

CONGRESS.

House of Representatives.

January 27.

In committee of the whole on Mr. Madison's resolutions.

Mr. AMES spoke as follows:

The question lies within this compass, Is there any measure proper to be adopted by Congress, which will have the effect to put our trade and navigation on a better footing? If there is, it is our undoubted right to adopt it; if by right is understood the power of self-government which every independent nation possesses, and our own as completely as any other. It is our duty also, for we are the depositories and the guardians of the interests of our constituents, which on every consideration ought to be dear to us. I make no doubt they are so, and that there is a disposition sufficiently ardent existing in this body to co-operate in any measures for the advancement of the common good. Indeed so far as I can judge from any knowledge I have of human nature or of the prevailing spirit of public transactions, that sort of patriotism, which makes us wish the general prosperity when our private interest does not happen to stand in the way, is no uncommon sentiment. In truth, it is very like self-love and not less much prevalent. There is little occasion to excite and enflame it. It is like self-love, more apt to want intelligence than zeal. The danger is always that it will rush blindly into embarrassments, which a prudent spirit of enquiry might have prevented, but from which it will scarcely find means to extricate us. While therefore, the right, the duty, and the inclination to advance the trade and navigation of the United States, are acknowledged and felt by us all—the choice of the proper means to that end, is a matter requiring the most circumspect enquiry, and the most dispassionate judgment.

After a debate has continued a long time, the subject very frequently becomes tiresome before it is exhausted. Arguments, however solid, urged by different speakers can scarcely fail to render the discussion both complex and diffusive—without pretending to give to my arguments any other merit, I shall aim at simplicity.

We hear it declared, that the design of the resolutions is to place our trade and navigation on a better footing. By a better footing, we are to understand a more profitable one. Profit is a plain word that cannot be misrepresented.—We have, to speak in round numbers, twenty millions dollars of exports annually. To have the trade of export on a good footing, means nothing more than to sell them dear—and consequently the trade of import on a good footing, is to buy cheap. To put them both on a better footing, is to sell dearer and to buy cheaper than we do at present. If the effect of the resolutions will be to cause our exports to be sold cheaper, and our imports to be bought dearer, our trade will suffer an injury.

It is hard to compute how great the injury would prove: for the first loss of value in the buying dear, and selling cheap, is only the symptom and beginning of the evil, but by no means the measure of it.—It will withdraw a great part of the nourishment that now supplies the wonderful growth of our industry and opulence. The difference may not amount to a great proportion of the price of the articles, but it may reach the greater part of the profit of the producer.—It may have effects in this way which will be of the worst kind, by discouraging the products of our land and industry. It is to this test I propose to bring the resolutions on the table, and if it shall clearly appear that they tend to cause our exports to be sold cheaper, and our imports to be bought dearer, they cannot escape condemnation. Whatever specious shew of advantage may be given them, they deserve to be called aggravations of any real or supposed evils in our commercial system, and not remedies.

I have framed this statement of the question so as to comprehend the whole subject of debate, and at the same time, I confess it was my design to exclude from consideration, a number of topics which appear to me totally irrelevant to it.

The best answer to many assertions we have heard, is to admit them without proof. We are exhorted to assert our natural rights, to put trade on a respect-

able footing, to dictate terms of trade to other nations, to engage in a contest of self-denial, and by that, and by shifting our commerce from one country to another, to make our enemies feel the extent of our power. This language, as it respects the proper subject of discussion, means nothing, or what is worse. If our trade is already on a profitable footing, it is on a respectable one. Unless war be our object, it is useless to enquire, what are the dispositions of any government, with whose subjects our merchants deal to the best advantage? While they will smoke our tobacco, and eat our provisions, it is very immaterial, both to the consumer and the producer, what are the politics of the two countries, excepting so far as their quarrels may distract the benefits of their mutual intercourse.

So far therefore as commerce is concerned, the enquiry is, have we a good market?

The good or bad state of our actual market is the question. The actual market is every where more or less a restricted one, and the natural order of things is displaced by the artificial.—Most nations for reasons of which they alone are the rightful judges, have regulated and restricted their intercourse, according to their views of safety and profit. We claim for ourselves the same right; as the acts in our statute book, and the resolutions on the table evince, without holding ourselves accountable to any other nation whatever. The right which we properly claim, and which we properly exercise when we do it prudently and usefully for our nation, is as well established, and has been longer in use in the countries of which we complain, than in our own. If their right is as good as that of Congress, to regulate and restrict, why do we talk of a strenuous exertion of our force, and by dictating terms to nations, who are fancied to be physically dependent on America, to change the policy of nations? It may be very true, that their policy is very wise and good for themselves, but not as favorable for us as we could make it, if we could legislate for both sides of the Atlantic.

The extravagant despotism of this language accords very ill with our power to give it effect, or with the affectation of zeal for an unlimited freedom of commerce. Such a state of absolute freedom of commerce never did exist, and it is very much to be doubted whether it ever will. Were I invested with the trust to legislate for mankind, it is very probable the first act of my authority would be to throw all the restrictive and prohibitory laws of trade into the fire—the resolutions on the table would not be spared. But if I were to do so, it is probable I should have a quarrel on my hands with every civilized nation. The Dutch would claim the monopoly of the spice trade, for which their ancestors passed their whole lives in warfare. The Spaniards and Portuguese would be no less obstinate. If we calculate what colony monopolies have cost in wealth, in suffering, and in crimes, we shall say they were dearly purchased.—The English would plead for their navigation act, not as a source of gain, but as an essential mean of securing their independence. So many interests would be disturbed, and so many lost, by a violent change from the existing, to an unknown order of things, and the mutual relations of nations, in respect to their power and wealth, would suffer such a shock, that the idea must be allowed to be perfectly Utopian and wild. But for this country to form the project of changing the policy of nations, and to begin the abolition of restrictions by restrictions of its own, is equally ridiculous and inconsistent.

Let every nation, that is really disposed to extend the liberty of commerce, beware of rash and hasty schemes of prohibition. In the affairs of trade, as in most others, we make too many laws. We follow experience too little, and the visions of theorists a great deal too much. Instead of listening to discourses on what the market ought to be, and what the schemes, which always promise much on paper, pretend to make it, let us see what is the actual market for our exports and imports. This will bring vague assertions and sanguine opinions to the test of experience. That rage for theory and system, which would entangle even practical truth in the web of the brain, is the poison of public discussion.—One fact is better than two systems.

The terms on which our exports are received in the British market, have been accurately examined by a gentleman from South Carolina (Mr. Wm. Smith) Be-

fore his statement of facts was made to the committee, it was urged, and with no little warmth, that the system of England indicated her inveteracy towards this country, while that of France, springing from disinterested affection, constituted a claim for gratitude and self-denying measures of retribution.

Since that statement, however, that romantic style, which is so ill adapted to the subject, has been changed. We hear it insinuated, that the comparison of the footing of our exports, in the markets of France and England, is of no importance; that it is chiefly our object to see how we may assist and extend our commerce. This evasion of the force of the statement, or rather this indirect admission of its authority, establishes it. It will not be pretended that it has been shaken during the debate.

It has been made appear, beyond contradiction, that the British market for our exports, taken in the aggregate, is a good one, that it is better than the French, and better than any we have, and for many of our products the only one.

The whole amount of our exports to the British dominions in the year ending the 30th September 1790, was nine millions two hundred and forty six thousand six hundred and six dollars.

But it will be more simple and satisfactory to confine the enquiry to the articles following—

Bread-stuff, tobacco, rice, wood, the produce of the fisheries, fish oil, pot and pearl ash, salted meats, indigo, live animals, flaxseed, naval stores, and iron.

The amount of the before mentioned articles exported in that same year, to the British dominions, was 8,457,173 dollars.

Mr. Ames went into a consideration of the footing on which they are received.—He then said, we have heard so much of restriction, of inimical and jealous prohibitions to cramp our trade, it is natural to scrutinize the British system with the expectation of finding little besides the effects of her selfish and angry policy.

Yet of the great sum of nearly eight millions and an half, the amount of the products before mentioned fold in her markets, two articles only are dutied by way of restriction. Bread stuff is dutied so high in the market of Great Britain, as in times of plenty, to exclude it, and this is done from the desire to favor her own farmers. The mover of the resolutions justified the exclusion of our bread stuff from the French West Indies by their permanent regulations, because he said they were bound to prefer their own products to those even of the United States. It would seem that the same apology would do for England, in her home market. But what will do for the vindication of one nation becomes invective against another. The criminal nation however receives our bread stuff in the West-Indies free, and excludes other foreign—so as to give our producers the monopoly of the supply. This is no merit in the judgment of the mover of the resolutions, because it is a fragment of her old colony system. Notwithstanding the nature of the duties on bread stuff in Great Britain, it has been clearly shewn that she is a better customer for that article, in Europe, than her neighbor France. The latter, in ordinary times, is a poor customer for bread stuff, for the same reason that our own country is, because she produces it herself, and therefore France permits it to be imported and the United States do the like.—Great Britain often wants the article, and then she receives it—no country can be expected to buy what it does not want. The bread-stuff fold in the European dominions of Great Britain in the year 1790, amounted to 1,087,840 dollars.

Whale-oil pays the heavy duty of eighteen pounds three shillings sterling per ton; yet spermaceti-oil found a market there to the value of 81,048 dollars.

Thus it appears that, of eight millions and an half fold to Great Britain and her dominions, only the value of one million one hundred and sixty-eight thousand dollars was under duty of a restrictive nature. The bread-stuff is certainly to be considered as within the description—yet to give the argument its full force, what is it—about one-eighth part is restricted.—To proceed with the residue:

	Dollars.
Indigo to the amount of	473,830
Live animals to the W. Indies	62,415
Flax-Seed to Great Britain	219,924
Total	756,169

These articles are received, duty free, which is a good foot to the trade. Yet we find, good as it is, the bulk of our exports is received on even better terms: Flour to the British W. Indies 858,006 Grain - - - - - 273,505 Free—while other foreign flour and grain is prohibited.

Tobacco to G. Britain 2,754,493 Ditto to the W. Indies 22,816 One shilling and three pence sterling, duty—three shillings and six-pence on other foreign tobacco.

In the West-Indies other foreign tobacco is prohibited.

Rice to G. Britain 773,852 7s. 4d. per Cwt. duty; 8s. 10d. on other foreign rice.

To West-Indies - - - 180,087 Other foreign rice prohibited.

Wood to Great Britain - 240,174 Free—higher duties on other foreign.

To West-Indies - - - 382,481 Free—other foreign prohibited.

Pot and pearl-ashes - 747,078 Free—2s. 3d. on other foreign, equal to 10 dollars per ton.

Naval stores to Great Britain 190,670 Higher duties on other foreign.

To West-Indies - - - 6,162 Free—other foreign prohibited.

Iron to Great Britain - 81,512 Free—duties on other foreign

Dollars 6,510,926

Thus it appears, that nearly seven eighths of the exports to the British dominions are received on terms of positive favor. Foreigners, our rivals in the sale of these articles, are either absolutely shut out of their market by prohibitions, or discouraged in their competition with us by higher duties. There is some restriction, it is admitted, but there is, to balance it, a large amount received duty free. The above surplus of six millions and an half, goes to the account of privilege and favor. This is better than she treats any other foreign nation—it is better, indeed, than she treats her own subjects, because they are by this means, deprived of a free and open market—it is better than our footing with any nation, with whom we have treaties. It has been demonstratively shewn, that it is better than the footing on which France receives either the like articles, or the aggregate of our products—the best proof in the world is, that they are not sent to France—the merchants will find out the best market sooner than we shall.

The footing of our exports, under the British system, is better than that of their exports to the United States, under our system. Nay it is better than the freedom of commerce, which is one of the visions for which our solid prosperity is to be hazarded.—For suppose we could batter down her system of prohibitions and restrictions, it would be gaining a loss—one-eighth is restricted, and more than six-eighths has restrictions in its favor. It is as plain as figures can make it, that if a state of freedom for our exports is par, the present system raises them, in point of privilege, above par. To suppose that we can terrify them, by these resolutions, to abolish their restrictions, and at the same time to maintain in our favor their duties, to exclude other foreigners from their market, is too absurd to be refuted.

We have heard that the market of France is the great centre of our interests—we are to look to her, and not to England, for advantages—Being, as the style of theory is, our best customer and best friend, shewing to our trade particular favor and privilege, while England manifests in her system such narrow and selfish views; it is strange to remark such a pointed refutation of assertions and opinions by facts. The amount sent to France herself is very trivial; either our merchants are ignorant of the best markets, or those which they prefer are the best—and if the English markets, in spite of the alleged ill-usage, are still preferred to the French, it is a proof of the superior advantages of the former over the latter. The arguments I have adverted to, oblige those who urge them to make a greater difference in favor of the English than the true state of facts will warrant. Indeed, if they persist in their arguments, they are bound to deny their own conclusions. They are bound to admit this position—If France receives little of such of our products as Great Britain takes on terms, of privilege and favor, because of that favor it allows the value of that favored footing. If France takes little of our articles, because she does not want them, it shews the absurdity of looking to her as the best customer.

It may be said, and truly, that Great Britain regards only her own interest in these arrangements—So much the better. If it is her interest to afford to our commerce more encouragement than France gives, if she does this when she is inveterate against us, as it is alleged, and when we are in-