

But the injuries of impressment are by no means confined to its immediate subjects or the individuals on whom it is practised. Vessels suffer from the weakening of their crews, and voyages are often delayed, and not unfrequently broken up, by subtraction from the number of necessary hands by impressment. And what is still of greater and more general moment, the fear of impressment has been found to create great difficulty in obtaining sailors for the American merchant service in times of European war. Seafaring men, otherwise inclined to enter into that service, are, as experience has shown, deterred by the fear of finding themselves ere long in compulsory military service in British ships of war. Many instances have occurred, fully established in proof, in which raw seamen, natives of the United States, fresh from the fields of agriculture, entering for the first time on shipboard, have been impressed before they made the land, placed on the decks of British men-of-war, and compelled to serve for years before they could obtain their release, or revisit their country or their homes. Such instances become known, and their effect in discouraging young men in engaging in the merchant service of their country can neither be doubted nor wondered at. More than all, my lord, the practice of impressment, whenever it has existed, has produced not conciliation and good feeling, but resentment, exasperation, and animosity, between the two great commercial countries of the world.

In the calm and quiet which succeeded the late war—a condition so favorable for dispassionate consideration—England herself has evidently seen the harshness of impressment, even when exercised on seamen in her own merchant service, and she has adopted measures calculated, if not to renounce the power or to abolish the practice, at least to supersede its necessity by other means of manning the royal navy, more compatible with justice and the rights of individuals, and far more conformable to the spirit and sentiments of the age.

Under these circumstances, the Government of the United States has used the occasion of your lordship's pacific mission to review this whole subject, and to bring it to your notice and that of your Government. It has reflected on the past, pondered the condition of the present, and endeavored to anticipate, so far as might be in its power, the probable future; and I am now to communicate to your lordship the result of these deliberations.

The American Government, then, is prepared to say that the practice of impressing seamen from American vessels cannot hereafter be allowed to take place. That practice is founded on principles which it does not recognise, and is invariably attended by consequences so unjust, so injurious, and of such formidable magnitude, as cannot be submitted to.

In the early disputes between the two Governments on this so long-contested topic, the distinguished person to whose hands were first intrusted the seals of this Department declared, that "the simplest rule will be, that the vessel, being American, shall be evidence that the seamen on board are such."

Fifty years' experience, the utter failure of many negotiations, and a careful reconsideration now had of the whole subject, at a moment when the passions are laid, and no present interest or emergency exists to bias the judgment, have fully convinced this Government that this is not only the simplest and best, but the only rule which can be adopted and observed, consistently with the rights and honor of the United States, and the security of their citizens. THAT RULE ANNOUNCES, THEREFORE, WHAT WILL HEREAFTER BE THE PRINCIPLE MAINTAINED BY THEIR GOVERNMENT. IN EVERY REGULARLY DOCUMENTED AMERICAN MERCHANT VESSEL THE CREW WHO NAVIGATE IT WILL FIND THEIR PROTECTION IN THE FLAG WHICH IS OVER THEM.

This announcement is not made, my lord, to revive useless recollections of the past, nor to stir the embers from fires which have been, in a great degree, smothered by many years of peace. Far otherwise. Its purpose is to extinguish those fires effectually before new incidents arise to fan them into flame. The communication is in the spirit of peace, and for the sake of peace; and springs from a deep and conscientious conviction, that high interests of both nations require that this so long-contested and controverted subject should now be finally put to rest. I persuade myself, my lord, that you will do justice to this frank and sincere avowal of motives; and that you will communicate your sentiments, in this respect, to your Government.

This letter closes, my lord, on my part, our official correspondence; and I gladly use the occasion to offer to you the assurance of my high and sincere regard.

DANIEL WEBSTER.

Lord ASHBURTON, &c., &c., &c.