 the amount was | $37 261 077 15 |
| In 1838 it was | 39 455 138 35 |
| In 1839 | 37 614 936 15 |
| In 1840 | 28 226 535 81 |
| Making an aggregate of | $142 561,945 46 |

Which gives us an average per year of $35,640,486 38.

The sum I have proposed is only twenty two millions, which, deduced from thirty five as above, leaves a reduction of $13,640 000—being a sum greater than the whole average expenditure of the extravagant and profligate administration of Mr. Adams, which they told us was so enormous that it must be reduced by a great "retrenchment and reform."

I am not here going to inquire into the items which composed the large expenditures of the four years of Van Buren's administration. I know what has been said, and will again be said, on that subject—that there were many items of extra expenditure which may never occur again. Be it so; but do we not know that every administration has its extras, and that these may be expected to arise, and will and must arise, under every administration beneath the sun? But take this also into view in looking at the expenses of that administration: that less was expended on the national defences—less in the construction or repair of fortifications—less for the navy, and less for other means of repelling a foreign attack, than, perhaps, ought to have been expended. At present, we are all animated with a common zeal and determination on the subject of defence; all feel the necessity of some adequate plan of defence, as well upon the ocean as upon the land, and especially of putting our navy and our fortifications in a better state to defend the honor and protect the rights of the nation. We feel this necessity, although we all trust that the calamity of a war may be averted. This calls for a greater amount of money for these purposes than was appropriated under Mr Van Buren's administration; beside which, in the progress of affairs, unforeseen exigencies may arise, and do soon surely occur, calling for other appropriations needed, which no man can anticipate. Every minister in every government—every administration of our own government, has its extraordinaries and its contingencies; and it is no apology for Mr. Van Buren's administration to say that the circumstances which occasioned its expenditures were extraordinary and peculiar. Making all the allowances which its warmest friends can ask for the expenses of the inglorious Florida war—a contest which has profusely wasted not only the resources of the treasury, but the best blood of the nation—making the amplest allowance for this and for all other extras whatever, the sum expended by the last administration still remains to be far, far beyond what is proposed in these resolutions as sufficient for the present, and for years to come. It must, in candor, be conceded that this is a very great diminution of the national expenditure; and such, if nothing else were done, would redeem the pledge of the Whig party.

But let us now consider the subject in another light. Thirteen millions was the average annual amount of expenditure under Mr. Adams's administration, which terminated thirteen years ago. I should be authorized, therefore, to take the commencement of his administration in 1825, being a period of seventeen years in making a comparison of the progressive increase of the national expenditure; or, at all events, adding one-half of Mr. Adams's term, to take the period as running fifteen years back; but shall I not avail myself of this perfectly fair calculation; and I will therefore say, that at the end of thirteen years, from the time when the expenditures were thirteen millions, I propose that they be raised to twenty two millions. And is this an extraordinary increase for such a period, in a country of such rapid increase and development as this is? What has occurred during this lapse of time? The army has doubled, or nearly so; it has increased from a little over 6 000 men to 12,000. We have built six, eight, or ten ships of the line. (I do not recollect the precise number:) two or three new states have been added to the Union; and two periodical enumerations have been made of the national population; besides which there have been, and yet are to be, vast expenditures on works of fortification and national defence. Now when we look at the increase in the number of members in both Houses of Congress, and consider the necessary and inevitable progress and growth of the nation, is it, I ask, an extraordinary thing that at the end of a period of thirteen years our expenditures should increase from thirteen to twenty-two millions of dollars? If we take the period at seventeen years, (as we fairly may,) or at but fifteen years, the increase of expenses will be found not to go beyond the proportional increase of our population within the same period. That increase is found to be about four per cent. annually—and the increase of government expenditures, at the rate above stated, will not exceed that. This is independent of any augmentation of the army or navy, of the addition of new states and territories, or the enlargement of the numbers in Congress. Taking the addition, at the end of thirteen years, to be nine millions of dollars, it will give an annual increase of about 700,000 dollars. And I think that the government of no people, young, free, and growing as is this nation, can, under circumstances like ours, be justly charged with rashness, recklessness, or extravagance, if its expenses increase but at the rate of $700,000 per annum. If our posterity, after their numbers shall have swelled to one hundred millions, shall find that their expenses have augmented in no greater ratio than this, they will have no cause of complaint of the profuseness or extravagance of their government.

But it should be recollected that while I have fixed the rate of expenditure at the sum I have mentioned, viz: twenty two millions, this does not preclude further reductions, if they shall be found practicable, after existing abuses have been explored and all useless or unnecessary expenses have been lopped off.

The honorable senator from South Carolina (Mr. Calhoun,) has favored us, on more occasions than one, with an account of the reforms he effected when at the head of the war department of this government; and no man, certainly, can be less disposed than I am to deprive him of a single feather which he thinks he put in his cap by that operation. But what does he tell us was his experience in this business of retrenchment? He tells us what we all know to be true—what every father, every householder, especially finds to be true in his own case—that it is much easier to plunge into extravagance than to reduce expenses; and it is pre-eminently true of a nation. Every nation finds it far easier to rush into an extravagant expenditure of the money entrusted to its public agents, than to bring down the public expenditures from a profuse and reckless to an economical standard. All useful and salutary reforms must be made with care and circumspection. The gentleman from South Carolina admits that the reforms he accomplished took him four years to bring about. It was not till after four years of constant exertion that he was enabled to establish a system of just accountability, and to bring down the expenses of the army to the average, per man, to which they were at length reduced. And now, with all his personal knowledge of the difficulties of such a task, was it kind in him, was it kind or fair in his associates, to taunt us as they have done, by already asking, "where are the reforms you promised to accomplish when you were put in power?"

[Mr. Calhoun here rose to explain, and observed that what he had again and again said on the subject of reforms was no more than this, that it was time the promised reforms should begin: it was time they should *begin* and that was all he now asked.]

Very well: if that is all he asks, the gentleman will not be disappointed. We could not begin at the extra session; it could not then reasonably be expected of us; for what is the duty of a new Administration when it first comes into the possession of power? Its immediate and pressing care is to carry on the government; to become acquainted with the machine; to look how it acts in its various parts, and to take care that it shall not work injuriously to the public interest. They cannot, at once, look back at the past abuses; it is not practicable to do so; it must have time to look into the pigeon holes of the various bureaux, to find out what has been done, and what is doing. Its first great duty is to keep the machine of government in regular motion. It could not, therefore, be expected that Congress would go into a thorough process of reform at the extra session. Its peculiar object then was to adopt measures of immediate and indispensable relief to the people and to the government. Besides which, the subsequent misfortunes of the Whig party were well known. President Harrison occupied the chair of state but for a single month; and the members of his cabinet left it under circumstances which, let me here say, do them the highest honor. I do not enter upon the inquiry whether the state of things which they supposed to exist did actually exist or not; but, believing it to exist, as they did, their resignation presents one of the most signal examples of the sacrifice of the honors and emoluments of high station, at great expense and personal inconvenience, and of noble adherence to honor and good faith, which the history of any country can show. But I may justly claim, not only on behalf of the retiring secretaries, but for the whole Whig party, a stern adherence to principle, in utter disregard of the spoils doctrine, and of all those baser motives and considerations which address themselves to some men with so great a power. I say, then, that the late extra session was no time to enforce a great and extensive and difficult reform throughout the departments of the government: a process like that can be attempted only during a regular session of Congress; and do not gentlemen know that it is now in progress, by the faithful hands to which it has here and elsewhere in Congress been committed? and that an extraordinary committee has been raised in this body, insomuch that to effect it the Senate has somewhat shot from its usual and appropriate orbit by establishing a standing committee of retrenchment? If the honorable senator from South Carolina took four years to bring down the expenses of the war department, when under his own immediate superintendence, I may surely, with confidence, make my appeal to his sense of justice and liberality to allow us at least two years before he reproaches us with a failure in a work so much more extensive.

I will now say that, in suggesting the propriety of fixing the annual average expenditure of this government at twenty-two millions of dollars, from this time and for some year to come, it is not my purpose to preclude any further reductions of expense by the dismissal of useless officers, the abolition of useless institutions, and the reduction of unnecessary or extravagant expenditures. No man is more desirous than I am of seeing this government administered at the smallest possible expense consistent with the duties entrusted to us in the management of our public interests both at home and abroad. None will rejoice more if it shall be found practicable to reduce our expenses to eighteen, to fifteen, or even to thirteen millions. None, I repeat it, will rejoice in such a triumph of economy more heartily than I. None—none.

But now allow me to proceed to state by what process I have reached the sum of twenty two millions, as proposed in the resolution I have offered.

The Secretary of the Treasury has presented to us estimates for the current year, independent of permanent expenses of a million and a half, amounting to about twenty-four and a half millions, which may be stated under the following heads, viz:

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| For the civil list, foreign intercourse and miscellaneous, | $4,000,987 83 |
| For the war department including all branches, | 11 717 791 27 |
| Naval service, | 8,705,579 83 |
| | $21 424 358 93 |

And here let me say a single word in defence of the army. The department of war comes to us with estimates for the sum of $11,717,491 27; and those who look only on the surface of things may suppose that this sum is extraordinarily large; but there are many items in that sum. I have before me a statement going to show that of that sum only four millions are asked for the military service proper—a sum less than is demanded for the naval service proper, and only double the amount at which it stood when the honorable gentleman from South Carolina left the department. The sum was then about $2,000,000; it is now not quite $4,000,000: while, during the same period, the army has been nearly doubled, besides the raising of mounted regiments, the most expensive for that very reason of any in the service. I think the gentleman from South Carolina, if he looks into the subject in detail, will find that the cost of the army is not at this hour greater, per man, than it was when it was under his own personal administration. So I am informed; and that, although the pay has been raised a dollar a month, which has very largely augmented the expenditure.

The executive branch of the government has sent in estimates amounting, in all, to twenty-four and a half millions of dollars, for the service of the current year, which, with the million and a half of permanent expenditure, makes twenty-six millions. How much is to be added to that amount for appropriations not yet estimated, which may be made during the session of Congress, to meet honest claims, and for other objects of a public nature? I remember one item proposed by my friend near me (Mr. Mangum) for a quarter of a million for the building of a steamship, an item not included in the estimates, but for which the Senate has already appropriated: besides which there are various other items which have passed or will pass during the present session. When the honorable gentleman from New Hampshire was at the head of the Treasury, he made, in his communications to Congress, constant complaints of this very practice. He well remembers that he was ever complaining that the expenditures of government were swelled far beyond the executive estimates, by appropriations made by Congress not estimated for by the departments. I have calculated that we shall add to the twenty-six millions of dollars estimated for by the executive departments, or permanently required, at least one million and a half, which would raise the sum for this year to twenty-seven millions and a half.

How then do I propose to bring this down to twenty-two millions? I have, I own, some fears that we shall not be able to effect it: but I hope that we shall so far reduce the estimates and prevent unnecessary appropriations that the total expenditure shall not exceed that amount. The mode in which I propose to reach such a result is this: I suppose we may effect a reduction of the civil list to the amount of half a million. That general head includes, among other things, the expenses of the two Houses, and, as I have heard, the other House has already introduced a report which, if adopted, will cut down those expenses one hundred thousand dollars, though I think that they should be reduced much more. I estimate, then, three and a half millions for the civil list instead of four millions; then I estimate nine millions for the war department instead of $11,717,000. In a conversation which I have lately held with the chairman of the military committee of this body, he expressed the apprehension that it could not be reduced below ten millions, but I hope it may be cut down to nine. As to the naval service, the estimates of the department for that branch of the service amount to $8,707,500; an amount I think far too high, and indeed quite extravagant. I was greatly astonished at learning the amount was so large. Still I know that the navy is the favorite of all, and justly: it is the boast of the nation, and our great resource and chief dependence in the contingency of a war: no man thinks, for a moment, of crippling or disabling this right arm of our defence. But I have supposed that without injury the appropriation asked for might be reduced from 8,707,500 to $6,500,000. This would put the reduction in the naval on a footing with that in the military appropriation, and still leave a greater appropriation than usual to that department. The reduction to six millions and a half is as large as I think will be practicable, if we are to provide for proposed experiments in the application of steam, and are, besides, to add largely to the marine corps.

How, then, will the total of our expenditures stand? We shall have—

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| For the civil and diplomatic expenses of the government | $3 500 000 |
| For the military service | 9 000 000 |
| For the naval service | 6,500 000 |
| For permanent appropriations * | 1,500,000 |
| For appropriations not included in the estimates | 1 500,000 |
| Making an aggregate of | $22 000 000 |

To this amount I suppose and hope our expenses may be reduced, until, on due investigation, it shall be discovered that still further reductions may be effected.

Well, then, having fixed the amount at twenty-two millions for the ordinary current expenses of government, I have supposed it necessary and proper to add two millions more to make provisions for the payment of the existing national debt, which is, in the event of the loan being

* Mr. Clay had omitted this item in the delivery of his speech, and the omission is now supplied.