RALEIGH REGISTER,

AND

North-Carolina State Gazette.

Ours are the plans of fair delightful peace,
Unwarp'd by party rage, to live like Brothers.

VOL. IX. THURSDAY. NOVEMBER 5, 1807 No. 484

OPINION OF THE COURT

On the motion

To arrest the Evidence

in

Burr's Trial.

Delivered August 31, 1807.

CONCLUDED.

This opinion does not touch the case of a person who advises or procures an assemblage, and does nothing further. The advising certainly, and perhaps the procuring, is more in the nature of a conspiracy to levy war, than of the actual levying of war. According to the opinion, it is not enough to be leagued in the conspiracy, and that war be levied, but it is also necessary to perform a part; that part is the act of levying war. This part, it is true, may be minute, it may not be the actual appearance in arms; and it may be remote from the scene of action, that is from the place where the army is assembled; but it must be a part, and that part must be performed by a person who is leagued in the conspiracy. This part, however minute or remote, constitutes the overt act, on which alone the person who performs it can be convicted.

The opinion does not declare that the person who has performed this remote and minute part, may be indicted for a part which was in truth performed by others, and convicted on their overt acts. It amounts to this and nothing more, that when war is actually levied, not only those who bear arms, but those also who are leagued in the conspiracy, and who perform the various distinct parts which are necessary for the prosecution of war, do in the sense of the constitution levy war. It may possibly be the opinion of the supreme court, that those who procure a treason, and do nothing further, are guilty under the constitution; I only say that opinion has not yet been given; still less has it been indicated that he who advises shall be indicted as having performed the fact.

It is then the opinion of the court that this indictment can be supported only by testimony which proves the accused to have been actually or constructively present when the assemblage took place on Blannerhassett's island, or by the admission of the doctrine that he who procures an act may be indicted as having performed that act.

It is further the opinion of the court, that there is no testimony whatever which tends to prove that the accused was actually or constructively present when that assemblage did take place. Indeed the contrary is most apparent. With respect to admitting proof of procurement to establish a charge of actual presence, the court is of opinion that if this be admissible in England on an indictment for levying war, which is far from being conceded, it is admissible only by virtue of the operation of the common law upon the statute, and therefore is not admissible in this country unless by virtue of a similar operation; a point far from being established, but on which, for the present, no opinion is given. If, however, this point be established, still the procurement must be proved in the same manner and by the same kind of testimony which would be required to prove actual presence.

The second point in this division of the subject, is the necessity of adducing the record of the previous conviction of some one person who committed the fact alledged to be treasonable.

This point presupposes the treason of the accused, if any has been committed, to be accessorial in its nature. Its being of this description, according to the British authorities, depends on the presence or absence of the accused at the time the fact was committed. The doctrine on this subject is well understood, has been most copiously explained, and need not be repeated. That there is no evidence of his actual or legal presence, is a point already discussed and decided. It is then apparent that, but for the exception to the general principle which is made in cases of treason, those who assembled at Blannerhassett's island, if that assemblage was such as to constitute the crime, would be principals, & those who might really have caused that assemblage, altho' in truth the chief traitors, would in law be accessaries.

It is a settled principle in the law that the accessary cannot be guilty of a greater offence than his principal. The maxim is, accessorius sequitur naturam sui principalis; the accessary follows the nature of his principal. Hence results the necessity of establishing the guilt of the principal before the accessary can be tried. For the degree of guilt which is incurred by counselling or commanding the commission of a crime, depends upon the actual commission of that crime. No man is an accessary to murder unless the fact has been committed.

The fact can only be established in a prosecution against the person by whom a crime has been perpetrated. The law supposes a man more capable of defending his own conduct than any other person, and will not tolerate that the guilt of A shall be established in a prosecution against B. Consequently, if the guilt of B depends on the guilt of A, A must be convicted before B can be can be tried. It would exhibit monstrous deformity, indeed, in our system, if B might be executed for being accessary to a murder committed by A, and A should afterwards, upon a full trial, be acquitted of the fact. For this obvious reason, altho' the punishment of a principal and accessary was originally the same, and although in many instances it is still the same, the accessary could in no case be tried before the conviction of his principal, nor can he yet be tried previous to such conviction, unless he require it, or unless a special provision to that effect be made by statute.

If then this was a felony, the prisoner at the bar could not be tried until the crime was established by the conviction of the person by whom it was actually perpetrated.

Is the law otherwise in this case, because in treason all are principals?

Let this question be answered by reason and by authority.

Why is it that in felonies, however atrocious, the trial of the accessary can never precede the conviction of the principal? Not because the one is denominated the principal and the other the accessary, for that would be ground on which a great law principle could never stand. Not because there was in fact a difference in the degree of moral guilt, for in the case of murder committed by a hardy villain for a bribe, the person plotting the murder and giving the bribe, is, perhaps, of the two the blacker criminal and, were it otherwise, this would furnish no argument for precedence in trial.

What then is the reason?

It has been already given. The legal guilt of the accessary depends on the guilt of the principal; & the guilt of the principal can only be established in a prosecution against himself.

Does not this reason apply in full force to a case of treason?

The legal guilt of the person who planned the assemblage on Blannerhassett's island depends, not simply on the criminality of the previous conspiracy, but on the criminality of that assemblage. If those who perpetrated the fact be not traitors, he who advised the fact cannot be a traitor. His guilt then, in contemplation of law, depends on theirs, & their guilt can only be established in a prosecution against themselves. Whether the adviser of this assemblage be punishable with death as a principal or as an accessary, his liability to punishment depends on the degree of guilt attached to an act which has been perpetrated by other and which, if it be a criminal act, renders them guilty also. His guilt therefore depends on theirs, & their guilt cannot be legally established in a prosecution against him.

The whole reason of the law then relative to the principal and accessary, so far as respects the order of the trial, seems to apply in full force to a case of treason committed by one body of men in conspiracy with others who are absent.

If from reason we pass to authority, we find it laid down by Hale, Foster and East, in the most explicit terms, that the conviction of some one who has committed the treason must precede the trial of him who has advised or procured it. This position is also maintained by Leach, in his notes on Hawkins, & is not, so far as the court has discovered, any where contradicted.

These authorities have been read and commented on at such length, that it cannot be necessary for the court to bring them again into view. It is the less necessary because it is not understood that the law is controverted by the counsel for the U. States.

It is, however, contended, that the prisoner has waved his right to demand the conviction of some one person who was present at the fact, by pleading to his indictment.

Had this indictment even charged the prisoner according to the truth of the case, the court would feel some difficulty in deciding that he had by implication waved his right to demand a species of testimony essential to his conviction. The court is not prepared to say that the act which is to operate against his rights, did not require that it should be performed with a full knowledge of its operation. It would seem consonant to the usual course of proceeding in other respects in criminal cases, that the prisoner should be informed that he had a right to refuse to be tried until some person who committed the act should be convicted, and that he ought not to be considered as waving the right to demand the record of conviction, unless with the full knowledge of that right he consented to be tried. The court, however, does not decide what the law would be in such a case. It is unnecessary to decide it, because pleading to an indictment in which a man is charged as having committed an act, cannot be construed to wave a right which he would have possessed, had he been charged with having advised the act. No person indicted as a principal can be expected to say I am not a principal, I am an accessary; I did not commit, I only advised the act.

The authority of the English cases subject depends in a great measure on the adoption of the common law doctrine of accessorial treasons. If that doctrine be excluded, this branch of it may not be directly applicable to treasons committed within the U. States. If the crime of advising or procuring a levying of war be within the constitutional definition of treason, then he who advises or procures it must be indicted on the very act, and the question whether the treasonableness of the act may be decided in the first instance in the trial of him who procured it, or must be decided in the trial of one who committed it, will depend upon the reason, as it respects the law of evidence, which produced the British decisions with regard to the trial of principal and accessary, rather than on the positive authority of those decisions.

This question is not essential in the present case, because if the crime be within the constitutional definition, it is an overt act of levying war, and to produce a conviction, ought to have been charged in the indictment.

The law of the case being thus far settled, what ought to be the decision of the court on the present motion? Ought the court to set & hear testimony which cannot affect the prisoner, or ought the court to arrest that testimony? On this question much has been said—much that may perhaps be ascribed to a misconception of the point really under consideration. The motion has been treated as a motion confessedly made to stop relevant testimony, and in the course of the argument, it has been repeatedly stated by those who oppose the motion, that irrelevant testimony may & ought to be stopped. That this statement is perfectly correct, is one of those fundamental principles in judicial proceedings which is acknowledged by all and is founded in the absolute necessity of the thing. No person will contend that in a civil or criminal case, either party is at liberty to introduce what testimony he pleases, legal or illegal, and to consume the whole term in details of facts unconnected with the particular case.—Some tribunal then must decide on the admissibility of testimony. The parties cannot constitute this tribunal, for they do not agree. The jury cannot constitute it, for the question is whether they shall hear the testimony or not. Who then but the court can constitute it? It is of necessity the peculiar province of the court to judge of the admissibility of testimony. If the court admit improper, or reject proper testimony, it is an error of judgment, but it is an error committed in the direct exercise of their judicial functions.

The present indictment charges the prisoner with levying war against the U. States, and alledges an overt act of levying war. That overt act must be proved, according to the mandates of the constitution and of the act of congress, by two witnesses. It is not proved by a single witness. The presence of the accused has been stated to be an essential component part of the overt act in this indictment, unless the common law principle respecting accessaries should render it unnecessary; and there is not only no witness who has proved his actual or legal presence, but the fact of his absence is not controverted. The counsel for the prosecution offer to give in evidence subsequent transactions, at a different place, and in a different State, in order to prove what? The overt act laid in the indictment? That the prisoner was one of those who assembled at Blannerhassett's island? No; that is not alledged. It is well known that such testimony is not competent to establish such a fact. The constitution and law require that the fact should be established by two witnesses, not by the establishment of other facts from which the jury might reason to this fact. The testimony then is not relevant. If it can be introduced, it is only in the character of corroborative or confirmatory testimony, after the overt act has been proved by two witnesses, in such manner that the question of fact ought to be left with the jury. The conclusion that in this state of things no testimony can be admissible, is so inevitable, that the counsel for the U. States could not resist it. I do not understand them to deny, that if the overt act be not proved by two witnesses, so as to be submitted to the jury, that all other testimony must be irrelevant, because no other testimony can prove the act. Now an assemblage on Blannerhassett's island is proved by the requisite number of witnesses, and the court might submit it to the jury, whether that assemblage amounted to a levying of war, but the presence of the accused at that assemblage being no where alledged except in the indictment, the overt act is not proved by a single witness, and of consequence all other testimony must be irrelevant.

The only difference between this motion as made, and the motion in the form which the counsel for the U. S. would admit to be regular, is this. It is now general for the rejection of all testimony. It might be particular with respect to each witness as adduced. But can this be wished, or can it be deemed necessary? If enough is proved to show that the indictment cannot be supported, and that no testimony, unless it be of that description which the attorney for the U. S. declares himself not to possess, can be relevant, why should a question be taken on each witness?

The opinion of the court on the order of testimony has frequently been adverted to as deciding the question against the motion.

If a contradiction between the two opinions does exist, the court cannot perceive it. It was said that levying war is an act compounded of law & fact, of which the jury aided by the court must judge. To that declaration the court still adheres.

It was said that if the overt act was not proved by two witnesses, no testimony, in its nature corroborative or confirmatory, was admissible or could be relevant.

From that declaration there is certainly no departure. It has been asked, in allusion to the present case, if a general commanding an army should detach troops for a distant service, would the men composing that detachment be traitors & would the commander in chief escape punishment?

Let the opinion which has been given answer this question. Appearing at the head of an army would, according to this opinion, be an overt act of levying war; detaching a military corps from it for military purposes, might also be an overt act of levying war. It is not pretended that he would not be punishable for these acts, it is only said that he may be tried and convicted on his own acts in the State where those acts were committed, not on the acts of others in the State where those others acted.

Much has been said in the course of the argument on points on which the court feels no inclination to comment particularly, but which may, perhaps not improperly, receive some notice.

That this court dares not usurp power is most true.

That this court dares not shrink from its duty is not less true.

No man is desirous of placing himself in a disagreeable situation. No man is desirous of becoming the peculiar subject of calumny. No man, might he let the bitter cup pass from him without self-reproach, would drain it to the bottom. But if he has no choice in the case; if there is no alternative presented to him but a dereliction of duty on the opprobrium of those who are denominated the world, he merits the contempt as well as the indignation of his country who can hesitate which to embrace.

That gentlemen, in a case the utmost interesting, in the zeal with which they advocate particular opinions, and under the conviction in some measure produced by that zeal, should on each side press their arguments too far, should be impatient at any deliberation in the court, and should suspect or fear the operation of motives to which alone they can ascribe that deliberation, is perhaps a frailty incident to human nature; but if any conduct on the part of the court could warrant a sentiment that they would deviate to the one side or the other from the line prescribed by duty and by law, that conduct would be viewed by the judges themselves with an eye of extreme severity, and would long be recollected with deep and serious regret.

The arguments on both sides have been intently and deliberately considered. Those which could not be noticed, since to notice every argument and authority would swell this opinion to a volume, have not been disregarded. The result of the whole is a conviction as complete as the mind of the court is capable of receiving on a complex subject, that the motion must prevail.

No testimony relative to the conduct or declarations of the prisoner elsewhere & subsequent to the transaction on Blannerhassett's island, can be admitted, because such testimony, being in its nature merely corroborative, and incompetent to prove the overt act in itself, is irrelevant, until there be proof of the overt act by two witnesses.

This opinion does not comprehend the proof by two witnesses that the meeting on Blannerhassett's island was procured by the prisoner. On that point the court, for the present, withholds its opinion, for reasons which have been already assigned; and as it is understood from the statements made on the part of the prosecution, that no such testimony exists. If there be such, let it be offered and the court will decide upon it.

The jury have now heard the opinion of the court on the law of the case. They will apply that law to the facts, and will find a verdict of guilty or not guilty as their own consciences may direct.