

IX.

Mr. Webster to Lord Ashburton.

DEPARTMENT OF STATE,

Washington, August 8, 1842.

MY LORD: We have had several conversations on the subject of impressment, but I do not understand that your lordship has instructions from your Government to negotiate upon it, nor does the Government of the United States see any utility in opening such negotiation, unless the British Government is prepared to renounce the practice in all future wars.

No cause has produced, to so great an extent, and for so long a period, disturbing and irritating influence on the political relations of the United States and England, as the impressment of seamen by British cruisers from American merchant vessels.

From the commencement of the French revolution to the breaking out of the war between the two countries in 1812, hardly a year elapsed without loud complaint and earnest remonstrance. A deep feeling of opposition to the right claimed, and to the practice exercised under it, and not unfrequently exercised without the least regard to what justice and humanity would have dictated, even if the right itself had been admitted, took possession of the public mind of America; and this feeling, it is well known, co-operated most powerfully with other causes to produce the state of hostilities which ensued.

At different periods, both before and since the war, negotiations have taken place between the two Governments, with the hope of finding some means of quieting these complaints. At some times, the effectual abolition of the practice has been requested and treated of; at other times, its temporary suspension; and, at other times, again, the limitation of its exercise, and some security against its enormous abuses.

A common destiny has attended these efforts; they have all failed. The question stands at this moment where it stood fifty years ago. The nearest approach to a settlement was a convention proposed in 1803, and which had come to the point of signature, when it was broken off in consequence of the British Government insisting that the *narrow seas* should be expressly excepted out of the sphere over which the contemplated stipulations against impressment should extend. The American minister, Mr. King, regarded this exception as quite inadmissible, and chose rather to abandon the negotiation than to acquiesce in the doctrine which it proposed to establish.

England asserts the right of impressing British subjects, in time of war, out of neutral merchant vessels, and of deciding by her visiting officers, who, among the crews of such merchant vessels, are British subjects. She asserts this as a legal exercise of the prerogative of the crown; which prerogative is alleged to be founded on the English law of the perpetual and indissoluble allegiance of the subject, and his obligation, under all circumstances, and for his whole life, to render military service to the crown whenever required.

This statement, made in the words of eminent British jurists, shows, at once, that the English claim is far broader than the basis or platform on which it is raised. The law relied on is English law; the obligations insisted on are obligations existing between the crown of England and its subjects. This law and these obligations, it is admitted, may be such as England may choose they shall be. But then they must be confined to the parties. Impressment of seamen, out of and beyond English territory, and from