President's Message

READ IN BOTH HOUSES OF CONGRESS, DECEMBER FOURTH, 1854.

Fellow-citizens of the Senate and of the House of Representatives:

The past has been an eventful year, and [illegible] be hereafter referred to as a marked epoch in the history of the world. While we have been happily preserved from the calamities of war, our domestic prosperity has not been entirely uninterrupted. The crops, in portions of the country, have been nearly cut off. Disease has prevailed to a greater extent than usual, and the scourge of human life, through casualties by sea and land, is without a parallel. But the pestilence has swept by, and restored salubrity invites the absent to their homes, and the return of business to its ordinary channels. If the earth has rewarded the labor of the husbandman less bountifully than in preceding seasons, it has left him with abundance for domestic wants, and a large surplus for exportation. In the present, therefore, as in the past, we find ample grounds for reverent thankfulness to the God of Grace and Providence, for his protecting care and merciful dealings with us as a people.

Although our attention has been arrested by painful interest in passing events, yet our country feels no more than the slight vibrations of the convulsions which have shaken Europe. As individuals, we cannot express sympathy with human suffering nor regret for the causes which produce it. As a nation, we are reminded that whatever interrupts the peace or checks the prosperity of any part of Christendom, tends, more or less, to involve our own. The condition of States is not unlike that of individuals. They are mutually dependent upon each other. A similar relation between the different nations of good will, are essential for the promotion of whatever is desirable in their moral, social, and political condition. Hence it has been my earnest endeavor to maintain peace and friendly intercourse with all nations.

The wise theory of this government, so early adopted and steadily pursued, of avoiding all entangling alliances, has hitherto exempted it from many complications, in which it would otherwise have become involved. Notwithstanding this, our clearly defined and well sustained course of action, and our geographical position so remote from Europe, increasing disposition has been manifested by some of its governments to supervise and, in certain respects to direct our foreign policy. In plans for adjusting the balance of power among themselves, they have assumed to take us into account, and would constrain us to govern our conduct to their views. One or another of the powers of Europe has, from time to time, undertaken to enforce arbitrary regulations, contrary, in many respects, to established principles of international law. That law the United States have, in their foreign intercourse and relations, ever respected and observed, and they cannot recognize as such interpolations therein, as the temporary interests of others may suggest. They do not admit that the sovereigns of one continent, or of a particular community of States, can legislate for all others.

Leaving the trans-atlantic nations to adjust their political system in the way they may think best for the common welfare, the independent powers of the continent may well assert the right to be exempt from all annoying interference on their part. Systematic abstinence from intimate political connection with distant foreign nations, does not conflict with giving the widest range to our foreign commerce. This distinction, so clearly marked in history, seems to have been overlooked or disregarded by some leading foreign states. Our refusal to be brought within and subjected to their peculiar system, has, I fear, created a jealous distrust of our conduct, and induced, on their part, occasional acts of disturbing effect upon our foreign relations.

Our present attitude and past course give assurances which should not be questioned, that our purposes are not aggressive, nor threatening to the safety and welfare of other nations. Our military establishment, in time of peace, is adapted to maintain exterior defences, and to preserve order among the aboriginal tribes within the limits of the Union. Our naval force is intended only for the protection of our citizens abroad, and of commerce diffused, as it is, over all the seas of the globe. The government of the United States being essentially pacific in policy, stands prepared to repel invasion by the voluntary service of a patriotic people, and provides no permanent means of foreign aggression. These considerations should allay all apprehension, that we are disposed to encroach on the rights, or endanger the security of other states.

Such European powers have regarded with disquieting concern, the territorial expansion of the United States. This rapid growth has resulted from the legitimate exercise of sovereign rights, belonging alike to all nations, and by many liberally exercised. Under such circumstances, it could hardly have been expected that those among them, which have, within a comparative recent period, subdued and absorbed ancient kingdoms, planted their standards on every continent, and now possess, or claim the control of, the islands of every ocean as their appropriate domain, would look with unfriendly sentiments upon the acquisitions of this country in every instance honorably obtained, or would feel themselves justified in imputing our advancement to a spirit of aggression, or to a passion for political predominance

Our foreign commerce has reached a magnitude and extent nearly equal to that of the first maritime power of the earth, and exceeding that of any other. Over this great interest, in which not only our merchants, but all classes of citizens, at least indirectly, are concerned, it is the duty of the executive and legislative branches of the government to exercise a careful supervision, and adopt proper measures for its protection. The policy which I have had in view, in regard to this interest, embraces its future as well as its present security.

Long experience has shown that, in general, when the principal powers of Europe are engaged in war, the rights of neutral nations are endangered. This consideration led, in the progress of the war of our independence, to the formation of the celebrated confederacy of armed neutrality, a primary object of which was, to assert the doctrine, that free ships make free goods, except in the case of articles contraband of war: a doctrine, which, from the very commencement of our national being, has been a cherished idea of the statesmen of this country. At one period or another, every maritime power has, by some solemn treaty stipulation, recognized that principle; and it might have been hoped that it would come to be universally received and respected as a rule of international law. But the refusal of one power prevented this, and in the next great war which ensued, that of the French revolution, it failed to be respected among the belligerent states of Europe. Notwithstanding this, the principle has generally admitted to be a sound and salutary one; so much so, that, at the commencement of the existing war in Europe, Great Britain and France announced their purpose to observe it for the present; not, however, as a recognized international right, but as a mere concession for the time being.

The co-operation, however, of these two powerful maritime nations in the interest of neutral rights, appeared to me to afford an occasion, in writing and justifying, on the part of the United States, a renewed effort to make the doctrine in question a principle of international law by means of special conventions between the several Powers of Europe and America. Accordingly, a proposition, embracing not only the rule, that free ships make free goods, except contraband articles, but also the less contested one, that neutral property, other than contraband, though on board enemy's ships, shall be exempt from confiscation, has been submitted by this government to those of Europe and America.

Russia acted promptly in this matter, and a convention was concluded between that country and the United States, providing for the observance of the principles announced, not only as between themselves, but also as between them and all other nations, which shall enter into like stipulations. None of the other powers have as yet taken final action on the subject. I am not aware, however, that any objections to the proposed stipulations has been made; but, on the contrary, they are acknowledged to be essential to the security of neutral commerce; and the only apparent obstacle to their general adoption is in the possibility that it may be encumbered by inadmissible conditions.

The King of the two Sicilies has expressed to our Minister at Naples his readiness to concur in our propositions relative to neutral rights, and to enter into a convention on that subject.

The King of Prussia entirely approves of the project of a treaty to the same effect, submitted to him, but proposes an additional article, providing for the renunciation of privateering. Such an article, for most obvious reasons, is much desired by nations having naval establishments, large in proportion to their foreign commerce. If it were adopted as an international rule, the commerce of a nation having comparatively a small naval force, would be very much at the mercy of its enemy, in case of war with a power of decided naval superiority. The bare statement of the condition in which the United States would be placed, after having surrendered the right to resort to privateers, in the event of war with a belligerent of naval supremacy, will show that this government could never listen to such a proposition. The United States are first maritime power in Europe as [illegible] times as large as that of the United States. [illegible] commerce of the two countries [illegible] nearly equal, and above equally exposed to the depredations of war. It is clear between that people and the United States, it is their interest to [illegible] commerce [illegible] be subject to less injury than ours to retaliate. We could not extricate our country from this unequal condition, with such an enemy, unless we at once departed from our present peaceful policy, and became a great naval power. Nor would this country be bitter situated in war with one of the secondary naval powers. Though the naval disparity would be less, the greater extent and more exposed condition of our wide spread commerce, would give any of them a like advantage over us.

The proposition to enter into engagements to forego resort to privateers, in case this country should be forced into war with a great naval power, is not entitled to more favorable consideration than would be a proposition to agree not to accept the services of volunteers for operations on land. When the honor or the rights of our country require it to assume a hostile attitude, it confidently relies upon the patriotism of its citizens, not ordinarily devoted to the military profession, to augment the army and navy, so as to make them fully adequate to the emergency which calls them into action. The proposal to surrender the right to employ privateers is professedly founded upon the principle, that private property of unoffending non-combatants, though enemies, should be exempt from the ravages of war; but the proposed surrender goes but little way in carrying out that principle, which equally requires that such private property should be seized or molested by national ships of war. Should the leading powers of Europe concur in proposing, as a rule of international law, to exempt private property, upon the ocean, from seizure by public armed cruisers, as well as by privateers, the United States will readily meet them upon that broad ground.

Since the adjournment of Congress, the ratifications of the treaty between the United States and Great Britain, relative to coast fisheries and to reciprocal trade with the British North American provinces, have been exchanged, and some of its anticipated advantages are already enjoyed by us, although the mutual concessions, on which certain acts of legislation not yet fully performed. So soon as it was ratified, Great Britain opened to our commerce the free navigation of the river St. Lawrence, and to our fishermen unmolested access to the shores and bays, from which they had been previously excluded, on the coasts of her North American provinces: in return for which, she asked for the introduction, free of duty, into the ports of the United States, of the fish caught on the same coast by British fishermen. This being the compensation, stipulated in the treaty, for privileges of the highest importance and value to the United States, which were thus voluntarily yielded before it became effective, the request seemed to me to be a reasonable one; but it could not be acceded to, from want of authority to suspend our laws imposing duties upon all foreign fish. In the meantime, the Treasury Department issued a regulation, for admitting the duties paid or secured by bonds on fish caught on the coasts of the British provinces, and brought to our markets by British subjects, after the fishing-grounds had been made fully accessible to the citizens of the United States. I recommend to your favorable consideration the proposition, which will be submitted to you, for authority to refund the duties and cancel the bonds thus received. The provinces of Canada and New Brunswick have also anticipated the full operation of the treaty, by legislative arrangements, respectively, to admit, free of duty, the products of the United States mentioned in the first list of the treaty; and an arrangement, similar to that regarding British fish, has been made for duties now chargeable on the products of those provinces enumerated in the same free list, and introduced into the ports of the United States; a proposition for refunding which will, in my judgment, be as like manner entitled to your favorable consideration.

There is difference of opinion between the United Stated and Great Britain, as to the boundery line of its Territory of Washington adjoining the British possessions on the Pacific. This has already led to difficulties on the part of the citizens and local authorities of the two governments. I recommended that provision be made for a commission, to be joined by one on the of her Britannic Majesty, for the purpose of running and marking the line in controversy. Certain stipulations of the third and fifth articles of the treaty concluded by the United States and Great Britain in 1846 regarding possessory rights of the Hudson's Bay Company, and property of the Puget's Sound Agricultural Company, have given rise to serious disputes, and it is important to all concerned, that some means of settling them amicably should be devised. I have reason to believe, that an arrangement can be made on just terms, for the extinguishment of the rights in question, embracing, also, the right of the Hudson's Bay Company to the navigation of the river Columbia; and I therefore suggest to your consideration, the expediency of making a contingent appropriation for that purpose.

France was the early and efficient ally of the United States in their struggle for independence. From that time to the present, with occasional slight interruptions, cordial relations of friendship have existed between the governments and people of the two countries. The kindly sentiments, cherished alike by both nations, have led to extensive social and commercial intercourse, which, I trust, will not be interrupted or checked by any casual event of an apparently unsatisfactory character. The French Consul at San Francisco was, not long since, arrested by the United States District Court at that place, by its ordinary process, as a witness in favor of another foreign consul, in violation, as the French Government conceives, of his privileges under our consular convention with France. There being nothing in the transaction which could imply any disrespect to France or its consulate, an explanation has been made as I hope will be satisfactory. Subsequently, a misunderstanding arose on the subject of the French government having, as it appeared, abruptly excluded the American minister to Spain from passing through France, on his way from Madrid to Paris. But that government has unequivocally disavowed any design to deny the right of transit to the Minister of the United States, and, after explanations to this effect, he has resumed his journey, and actually returned through France to Spain. I regret that the Spanish Congress the correspondence on this subject between our envoy at Paris and the minister of foreign relations of the French government.

The position of our affairs with Spain remains as at the close of your last session. Internal agitation, amounting nearly to the character of political revolution, has recently convulsed that country. The late ministers were violently expelled from power, and men of very different views in relation to its internal affairs have succeeded. Since this change, there has been no propitious opportunity to resume and press on negotiations for the adjustment of serious questions of difficulty between the Spanish government and the United States. There is reason to believe that our minister will find the present government more favorably inclined than the preceding to comply with our just demands, and to make suitable arrangements for restoring harmony and preserving peace between the two countries.

Negotiations are pending with Denmark to discontinue the practice of levying tolls on our vessels and their cargoes passing through the sound. I do not doubt that we can claim exemption therefrom, as a matter of right. It is admitted on all hands that this exaction is sanctioned not by the general principles of the law of nations, but only by special conventions, which most of the commercial nations have entered into with Denmark. The fifth article of our treaty of 1826, with Denmark, provides that there shall not be paid on the vessels of the United States and their cargoes, when passing through the Sound, higher duties than those of the most favored nations. This may be regarded as an implied agreement to submit to the tolls during the continuance of the treaty, and consequently may embarrass the assertion of our right to be released therefrom. There are also other provisions in the treaty which ought to be modified. It was to remain in force ten years, and until one year after either party should give notice to the other of intention to terminate it. I deem it expedient that the contemplated notice should be given to the government of Denmark.

The naval expedition, despatched about two years since for the purpose of establishing relations with Japan, has been ably and skillfully conducted to a successful termination by the officer to whom it was intrusted. A treaty opening certain of the ports of that populous country has been negotiated, and in order to give full effect thereto, it only remains to exchange ratifications, and adopt requisite commercial regulations.

The treaty lately concluded between the United States and Mexico, settled some of our most embarrassing difficulties with that country, but numerous claims upon it for wrongs and injuries to our citizens remained unadjusted, and many new cases have been recently added to the former list of grievances. Our legation has been earnest in its endeavors to obtain from the Mexican government, a favorable consideration of these claims, but hitherto without success. This failure is, probably, in some measure, to be ascribed to the distracted condition of that country. It has been my anxious desire to maintain friendly relations with the Mexican republic, and to cause its rights and territories to be respected, not only by our citizens, but by foreigners who have resorted to the United States for the purpose of organizing hostile expeditions against some of the States of that Republic. The defenceless condition in which its frontiers have been left, has stimulated lawless adventurers to embark in these enterprises, and greatly increased the difficulty of enforcing our obligations of neutrality. Regarding it as my solemn duty to fulfil, efficiently, these obligations, not only towards Mexico, but other foreign nations, I have exerted all the powers with which I am invested to defeat such criminal proceedings, and bring to punishment those who, by taking part therein, violated our laws.

The energy and activity of our civil and military authorities have frustrated the designs of those who meditated expeditions of this character, except in two instances. One of these, composed of foreigners, was at first countenanced and aided by the Mexican government itself, it having been deceived as to their real object — The other, small in number, eluded the vigilance of the magistrates at San Francisco, and succeeded in reaching the Mexican territories; but the effective measures taken by this government compelled the abandonment of the undertaking.

The commission to establish the new line between the United States and Mexico, according to the provisions of the treaty of the 30th of December last, has been organized, and the work is already commenced.

Our treaties with the Argentine Confederation and with the Republics of Uraguay and Paraguay, secure to us the free navigation of the river La Platte, and some of its larger tributaries, but the same success has not attended our endeavors to open the Amazon. The reasons in favor of the free use of that river, I had occasion to present fully in a former message; and, considering the cordial relations which have long existed between this government and Brazil, it may be expected that pending negotiations will, eventually, reach a favorable result.

Convenient means of transit, between the several parts of a country, are not only desirable for the objects of commercial and personal communication, but essential to its existence under one government. Separated as are the Atlantic and Pacific coasts of the United States by the whole breadth of the continent, still the inhabitants of each are closely bound together by community of origin and institutions, and by strong attachment to the Union. Hence its constant and increasing intercourse, and vast interchange of commercial productions, between these remote divisions of the Republic. At the present time, the most practicable and only commodious routes for communication between them are by the way of the Isthmus of Central America. It is the duty of the government to secure these avenues against all danger of interruption.

In relation to Central America, perplexing questions existed between the U. States and Great Britain at the time of the cession of California. These as well as questions which subsequently arose concerning inter-oceanic communication through that region, are now happily terminated. By treaties with Spain, which have been left, has stimulated lawless adventurers to embark in these enterprises, and greatly increased the difficulty of enforcing our obligations of neutrality. Regarding it as my solemn duty to fulfil, efficiently, these obligations, not only towards Mexico, but other foreign nations, I have exerted all the powers with which I am invested to defeat such criminal proceedings, and bring to punishment those who, by taking part therein, violated our laws.

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