

SPEECH OF MR. ROBBINS,

OF RHODE ISLAND,

ON

PRESENTING CERTAIN RESOLUTIONS OF THE LEGISLATURE OF THAT STATE

ON THE SUBJECT OF

FORTIFICATIONS AT NARRAGANSETT BAY AND ITS ADJOINING COASTS.

Delivered in the Senate of the United States, June 17, 1836.

Mr. ROBBINS, of Rhode Island, presented the following Resolutions, which were read :

STATE OF RHODE ISLAND AND PROVIDENCE PLANTATIONS,
In General Assembly, May Session, A. D. 1836.

Resolved, That, in the opinion of this General Assembly, it is highly expedient that all such fortifications as may be adequate to the best defence and protection of the waters of the Narragansett bay and its adjoining coasts and country be completed by the United States, in such manner and at as early a period as is consistent with the convenience of Government, and a proper regard to the effective construction and durability of said works, as well as to the importance of its waters for purposes of navigation.

Resolved, That, in the opinion of this General Assembly, supported by the united opinions of the most eminent engineers, the Narragansett bay is susceptible of a complete defence; that, being accessible at all seasons of the year, and with nearly every wind, to the largest fleets which this country can ever maintain, it offers them within its bosom the only safe station, comprising such advantages, north of the Chesapeake bay; that it is invaluable as a port of expedition and naval rendezvous; and that thus not only the State, but the whole Union, is interested in its effective defence.

Resolved, That our Senators and Representatives in Congress be requested to lay these resolutions before the respective bodies of which they are members, and to use their best exertions to obtain the necessary appropriations to carry into effect the views of this General Assembly, as before expressed.

True copy. Witness :

HENRY BOWEN, Secretary.

After these Resolutions were read, Mr. ROBBINS addressed the Senate as follows :

I am glad of the opportunity afforded by these resolutions to speak upon a subject on which very erroneous ideas, or rather very imperfect conceptions, have obtained; I mean the importance of those waters, the subject of these resolutions, as connected with the naval defences of the country, and of the unwise, not to say culpable, neglect they have met with from the Government.

For securing maritime power and defence to this country, the waters of Narragansett bay present the most important point for a naval station and depot; by far the most important of any on the whole line of our seacoast, from the northeastern extremity of Maine, on the bay of Passamaquoddy, to the mouth of the Sabine, on the Gulf of Mexico. I say this on the authority of the ablest naval engineers of the world, especially of those of France and England, as well as of our own country; not only of the present time, but of all time back to our revolutionary struggle; all concurring in this opinion, an opinion founded upon a detail of the comparative advantages of these waters, with the waters of all other ports on our coast; a detail bottomed on actual and accurate and scientific inspection and examination and survey, and tested too by experience. France and England have possessed themselves, and long since, of the most accurate and minute surveys of those Rhode Island waters, with all their soundings and bearings, and with all their naval facilities of every description. Their knowledge on this subject has been, till recently, much more complete than our own; and it is a fact that

our surveys have been perfected by means of theirs. Their appreciation of the decisive and pre-eminent importance of those waters, in case of a war, has gone far before our own. As one proof of this, let me remind the Senate of one historical fact. At the treaty of peace in 1783, France had an idea of effecting a transfer of our dependence on Great Britain to a dependence on herself; and discountenanced our insisting on the acknowledgment of our independence by Great Britain as a preliminary to the treaty, and would have made the treaty the sole basis and guaranty of our independence, and herself its guardian; and, to strengthen her in this character of guardian, manifested a desire to have ceded to her a foothold in this country—suggesting that the island of Rhode Island should be that foothold, where and whence she could most effectively wield her power for our protection. But our ministers convinced the British minister that it was their interest as well as our own that their acknowledgment of our independence should be a preliminary to any treaty; and France was thus baffled in her sinister scheme.

I recollect in a conversation I once had with General Hamilton, many years ago, he spoke to me of the paramount importance of the waters of Rhode Island, in a view to our maritime power and defence; and then remarked to me that he had had occasion to know that they were viewed in the same light by the Governments both of France and England. Indeed, when the case is understood in all its merits, it decides itself; for then every one must see that, as to maritime power and defence, these waters present a point, formed by Nature herself, to be, as those nations consider it, the Gibraltar of this country. And as it would be in our hands for power and defence, so it would be in the hands of the enemy for power and offence. With a firm foothold there, the enemy would hold the reins in his own hands; to control the war, and direct its storm at will both by sea and land.

I have said that those waters possess advantages in the aggregate beyond comparison before those of any other port on our whole maritime frontier; and I now add, beyond those of any other port in the whole world. I say this, too, on the authority of those who have seen all our ports; who have visited the most celebrated ports in other parts of the world; who have made the subject a study, a professional, a scientific study; and who have compared and contrasted their respective and peculiar advantages. Other ports have some of the advantages in equal degree; but in the aggregate of advantages none can stand in competition with that port. This is not the time nor place for the particular detail, comparison, and contrast, proper for a full illustration of this fact; but a few of its prominent and more peculiar and pre-eminent advantages may now be indicated.

None then can compare with it for depth and safety of its waters; safely insured by the boldness of its shores, its freedom from shoals and sunken rocks, its excellence of anchorage ground, all combined with facility of ingress and egress to and from the ocean, and that to the largest ships of the line; a facility always existing, at all times existing, never to be impeded by the obstructions of ice, and never to be denied to that, as it is to all other ports on our

coast during the prevalence of certain winds; and those the most tempestuous and disastrous of all others to navigation on our coast, and the most imperiously demanding the protection of some harbor.

Look at New York for instance, and in comparison: her waters only admit the ingress and egress of frigates, and not frigates of the largest class at all times of tide; these must wait its high flood. Her bars interpose delays to their egress and ingress; delays always injurious, and, under given circumstances, would be disastrous—might be fatal. It is a port, then, incommensurable as a station for frigates: for our ships of the line it cannot be a station, nor a harbor to fly to for refuge. In the last war one of our frigates got a wound in passing those bars that crippled her for the cruise, and disappointed all her expectations. Yet what immense sums have been expended for our naval establishment at New York, while nothing has been expended for one at Rhode Island—a place, nationally considered, so much more important; as if we had forgotten to remember that New York, though important, is not the country.

Those Narragansett waters are at a point, too, in relation to the whole Atlantic frontier, which gives it a decided advantage over every other for sending expeditions to sea for the protection or relief of any part of the coast, or for naval war on the ocean. It is the vantage ground for commanding and ruling all the operations of naval warfare. Then it is susceptible of defences that will render it impregnable; giving safety to all within its waters against any assailing force. The plan of defences projected under the administration of a gentleman now an honorable member of this body, if completed, would give it this security. This safety to our fleets while within those waters is combined with this singular advantage, that they could not be shut in and confined there by blockade; for it is incapable of being blockaded by any fleet, however superior.

Add to all this, that these waters abound with sites for every species of naval establishment, and of naval preparation; placed in that happy medium between the extremes of heat and cold, as to be of all others in the world the most favorable throughout the year to health and to labor.

On a smaller scale, it is another *Ægean* sea, with islands as beautiful, though not as celebrated; and here let my partiality add, with daughters vying in beauty with Ionian maids.

In saying all I have said in favor of that station, and in giving it a preference to all others for a naval establishment, I but say after our most skilful naval engineers; I but repeat what I have learned from their reports, and from our most eminent naval men, with whom I have frequently conversed on this subject. I but express their opinion; their settled, their undivided, their unanimous opinion; an opinion enlightened by professional science, and matured by experience, by observation, by frequent comparison, and by long reflection; an opinion in which truth herself must be presumed to speak.

It is true, the Secretary of War, a mere military man; eminent, if you please, as a military man; eminent, I know, for other merits, but still a mere military man, stepping out of his own appropriate province into the province of the Navy, dissents from this opinion; and for reasons that show how little entitled he is to revise their opinion, to rejudge their judgment, and to overrule it. The Secretary represents that the enemy might find at Gardner's Island, in Long Island Sound, or at Buzzard's Bay, in the Vineyard Sound, an equivalent substitute as a station for the waters of Rhode Island; an idea that never in all time has once entered into the head of any one naval man of our country, or of any other. I venture to say, that to every naval man of our country, or of any other, acquainted with these waters, the idea would appear preposterous. I must doubt whether the Secretary has ever seen the waters of his substitutes; or, if so, whether he is at all advised of the requisites of a secure station for fleets with their line of battle ships. The waters of Rhode Island would be a station permanently secure, year in and year out, for the largest fleets with their line of battle ships. Can this be predicated of Gardner's Island or Buzzard's Bay? Those places may, and do afford a temporary summer station for single frigates

or small squadrons; but did either ship or squadron ever attempt and dare attempt to winter at either? Never. As a permanent station for fleets with their line of battle ships, such an idea never has, and never would, enter into the head of any naval commander.

Again, the Secretary represents that if the enemy took possession of Rhode Island with a superior fleet, he might easily be driven off by the land forces that might be concentrated and rapidly brought to bear upon that point. But what do our naval engineers and naval men say on this point? They say:

"If Narragansett bay was left in its existing state as to defence, an enemy would seize it without difficulty, and, by the aid of his naval supremacy, form an establishment in Rhode Island for the war. For this purpose, it would be sufficient for him to occupy the position of Tiverton Heights, opposite Hawland's ferry, which is of narrow front, easy to secure, impossible to turn. He might then defy all the powers of the Eastern States."

Never was more strikingly displayed the difference between writing *de arte*, which any body can do, but which is of very little value when done, and writing *ex arte*, which only the artist can do; but who only can give the true lesson, the lesson to be trusted to, the lesson to be guided by; than is displayed by the communication of the Secretary of War, and the reports of our naval engineers. I can write concerning statuary, so can you, so can any one else; but it is only the artist who can give the true lecture upon the art. What should we think of his sense who should adopt my crude ideas for his guide and his government, and reject those of a master statuary? Our folly would be scarcely less to take the ideas of a mere military man for our guide and our government, as to naval engineering and tactics, as to naval desiderata, and naval capabilities to supply them; in a word, as to all resources for naval warfare; who has never made a study of either, and to reject the instructions of men who have made these things the study and business of their lives, whose profession they are, and who are pre-eminent in their profession. The true way of testing the value of the Secretary's ideas would be to suppose them addressed to one of our eminent naval engineers, versed in naval tactics, and intimately acquainted with all our waters, and all our naval capacities, and to see how they would strike his mind. I fancy he would feel very much as Hannibal did when he heard the eloquent Grecian sophist harangue before him on the art of war; displaying, no doubt, all those common sense plausibilities on the subject, of which my honorable friend from Virginia (Mr. RIVES) seems to think so highly, while he undervalues and speaks so disparagingly of the lessons of professional and practical wisdom. All the audience were in raptures with the eloquent oration, and loud in its praises—all except Hannibal; he was mute; but, being pressed for his opinion, he at length said: "Why, gentlemen, I have seen fools before, and heard them speak; but I never before listened to any thing quite so foolish." Our naval engineer might be too courteous to speak out as Hannibal did; but secretly, I have no doubt, he would feel exactly as Hannibal did, especially as to this part of the Secretary's report. Here I cannot forbear saying that his general ideas as to a system of naval preparations proper for this country to adopt appear to me to have been hastily taken up—to want comprehension; in a word, that his sketches, meant for an outline of a system, appear to me not to be the sketches of a master mind; at least not of a master mind exerted on this subject. His system looks only to the operations of defensive war; not to the operations of offensive war as well as the defensive. And as to defensive war, his system looks primarily to that of particular cities, and not primarily, as it ought, to that of the whole country, in which case that of the particular cities would of course be included. Such a system as his for this country must be essentially defective; far from what it ought to be, far from what a perfect system would be. Surely this country ought to possess herself of the means of concentrating at will the whole force of her naval marine at some commanding point, and of thence directing at will that force in all its operations; and further, she ought to make it impossible for the enemy to deprive her of these means.

Though this object is attainable, demonstrably so, yet the Secretary's scheme aspires to nothing of the kind; on the contrary, he would leave the country in such a state as would give to the enemy an opportunity to possess herself of such means, and to turn them against the country. Giving credit to the Secretary for talents, as I do, I repeat that I think he must have taken up his ideas on this subject hastily, from a superficial acquaintance with naval subjects, contenting himself with the common sense views which present themselves to a mind not enlightened by naval science, nor improved, nor seeking to be improved by the lessons of professional and practical wisdom—ideas which, I am persuaded, he himself, on better information and further reflection, will renounce as unworthy of his high reputation.

If that day is to arrive when we are to have a great naval war, to assert rights or redress wrongs, as so many predict, and which is but too probable, from the conflicting claims and unsettled rights of nations on the ocean; and from the selfishness of arrogant power, making itself its own arbiter of contested rights, and deciding, almost invariably, in its own favor—it is, I say, but too probable that we are to have such a war. How soon, we must leave to the revelations of the unknown future. But, admonished by recent events, when another brand added to the fuel might have kindled into such a war, it would be fatuity to blind ourselves to the danger involved in the future, or to be unprepared for it when it does come. In the event of such a war, when the question is probably to be settled, whether we are to have our equal share of the equal dominion of the ocean; or to yield its supremacy to another Power—who can imagine that in this great contest the enemy will content himself with hovering on our coasts with his fleets; and thence making his predatory incursions on our shores? No; he would, if he could, plant himself on our coasts, in some position where he could have a secure rendezvous for his fleet; and whence he could command our whole commerce—strike where he pleased and when he pleased; and keep our whole immense extent of seaboard in one continual turmoil of alarm. Now Rhode Island, beyond all other places, would be exactly this position, and he would bend all his efforts to possess himself of it, and to entrench himself there. From that moment we should carry on the war under every disadvantage. He would compel us to multiply our land forces so enormously as to make the burden intolerable; or to leave our seaboard a prey to his predatory incursions. In one campaign he would make the difference of the expense of the war to us—more than ten-fold the cost of securing that Gibraltar to ourselves. With its possession, and secured to us as it may be, we should carry on the war with every advantage. With that Gibraltar in our hands, our fleets would do more towards the protection of our coast and our commerce than an army of a hundred thousand men, however judiciously placed on our seaboard. All the European commerce to the American seas, which, on its return, must pass along our coast, with that Gibraltar in our hands, would be peculiarly exposed to the enterprises of our naval marine. There and thence we should let slip the dogs of war, almost in sight of the congregated and passing game, to course it down and make it their prey. With that Gibraltar in our hands, no fleet of the enemy could live long upon our coast. For, at times, all fleets must find a refuge somewhere from the perils of the ocean; and those waters, too, as before remarked, afford the only port that can be made during the prevalence of certain winds, and these the most tempestuous and the most disastrous of all others to vessels on our coast; and, to crown all, those waters are incapable of being blockaded. All the fleets in the world could not blockade them. Now what would it cost to make and secure to ourselves the possession of that Gibraltar? About a million and a half of dollars. The honorable gentleman from Missouri (Mr. BENTON) says the expense of the works begun there has

already exceeded the estimate, viz. \$750,000. But the estimate he refers to was the conjectural estimate made without data, but estimate made upon data was \$1,600,000; and there is every probability that to complete these works will not exceed that amount of expense, \$1,600,000! Why it is but a drop to the ocean compared to the power it would give us for the war upon the enemy, or to the power it would give the enemy, if in his hands, for the war against ourselves.

If all these States were but one country, with but one head, looking to the whole, and only to the whole, and that head intelligent and thoroughly instructed in all his faculties and means of maritime power and defence, I hesitate not to say he would not lose one moment in making the waters of Narragansett Bay the head-quarters of all his naval preparations and operations. Why, then, has this great national concern been neglected by the nation so far as it has been neglected? From the combined influence of two causes: First, because the great and peculiar natural advantages of this point have not been fully appreciated, from not having been generally understood; and, secondly, because sectional interest has prevailed over the general interest. Points of minor importance to the whole country have carried it by the force of this sectional interest against the whole country. This should not be so. Why should the great West, for instance, and especially those who have a common interest in the maritime power and defences of the whole country, and only that common interest, throw their weight into the scale of any sectional interest on the Atlantic border, in opposition to the general interest? Why should they injure themselves by injuring the common country, to benefit, in particular, any one of the Atlantic States? The squabbles of the Atlantic States for preference in naval establishments and appropriations are nothing to them; and, instead of being parties to them, you ought, ye men of the West, to act as umpires to decide between the contending States, and to decide always and only in reference to the common good.

If our country herself would speak to her family of States, I believe she would say:

"Hushed be the voice of every State pleading for herself and her separate interest, and listen to mine. My interest is your interest, collectively; and, whatever you may think to the contrary, your interest individually. My great danger lies in the East, and is to come, when it does come, from that quarter and on my seaboard. The ocean is to be my battle-field; the Navy to be my strong arm to fight with and to strike down the enemy. Would you have that arm crippled, and its blows enfeebled? Then give to the enemy the superiority, by giving to him the means to acquire it. Give him, by your neglect, an opportunity to acquire a secure station for his fleets in the Narragansett waters; and thus a bridle hold upon the country. But if you would give to that arm irresistible strength; if you would clothe it with the energy of the thunder, whose bolt nothing can resist, and whose voice quails the world, you will make those waters the head-quarters of your naval preparations, you will make that a Gibraltar, and will make it your own forever."

Mr. R. concluded by submitting to the Senate the following resolution:

Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That the Commissioners of the Navy Board be, and hereby are, authorized and directed to report to the next session of Congress a plan for a navy establishment in the waters of Narragansett Bay, Rhode Island, with all such works, and at such points, as are proper therefor, to make it one of the principal naval establishments of the United States; and also to report an estimate of the expense thereof.

[The resolution came up for consideration on the following day, and was agreed to.]