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Vol. 13. RALEIGH, (N. C.) THURSDAY, MARCH 31, 1808. No. 626.

A LETTER

FROM TIMOTHY PICKERING,

A Senator of the United States, from the state of Massachusetts, exhibiting to his constituents a view of the eminent danger of an unnecessary and ruinous war:

ADDRESSED TO JAMES SULLIVAN,

Governor of the said state.

CITY OF WASHINGTON,
FEB. 16, 1808.

SIR,

In the even current of ordinary times, an address from a senator in congress to his constituents might be dispensed with. In such times, the proceedings of the executive and legislature of the United States, exhibiting in their *public acts*, might be sufficient. But the present singular condition of our country, when its most interesting concerns, wrapt up in mystery, excite universal alarm, requires me to be no longer silent....Perhaps I am liable to censure at such a crisis, for not sooner presenting to you and them, such a view of our national affairs as my official situation has placed in my power. I now address it to you, sir, as the proper organ of communication to the legislature

The attainment of truth is ever desirable: and I cannot permit myself to doubt that the statement I now make must be acceptable to all who have an agency in directing the affairs, and who are guardians of the interests of *our commonwealth*, which so materially depend on the measures of the *government* of the *nation*. At the same time, I am aware of the jealousy with which, in these unhappy days of party dissentions, my communications may, by some of my constituents, be received. Of this I will not complain: while I earnestly wish the same jealousy to be extended towards all public men. Yet I may claim some share of attention and credit--that share which is due to the man who defies the world to point, in the whole course of a long and public life, at one instance of deception, at a single departure from TRUTH.

The EMBARGO demands the first notice.---- For perhaps no act of the national government has ever produced so much solicitude, or spread such universal alarm. Because all naturally conclude, that a measure pregnant with incalculable mischief to all classes of our fellow citizens, would not have been proposed by the president, and adopted by congress, but for causes deeply affecting the interests and safety of the nation. It must have been under the influence of this opinion that the legislative bodies of some states have expressed their approbation of the embargo, either explicitly, or by implication.

The following were all the papers laid by the president before congress, as the grounds of the embargo.

1. The proclamation of the king of Great-Britain requiring the return of his subjects, the seamen especially, from foreign countries, to aid, in this hour of peculiar danger, in the defence of their own. But it being an acknowledged principle, that every nation has a right to the service of its subjects in time of war, that proclamation could not furnish the slightest ground for an embargo.

2. The extract of a letter from the grand judge Regnier to the French attorney-general for the court of prizes. This contained a partial interpretation of the imperial blockading decree of November 21, 1806. This decree, indeed, in its interpretation, present flagrant violation of our neutral rights, and of the existing treaty between the United States and France: but still, the execution of that decree could not (from the small number of French cruizers) extensively interrupt our trade. These two papers were public.

3. The letter from our minister, Mr. Armstrong to Mr. Champagny the French minister of foreign affairs: and

4. Mr. Champagny's answer. Both these ought, in form and substance, also to have been made public. The latter would have furnished to our nation some idea of the views and expectations of France. But both were withdrawn by the president, to be deposited among other executive secrets: while neither presented any new grounds to justify an embargo.

In the senate these papers were referred to a committee. The committee quickly reported a bill laying an Embargo, agreeably to the President's proposal. This was read a first, a second, and a third time, and passed; and all in the short compass of about four hours! A little time was repeatedly asked, to obtain further information, and to consider a measure of such moment, of such universal concern: but the requests were denied. We were hurried into the passage of the bill, as if there was danger of its being rejected, if we were allowed time to obtain further information, and deliberately consider the subject. For to that time our vessels were freely sailing on foreign voyages; and in a national point of view, the departure of half a dozen or a dozen more, while we were enquiring into the necessity or expediency of the Embargo, was of little moment. Or if the danger to our vessels, seamen and merchandise had been so extreme as not to admit of one day's delay, ought not that extreme danger to have been exhibited to congress? The Constitution which requires the President "to give to Congress information of the state of the union," certainly meant, not *partial*, but *complete* information on the subject of a communication, so far as he possessed it. And when it enjoins him "to recommend to their consideration such measures as he should judge necessary and expedient," is as certainly intended that those recommendations should be bottomed on *information communicated*, not on *facts withheld*, and locked up in the executive cabinet. Had the public safety been at stake, or any great public good been presented to our view, but which would be lost by a moment's delay, there would have been some apology for *dispatch*, though none for acting *without due information*. In truth, the measure appeared to me then, as it still does, and as it appears to the public, without a sufficient motive; without a legitimate object. Hence the general enquiry--"For what is the embargo laid?" And I challenge any man not in the secrets of the Executive to tell. I know, Sir, that the president said the papers above mentioned "showed that great and increasing dangers threatened our vessels, our seamen, and our merchandise:" but I also know that they exhibited no *new dangers; none* of which our merchants and seamen had not been well apprised. The British proclamation had many days before been published in the newspapers [the copy laid before us by the president had been cut out of a newspaper;] and so had the substance if not the words of Regnier's letter. Yet they had excited little concern among merchants and seamen, the preservation of whose persons and property was the *professed* object of the President's recommendation of an Embargo. The merchants and seamen could accurately estimate the dangers of continuing their commercial operations; of which dangers, indeed the actual premiums of ensurance were a satisfactory gauge. Those premiums had very little increased: by the British proclamation not a cent: and by the French decree so little as not to stop commercial enterprises. The great numbers of vessels loading or loaded, and prepared for sea; the exertions every where made, on the first rumour of the Embargo, to dispatch them; demonstrate the President's dangers to be *imaginary*---to have been *assumed*. Or if great and real dangers, unknown to commercial men, were impending, or sure to fall, how desirable was it to have had them *officially* declared and published! This would have produced a voluntary embargo, and prevented every complaint. Besides, the dangers clearly defined and understood, the public mind would not have been disquieted with imaginary fears, the more tormenting, because uncertain.

It is true that considerable numbers of vessels were collected in our ports, and many held in suspense. not, however, from any new dangers which *appeared*; but from the mysterious conduct of our affairs, after the attack on the Chesapeake; and from the painful apprehension that the course the President was pursuing would terminate in war. The National Intelligencer (usually considered as the Executive newspaper) gave the alarm; and it was echoed through the United States. War, probable or inevitable war, was the constant theme of the newspapers, and of the conversations, as was reported, of persons supposed to be best informed of Executive designs. Yet amid this din of war, no adequate preparations were seen making to meet it. The order to detach a hundred thousand militia to fight the British navy (for there was no appearance of an enemy in any other shape) was so completely absurd, as to excite, with men of common sense, no other emotion than ridicule. Not the shadow of a reason that could operate on the mind of a man of common understanding can be offered in its justification. The refusal of the British officer to receive the frigate Chesapeake as a *prize*, when tendered by her commander, is a demonstration that the attack upon her was exclusively for the purpose of taking their deserters; and not intended as the commencement of a *war* between the two nations. The President knew that the British had no invading army to land on our [illegible] and the detached militia would be useless, except against land forces. Why then was this order for the Militia given? The nature of the case, and the actual state of things, authorise the inference, that its *immediate*, if not its *only* object, was to increase the public alarm, to aggravate the public resentment against Great-Britain, to excite a war pulse; and in the height of this artificial fever of the public mind, which was to be made known in Great-Britain, to renew the demands on her government; in the poor expectation of extorting, in that state of things, concessions of points which she had always considered as her *rights*, and which at all times and under all circumstances, she had uniformly refused to relinquish. The result of the subsequent negociation at London has shown how utterly unfounded was the President's expectation, how perfectly useless all this bluster of war. While no well informed man doubted that the British Government would make suitable reparation for the attack on the Chesapeake. The President himself, in his proclamation, had placed the affair on that footing. A rupture between the two nations said he, "is equally opposed to the interests of both, as it is to assurances of the most friendly dispositions on the part of the British Government, in the midst of which this outrage was committed. In this light the subject cannot but present itself to that Government, and strengthen the motives to an honorable reparation for the wrong which has been done." And it is now well known that such reparation might have been promptly obtained in London had the President's instructions to Mr. Monroe been compatible with such an adjustment. He was required not to negociate on this single transient act (which when once adjusted was forever settled) but in connexion with another claim of long standing, and, to say the least, of doubtful right;---to wit, the exemption from impressment of *British* seamen found on board American *merchant* vessels. To remedy the evil arising from its exercise, by which our own citizens were sometimes impressed, the attention of our government, under every administration, had been earnestly engaged: but no practicable plan has yet been contrived, while no man who regards the truth, will question the disposition of the British government to adopt any arrangement that will secure to Great-Britain the services of *her own subjects*. And now, when the unexampled situation of that country (left alone to maintain the conflict with France, and her numerous dependent states --left alone to withstand the power which menaces the liberties of the world) rendered the aid of all her subjects more than ever needful; there was no reasonable ground to expect that she would yield the right to take them when found on board the merchant vessels of any nation. Thus to insist on her yielding this point, and inseparably to connect it with the affair of the Chesapeake, was tantamount to a determination not to negociate at all.

I write, sir, with freedom; for the times are too perilous to allow those who are placed in high and responsible situations to be silent or reserved. The peace and safety of our country are suspended on a thread. The course we have seen pursued leads on to war ---to a war with Great Britain...a war absolutely without necessity...a war which whether disastrous or successful, must bring misery and ruin to the United States: *misery* by the destruction of our navigation and commerce (perhaps also of our fairest seaport towns and cities) the loss of markets for our produce, the want of foreign goods and manufactures, and the other evils incident to a foreign war: and *ruin*, by the loss of our liberty and independence. For if with the aid of our arms Great Britain were subdued, from that moment (though flattered perhaps with the name of *allies*) we should become the *provinces* of *France*. This is a result so obvious, that I must crave your pardon for noticing it. Some advocates of executive measures admit it. They acknowledge that the navy of Britain is our shield against the overwhelming power of France. Why then do they persist in a cause of conduct tending to a rupture with Great Britain? Will it be believed that it is principally, or solely, to procure inviolability to the *merchant flag* of the United States? In other words, to protect all seamen, *British subjects*, as well as our own citizens, on board merchant vessels? It is a fact, that this has been *made* the greatest obstacle to an amicable settlement with Great Britain. Yet, (I repeat) it is perfectly well known that she desires to obtain *only her own subjects*; and that American citizens impressed by mistake, are delivered up on duly authenticated [illegible]ises from the impossibility [illegible]ays distinguishing the persons of two nations who a few years since were one people, who exhibit the same manner, speak the same language, & possess similar features. But seeing that we seldom hear complaints in the great *navigating states*, how happens there to be such extreme sympathy for American seamen at *Washington*? Especially in gentlemen from the interior states, which have no seamen, or from those Atlantic states, whose seamen, or from those Atlantic states, whose native seamen bear a very small proportion to those of New England? In fact, the causes of complaint are much fewer than are pretended. They rarely occur in the states whose seamen are chiefly natives. The first merchant in the United States, in answering my late enquiry about British impressments, says "since the Chesapeake affair we have had no cause of complaint. I cannot find one single instance where they have taken one man out of a merchant vessel. I have had more than twenty vessels arrived in that time, without one instance of a man being taken by *them*. Three *Swedes* were taken out by a *French frigate*. I have made all enquiry of all the masters that have arrived in this vicinity, and cannot find any complaints against the British cruisers."

Can gentlemen of known *hostility* to foreign commerce *in our own vessels*...who are even willing to *annihilate* (and such there are)--can these gentlemen plead the cause of our *seamen* because they really wish to *protect* them? Can those desire to *protect* our seamen, who, by laying an unnecessary embargo, expose them by thousands to *starve* or *beg*? One gentleman has said (and I believe he does not stand alone) that sooner than admit the principle that Great Britain had a right to take *her own subjects* from *our merchant vessels*, he would abandon commerce altogether! To what will every man in New England and of the other navigating states, ascribe such a sentiment? A sentiment which, to prevent the temporary loss of five men, by impress, would reduce fifty thousand to beggary! But for the embargo, thousands depending on the ordinary operations of commerce, would now be employed. Even under the restraints of the orders of the British government retaliating the French imperial decree, very large portions of the world remain open to the commerce of the United States. We may yet pursue our trade with the British dominions, in every part of the globe....with Africa, with China, and with the colonies of France, Spain and Holland. And let me ask, whether in the midst of a profound peace, when the powers of Europe possessing colonies, would, as formerly, confine the trade with them to their own bottoms, or admit us as foreigners only under great limitations we could enjoy a commerce much more extensive than is practicable at this moment, if the embargo were not in the way? Why then should it be continued? Why rather was it ever laid? Can those be legitimate reasons for the embargo which are concealed from congress, at the moment when they are required to impose it? Are the reasons to be found in the dispatches from Paris? These have been moved for; and the motion was quashed by the advocates for the embargo---Why are these dispatches withheld by the executive? Why when all classes of citizens anxiously enquire "For what is the embargo laid?" is a satisfactory answer denied? Why is not *congress* made acquainted with the actual situation of the United States in relation to France? Why, in this dangerous crisis, are Mr. Armstrong's letters to the secretary of state absolutely withheld, so that a line of them cannot be seen? Did they contain no information of the demands and intentions of the French emperor? Did the *Revenge* sail from England to France, & there wait three or four weeks for dispatches of no importance? If so, why, regardless of public solicitude, are their contents so carefully concealed? If really unimportant, what harm can arise from telling congress and the nation, *officially*, that they contain nothing of moment to the safety, the liberty, the honor, or the interests of the U. States? On the contrary, are they so closely locked up because they will not bear the light? Would their disclosure rouse the spirit of the people, still slumbering in blind confidence in the executive? Has the French emperor declared he will have no neutrals? Has he required that *our ports*, like those of his vassal states in Europe, *be shut against British commerce?* Is the embargo a *substitute*, a *milder form* of compliance with that harsh demand, which is exhibited in its naked and insulting aspect, the American spirit might yet resent? Are we still to be kept profoundly ignorant of the declarations and avowed designs of the French emperor, although these may strike at our liberty and independence? And, in the mean-