

THE
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

TO THE
PEOPLE OF THE UNITED STATES;
OR, TO SUCH AMERICANS AS VALUE THEIR RIGHTS, AND
DARE TO MAINTAIN THEM.

FELLOW COUNTRYMEN!

A crisis has arrived, in which rights the most important which civil society can acknowledge, and which have been acknowledged by our Constitution and laws, in terms the most explicit which language can afford, are set at nought by men, whom your favor has invested with a brief authority. By what standard is your liberty of conscience, of speech, and of the press, now measured? Is it by those glorious charters you have inherited from your fathers, and which your present rulers have called Heaven to witness, they would preserve inviolate? Alas! another standard has been devised, and if we would know what rights are conceded to us by our own servants, we must consult the COMPACT by which the South engages on certain conditions to give its trade and votes to Northern men. All rights not allowed by this compact, we now hold by sufferance, and our Governors and Legislatures avow their readiness to deprive us of them, whenever in their opinion, legislation on the subject shall be "necessary."* This compact is not indeed published to the world, under the hands and seals of the contracting parties, but it is set forth in official messages,—in resolutions of the State and National Legislatures—in the proceedings of popular meetings, and in acts of lawless violence. The temples of the Almighty have been sacked, because the worshippers did not conform their consciences to the compact.† Ministers of the gospel have been dragged as criminals from the altar to the bar, because they taught the people from the Bible, doctrines proscribed by the compact.‡ Hundreds of free citizens, peaceably assembled to express their sentiments, have, because such an expression was forbidden by the compact, been forc-

* See the Messages of the Governors of New-York and Connecticut, the resolutions of the New-York Legislature, and the bill introduced into the Legislature of Rhode Island.

† Churches in New-York attacked by the mob in 1834.

‡ See two cases within the last twelve months in New Hampshire.

bly dispersed, and the chief actor in this invasion on the freedom of speech, instead of being punished for a breach of the peace, was rewarded for his fidelity to the compact with an office of high trust and honor.*

"The freedom of the press—the palladium of liberty," was once a household proverb. Now, a printing office† is entered by ruffians, and its types scattered in the highway, because disobedient to the compact. A Grand Jury, sworn to "present all things truly as they come to their knowledge," refuse to indict the offenders; and a senator in Congress rises in his place, and appeals to the outrage in the printing office, and the conduct of the Grand Jury as evidence of the good faith with which the people of the state of New-York were resolved to observe the compact.‡

The Executive Magistrate of the American Union, unmindful of his obligation to execute the laws for the equal benefit of his fellow citizens, has sanctioned a censorship of the press, by which papers incompatible with the compact are excluded from the southern mails, and he has officially advised Congress to do by law, although in violation of the Constitution, what he had himself virtually done already in despite of both. The invitation has indeed been rejected, but by the Senate of the United States only, after a portentous struggle—a struggle which distinctly exhibited the *political* conditions of the compact, as well as the fidelity with which those conditions are observed by a northern candidate for the Presidency. While in compliance with these conditions, a powerful minority in the Senate were forging fetters for the press, the House of Representatives were employed in breaking down the right of PETITION. On the 26th May last, the following resolution, reported by a committee was adopted by the House, viz. .

"RESOLVED, THAT ALL PETITIONS, MEMORIALS, RESOLUTIONS AND PROPOSITIONS RELATING IN ANY WAY, OR TO ANY EXTENT WHATEVER, TO THE SUBJECT OF SLAVERY, SHALL WITHOUT BEING EITHER PRINTED OR REFERRED, BE LAID ON THE TABLE, AND THAT NO FURTHER ACTION WHATEVER SHALL BE HAD THEREON." Yeas, 117. Nays, 68.

Bear with us, fellow countrymen, while we call your attention to the outrage on your rights, the contempt of personal obligations and the hardened cruelty involved in this detestable resolution. Condemn us not for the harshness of our language, before you hear our justification. We shall speak only the truth, but we shall speak it as freemen.

The right of petition is founded in the very institution of civil government, and has from time immemorial been acknowledged as among the unquestionable privileges of our English ancestors. This right springs from the great truth that government is established for

* Samuel Beardsley, Esq., the leader of the Utica riot, was shortly afterwards appointed Attorney General of the state of New-York.

† Office of the Utica Standard and Democrat newspaper.

‡ See speech of the Hon. Silas Wright in the U. S. Senate of Feb. 1836.

the benefit of the governed ; and it forms the medium by which the people acquaint their rulers with their wants and their grievances. So accustomed were the Americans to the exercise of this right, even during their subjection to the British crown, that, on the formation of the Federal Constitution, the Convention not conceiving that it could be endangered, made no provision for its security. But in the very first Congress that assembled under the new Government, the omission was repaired. It was thought some ease might possibly occur, in which this right might prove troublesome to a dominant faction, who would endeavor to stifle it. An amendment was therefore proposed and adopted, by which Congress is restrained from making any law abridging "the right of the People, peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." Had it not been for this prudent jealousy of our Fathers, instead of the resolution I have transcribed, we should have had a LAW, visiting with pains and penalties, all who dared to petition the Federal Government, in behalf of the victims of oppression, held in bondage by its authority. The present resolution cannot indeed consign such petitioners to the prison or the scaffold, but it makes the right to petition a congressional boon, to be granted or withheld at pleasure, and in the present case effectually withholds it, by rendering it nugatory.

Petitions are to inform the Government of the wishes of the people, and by calling forth the action of the Legislature, to inform the constituents how far their wishes are respected by their representatives. The information thus mutually given and received is essential to a faithful and enlightened exercise of the right of legislation on the one hand, and of suffrage on the other. But the resolution we are considering, provides that no petition in relation to slavery, shall be printed for the information of the members, nor referred to a committee to ascertain the truth of its statements ; nor shall any vote be taken, in regard to it, by which the People may learn the sentiments of their representatives.

If Congress may thus dispose of petitions on one subject, they may make the same disposition of petitions on any and every other subject. Our representatives are bound by oath, not to pass any law abridging the right of petition, but if this resolution is constitutional, they may order every petition to be delivered to their door-keeper, and by him to be committed to the flames ; for why preserve petitions on which *no action can be had*? Had the resolution been directed to petitions for an object palpably unconstitutional, it would still have been without excuse. The construction of the Constitution is a matter of opinion, and every citizen has a right to express that opinion in a petition, or otherwise.

But this usurpation is aggravated by the almost universal admission that Congress does possess the constitutional power to legislate on the subject of slavery in the District of Columbia and the Territories. No wonder that a distinguished statesman refused to sanction the right of the House to pass such a resolution by even voting against

it.* The men who perpetrated this outrage had sworn to support the Constitution, and will they hereafter plead at the bar of their Maker, that they had kept their oath, because they had abridged the right of petition *by a resolution*, and not by law!

This resolution not only violates the rights of the people, but it nullifies the privileges and obligations of their representatives. It is an undoubted right and duty of every member of Congress to propose any measure within the limits of the Constitution, which he believes is required by the interests of his constituents and the welfare of his country. Now mark the base surrender of this right—the wicked dereliction of this duty. All “resolutions and propositions” relating “in *any way* or to *any extent* whatever to the subject of slavery,” shall be laid on the table, and “no farther action *whatever* shall be had thereon.” What a spectacle has been presented to the American people!—one hundred and seventeen members of Congress relinquishing their own rights, cancelling their own solemn obligations, forcibly depriving the other members of their legislative privileges, abolishing the freedom of debate, contemning the right of petition, and prohibiting present and future legislation on a most important and constitutional subject, by a rule of order!

In 1820, the New-York Legislature instructed the representatives from that state in Congress, to insist on making “the prohibition of slavery an indispensable condition of admission” of certain territories into the Union. In 1828, the Legislature of Pennsylvania instructed the Pennsylvania members of Congress, to vote for the abolition of slavery in the district of Columbia. In vain hereafter shall a representative present the instructions of his constituents, or the injunctions of a sovereign state. No question shall be taken, or any motion he may offer, in *any way*, or to *any extent*, relating to slavery!

Search the annals of legislation, and you will find no precedent for such a profligate act of tyranny, exercised by a majority over their fellow legislators, nor for such an impudent contempt of the rights of the people.

But this resolution is no less barbarous than it is profligate and impudent. Remember, fellow countrymen! that the decree has gone forth, that there shall be no legislation by Congress, in *any way*, or to *any extent whatever*, on the subject of slavery. Now call to mind, that Congress is the *local* and only legislature of the District of Columbia, which is placed by the Constitution under its “exclusive jurisdiction in *all cases whatsoever*.” In this District, there are thousands of human beings divested of the rights of humanity, and subjected to a negotiable despotism; and Congress is the only power that can extend the shield of law to protect them from cruelty and abuse; and that shield, it is now resolved, shall not be extended in any way, or to any extent! But this is not all. The District has become the great slave-market of North America, and the port of

* Mr. J. Q. Adams, on his name being called, refused to vote, saying, “the resolution is in direct violation of the Constitution of the United States, and the privileges of the members of this House.”

Alexandria is the Guinea of our proud republic, whence "cargoes of despair" are continually departing.*

In the city which bears the name of the Father of his country, dealers in human flesh receive licences for the vile traffic, at four hundred dollars each per annum; and the gazettes of the Capital have their columns polluted with the advertisements of these men, offering cash for children and youth, who, torn from their parents and families, are to wear out their existence on the plantations of the south.† For the safe keeping of these children and youth, till they are shipped for the Mississippi, private pens and prisons are provided, and the UNITED STATES' JAIL used when required. The laws of the District in relation to slaves and free negroes are of the most abominable and iniquitous character. Any free citizen with a dark skin, may be arrested on pretence of being a fugitive slave, and committed to the UNITED STATES' PRISON, and unless within a certain number of days he proves his freedom, while immured within its walls, he is, under authority of Congress, sold as a slave for life. Do you ask why? Let the blood mantle in your cheeks, while we give you the answer of the LAW—"to pay his jail fees!"

On the 11th of January, 1827, the Committee for the District of Columbia, (themselves slaveholders) introduced a bill providing that the jail fees should hereafter be a county charge. The bill did not pass; and by the late resolution, a statute unparalleled for injustice and atrocity by any mandate of European despotism, is to be like the law of the Medes and Persians, that altereth not, since no proposition for its repeal or modification can be entertained.

The Grand Jury of Alexandria presented the slave trade of that place, as "disgraceful to our character as citizens of a free government," and as "a grievance demanding legislative redress;" that is, the interposition of Congress—but one hundred and seventeen men have decided that there shall be "no action whatever" by Congress in relation to slavery.

In March, 1816, John Randolph submitted the following resolution to the House of Representatives: "*Resolved*, That a Committee be appointed to inquire into the existence of an *inhuman* and illegal traffic of slaves, carried on in and through the District of Columbia, and to report whether any, and what measures are necessary for putting a stop to the same." The COMPACT had not then been formed and the resolution *was adopted*. Such a resolution would *now* "be laid on the table," and treated with silent contempt.

In 1828, eleven hundred inhabitants of the District presented a petition to Congress, complaining of the "DOMESTIC SLAVE-TRADE" as a grievance disgraceful in its character, and "even more demoral-

* One dealer, John Armfield, advertises in the National Intelligencer of the 10th of February last, that he has three vessels in the trade, and they will leave the port of Alexandria on the first and fifteenth of each month.

† Twelve hundred negroes are thus advertised for in the National Intelligencer of the 28th of March last. The negroes wanted are generally from the age of ten or twelve years to twenty-five, and of both sexes.

izing in its influence" than the foreign traffic. The petition concluded as follows: "The people of this District have within themselves no means of legislative redress, and we therefore appeal to your Honorable body as the *only one* vested by the American Constitution with power to relieve us." No more shall such appeals be made to the national council. What matters it, that the people of the District are annoyed by the human shambles opened among them? What matters it, that Congress is "the only body vested by the American Constitution with power to relieve" them? The compact requires that no action shall be had on *any* petition relating to slavery.

The horse or the ox may be protected in the District, by act of Congress, from the cruelty of its owner; but MAN, created in the image of God, shall, if his complexion be dark, be abandoned to every outrage. The negro may be bound alive to the stake in front of the Capitol, as well as in the streets of St. Louis—his shrieks may resound through the representative hall—and the stench of his burning body may enter the nostrils of the law-givers—but no vote may rebuke the abomination—no law forbid its repetition.

The representatives of the nation may regulate the traffic in sheep and swine, within the ten miles square; but the SLAVERS of the District may be laden to suffocation with human cattle—the horrors of the middle passage may be transcended at the wharves of Alexandria; but Congress may not limit the size of the cargoes, or provide for the due feeding and watering the animals composing them!—The District of Columbia is henceforth to be the only spot on the face of the globe, subjected to a civilized and Christian police, in which avarice and malice may with legal impunity inflict on humanity whatever sufferings ingenuity can devise, or depravity desire.

And this accumulation of wickedness, cruelty and baseness, is to render the seat of the federal government the scoff of tyrants and the reproach of freemen FOREVER! On the 9th of January 1829, the House of Representatives passed the following vote. "Resolved, that the committee of the District of Columbia be instructed to inquire into the expediency of providing by law, for the gradual abolition of Slavery in the District, in such manner that no individual shall be injured thereby." Never again while the present rule of order is in force, can similar instructions be given to a committee—never again shall even an inquiry be made into the expediency of abolishing slavery and the slave-trade in the District. What stronger evidence can we have, of the growing and spreading corruption caused by slavery, than that one hundred and seventeen republican legislators professed believers in Christianity—many of them from the North, aye even from the land of the Pilgrims, should strive to render such curses PERPETUAL!

The flagitiousness of this resolution is aggravated if possible by the arbitrary means by which its adoption was secured. No representative of the People was permitted to lift up his voice against it—to plead the commands of the Constitution which is violated—his own privileges and duties which it contemned—the rights of his con-

stituents on which it trampled—the claims of justice and humanity which it impiously outraged. Its advocates were afraid and ashamed to discuss it, and forbidding debate, they perpetrated in silence the most atrocious act that has ever disgraced an American Legislature.*

And was no reason whatever, it may be asked, assigned for this bold invasion of our rights, this insult to the sympathies of our common nature? Yes—connected with the resolution was a preamble explaining its OBJECT. Read it, fellow countrymen, and be equally astonished at the impudence of your rulers in avowing such an object, and at their folly in adopting such an expedient to effect it. The lips of a free people are to be sealed by insult and injury!

“Whereas, it is extremely important and desirable that the AGITATION on this subject should be finally ARRESTED, for the purpose of restoring *tranquillity* to the public mind, your committee respectfully recommend the following resolution.”

ORDER REIGNS IN WARSAW, were the terms in which the triumph of Russia over the liberties of Poland, was announced to the world. When the right of petition shall be broken down—when no whisper shall be heard in Congress in behalf of human rights—when the press shall be muzzled, and the freedom of speech destroyed by gag-laws, then will the slaveholders announce, that TRANQUILLITY IS RESTORED TO THE PUBLIC MIND!

Fellow countrymen! is such the tranquillity you desire—is such the heritage you would leave to your children? Suffer not the present outrage, by effecting its avowed object, to invite farther aggressions on your rights. The chairman of the committee boasted that the number of petitioners the present session, for the abolition of slavery in the District, was *only* thirty-four thousand! Let us resolve, we beseech you, that at the next session the number shall be A MILLION. Perhaps our one hundred and seventeen representatives will then abandon in despair their present dangerous and unconstitutional expedient for tranquillizing the public mind.

The purpose of this address, is not to urge upon you our own views of the sinfulness of slavery, and the safety of its immediate abolition; but to call your attention to the conduct of your rulers. Let no one think for a moment, that because he is not an abolitionist, his liberties are not and will not be invaded. *We* have no rights, distinct from the rights of the whole people. Calumny, falsehood, and popular violence, have been employed in vain, to tranquillize abolitionists. It is now proposed to soothe them, by despoiling them of their constitutional rights; but they cannot be despoiled *alone*. The right of petition and the freedom of debate are as sacred and valuable to those who dissent from our opinions, as they are to ourselves. Can the Constitution at the same time secure liberty to you, and expose us to

* A debate was allowed on a motion to re-commit the report, for the purpose of preparing a resolution that Congress has no constitutional power to interfere with slavery in the District of Columbia; but when the sense of the House was to be taken on the resolution reported by the committee, all debate was prevented by the previous question.

oppression—give you freedom of speech, and lock our lips—respect your right of petition, and treat ours with contempt? No, fellow countrymen!—we must be all free, or all slaves together. We implore you, then, by all the obligations of interest, of patriotism, and of religion—by the remembrance of your Fathers—by your love for your children, to unite with us in maintaining our common, and till lately, our unquestioned political rights.

We ask you as men to insist that your servants acting as the local legislators of the District of Columbia, shall respect the common rights and decencies of humanity.—We ask you as freemen, not to permit your constitutional privileges to be trifled with, by those who have sworn to maintain them.—We ask you as Christian men, to remember that by sanctioning the sinful acts of your agents, you yourselves assume their guilt.

We have no candidates to recommend to your favor—we ask not your support for any political party; but we do ask you to give your suffrages hereafter only to such men as you have reason to believe will not sacrifice your rights, and their own obligations, and the claims of mercy and the commands of God, to an iniquitous and mercenary compact. If we cannot have northern Presidents and other officers of the general government except in exchange for freedom of conscience, of speech, of the press and of legislation, then let all the appointments at Washington be given to the South. If slaveholders will not trade with us, unless we consent to be slaves ourselves, then let us leave their money, and their sugar, and their cotton, to perish with them.

Fellow countrymen! we wish, we recommend no action whatever, inconsistent with the laws and constitutions of our country, or the precepts of our common religion, but we beseech you to join with us in resolving, that while we will respect the rights of others, we will at every hazard maintain our own.

In behalf of the American Anti-Slavery Society.

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