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CONGRESS.

House of Representatives.

FRIDAY, *Nov.* 18.

Debate on the bill fixing the SALARIES of certain Officers therein mentioned.

In committee of the whole, Mr. VARNUM in the chair.

The bill was read, as follows:

A BILL

Fixing the Salaries of certain Officers therein mentioned.

BE it enacted, by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America, in Congress assembled, That from and after the end of the present year, the following annual compensations and no other, be, and they are hereby granted to the officers herein enumerated, respectively, that is to say:

To the secretary of state, dollars:
the secretary of the treasury, dollars:
the secretary of war, dollars:
the secretary of the navy, dollars:
the attorney general, dollars:
the comptroller of the treasury, dollars:
the treasurer, dollars:
the auditor of the treasury, dollars:
the commissioner of the revenue, dollars:
the register of the treasury, dollars:
the accountant of the war department, dollars:
the accountant of the navy department, dollars:
the post master general, dollars:
and the assistant post master general, dollars:

Which sums shall be respectively paid quarter yearly, at the treasury of the United States.

Mr. J. Randolph moved to fill the blank in relation to the salary of the Secretary of State with "*five thousand dollars.*"

Mr. Leib moved to fill it with 3,500 dollars. According to the rules of the House, the question was first put upon the highest sum.

Mr. *Sanford* said he was not able to ascertain what the existing salaries given to the officers named in the bill were, and was, therefore, unprepared to vote on the question. He wished that some gentleman would state precisely what these salaries were.

Mr. *J. Randolph* rose to give the gentleman from Kentucky the information he desired. The salaries, under the existing law, were as follows:—the secretary of State 5,000 dollars, the secretary of the Treasury 5,000 dollars, the secretary of war, 4,500 dollars, the secretary of the Navy, 4,500 dollars, the comptroller 3,500 dollars; the Treasurer 3 000 dollars; the Auditor 3,000 dollars; the Register 2,400 dollars; the attorney general 3,000 dollars; the accountants of the War and Navy departments each 2,000 dollars.

These are the salaries, said Mr. R. to which these officers are now entitled, and which they have received from the time of their coming into office; and these are the salaries received by their predecessors when they went out of office. The law under which these salaries are received expires with the present year, and if the law now submitted be not passed the salaries will be as follow: the secretary of State 3,500 dollars; the secretary of the Treasury 3,500; the secretary of war 3,000; the secretary of the Navy 3,000; the comptroller 2,650; the auditor 2,400; the treasurer 2,400; the register 2,000; the attorney general 2,400; the accountants of the War and Navy departments 1,600 dollars each.

Mr. LEIB. The gentlemen from Virginia (Mr. Randolph) has stated that the existing salary of the secretary of State is the same with that received by his predecessor. If the gentlemen means by his predecessor the gentleman who immediately preceded the present secretary, he is correct; but if he means all his predecessors he is incorrect. Under the government, as first organised, the secretary of state received only 3,500 dollars. That office was then filled by a man of the first talents, and the country was also in a critical situation; yet the salary of 3,500 dollars was deemed sufficient. When it was increased in the year 1799, it was contended that articles of consumption were at war prices, and that the seat of government being about to be removed to the city of Washington, it was necessary to make an additional provision. Suppose these were facts then, are they so now? Are the articles of living dearer now than they were before the passage of the act of 1799? They are not dearer in Washington than in Philadelphia; while house rent is dearer there than here. These are reasons why the salaries as they stood at that period should not now be increased. When the act of 1799 was passed it was urged by certain gentlemen now in favor of an increase of salaries, that economy under a republican government was highly necessary, and that there was a large national debt, the discharge of which required the most frugal disbursement of the public monies. Now, when a change has taken place in the administration of the government, and gentlemen possess the power of reducing these salaries, they are in favor of their continuance—Mr. Leib hoped they would regard consistency of character, and recollect that if these salaries were wrong then, they could not be right now. He, therefore, trusted when they fully considered these circumstances they would vote in favor of filling the blank with the smallest sum proposed.

Mr. ALSTON hoped the motion of the gentlemen from Virginia would prevail. If gentlemen really wish to make a saving, they will not turn their attention to the trifling difference between the present salaries and those that existed four or five years back; the difference is so small as not to be noticed in the scale of national expenditure. We know also that the salaries now received have called forth the first talents. If they shall be reduced, we do not know that those given will call forth the best talents. It therefore appears to me, said Mr. A. extremely probable that this small saving, contemplated by some gentlemen, will be attended with a great eventual loss. With regard to the remarks of the gentleman from Pennsylvania (Mr. Leib) on the comparative expences of this place and Philadelphia, I can only judge from my own expences; which were less in Philadelphia than here.

Mr. LEIB said it was true that boarding was dearer in this city than in Philadelphia; but that arose from the cession of Congress being but for part of a year, which obliged those who kept boarding houses to charge enough during a part of the year for them to subsist on during the whole. This was not the case with those whose residence was permanent.

Mr. FINDLEY believed that gentlemen were so far agreed with regard to the salaries of permanent offices, as to unite in opinion that there should be attached to them established salaries. As far as he knew the intention of those who were friendly to the motion made by the gentleman from Virginia, their object was to fill the blanks with the same salaries which had been allowed for five years past. This object, therefore, had received the sanction of five years experience, an experience which in ordinary concerns ought not, in his opinion, to be disregarded. In the course of his experience, under either the federal or state governments, he had not known salaries lowered. Besides, if from time to time changes be made in the salaries of the officers of government, it may be said that we are actuated by a spirit of favoritism to particular men.

His colleague (Mr. Leib) had taken a review of the state of the salaries, and of the comparative expences of living. To the opinion expressed by him the gentleman from North Carolina (Mr. Alston) had replied. He (Mr. F.) agreed with that gentleman. As far as his experience extended, he found no abatement, but an augmentation, of the expences of living; all the changes that had taken place were in favor of higher living and higher salaries. The necessaries of life might be cheaper, so far as they depended upon a foreign demand; but we cannot calculate upon this as a permanent state of things. The late peace of Europe had been of short duration and war had returned. Nor can we derive an argument for reducing the salaries from the existing state of the circulating medium. A few years back there was but one bank in Philadelphia, which had but a small capital; now there are three. A similar increase of those institutions has taken place in different parts of the United States. This is proof of a great increase of capital, and depreciation of money.

But gentlemen, desirous of reducing salaries, should look round to other officers than those named in this bill. For his own part, Mr. Findley said he did not know that he had ever voted for lowering the salary of any officer; and when he desired gentlemen to turn their attention to other officers, it was not that he was in favor of reducing their salaries. But he asked gentlemen to look to the collectors of the ports, some of whom received 5,000 dollars a year, a sum equal to the highest allowed, under this bill, to officers where the responsibility incurred and talents required, were infinitely greater. With regard to the policy of the measure, he would appeal to gentlemen whether it was politic in the government of the United States to narrow the field of choice for the selection of these important officers? For his part, he wished this government might always hold out a temptation to the greatest talents. When he considered the salaries given by the states to their officers, the present salaries did not appear more than a competence. With respect to the motion to fill the blank with 3,500 dollars, Mr. F. said he called it lowering the present salaries; as the gentlemen, now in office, came in under the expectation that the existing salaries would be continued; they had not, it is true, the security of law for their continuance, but they had a well founded expectation. In Pennsylvania the salaries of the judges were raised for a time, and then made permanent.

Mr. F. said that he in 1799 voted against raising these salaries; but now after the increase had so long existed and had become fortified by experiente, he should be against reducing them, under the impression that the salaries of such officers should be permanent. He, therefore, hoped that the motion to fill the blank with 5,000 dollars would prevail.

Mr. J. Randolph said he did not understand the reasoning adduced by the gentleman from Pennsylvania (Mr. Leib) to shew that the blank ought to be filled with a smaller sum than five thousand dollars. There had, indeed, been adduced an argument that might apply with some force to particular gentlemen in that House, but which was inapplicable to a great majority of the members. He alluded to the argument that those who in 1799 voted against an increase of salaries should at this time vote in favor of a diminution of them. At that period he had not the honor of a seat in the House. But if this argument applied with any force to those who voted against an increase to restrain them from voting for this bill, it ought surely to be more conclusive on the minds of those who on that occasion voted for it, to induce them now not to vote against it. And for this plain reason. The committee would perceive that the same cause, which induced members in 1799 to vote against the increase of salaries, might induce them to vote for their continuance after they were raised. It did not, therefore, follow that there was any inconsistency between opposing the increase in 1799, and voting for its continuance in 1803. There was a wide difference between refusing to augment a salary, and refusing to diminish it after it was augmented. For though there may have been in 1799 strong reasons against an increase, there may be stronger reasons at present entertained by the same men against a diminution. He believed, had he been then a member, he should have voted against the increase. But there would be an obvious and glaring inconsistency in those, who having voted in 1799 for an increase, should now vote for a diminution of these salaries. He said not so from an idea that there were in the House any such gentlemen. He was, on the contrary, persuaded those gentlemen had too great a regard to consistency and to character, to commit such a glaring inconsistency of conduct.

As this reduction of the salaries of a few of the executive officers was supported on the ground of economy, Mr. R. said he would take a view of the expences of the government, in order to determine whether this object, so much the favorite of some gentlemen, was worthy of the attention bestowed upon it. Of the expenditures of the government, those usually classed under the name of civil list amounted to 564,060 dollars; those of a miscellaneous nature, which in some of the items partook of the character of those which constituted the civil list, 183,000 dollars; for foreign intercourse 159,000 dollars; for the military department 863,000 dollars; for the naval establishment 650,000 dollars. These, constituting the whole estimate of the expences for the ensuing year, fell short of two millions and a half, of which only about half a million go to the support go of the civil list. What are we now about to do? To legislate at an expence greater than the saving contemplated, to bring a mere pepper corn into the treasury; to cut off, perhaps, some of the most responsible officers in the government. In my opinion, said Mr. R. if a reform of expences is our object, it belongs to us to begin, where we ought to begin on some other solemn occasions, at home. Let us look at our own expences and receipts, at the contingent fund of this House and of the other branch of the legislature; at the contingent fund of the departments. We shall find the expences of the department of state, exclusive of the expence of printing and distributing the laws, 12,000 dollars, while the salary of the secretary is 5,000 dollars; of the secretary of the treasury 9,000 dollars, while the salary of the secretary is 5,000; of the Comptroller's office 9,000, while the salary is 3,500; of the Auditor 9,000, while the salary is 3,000; of the Register's office 14,000, while the salary is 2,400 dollars. We shall also find in the same department other miscellaneous expences to the large amount of 11,000 dollars. We shall find in the war department the expences 12,000, of which 4 500 constitutes the salary of the secretary; and in the Accountant's office, 10,000 dollars expences, while the salary is 2,000 dollars; besides the expences of the pay master, and purveyor of public surplies. We shall find in the naval department, the expences 6,600 dollars, and the salary of the secretary 4,500 dollars; and in the accountant's office, the expences 8,000 dollars, and the salary 2,000 dollars. In the post office department we shall find the same ratio between the expenses and the salary of the head of the department. Then come the expences of the officers of the commissioners of loans in the several states, properly the expences of the treasury department, and which are immense. Then follows that glorious institution, that splendid attribute of sovereignty, the mint, for which the government annually pays 11,600 dollars in salaries to its officers, exclusive of other expences amounting to 9 400 dollars, and making altogether the enormous sum of 20,000 dollars. Then follows the Judiciary, respecting the expenses of which I have no further observations to make, than that I believe the salaries of the men who fill those high and responsible offices are very inferior to what they ought to be. Then follows that description of expence, which I have always understood to be the peculiar fund from which a nation may economise—the marine and war departments, one of which amounts to 860,000, and the other to 650,000 dollars. These are the departments in which a nation can alone exercise true economy.—When I make this observation, I do not mean to say that reform ought not to take place in the civil expenditures; but even then we ought to strike at the contingent funds, the stationary and fuel of the departments, and of this and the other House.

It has been stated truly by the venerable gentleman from Pennsylvania (Mr. Findley) that it is not sound policy to narrow the range of choice for the great Executive officers of the United States. I believe it will be narrowed by the proposed diminution of their salaries. On this subject I speak without any understanding with the gentlemen who at present hold those offices. I believe that inducements, other than pecuniary, brought those gentlemen into office; and I also believe that if this blank shall be filled with 3,500 dollars, it will be impossible to get men to hold these offices from pecuniary considerations. We know the fact that no man of talents, devoted to the liberal professions, fails to get a larger sum. Of course it follows that men who hold these office cannot be actuated by such motives. No, it is to an attachment to certain political opinions, to particular men, to the love of glory inherent in every noble breast, that we are to look for the true motives; and these, I believe, are the motives that would induce the men who at present hold these high offices, still to hold them, if the compensation were reduced to a single cent. But whether these are motives, which can or ought to induce a man to become a public servant, will you induce such a man to sacrifice his patrimony or abandon his office, unless fortune has been so kind as to make the sum he is necessarily called upon to expand to him a trifling consideration? Is this policy? Is it republicanism;—that no man, unless of overgrown fortune, should be able to hold a high executive office in a fair way? I know there is an abundance of hunters and bidders for offices, who are ready to take them on any terms. But these are not the men with which these important and dignified offices ought to be filled.—There is not a doubt, if you put the office of the Secretary of State up to auction, you will get men, who will undertake to execute its important functions at the sum proposed by the gentleman from Pennsylvania. But in this way, for a saving of 1,500 dollars we may lose millions. I beg gentlemen to attend to the nature and extent of the duties of the great offices of the departments of state and of the treasury. I speak without reference to those who at present hold them, though I might speak with reference to them. Do not these stations require an unblemished character, the highest talents, and an unwearied assiduity to discharge their duties with benefit to the nation; and can you expect such men to accept such offices for the small sum of three thousand five hundred dollars, if influenced by pecuniary considerations? While gentlemen are for detracting from the little which these great officers possess, we find that collectors, and supervisors, and other officers, whose duties are merely ministerial, and which require only common talents, are drawing from the treasury to the amount of five thousand dollars a year; and until a late law passed drew from five to twelve thousand dollars; and these men, according to the ideas of some gentlemen, are to retain their five thousand dollars while the Secretary of State and of the Treasury are only to receive three thousand five hundred.

I well know that when the act, establishing the salaries as they now stand, passed, it was a subject of clamour; but it was a clamour that never reached me; I mean one by which I was not affected. For I have always believed, in public as well as in private life, it is sound policy to obtain the best agents, to give them enough to do, and to pay them well for their services. I believe that in a single negociation conducted by a Secretary of State, millions may depend upon the exercise of the discretionary power with which he is clothed. It may depend upon his answer to a foreign minister, whether we shall have peace or war. There is also a vast responsibility attached to the Secretary of the Treasury; and though the scope of his duties may be less extensive than those of the Secretary of State, yet millions may be won or lost by the manner in which he discharges them.—There are other officers whose compensations are fixed by this bill, called upon to discharge high duties, on the proper execution of which much depends.

It may be said, for all these things the President is responsible; that he is, or ought to be a man of the first talents; and that the heads of the departments cannot go amiss without his sanctioning their measures. It has, however, always appeared to me that every form of government that devolves the whole executive power on a single individual, differs but in form from that which devolves it upon a plurality of persons. It is of the essence of government that one man cannot execute it alone; and that he is obliged to share it with heads of departments, or with agents by some other name. The imbecility of human nature is such that he must participate power with others. It is the nature of the human race not to possess confidence in themselves; to take advice, and of consequence to be influenced by others in whom they repose confidence. Whatever, therefore, the theory of the government may be, the acts of the government must take their color more or less from the advisers of the heads of the executive power; and hence the necessity of those advisers being men of wisdom and of the purest character.—Such men ought to receive a compensation that will render them independent; for it is in the middling ranks, neither among the rich or the poor, that such characters abound.

As I have before remarked, I know when the last act on this subject passed there was a clamour; a clamour on one point, and then on an other. But what effect had it on the nation? Let gentlemen enquire of the people, whether, while the affairs of the nation are so prosperously managed, they are not content to give a fair compensation? We only ask that those, to whom the country eminently owes its peace and prosperity, may be enabled to support with comfort themselves and their families. Let us suppose that those who manage the public concerns, had acted indiscreetly; that instead of preserving us in peace and paying off with great rapidity the public debt, they had produced a state of war, and had saddled the people with additional and heavy impositions. If they, in such circumstances, should ask for salaries and argue that the articles of life are at war prices,