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CONGRESS.

House of Representatives,
January 23.

DEBATE ON THE DEFENCE OF OUR PORTS AND HARBORS.

Continued.

Mr. Smilie, I am well pleased the subject has been thus brought before the committee, as it affords the first opportunity we have had of discussing it with each other on it. I am of opinion that our time will not be thrown in proceeding further in the discussion, although, I shall ultimately be in favor of the committee's rising. Gentlemen were not correct when they told us that although we had not seven weeks, we had done nothing with regard to the difference of the C. States with foreign nations. I believe we have done something, and I trust that it will prove beneficial. There is not strong reason on my mind why we should not decide now on the subject, before us. This relates to the ground on which we may decide this question. I mean, I do not yet understand the reason (the conduct of British) in relation to which we are to act with to have made such a bill as we entered on the business, before we entered on the business now under consideration. Perhaps the best course, however, may be to defer the whole what will be necessary to this. If there be thought necessary to go to war, one system of measures will be necessary, if it should be determined to be peaceable, a different course, a different system will be required. Our whole business results in a decision of war and the direction to make. The subject is perhaps as regards a political nature. What do we complain of? Although we are neutral right, yet the subject is not at present before us. If in that subject we are determined to pursue peaceable measures, our course will be very different from that which we have followed from our assuming a warlike attitude. In my opinion it is best that the committee will go further and say, that it is not by positive orders we are at this moment with that will oblige us to go to war with her, and if this shall appear to be the opinion of a majority of the House, it may save us from a great expenditure, on the object now under consideration.

Mr. Mercer, I agree with the gentleman from Pennsylvania in the story of the committee's rising. We are called upon for 150,000 dollars and for war and for peace. In requiring the information the gentleman demands so much, I think unfair, or that too precipitate. Were I satisfied myself with the expression so important, I would not permit time to elapse before they are prepared. It is proper that the money of the nation should be spent to the expence of a 74 gun ship, we are furnished with the money with an estimate. So, with regard to the expence of fortifying our ports and harbors, they put the secretary of war give a similar estimate. I would not, it is true, be binding upon us, but it would be the information of a man whose duty it is to be well informed on the subject of which I believe to be well informed. Let him give us this information, and we shall then be in a state to be informed to judge for ourselves. Let us see the whole length of the measures we begin the journey; before we undertake it let us be satisfied we expence. Let us see the way we shall take the most direct course, and the business will be more done than by rushing on at present. The committee have given us an estimated expence of from 4 to 5 millions on this subject, there is a difference of opinion—so also is there with regard to the defending the port of New York. On this point the head of the war department may be the clearest. He probably may have had an examination made into the possibility of defending it. Perhaps possible he of opinion, that it may be defended by fortifications supported by a naval armament. Before, however, we take any steps, I have seen that all the information we can. I have seen such a crisis as this before; and if the statute books be examined, it will be found, that at least seven weeks were then sufficient to elapse before any fatal mistake was made. I am not of opinion that it is sound policy to join issue so fast as we run. On the contrary, I believe the less legislation the better. Into the recommendation of the President, I agree with the gentleman from Maryland. I am not sent here to obey his mandate, or to carry into effect what he recommends; but to obey the judgment which God gave me, and that I shall do whenever is proper. In the 150,000 dollars contemplated only as an entering wedge into this business. The same thing was attempted once before; but, then, to me, an inappropriate expression, the thing would not stand. I hope the committee will rise, and the subject be resumed. I hope the last committee who brought in this resolution will agree to this course. They have had a full communication with the secretary of war.

Mr. Hitchcock, I feel satisfied, that a little additional charity and good neighborhood should induce them to allow us some privilege to others particularly as it is agreed that this subject is of more importance, and may interest the people in a higher degree, than any other which can come before the House this session.

Mr. Davis, As appeal is made to my feelings, I am sorry I am unable to comply with, and which it would be my duty to gratify, if I could, I just spoken, but little reason to expect, that the committee will rise, I will resolve that on the first topic of the message, the honorable gentleman called upon that he was not dealing, on this, and set he now calls for information. I do presume that this information can have no influence on his mind. I am sorry, that we cannot do his business for it, but from his wish that we should do so.

The gentleman from Maryland (Mr. Nelson) says that if the sum required for the defence of our ports and harbors will be enormous, he shall be against it, but I, therefore, he may be in favor of it. I am sorry that we are in the resolution that the sum contemplated to be appropriated, is so small. I hope, that therefore, it can operate no difficulty in the way of the people. These words, lastly, sound very well; gentlemen may talk of hardness imposed on the people, but I think, that this measure cannot produce any new burdens.

Mr. Macon, When I was on the committee, I stated that I felt compelled myself to the question under debate. I have no objection to say that I am against the resolution, for reasons, however, to say, that facts which I have not seen are material to me, I do not indicate my hesitate to offer my opinion, but I confess, I am not ready to the resolution under consideration.

The Chairman remarked that gentlemen should not allude to the question before them.

Mr. Wilson, Having been on the committee who brought in the report, and feel satisfied with it myself, I should be very sorry to deny the same information to others, which I have found it necessary seems to require, more information. As I believe, and the committee did not enter into an extensive view of the subject. They thought it only necessary of a present, to recommend the fortifications, and fortifications, and the fitting up some of the ships. I, for one, I think, was not with a view to erect new fortifications. This every one will perceive to be maintainable by so small an appropriation, when he considers the vast extent of our sea coast, in the United States.

Colonel G. W. Campbell, I would not trouble the committee with a single word, if it not for the information to be intended to be produced, that those who call for information wish to do nothing, but that they may have time to consider, one who differs from other members on the subject, I cannot but be persuaded, is not therefore be considered less friendly to maintaining our rights, and the honor of the nation. I hope that nothing be come seven weeks have elapsed, without any information, of such nature, we shall not be considered so hostile to their interests, as to be considered by those who have already expressed their sentiments, that we have not done anything. I hope, that we have not done. The only question is, whether we shall appropriate a sum required by my honorable friend, ports and harbors. It is not whether we shall protect our ports and harbors, before I make an appropriation, that is, I am not prepared for by law. By an act passed in the year 1794, the President is authorized to call on the militia of the United States, to repel any hostile attack on our ports and harbors. Before I make an appropriation, I wish to know the opinions of well informed persons, and I wish to know the information it appears, that they can be protected by the militia, and a sum of money, I have no disposition to grant it, but I am prepared to say, I shall be disposed will answer any reasonable purpose.

Mr. Cook, Although I am in favor of the resolution, yet I am also in favor of the committee rising, as I believe the information will be of a nature, that will enable every member of the House in favor of the resolution.

Mr. Smilie said he just rose to explain some remarks which had fallen from him, that had been misunderstood. When he alluded to a particular business, he had reference to a secret, or secure nature. Sometime since, a business, (relative to the invasion of several rights by British cruisers) was referred to the committee of Ways and Means, and I thought, in my opinion, never to have been referred to that committee. It involved a great national question, which was properly the province of a committee of the whole on the state of the union. From the cleringed state of the Committee of Ways and Means, three members being absent, nothing could be done in the business. He wish vents discharge them from the further consideration of it.

Mr. Dana, If I understood the subject in the same light with some gentlemen who have expressed their sentiments, I should agree to the rising of the committee. My consideration was that that of the sum which we shall now appropriate for the defence of our ports and harbors, I consider as the simplest question, whether we are disposed to appropriate any thing towards that purpose. With regard to the proper sum to be appropriated, I allow that we want information. I think that we have not been sufficiently early on this subject, but likewise on some others of no small importance. But consider this committee as having now the general question before them, and, if it appears, that on the general principle, we should act agree, I propose the indefinite, of the proposition from Maryland and North Carolina; holding the opinions they do, that it ought to be certainly correct. But when the President recommended the subject to us, and lately attitude, I think it consequence impedition a strong argument for the prompt consideration of the legislature. Perhaps whatever different lights, different opinions, may be entertained, I think the character of the executive, even his enemies have never charged him with a disposition to take measures, that too warlike a nature. But it is said we are not ready, and, I, for one, believe we never, but informed us, that after mature deliberation, we should be ready to act. When I look to the liberties of the people of this country, I will not mean to be understood as doubting the loyalty or possibility of our fortifying our ports and harbors by land batteries as to affect them as effectual protection. I mean to say that such was their physical situation as to require a great sum of revenue beyond the resources of the nation. I have no doubt but that it is possible to erect batteries at the mouth of York and other harbors, if we consider the power of navigation. I have no doubt that we might with ease make a defence, but, I know, that, if, some any gentlemen of the House would be prepared to adopt the principle which I propose, I, for one, would be ready to place, and to the extent to which it would carry us. I, I, doubt whether any gentleman would be prepared to adopt the course pursued by the Dutch government, with regard to Charlemagne and along her coast; a course which, I, for one, would be ready to adopt, and oblige ourselves to the mandatory of their government.

I, for leave to state one or two other subjects, things. When I suggested to you, it is thought necessary, I, I, I, I, I, said, that my object was evidently presented, that it was, not, to be understood in the House, after so much time had been already consumed, to attempt further preparation; for the sentiment of the nation was before us; it discovered, no course, but that of war. I, I, I, I, see, the public indication wanting fight of the country opinion, which, I, I, I, ought to be deduced from what has been obtained the sentiment of the nation, in this and other cases, is this—That in this country, where the government and the nation are identical, it is, I, I, I, I, I