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Speech of Henry Clay,

IN DEFENCE OF THE AMERICAN SYSTEM,

AGAINST THE BRITISH COLONIAL SYSTEM:

Delivered in the Senate of the United States, Feb. 2d, 3d and 6th.

[CONCLUDED]

I have now to consider the remaining of the two propositions which I have already announced. That is,

2dly. That, under the operation of the American System, the products of our agriculture command a higher price than they would do without it, by the creation of a home market; and, by the augmentation of wealth produced by manufacturing industry, which enlarges our powers of consumption both of domestic and foreign articles. The importance of the home market is among the established maxims which are universally recognised by all writers and all men. However some may differ as to the relative advantages of the foreign and home market, none deny to the latter great value and high consideration. It is nearer to us; beyond the control of foreign legislation; and undisturbed by those vicissitudes to which all inter-national intercourse is more or less exposed. The most stupid are sensible of the benefit of a residence in the vicinity of a large manufactory, or a market town, of a good road, or of a navigable stream, which connects their farms with some great capital. If the pursuits of all men were perfectly the same, although they would be in possession of the greatest abundance of the particular produce of their industry, they might, at the same time, be in extreme want of other necessary articles of human subsistence. The uniformity of the general occupation would preclude all exchanges, all commerce. It is only in the diversity of the vocations of the members of a community that the means can be found for those salutary exchanges which conduce to the general prosperity. And, the greater that diversity, the more extensive and the more animating is the circle of exchange. Even if foreign markets were freely and widely open to the reception of our agricultural produce, from its bulky nature, and the distance of the interior and the dangers of the ocean' large portions of it could never profitably reach the foreign market. But, let us quit this held of theory, clear as it is, and look at the practical operation of the system of protection, beginning with the most valuable staple of our agriculture.

In considering this staple, the first circumstance that excites our surprise is the rapidity with which the amount of it has annually increased. Does not this fact, however, demonstrate that the cultivation of it could not have been so very unprofitable? If the business were ruinous, would more and more have annually engaged in it? The quantity in 1816 was eighty one millions of pounds; in 1826 two hundred and four millions; in 1830, near three hundred millions. The ground of greatest surprise is, that it has been able to sustain even its present price with such an enormous augmentation of quantity. It could not have done it but for the combined operation of three causes, by which the consumption of cotton fabrics has been greatly extended, in consequence of their reduced prices, 1st, competition; 2d, the improvement of labor-saving machinery; and 3dly, the low price of the raw material. The crop of 1819, amounting to eighty millions of pounds, produced twenty one millions of dollars; the crop of 1823, when the amount was swelled to one hundred and seventy four millions, (almost double that of 1819) produced a less sum, by more than half a million of dollars; and the crop of 1824, amounting to thirty millions of pounds less than that of the preceding year, produced a million and a half of dollars more.

If there be any foundation for the established law of price, supply and demand, ought not the fact of this great increase of the supply to account, satisfactorily, for the alleged low price of cotton? Is it necessary to look beyond that single fact to the tariff—to the diminished produce of the mines furnishing the precious metals, or to any other cause, for the solution?—This subject is well understood in the south, and, although I cannot approve the practice which has been introduced, of quoting authority, and still less the authority of newspapers, for favorite theories, I must ask permission of the Senate to read an article from a southern newspaper. [Here General Hayne requested Mr. Clay to give the name of the authority, that it might appear whether it was not some other than a Southern paper expressing Southern sentiments. Mr. Clay stated that it was from the Charleston City Gazette, one, he believed, of the oldest and most respectable prints in that city, although he was not sure what might be its sentiments on the question which divides the people of South Carolina.] The article comprises a full explanation of the low price of cotton and assigns it to its true cause—increased production.

Let us suppose that the home demand for cotton, which has been created by the American System, were to cease, and that the 200,000* bales which the home market now absorbs were thrown into the glutted markets of foreign countries, would not the effect inevitably be to produce a further and a great reduction in the price of the article? If there be any truth in the facts and principles which I have before stated, and endeavoured to illustrate, it cannot be doubted, that the existence of American manufactures has tended to increase the demand, and extend the consumption of the raw material; and that but for this increased demand the price of the article would have fallen, possibly one half, lower than it now is. The error of the opposite argument is, in assuming one thing, which, being denied, the whole fails; that is, it assumes that the whole labor of the United States would be profitably employed, without manufactures. Now, the truth is, that the system excites and creates labor, and this labor creates wealth and this new wealth communicates additional ability to consume, which acts on all the objects contributing to human comfort and enjoyment. The amount of cotton imported into the two ports of Boston and Providence alone, (during the last year, and it was imported exclusively for the home manufacture) was 109,517 bales.

On passing from that article to others of our agricultural productions, we shall find not less gratifying facts. The total quantity of flour imported into Boston, during the same year was 281,504 barrels and 3,955 half barrels; of which there were from Virginia, Georgetown, and Alexandria, 114,222 barrels; of Indian corn, 681,131 bushels; of oats, 239,809 bushels, of rye, about 50,000 bushels; and of shorts, 33,489 bushels. Into the port of Providence, 71,369 barrels of flour, 216,662 bushels of Indian corn and 7,772 bushels of rye. And there were discharged at the port of Philadelphia, 420,353 bushels of Indian corn, 201,878 bushels of wheat and 110,557 bushels of rye and barley. There were slaughtered in Boston during the same year, 1831, (the only northern city from which I have obtained returns) 33,922 beef cattle, 15,430 stores, 84,453 sheep, and 26,871 swine. It is confidently believed that there is not a less quantity of southern flour consumed at the North than 800,000 barrels—a greater amount, probably, than is shipped to all the foreign markets of the world together.

What would be the condition of the farming country of the United States—of all that portion which lies north, east and west of James river, including a large part of North Carolina, if a home market did not exist for this immense amount of agricultural produce?—Without that market where could it be sold? In foreign markets? If their restrictive laws did not exist, their capacity would not enable them to purchase and consume this vast addition to their present supplies, which must be thrown in or thrown away, but for the home markets. But their laws exclude us from their market. I shall content myself by calling the attention of the Senate to Great Britain only.

The duties, in the ports of the United Kingdom, on bread stuffs, are prohibitory, except in times of dearth. On rice, the duty is fifteen shillings sterling per hundred weight, being more than one hundred per cent. On manufactured tobacco, it is nine shillings sterling per pound, or about two thousand per cent—On leaf tobacco, three shillings per pound, or one thousand two hundred per cent. On lumber and some other articles, they are from four hundred to one thousand five hundred per cent more than on similar articles imported from British colonies. In the British West Indies, the duty on beef, pork, hams, and bacon is twelve shillings sterling per hundred, more than one hundred per cent, on the first cost of beef and pork in the Western States. And yet Great Britain is the Power in whose behalf we are called upon to legislate so that we may enable her to purchase our cotton! Great Britain that thinks only of herself in her legislation!—When have we experienced justice, much less of favor, at her hands? When did she shape her legislation in reference to the interests of any foreign Power? She is a great, opulent, and powerful nation; but haughty, arrogant and supercilious. Not more separated from the rest of the world by the sea that girts her island, than she is separated in feeling, sympathy, or friendly consideration of their welfare. Gentlemen, in supposing it impracticable that we should successfully compete with her in manufactures, do injustice to the skill and enterprise of their own country. Gallant as Great Britain undoubtedly is: we have gloriously contended with her, man to man, gun to gun, ship to ship, fleet to fleet, and army to army. And I have no doubt we are destined to achieve equal success in the more useful, if not nobler contest for superiority in the arts of civil life.

I could extend and dwell on the long list of articles—the hemp, iron, lead, coal, and other items, for which a demand is created in the home market, by the operation of the American System; but I should exhaust the patience of the Senate. Where, where should we find a market for all these articles, if it did not exist at home. What would be the condition of the largest portion of our people and of the territory, if this home market were annihilated? How could they be supplied with objects of prime necessity? What would not be the certain and inevitable decline in the price of all these articles but for the home market? And allow me, Mr. President, to say, that, of all the agricultural parts of the United States which are benefited by the operation of this system, none are equally so with those which border the Chesapeake bay, the lower parts of North Carolina, Virginia, and the two shores of Maryland. Their facilities of transportation and proximity to the North gives them decided advantages.

But if all this reasoning were totally fallacious—if the price of manufactured articles were really higher, under the American System than without it, I should argue that high or low prices were themselves relative—relative to the ability to pay them. It is in vain to tempt to tantalize us with the lower prices of European fabrics than our own, if we have nothing wherewith to purchase them. If, by the home exchanges, we can be supplied with necessary even if they are dearer and worse, articles of American production than the foreign, it is better than not to be supplied at all. And how would the large portion of our country which I have described, be supplied, but for the home exchanges? A poor people, destitute of wealth or of exchangeable commodities, have nothing to purchase foreign fabrics. To them they are equally beyond their reach, whether their cost be a dollar or a guinea. It is in this view of the matter that Great Britain, by her vast wealth; her exerted and protected industry—is enabled to bear a burthen of taxation which when compared to that of other nations, appears enormous; but which, when her immense riches are compared to theirs, is light and trivial. The gentleman from South Carolina has drawn a lively and flattering picture of our coast, bays, rivers, and harbors; and he argues that these proclaimed the design of Providence that we should be a commercial people: I agree with him. We differ only as to the means. He would cherish the foreign, and neglect the internal trade. I would foster both. What is navigation without ships, or ships without cargoes? By penetrating the bosoms of our mountains, and extracting from them their precious treasures; by cultivating the earth, and securing a home market for its rich and abundant products; by employing the water power with which we are blessed; by stimulating and protecting our native industry, in all its forms; we shall but nourish and promote the prosperity of commerce, foreign and domestic.

I have hitherto considered the question in reference only to a state of peace; but a season of war ought not to be entirely overlooked. We have enjoyed near twenty years of peace; but who can tell when the storm of war shall again break forth? Have we forgotten, so soon, the privations to which not merely our brave soldiers and gallant tars were subjected, but the whole community during the last war, for the want of absolute necessaries? To what an enormous price they rose? And how inadequate the supply was, at any price? The statesman who justly elevates his views, will look behind as well as forward, and at the existing state of things; and he will graduate the policy, which he recommends, to all the probable exigencies which may arise in the republic. Taking this comprehensive range it would be easy to show that the higher prices of peace, if prices were higher in peace, were more than compensated by the lower prices of war, during which supplies of all essential articles are indispensable to its vigorous, effectual, and glorious prosecution. I conclude this part of the argument with the hope that my humble exertions have not been altogether unsuccessful in showing—

1 That the policy which we have been considering ought to continue to be regarded as the genuine American System.

2 That the free trade system, which is proposed as its substitute, ought really to be considered as the british colonial system.

3 That the American system is beneficial to all parts of the Union, and absolutely necessary to much the larger portion.

4 That the price of the great staple of cotton and of all our chief productions of agriculture, has been sustained and upheld, and a decline averted by the protective system.

5 That, if the foreign demand for cotton has been at all diminished, by the operation of that system, the diminution has been more than compensated in the addition I demand created at home.

6 That the constant tendency of the system, by creating competition among ourselves, and between American and European industry, reciprocally acting upon each other, is to reduce the prices of manufactured objects.

7 That, in point of fact, objects within the scope of the policy of protection have greatly fallen in price.

8 That if, in a season of peace, these benefits are experienced,—in a season of war, when the foreign supply might be cut off, they would be much more extensively felt.

9 And, finally, that the substitution of the British Colonial system for the American System, without benefiting any section of the Union, by subjecting us to a foreign legislation, regulated by foreign interests, would lead to the prostration of our manufactures, general impoverishment, and ultimate ruin.

And now, Mr. President, I have to make a few observations on a delicate subject, which I approach with all the respect that is due to its serious and grave nature. They have not, indeed, been rendered necessary by the speech of the gentleman from South Carolina, whose forbearance to notice the topic was commendable, as his argument, throughout, was characterized by the ability and dignity worthy of him, and of the Senate. The gentleman made one declaration which might possibly be misinterpreted, and I submit to him whether an explanation of it be not proper. The declaration, as reported in his printed speech, is—"the instinct of self interest might have taught us an easier way of relieving ourselves from this oppression. It wanted but the will, to have supplied ourselves with every article embraced in the protective system, free of duty, without any other participation on our part than a simple consent to receive them." [Here Gen. Hayne rose, and remarked that the passages which immediately preceded and followed the paragraph cited, he thought plainly indicated his meaning, which related to evasions of the system, by illicit introduction of goods, which they were not disposed to countenance in S. Carolina.] I am happy (resumed Mr. Clay) to hear this explanation. But, sir it is impossible to conceal from our view the facts that there is great excitement in South Carolina; that the protective system is strongly and violently denounced in popular meetings, & that the legislature itself has declared its purpose of resorting to counteracting measures—a suspension of which has only been submitted to, for the purpose of allowing Congress time to retrace its steps. With respect to this Union, Mr. President, the truth cannot be too generally proclaimed, nor too strongly inculcated, that it is necessary to the whole, and to all the parts—necessary to those parts, indeed, in different degrees, but vitally necessary to each; and that threats to disturb or dissolve it, coming from any of the parts, would be quite as indiscreet and improper, as would be threats from the residue to exclude those parts from the pale of its benefits.—The great principle which lies at the foundation of all free government, is that the majority must govern—from which there is or can be no appeal but to the sword. That majority ought to govern wisely, equitably, moderately, and constitutionally; but govern it must, subject only to that terrible appeal. If ever one or several States, being a minority, can, by menacing a dissolution of the Union, succeed in forcing an abandonment of great measures deemed essential to the interests & prosperity of the whole, the union, from that moment is practically gone. It may linger on, in form and name, but its vital spirit has fled forever! Entertaining these deliberate opinions, I would entreat the patriotic people of South Carolina—the land of Marion, Sumter, and Pickens—of Rutledge, Laurens, the Pinckneys, and Lowndes—of living and present names which I would mention if they were not living or present—to pause, solemnly pause! and contemplate the frightful precipice which lies directly before them. To retreat may be painful and mortifying to their gallantry and pride but it is to retreat to the Union, to safety, and to those brethren with whom, or with whose ancestors, they or their ancestors, have won, on fields of glory, imperishable renown. To advance, is to rush on certain and inevitable disgrace and destruction.

We have been told of deserted castles, uninhabited halls, and of mansions, once the seat of opulence and hospitality, now abandoned and mouldering in ruin. I never had the honor of being in South Carolina; but I have heard & read of the stories of its chivalry, and of its generous and open hearted liberality. I have heard, too, of the struggles for power between the lower and upper country. The same causes which existed in Virginia, with which I have been acquainted, I presume have had their influence in Carolina. In whose hands is now are the once proud seats of Westover, Curl, Maycox, Shirley,* and others on James river, and in Lower Virginia? Under the operation of laws abolishing the principle of primogeniture, & providing the equitable rule of an equal distribution of estates among those in equal degree of consanguinity, they have passed into other and stranger hands. Some of the descendants of illustrious families have gone to the far West, whilst others lingering behind, have contrasted their present condition with that of their venerated ancestors. They behold themselves excluded from their fathers' houses, now in the hands of those who were once their fathers' overseers, or sinking into decay; their imaginations, paint ancient renown, the fading honors of their name, glories gone by; too poor to live, too proud to work, too high minded and honorable to resort to ignoble means of acquisition, brave daring, chivalrous, what can be the cause of their present unhappy state? The "accursed" tariff presents itself to their excited imaginations, and they blindly rush into the ranks of those who, unfurling the banner of nullification, would place a State upon its sovereignty!

The danger to our Union does not lie on the side of persistence in the American System, but on that of its abandonment. If, as I have supposed and believe, the inhabitants of all the North and East of James river and all the West of the mountains, including Louisiana, are deeply interested in the preservation of that System, would they be reconciled to its overthrow? Can it be expected that two-thirds, if not three-fourths of the people of the United States would consent to the destruction of a policy, believed to be indispensably necessary to their prosperity? When, too, this sacrifice is made, at the instance of a single interest, which they verily believe will not be promoted by it. In estimating the degree of peril which may be incident to two opposite courses of human policy, the statesman would be short-sighted who should content himself with viewing only the evils, real or imaginary, which belong to that course which is in practical operation. He should lift himself up to the contemplation of those greater and more certain dangers which might inevitably attend the adoption of the alternative course. What would be the condition of this Union, if Pennsylvania and New York, those mammoth members of our confederacy, were firmly persuaded that their industry was paralysed, and their prosperity blighted, by the enforcement of the British Colonial System, under the delusive name of free trade? They are now tranquil, and happy, and contented, conscious of their welfare, and feeling a salutary and rapid circulation of the products of home manufactures and home industry throughout all their great arteries. But let that be checked let them feel that a foreign system is too predominate, and the sources of their subsistence and comfort dried up; let New England and the West, and the Middle States, all feel that they too are the victims of mistaken policy, and let these vast portions of our country despair of any favorable change, and then, indeed, might we tremble for the continuance and safety of this Union!

And need I remind you, sir, that this dereliction of the duty of protecting our domestic industry, and abandonment of it to the fate of foreign legislation, would be directly at war with leading considerations which prompted the adoption of the present Constitution? The States respectively surrendered to the General Government the whole power of laying imposts on foreign goods. They stripped themselves of all power to protect their own manufactures, by the most efficacious means of encouragement—the imposition of duties on rival foreign fabrics. Did they create that trust? Did they voluntarily subject themselves to this self-restriction; that the power should remain in the Federal Government, inactive, unexecuted, and lifeless? Mr. Madison at the commencement of the Government, told you otherwise. In discussing, at that early period, this very subject, he declared that a failure to exercise this power would be a "fraud" upon the Northern States, to which may now be added the Middle and Western States.

[Governor Miller asked to what expression of Mr. Madison's opinion Mr. Clay referred; and Mr. Clay replied, his opinion, expressed in the House of Representatives, in 1789, as reported in Lloyd's Congressional Debates.]

Gentlemen are greatly deceived as to the hold which this system has in the affections of the People of the United States. They represent that it it the policy of New England and that she is most benefitted by it. If there be any part of this Union which has been most steady, most unanimous, and most determined in its support, it is Pennsylvania. Why is not that powerful State attacked? Why pass her over, and aim the blow at New England? New England came, reluctantly, into the policy.—In 1824, a majority of her delegation was opposed to it. From the largest state of New England there was but a solitary vote in favor of the bill. That enterprising people can readily accommodate their industry to any policy, provided it be settled. They supposed this was fixed, and they submitted to the decrees of Government. And the progress of public opinion has kept pace with the developement of the benefits of the system. Now all New England, at least in this House, (with the exception of one small, still voice) is in favor of the system. In 1824 all Maryland was against it; now, the majority is for it. Then Louisiana, with one exception, was opposed to it, now without any exception, she is in favor of it. The march of public sentiment is to the South. Virginia will be the next convert; and, in less than seven years, if there be no obstacles from political causes, or prejudices industriously instilled, the majority of Eastern Virginia will be, as the majority of Western Virginia now is, in favor of the American system. North Carolina will follow later, but not less certainly! Eastern Tennessee is now in favor of the system. And finally its doctrines will pervade the whole Union, and the wonder will be, that they ever should have been opposed.

I have now to proceed to notice some objections which have been urged against the resolution under consideration. With respect to the amendment, which the gentleman from South Carolina had offered, as he has intimated his purpose to modify it, I shall forbear, for the present, to comment upon it. It is contended that the resolution proposes the repeal of duties on luxuries, leaving those on necessaries to remain, and that it will, therefore, relieve the rich, without lessening the burthens of the poor. And the gentleman from South Carolina has carefully selected, for ludicrous effect, a number of the unprotected articles, cosmetics, perfumes, oranges, &c.—I must say that this exhibition of the gentleman is not in keeping with the candor which he has generally displayed; that he knows very well that the duties upon these articles are trifling, and that it is of little consequence whether they are repealed or retained. Both systems, the American and the foreign, comprehend some articles which may be deemed luxuries? The Senate knows that the unprotected articles which yield the principal part of the revenue, with which this measure would dispense, are coffee, tea, spices, wines and silks. Of all these articles, wines and silks alone can be pronounced to be luxuries, and, as to wines, we have already ratified a treaty, not yet promulgated by which the duties on them are to be considerably reduced. If the universality of the use of objects of consumption determines their classification, coffee, tea and spices in the present condition of civilized society, may be considered necessaries. Even if they were luxuries, why should not the poor, by cheapening their prices, if that can be effected, be allowed to use them? Why should not a poor man be allowed to tie a silk handkerchief on his neck, occasionally regale himself with a glass of cheap French wine, or present his wife or daughter with a silk gown to be worn on Sabbath or gala days? I am quite sure that I do not misconstrue the feelings of the gentleman's heart, in supposing that he would be happy to see the poor, as well as the rich, moderately indulging themselves in these innocent gratifications. For one, I am delighted to see the condition of the poor attracting the consideration of the opponents of the tariff. It is for the great body of the people, and especially for the poor, that I have ever supported the American system. It affords them profitable employment and supplies the means of comfortable subsistence. It secures to them certainly, necessaries of life, manufactured at home, and places within their reach, and enables them to acquire, a reasonable share of foreign luxuries; whilst the system of gentlemen promises them necessaries made in foreign countries, and which are beyond their power and denies to them luxuries which they would possess no means to purchase.

The constant complaint of South Carolina against the tariff, is, that it checks importations, and disables foreign powers from purchasing the agricultural productions of the United States. The effect of the resolution will be to increase importations, not so much, it is true, from Great Britain, as from other powers, but not the less acceptable on that account. It is a misfortune that so large a portion of our foreign commerce concentrates in one nation; it subjects us too much to the legislation and the policy of that nation, and exposes us to the influence of her numerous agents, factors and merchants. And it is not among the smallest recommendations of the measure before the Senate, that its tendency will be to expand our commerce with France, our great revolutionary ally—the land of our Lafayette. There is much greater probability, also, of an enlargement of the present demand for cotton in France, than in Great Britain. France engaged later in the manufacture of cotton, and has made, therefore, less progress. She has, moreover, no colonies producing the article in abundance, whose industry she might be tempted to encourage.

The honorable gentleman from Maryland, (Gen. Smith) by his reply to a speech which on the opening of the subject of this resolution I had occasion to make, has rendered it necessary that I should take some notice of his observations. The honourable gentleman stated that he had been accused of partiality to the manufacturing interest. Never was there a more groundless and malicious charge preferred against a calumniated man. Since this question has been agitated in the public councils, although I have often heard from him, professions of attachment to this branch of industry, I have never known any member a more uniform, determined and uncompromising opponent of them, than the honorable Senator has invariably been. And if hereafter, the calumny should be repeated, of his friendship to the American system, I shall be ready to furnish him, in the most solemn manner, my testimony to his innocence. The honorable gentleman supposed that I had advanced the idea that the permanent revenue of this country should be fixed at eighteen millions of dollars. Certainly I had no intention to announce such an opinion nor do my expressions, fairly interpreted, imply it. I stated, on the occasion referred to, that, estimating the ordinary revenue of the country at twenty-five millions, and the amount of the duties on the unprotected articles proposed to be repealed by the resolution, at seven millions, the latter sum taken from the former would leave eighteen—But I did not intimate any belief that the revenue of the country ought, for the future, to be permanently fixed at that or any other precise sum. I stated that, after having effected so great a reduction, we might pause, cautiously survey the whole ground, and deliberately determine upon other measures of reduction, some of which I indicated. And I now say, preserve the protective system in full vigor; give us the proceeds of the public domain for internal improvements, or, if you please partly for that object and partly for the removal of free blacks, with their own consent, from the United States; and, for one, I have no objection to the reduction of the public revenue to fifteen, to thirteen, or even to nine millions of dollars.

In regard to the scheme of the Secretary of the Treasury for paying off the whole of the remaining public debt, by the 4th March, 1833 including the three per cent, and for that purpose, selling the bank stock, I had remarked that with the exception of the three per cent. there was not more than about four millions of the debt, due, and payable within this year: that, to meet this, the Secretary had stated, in his annual report, that the Treasury would have from the receipts of this year, fourteen millions of dollars, applicable to the principal of the

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*Mr. Clay stated that he assumed the quantity which was generally computed, but he believed it much greater, and subsequent information justifies his belief. It appears, from the report of the Cotton Committee, appointed by the New York Convention, that partial returns show a consumption of upwards of 250,000 bales; that the cotton manufacture employs near 40,000 females, and about 5,000 children; that the total dependents on it are 131,489; that the annual wages paid are $12 155,723; the annual value of its products, $32,036,076; the capital, $44,914,984; the number of mills, 795; of spindles, 1,246,503; and of cloth made, 250,461,990 yards. This statement does not comprehend the Western manufactures.

*As to Shirley, Mr. Clay acknowledges his mistake, made in the warmth of debate. It is yet the abode of the respectable and hospitable descendants of its former opulent proprietor.

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