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AN ADDRESS OF  
MEMBERS OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,  
OF THE CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES,  
TO THEIR CONSTITUENTS,  
ON THE SUBJECTS OF THE WAR WITH GREAT  
BRITAIN.  
The undersigned Members of the House of Representatives,  
to their respective Constituents.

A Republic has for its basis the capacity and right of the people to govern themselves. A main principle of a representative republic is the responsibility of the representatives to their constituents. Freedom and publicity of debate are essential to the preservation of such forms of government. Every arbitrary abridgement of the rights of speech in representatives, is a direct infringement of the liberty of the people. Every unnecessary concealment of their proceedings an approximation towards tyranny. When, by systematic rules, a majority takes to itself the right, at its pleasure, of limiting speech, or denying it, altogether; when secret sessions multiply; and in proportion to the importance of questions, is the studious concealment of debate, a people may be assured, that such practices continuing, their freedom is but short lived.

Reflections such as these, have been forced upon the attention of the undersigned, Members of the House of Representatives, of the United States, by the events of the present session of Congress. They have witnessed a principle, adopted as the law of the House, by which, under a novel application of the previous question, a power is assumed by the majority to deny the privilege of Speech, at any stage, and under any circumstances of debate. And recently, by an unprecedented assumption the right to give reasons for an original motion, has been made, to depend upon the will of the majority.

Principles more hostile than these to the existence of representative liberty, cannot easily be conceived. It is not, however on these accounts, weighty as they are, that the undersigned have undertaken this address. A subject of higher and more immediate importance impels them to the present duty.

The momentous question of war, with Great Britain, is decided. On this topic, so vital to your interests, the right of public debate, in the face of the world & especially of their constituents, has been denied to your representatives. They have been called into secret session, on this most interesting of all your public relations, although the circumstances of the time and of the nation, afforded no one reason for secrecy, unless it be found in the apprehension of the effect of public debate, on public opinion; or of public opinion on the result of the vote.

Except the message of the President of the U. States, which is now before the public, nothing confidential was communicated. That message contained no fact, not previously known. No one reason for war was intimated, but such as was of a nature public and notorious. The intention to wage war and invade Canada, had been long since openly avowed. The object of hostile menace had been ostentatiously announced. The inadequacy of both our army and navy, for successful invasion, and the insufficiency of the fortifications for the security of our seaboard were, every where known. Yet the doors of Congress were shut upon the people. They have been carefully kept in ignorance of the progress of measures, until the purposes of administration were consummated, and the fate of the country sealed. In a situation so extraordinary, the undersigned have demanded it their duty by no act of theirs to sanction a proceeding, so novel and arbitrary. On the contrary, they made every attempt, in their power, to attain publicity for their proceedings. All such attempts were vain. When this momentous subject was stated, as for debate; they demanded that the doors should be opened.

This being refused, they declined discussion; being perfectly convinced, from indications too plain to be misunderstood, that, in the house, all argument, with closed doors, was hopeless; and that any acting implied validity to so flagrant an abuse of power would be little less than

treachery to the essential rights of a free people. In the situation, to which the undersigned have thus been reduced, they are compelled, reluctantly to resort to this public declaration of such views of the state and relations of the country, as determined their judgement and vote upon the question of war. A measure of this kind has appeared to the undersigned to be more imperiously demanded, by the circumstance of a message and manifesto being prepared, and circulated at public expense, in which the causes for war were enumerated and the motives for it concentrated, in a manner suited to agitate and influence the public mind. In executing this task, it will be the study of the undersigned to reconcile the great duty, they owe to the people, with that constitutional respect, which is due to the administrators of public concerns.

In commencing this view of our affairs, the undersigned would fail in duty to themselves, did they refrain from recurring to the course, in relation to public measures, which they adopted and have undeviatingly pursued from the commencement of this long and eventful session; in which they deliberately sacrificed every minor consideration to, what they deemed, the best interests of the country.

For a succession of years the undersigned have from principle disapproved a series of restrictions upon commerce, according to their estimation, inefficient as respected foreign nations and injurious, chiefly, to ourselves. Success, in the system, had become identified with the pride, the character, and the hope of our cabinet. As is natural with men, who have a great stake depending on the success of a favourite theory, pertinacity seemed to increase as its hopelessness became apparent. As the inefficiency of this system could not be admitted by its advocates, without ensuring its abandonment, all success was, carefully attributed to the influence of opposition.

To this cause the people were taught to charge its successive failures and not to its intrinsic imbecility. In this state of things the undersigned deemed it proper, to take away all apology for adherence to this oppressive system. They were desirous, at a period so critical in public affairs, as far as was consistent with the independence of opinion, to contribute to the restoration of harmony in the public councils, and concord among the people. And if any advantage could be thus obtained in our foreign relations, the undersigned, being engaged, in no purpose of personal or party advancement, would rejoice, in such an occurrence.

The course of public measures also, at the opening of the session, gave hope that an enlarged and enlightened system of defence, with provision for the security of our maritime rights, was about to be commenced; a purpose, which, wherever found, they deemed it their duty to foster, by giving, to any system of measures, thus comprehensive, as unobstructed a course as was consistent with their general sense of public duty. After a course of policy, thus liberal and conciliatory, it was cause of regret that a communication should have been purchased by an unprecedented expenditure of secret service money; and used, by the chief magistrate, to disseminate suspicion and jealousy; and to excite resentment, among the citizens, by suggesting imputations against a portion of them, as unmerited by their patriotism, as unwarranted by evidence.

It has always been the opinion of the undersigned, that a system of peace was the policy, which most comported with the character, condition and interest of the U. States; that their remoteness from the theatre of contest, in Europe, was their peculiar felicity and that nothing but a necessity, absolutely imperious should induce them to enter as parties into wars, in which every consideration of virtue and policy seems to be forgotten, under the overbearing sway of rapacity and ambition. There is a new era in human affairs. The European world is convulsed. The advantages of our own situation are peculiar.—“Why quit our own to stand upon foreign ground? Why, by interweaving our destiny with that of any part of Europe, entangle our peace and prosperity in the the toils of European ambition, rivalry, interest, humour, or caprice?”

In addition to the many moral and prudential considerations, which should deter thoughtful men from hastening into the perils of such a war, there were some peculiar to the United States, resulting from Washington.

the texture of the government, & the political relation of the people. A form of government, in no small degree experimental, composed of powerful & independent sovereignties associated in relations, some of which are critical as well as novel, should not be hastily precipitated into situations, calculated to put to trial, the strength of the moral bond, by which they are united. Of all states, that of war is most likely to call into activity the passions, which are hostile and dangerous to such a form of government. Time is yet important to our country to settle and mature its recent institutions. Above all it appeared to the undersigned from signs not to be mistaken, that if we entered upon this war, we did it as a divided people; not only from a sense of the inadequacy of our means to success, but from moral and political objections of great weight and very general influence.

It appears to the undersigned, that the wrongs of which the United States have to complain, although in some aspects, very grievous to our interests, and, in many, humiliating to our pride, were yet of a nature, which, in the present state of the world, either would not justify war, or which war would not remedy. Thus for instance, the hovering of British vessels upon our coasts, and the occasional insults to our ports, imperiously demanded such a systematic application of harbor and sea coast defence, as would repel such aggressions, but, in no light, can they be considered as making a resort to war, at the present time, on the part of the United States either necessary or expedient.—So also, with respect to the Indian war, of the origin of which, but very imperfect information has as yet been given to the public. Without any express act of Congress, an expedition was, last year, set on foot, and prosecuted into Indian territory, which had been relinquished by treaty, on the part of the United States.—And now we are told about the agency of British traders, as to Indian hostilities. It deserves consideration, whether there has been such provident attention, as would have been proper to remove any cause of complaint, either real imaginary, which the Indians might alledge, and to secure their friendship. With all the sympathy and anxiety excited by the state of that frontier, important as it may be, to apply adequate means of protection against the Indians, how is its safety ensured by a declaration of war, which adds the British to the number of enemies?

As “a decent respect to the opinions of mankind” has not induced the two houses of congress to concur in declaring the reasons, or motives, for their enacting a declaration of war, the undersigned and the public are left to search elsewhere, for causes either real, or ostensible. If we are to consider the president of the United States, and the committee of the house of representatives, on foreign relations, as speaking on this solemn occasion, for congress, the United States have three principal topics of complaint against G. B. Impressments; blockade, & orders in council.

Concerning the subject of impressment, the undersigned sympathize with our unfortunate seamen, the victims of this abuse of power, and participate in the national sensibility, on their account. They do not conceal from themselves, both its importance and its difficulty; and they are well aware how stubborn is the will and how blind the vision of powerful nations, when great interests grow into controversy.

But before a resort to war for such interests, a moral nation will consider what is just, and a wise nation what is expedient. If the exercise of any right to the full extent of its abstract nature, be inconsistent with the safety of another nation, morality seems to require that, in practice, its exercise should, in this respect, be modified. If it be proposed to vindicate any right by war, wisdom demands that it should be of a nature, by war to be obtained. The interests connected with the subject of impressment are unquestionably great to both nations; and in the full extent of abstract right as asserted by each, perhaps irreconcilable.

The government of the United States asserts the broad principle that the flag of their merchant vessels shall protect the mariners. This privilege is claimed, although every person on board, except the captain, may be an alien.

The British government asserts that the allegiance of their subjects is inalienable, in time of war, and that their seamen, found on the sea, the common highway of nations shall not be protected by the flag of private merchant vessels.

private merchant vessels.

The undersigned deem it unnecessary here to discuss the question of the American claim, for the immunity of their flag. But they cannot refrain from viewing it as a principle, of a nature, very broad and comprehensive to the abuse of which the temptations are strong & numerous. And they do maintain that, before the calamities of war, in vindication of such a principle be incurred, all the means of negotiation should be exhausted and that also every practicable attempt should be made to regulate the exercise of the right; so that the acknowledged injury, resulting to other nations, should be checked, if not prevented. They are clearly of opinion that the peace of this happy and rising community should not be abandoned, for the sake of affording facilities to cover French property; or to employ British seamen.

The claim of Great Britain to the services of her seamen is neither novel nor peculiar. The doctrine of allegiance for which she contends is common to all the governments of Europe. France, as well as England, has maintained it for centuries. Both nations claim, in time of war, the services of their subjects. Both by decrees forbid their entering into foreign employ. Both recall them by proclamation.

No man can doubt that, in the present state of the French marine, if American merchant vessels were met at sea, having French seamen on board, France would take them. Will any man believe that the United States would go to war against France, on this account?

For very obvious reasons, this principle occasions little collision with France, or with any other nation, except England. With the English nation, the people of the United States are closely assimilated, in blood, language, intercourse, habits, dress manners and character. When Britain is at war and the United States neutral, the merchant service of the United States holds out to British seamen, temptations almost irresistible;—high wages and peaceful employ; instead of low wages and war service,—safety, in lieu of hazard;—entire independence in the place of qualified servitude.

That England whose situation is insular who is engaged in a war apparently for existence, whose seamen are bulwark, should look upon the effect of our principle upon her safety with jealousy is inevitable; and that she will not hazard the practical consequences of its unregulated exercise is certain. The question, therefore, presented, directly, for the decision of the thoughtful and virtuous mind, in this country, is—whether war, for such an abstract right be justifiable before attempting to guard against its injurious tendency by legislative regulation, in failure of treaty.

A dubious right should be advanced with hesitation. An extreme right should be asserted with discretion. Moral duty, requires that a nation, before it appeals to arms, should have been not only true to itself, but that it should have failed in no duty to others. If the exercise of a right, in an unregulated manner, be ineffect a standing invitation to the subjects of a foreign power to become deserters and traitors, is it no injury to that power?

Certainly moral obligation demands that the right of flag, like all other human rights should be so used, as that, while it protects what is our own, it should not injure what is another's. In a practical view, and so long as the right of flag is restrained, by no regard to the undeniable interests of others, a war, on account of impressments, is only a war for the right of employing British seamen on board American merchant vessels.

The claim of Great Britain pretends to to no further extent than to take British seamen from private merchant vessels. In the exercise of this claim, her officers take American seamen, and foreign seamen, in the American service; and although she disclaims such abuses, and proffers redress, when known, yet undoubtedly grievous injuries have resulted to the seamen of the United States. But the question is, can war be proper for such cause before all hope of reasonable accommodation has failed? Even after the extinguishment of such hope, can it be proper until our own practice be so regulated as to remove, in such foreign nation, any reasonable apprehension of injury?

The undersigned are clearly of opinion that the employment of British seamen, in the merchants service of the United States, is as little reconcilable with the permanent as the present interest of the U.