


JOHN RANDOLPH

OHN RANDOLPH, "of Roanoke," American statesman, nephew of the patriot, Peyton Randolph, was born at Cawsons, Chesterfield Co., Va., June 2, 1773, and died at Philadelphia June 24, 1833. Receiving his preliminary education at the grammar school attached to William and Mary College, he afterward studied at Princeton and Columbia Colleges, and then read law at Philadelphia. In 1799, he was elected to Congress as Democratic representative from Virginia, and with two brief intervals, he sat in the House for close upon thirty years. Early in his congressional career, he made a powerful speech in answer to Patrick Henry, who had opposed his election. He afterward became an ardent Republican and follower of Jefferson, yet opposed the War of 1812 with England, took adverse ground in regard to protective duties, favored Monroe as President, was an opponent of the Slave trade, and vehemently denounced the Missouri Compromise. In 1825-27 he sat in the Senate, had a duel with Henry Clay in 1826, and in 1830 was United States Minister to Russia. Returning to the United States he was once more elected to Congress, but before taking his seat he died of consumption, emancipating his many slaves by will before his death and providing for their after-maintenance. Randolph was a sufferer from nervous eccentricity, which extended even to matters of dress; and he had a biting, sarcastic tongue, modified at times, however, by amusing sallies of wit.

ON FOREIGN IMPORTATIONS

[Delivered March 5, 1836, on a motion for the non-importation of British merchandise, offered by Mr. Gregg in the House of Representatives during the dispute between Great Britain and the United States.]

I AM extremely afraid, sir, that so far as it may depend on my acquaintance with details connected with the subject I have very little right to address you: for in truth I have not yet seen the documents from the treasury, which were called for some time ago, to direct the judgment of this House in the decision of the question now before you; and indeed, after what I have this day heard, I no longer require that document, or any other document; indeed, I do not know that I ever should have required it, to vote on the resolution of the gentleman from Pennsylvania. If I had entertained any doubts, they would have been removed by the style in

(424)

which the friends of the resolution have this morning discussed it.

I am perfectly aware that upon entering on this subject we go into it manacled, handcuffed, and tongue-tied. Gentlemen know that our lips are sealed in subjects of momentous foreign relations which are indissolubly linked with the present question, and which would serve to throw a great light on it in every respect relevant to it. I will, however, endeavor to hobble over the subject as well as my fettered limbs and palsied tongue will enable me to do it.

I am not surprised to hear this resolution discussed by its friends as a war measure. They say, it is true, that it is not a war measure; but they defend it on principles which would justify none but war measures, and seem pleased with the idea that it may prove the forerunner of war. If war is necessary, if we have reached this point, let us have war.

But while I have life I will never consent to these incipient war measures which in their commencement breathe nothing but peace, though they plunge us at last into war.

It has been well observed by the gentleman from Pennsylvania behind me [Mr. J. Clay], that the situation of this nation in 1793 was in every respect different from that in which it finds itself in 1806. Let me ask, too, if the situation of England is not since materially changed? Gentlemen, who, it would appear from their language, have not got beyond the horn-book of politics, talk of our ability to cope with the British navy and tell us of the war of our Revolution.

What was the situation of Great Britain then? She was then contending for the empire of the British Channel, barely able to maintain a doubtful equality with her enemies, over whom she never gained the superiority until Rodney's victory of the 12th of April.

What is her present situation? The combined fleets of France, Spain, and Holland are dissipated; they no longer exist. I am not surprised to hear men advocate these wild opinions, to see them goaded on by a spirit of mercantile avarice, straining their feeble strength to excite the nation to war, when they have reached this stage of infatuation, that we are an over-match for Great Britain on the ocean. It is mere waste of time to reason with such persons. They do not deserve anything like serious refutation. The proper arguments for such statesmen are a strait waistcoat, a dark room, water-gruel, and depletion.

It has always appeared to me that there are three points to be considered, and maturely considered, before we can be prepared to vote for the resolution of the gentleman from Pennsylvania. First, our ability to contend with Great Britain for the question in dispute; second, the policy of such a contest; and third, in case both these shall be settled affirmatively, the manner in which we can with the greatest effect react upon and annoy our adversary.

Now the gentleman from Massachusetts [Mr. Crowninshield] has settled at a single sweep, to use one of his favorite expressions, not only that we are capable of contending with Great Britain on the ocean, but that we are actually her superior. Whence does the gentleman deduce this inference? Because truly at that time when Great Britain was not mistress of the ocean, when a North was her prime minister and a Sandwich the first lord of her admiralty; when she was governed by a counting-house administration, privateers of this country trespassed on her commerce. So too did the cruisers of Dunkirk. At that day Sufferin held the mastery of the Indian seas.

But what is the case now? Do gentlemen remember the

capture of Cornwallis on land because De Grasse maintained the dominion of the ocean? To my mind no position is more clear than that if we go to war with Great Britain, Charleston and Boston, the Chesapeake and the Hudson, will be invested by British squadrons. Will you call on the Count de Grasse to relieve them? or shall we apply to Admiral Gravina, or Admiral Villeneuve, to raise the blockade?

But you have not only a prospect of gathering glory, and, what seems to the gentleman from Massachusetts much dearer, to profit by privateering, but you will be able to make a conquest of Canada and Nova Scotia. Indeed? Then, sir, we shall catch a Tartar. I confess, however, I have no desire to see the senators and the representatives of the Canadian French, or of the Tories and refugees of Nova Scotia, sitting on this floor, or that of the other House — to see them becoming members of the Union and participating equally in our political rights. And on what other principle would the gentleman from Massachusetts be for incorporating those provinces with us? Or on what other principle could it be done under the constitution? If the gentleman has no other bounty to offer us for going to war than the incorporation of Canada and Nova Scotia with the United States, I am for remaining at peace.

What is the question in dispute? The carrying trade. What part of it? The fair, the honest, and the useful trade that is engaged in carrying our own production to foreign markets and bringing back their productions in exchange? No, sir; it is that carrying trade which covers enemy's property and carries the coffee, the sugar, and other West India products to the mother country.

No, sir; if this great agricultural nation is to be governed by Salem and Boston, New York and Philadelphia, and Bal-

timore and Norfolk and Charleston, let gentlemen come out and say so; and let a committee of public safety be appointed from those towns to carry on the government.

I, for one, will not mortgage my property and my liberty to carry on this trade. The nation said so seven years ago; I said so then, and I say so now. It is not for the honest carrying trade of America, but for this mushroom, this fungus of war, for a trade which, as soon as the nations of Europe are at peace, will no longer exist; it is for this that the spirit of avaricious traffic would plunge us into war.

I am forcibly struck on this occasion by the recollection of a remark made by one of the ablest, if not the honestest, ministers that England ever produced. I mean Sir Robert Walpole, who said that the country gentlemen, poor, meek souls! came up every year to be sheared; that they laid mute and patient whilst their fleeces were taking off; but that if he touched a single bristle of the commercial interest, the whole stye was in an uproar. It was indeed shearing the hog — “great cry and little wool.”

But we are asked, are we willing to bend the neck to England; to submit to her outrages? No, sir; I answer that it will be time enough for us to tell gentlemen what we will do to vindicate the violation of our flag on the ocean when they shall have told us what they have done in resentment of the violation of the actual territory of the United States by Spain, the true territory of the United States, not your new-fangled country over the Mississippi, but the good old United States — part of Georgia, of the old thirteen States, where citizens have been taken, not from our ships, but from our actual territory.

When gentlemen have taken the padlock from our mouths I shall be ready to tell them what I will do relative to our dispute with Britain on the law of nations, on contraband, and such stuff.

I have another objection to this course of proceeding.— Great Britain, when she sees it, will say the American people have great cause of dissatisfaction with Spain. She will see by the documents furnished by the President that Spain has outraged our territory, pirated upon our commerce, and imprisoned our citizens; and she will inquire what we have done. It is true, she will receive no answer; but she must know what we have not done. She will see that we have not repelled these outrages, nor made any addition to our army and navy, nor even classed the militia. No, sir; not one of our militia generals in politics has marshalled a single brigade.

Although I have said it would be time enough to answer the question which gentlemen have put to me when they shall have answered mine; yet, as I do not like long prorogations, I will give them an answer now. I will never consent to go to war for that which I cannot protect. I deem it no sacrifice of dignity to say to the Leviathan of the deep, We are unable to contend with you in your own element, but if you come within our actual limits we will shed our last drop of blood in their defence. In such an event I would feel, not reason; and obey an impulse which never has — which never can deceive me.

France is at war with England: suppose her power on the continent of Europe no greater than it is on the ocean. How would she make her enemy feel it? There would be a perfect non-conductor between them. So with the United States and England; she scarcely presents to us a vulnerable point. Her commerce is carried on, for the most part, in fleets; where in single ships, they are stout and well armed; very different from the state of her trade during the American war, when her merchantmen became the prey of paltry privateers. Great Britain has been too long at war with the three most powerful

maritime nations of Europe not to have learnt how to protect her trade. She can afford convoy to it all; she has eight hundred ships in commission: the navies of her enemies are annihilated.

Thus this war has presented the new and curious political spectacle of a regular annual increase (and to an immense amount) of her imports and exports, and tonnage and revenue, and all the insignia of accumulating wealth, whilst in every former war, without exception, these have suffered a greater or less diminution. And wherefore?

Because she has driven France, Spain, and Holland from the ocean. Their marine is no more. I verily believe that ten English ships of the line would not decline a meeting with the combined fleets of those nations.

I forewarn the gentleman from Massachusetts, and his constituents of Salem, that all their golden hopes are vain. I forewarn them of the exposure of their trade beyond the Cape of Good Hope (or now doubling it) to capture and confiscation; of their unprotected seaport towns exposed to contribution or bombardment. Are we to be legislated into a war by a set of men who in six weeks after its commencement may be compelled to take refuge with us in the country?

And for what? a mere fungus—a mushroom production of war in Europe, which will disappear with the first return of peace—an unfair truce. For is there a man so credulous as to believe that we possess a capital not only equal to what may be called our own proper trade, but large enough also to transmit to the respective parent States the vast and wealthy products of the French, Spanish, and Dutch colonies? 'Tis beyond the belief of any rational being.

But this is not my only objection to entering upon this naval warfare. I am averse to a naval war with any nation

whatever. I was opposed to the naval war of the last administration, and I am as ready to oppose a naval war of the present administration should they meditate such a measure. What! shall this great mammoth of the American forest leave his native element, and plunge into the water in a mad contest with the shark? Let him beware that his proboscis is not bitten off in the engagement. Let him stay on shore, and not be excited by the mussels and periwinkles on the strand, or political bears, in a boat to venture on the perils of the deep.

Gentlemen say, Will you not protect your violated rights? and I say, Why take to water, where you can neither fight nor swim? Look at France; see her vessels stealing from port to port on her own coast; and remember that she is the first military power of the earth, and as a naval people second only to England. Take away the British navy, and France to-morrow is the tyrant of the ocean.

This brings me to the second point. How far is it politic in the United States to throw their weight into the scale of France at this moment?—from whatever motive to aid the views of her gigantic ambition—to make her mistress of the sea and land—to jeopardize the liberties of mankind. Sir, you may help to crush Great Britain—you may assist in breaking down her naval dominion, but you cannot succeed to it. The iron sceptre of the ocean will pass into his hands who wears the iron crown of the land. You may then expect a new code of maritime law. Where will you look for redress?

I can tell the gentleman from Massachusetts that there is nothing in his rule of three that will save us, even although he should outdo himself and exceed the financial ingenuity which he so memorably displayed on a recent occasion. No, sir; let the battle of Actium be once fought, and the whole line