

OREGON AND THE NOOTKA CONVENTION.

SPEECH

OF

MR. ROBERT DALE OWEN, OF INDIANA,

DELIVERED

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE UNITED STATES, JAN. 28, 1844,

IN

VINDICATION OF THE COURSE PURSUED BY THE GOVERNMENT OF THE UNITED STATES, IN RELATION TO THE TERRITORY OF OREGON.

Mr. OWEN said:

EDMUND BURKE, when a member of the British Parliament, was once asked, why ministers, when, in any case, they had a well ascertained majority, did not press the question at once, without the trouble of discussing its merits. "That has been tried," was his reply; "but it would not do. The minister who should persevere in it would soon have to go out."

And yet, there is no direct responsibility of the British Premier to the people whom he governs. Powerful he is; absolute, almost, while he retains a controlling majority at his beck; but still, he must defer to public opinion; or, if he neglect such deference, loss of power and degradation from place, is the speedy penalty.

And thus, we of these United States, while we are responsible for our acts as a nation to no human power, must yet defer to the public opinion of mankind. If we would retain our station and influence among the nations of the earth, not only must our public acts be justifiable, but, before we consummate, we must take the trouble to justify them.

My motive in rising now is to furnish such small contribution as I may to the mass of evidence and argument so ably supplied from our Department of State, in vindication, to the world, of the course pursued by our government, on the great question of the day.

Accusations of a grave character are brought, in respectable quarters, impugning the justice of the measures recommended by the President and now under consideration by the House, in regard to the territory of Oregon. I do not speak of charges coming from foreign and interested sources; but of language used by the press here at home, and by members on this very floor. We of the majority may feel exceedingly well satisfied, that our course is just, and these charges unfounded; but it is not the less an imperative duty to defend the one and repel the other.

I select, as a specimen of the ground assumed by a portion of the press, a paragraph from a New York paper of good standing. Speaking of our ti-

tle to Oregon, the Journal of Commerce, in an editorial of December 25, says:

"The evidence, even as far south as Columbia river, is not all on one side, by a great deal. And when we come to latitude 49, the English claim is better than our own."

If this be true, then the President lost sight of right and justice, when he adhered to the offer of 49 as an ultimatum; and Mr. Pakenham was justified in expecting from our government some "further proposal more consistent with fairness and equity."

And, when some London journalist triumphantly quotes against us such a paragraph as that, drawn from the pages of one among the leading periodicals of the Union, he will find, in further aid of an argument about the reckless and grasping ambition of these States, certain resolutions touching war and Oregon, offered at your table, not by some young, rash, hot-headed partisan, but by a member from Massachusetts, [Mr. WINTHROP,] both able and experienced, a gentleman whose talent and standing no one disputes. The second of these resolutions declares:

"That it would be a dishonor to the age in which we live and in the highest degree discreditable to both the nations concerned, if they should suffer themselves to be drawn into a war upon a question of no immediate or practical interest to either of them."

An eminent British statesman once said, that "as we ought never to go to war for a profitable wrong, so neither ought we to go to war for an unprofitable right." There is much good sense in the maxim; and the gentleman from Massachusetts doubtless considers it strictly applicable in the present case.

The direct inference from his resolution is, in the first place, that the right in dispute, if indeed it be a right at all, is an unprofitable right; that it is of no practical importance whether we cede to England a part, or even the whole, of the territory lying south of 49 and north of the Columbia. He esteems it our imperative duty, rather than resort to war, to make some compromising division of this disputed tract.

I will ask the gentleman to take map in hand, and answer me a question or two. It avails nothing to talk vaguely of *some* compromise. Let him tell me *what* compromise, beyond that already offered, he suggests. If he recede but half a degree south