Congress of the United States.

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES.

Monday, November 28, 1803.

DEBATE

On the passage of the bill fixing the SALARIES of certain officers therein mentioned.

[Continued from Saturday's Gazette.]

Mr. Taggart. Mr. Speaker. I rise for the purpose of stating some reasons for the vote which it is probable I shall give on the passing of the bill now before the house. I feel no hostility to the principle of the bill in general. I am not certain that any of the specific sums contemplated as salaries are too high. With the official duties of several of the departments I am unacquainted; and therefore consider myself as not being a competent judge. With respect to some of them, however, when we bring into view the great importance of the trust to the United States, the high responsibility of the respective officers, and the talents necessary for the prompt discharge of the duties, I am persuaded the salaries are not too high. This I view to be particularly the case with the secretaries of state and of the treasury. I believe, sir, that where an office is of such high trust and responsibility as to require men of the first characters for talents and integrity to fill it, it is the truest economy for government to give such encouragement as shall be adequate to the calling forth of those talents. Though the time has been in our country (and possibly may again arrive) when there was a loud call upon the patriotism of individuals, to make important sacrifices both of their own property and ease for the public good; yet in a time of profound peace and national prosperity; when we are blessed with a regular government; a productive revenue; and, a full treasury; adequate to all necessary expences, for a man to abandon the superintendance of his domestic concerns; and, so a great proportion of his time, the comforts of domestic life--and, as is frequently the case, the emoluments of a lucrative profession, and embark in the public service without an adequate compensation, is a species of sacrifice which the public has no right to expect from individuals. I make no doubt but the highest departments of state may be filled for a less sum than the one contemplated in this bill. But, to starve the departments by rendering the salaries inadequate to the calling forth the first talents in the nation, is the way to have them either filled with men unequal to the trust, or to force worthy men, who have it at their option to follow other honorable and lucrative employments, frequently to abandon the public service, thereby exposing the department to such frequent changes and resignations as must be highly injurious to the public. By saving in this way three or four thousand dollars we may run the hazard of losing millions, by having the business pass into inexperienced and unskillful hands, while, had an adequate compensation been allowed, the man of real talents and integrity would have felt an honest pride in continuing in the public service, and discharging the duties of his office with promptness and fidelity. Some have in this house spoken warmly of the merits of the gentlemen who fill the respective departments. I have no disposition to detract from their merits. But I apprehend, Mr. Speaker, that this is not a principle which ought to have the least influence in fixing the quantum of salaries for the several departments; and I trust is not the motive with any gentleman on this floor. Perhaps these departments never have been, and never will be filled by men for whom every member of this house has an equal esteem. Perhaps there never either was or will be a time, when, if the members of this house were to consult their own feelings of personal attachment, they would not, some of them at least, be led to make a discrimination in the several heads of departments. But the feelings of private esteem and friendship ought, in my opinion, to have no influence whatever in fixing the quantum of salaries. The only principles by which, as I apprehend, the house ought to be governed in making the specific appropriation, are the importance of the office itself to the United States, the responsibility of the respective officers, and the talents necessary for the discharge of their high trust. In this view of the subject I do not know that the salaries are too high, and shall not oppose the passing of the bill now before the house. But to the passing of the bill in its present form I still have objections, arising chiefly from the amendment introduced by my colleague from Massachusetts, (Dr. Eustis.) Having formed a high opinion of the candor, & having been several times witness to the accuracy of that gentleman upon the floor of this house, conjecture has been busy in enquiring what could possibly be his motive for introducing, and what possible advantages the bill could receive by being incumbered with the above amendment? If the bill cannot stand on the footing of its own intrinsic merits, it ought to be abandoned. Why then shall we attempt in an indirect way to prop it? For myself I can conjecture only two reasons for which a clause of this kind should be introduced. Either it must be adapted to the circumstances of those who were members of this house when the law of 1799 was passed, and who opposed the enacting of that law, to come forward in an indirect manner and practically own that their opposition to that law was wrong. If this is meant, I can certainly have no objection to gentlemen confessing an error; though the confession should be made in an indirect manner. I conclude, however, that this is not the intention, therefore does not the language of the amendment, apparently at least, amount to this? We have a secret conviction that the law in question is not quite right, but we do not wish to disoblige our friends by lowering the salaries, and we do no more than the majority of both houses did in 1799, to oblige their friends, and in order to shew that we do no worse, we will allude to that law, and make it the basis, of the present, thereby making it the scape goat to bear our transgressions. But should this be intended I think it will by no means answer the purpose. Reformation, particularly with regard to salaries, as well as other expences, was what was called for and expected. It will not satisfy that expectation to say we have done no worse than the congress of 1799. As I had not at that time the honor to be a member of this house, and consequently can have no confession to make, and as I feel a willingness that the law should stand upon the footing of its own intrinsic merits independent of the law of 1799, which has already once died a natural death, and after being again revived, is upon the point of expiring, I feel opposed to this amendment. But, Mr. Speaker, I have a still farther objection to it. By means of this amendment the bill, which was before sufficiently plain to the meanest capacity, becomes perplexed, and apparently at least, at variance with itself. The bill now before the house proposes to fix the salaries of certain officers, agreeably to a law of 1799. But this law did not fix the salaries of these officers. It was only a temporary grant for three years. I do not understand that any permanent law was ever made for fixing the salaries of these officers; only the law of 1789, which fixed the salaries of the two secretaries of state and of the treasury at 3,500 dollars each, and the others in proportion. The object of the present bill is to fix permanent salaries. But professedly to fix these upon the principles of a law which did not fix, and never was intended to fix them, appears to me to render the bill completely inconsistent with itself. I humbly conceive, therefore, that the amendment introduced by my colleague from Massachusetts, is not only needless, but tends to destroy the force and consistency of the bill itself; and for these reasons, though not opposed to the general principles of the bill, I cannot in its present form give it my vote.

Mr. Hastings. Mr. Speaker. I am one of those who are willing to allow to every public officer a reasonable, just and honorable compensation for his services. I am for annexing to the great and important offices of our government such salaries as shall be sufficient to induce persons of suitable and proper talents to fill them. I am not disposed to pay our public officers grudgingly for their labors, but I think the salaries we propose by this bill to grant are too high.

By the law of 1789, the salaries of secretary of state and secretary of the treasury were each fixed at three thousand five hundred dollars, and the salary of the secretary of war, at three thousand dollars. I would ask if those salaries did not then command the first talents of the country? Was not Mr. Jefferson the first secretary of state under the present government? And did he resign that office because the compensation was insufficient? I believe not. I have never understood that this was the cause of his resignation. As to the first secretary of the treasury (general Hamilton) when we consider his great professional talents as a lawyer, and the great profits he might have made by the exercise of those talents (probably to three or four times the amount of his salary as head of the treasury department) we cannot I think be surprised at his resignation; it must be more a matter of surprise, that he should have ever accepted of the office, or after having accepted it, that he should have continued in it so long as he did. Did the first secretary of war (general Knox) resign because his salary was insufficient? I have never understood that to have been his only reason for resigning—but admitting that the insufficiency of salaries was the only reasons, which induced those gentlemen to resign their offices, I then ask was there any difficulty in finding persons of suitable talents to fill those offices for the same compensations allowed to their predecessors? This, I believe, will not be pretended. What then were the reasons for augmenting the salaries of those officers in 1799. The reasons have been stated in the course of the debate—a war had been raging in Europe for four or five years; and one of the effects of that war upon this country was to advance the price of provisions and most of the necessaries of life beyond what perhaps had ever before been known in this country. Flour at that time, we are told was sold for fifteen and and sixteen dollars a barrel, which is now selling for six and seven dollars—house rents we are also told were much higher at that time in Philadelphia than at the present time—these are some of the reasons which I presume then induced the national legislature to increase the salaries of certain officers of the government for a limited time only—the enquiry then is, have the causes which gave rise to the temporary augmenta- of salaries in 1799 ceased to exist? If they have, ought not the effect also to cease? I would ask if it cost the heads of departments as much to live in this city now, as it did in Philadelphia in 1799? Are house rents as high, or have they ever been as high in this city, as in Philadelphia? I apprehend it will not be pretended that this now is, or ever has been the case. I have been informed that house rents in most parts of this city, except just in the neighborhood of the capitol, have (within twelve or eighteen months past) fallen forty or fifty per cent. and that within the same time, rents for houses the nearest to the capitol have fallen from twenty to twenty-five per cent. Are provisions as high now in this city or in Philadelphia, or in any part of the country, as they were in 1799? Is flour now selling for fifteen and sixteen dollars a barrel, and other articles of produce and of the first necessity, in the same proportion? Are the heads of departments, whose salaries we now propose to augment, in a situation which obliges them to receive and entertain more company in this city than in Philadelphia? At a time then, when the prices of house rent, of provisions and many articles of the first necessity, are reduced from what they were in 1799, some of them probably to nearly their standard prices in 1789. yet in these times of œconomy, when the cry is to save the public money, we are about to give an instance of our love of œconomy, by increasing the salaries of certain officers of our government.

One of my colleagues has assigned as one of his reasons for the proposed augmentation of salaries, that a war has recommenced in Europe, and that this war may produce the same effects in this country, in raising the price of produce and articles of the first necessity, which the last war produced. But will it not be prudent and proper for us to wait and know whether the same effects are produced by the present European war, before we undertake to increase salaries? Although my colleague does not now consider the proposed salaries to be too high, yet I find that in 1799, when house-rent and provisions, I apprehend, were much higher than they now are, he voted against the temporary augmentation of salaries—against those salaries which it is now the object of this bill permanently to establish. He says also, that he has not heard any complaints against salaries in that part of Massachusetts in which he lives. No doubt my colleague is correct; but compare the salaries proposed to be increased by this bill with the salaries of other persons in the government, with the pay of members of congress, with the salaries of the highest state officers, and they appear to be enormously high. In Massachusetts the governor has a yearly salary of 2,666 dollars and 66 cents. The judges of the supreme court, who in holding courts in the several circuits are obliged to be absent from their families half the year or more, have each a permanent yearly salary something short, I believe, of 1200 dollars, except the chief justice, who has something more than that sum. The treasurer, secretary of the state, and attorney-general, each permanent sa salaries, I think, of 1000 dollars; and yet I have never understood, that there has been any difficuly in Massachusetts in procuring suitable and proper persons to fill those important offices. I believe, however, that for a few years past some temporary grants have been made by the state to those officers, (excepting the governor) in addition to their fixed salaries.

The bill before the house is intended to increase and make permanent the salaries of the officers therein mentioned—the law of 1799 was only temporary; by that law the salaries of certain officers were increased for special and sufficient reasons, which then existed; but now, when those reasons, or many of them, no longer exist, we are about to augment salaries and render permanent those which were only limited and temporary.

Considering the increase and depreciation of money, arising from the increase of bank institutions and other causes, perhaps the salaries of the officers named in the bill, as at first established in 1789, may now be considered as too low; but the great augmentation which by this bill we propose to make to some of those salaries, I cannot but consider as too high for the present time, and I must therefore vote against the passage of the bill.

Mr. Varnum. My two colleagues have expressed an opinion, in which I agree, that the salaries of the officers mentioned in this bill as fixed before the year 1799, are, under the existing state of things, too low for the present time, but they have drawn different conclusions from this fact. I believe they are not now too high, and shall therefore vote in favor of the bill. For although I voted in 1799 against the bill for augmenting salaries, I believe there is a perfect consistency in the vote I then gave and in that which I shall this day give.—My colleague last up has stated that rents are fifty per cent. lower in this city than they were at Philadelphia in 1799. For such an opinion I can find no data. In my mind the statement is highly erroneous, and I believe the other statements of the gentleman are equally erroneous. I wish he had brought forward the data on which he hazarded such statements. He further states that provisions are at present forty or fifty per cent. lower than they then were. This remark may, perhaps, be just in its application to bread, but it will apply to that article only; and this arises from circumstances, of a temporary nature well known to every member of the house.—There were greater crops of wheat the summer before the last than were ever before known; and the surplus of those crops on hand has reduced the price. My colleague lives in the midst of a country where one great staple article, beef, is raised in great quantities. I will ask him whether that article has been higher at any period since 1799 than it has been for three months past. You may go through all the articles of living, and you will find them, on the average, to be about the same thing that they were in 1799. But will my colleague say that any kind of manual labor is now lower than it was at that time. He will not. He must acknowledge that the reverse is the case in the country where he lives; and that a laboring man is there enabled to procure more for the occupation of his time than he could five year ago. These being the facts, the conclusions of my colleague do not hold, when the principles on which he founds them, do not exist. I have reasons which justify me for voting for the bill. I believe that a person in genteel life might entertain company in Philadelphia in the year 1799 as well for 3,500 dollars, as he can here at this time for 5000 dollars.—If this be a fact, of which I have no doubt, the salaries allowed by this bill, bear only a proper proportion to those that then existed.

My colleague observes that we are in favor of making this bill perpetual. But he will recollect that the other day a resolution was introduced for making it temporary. Yet he voted against it, and though he now acknowledges that the salaries, as they stood before the year 1799, were too low, yet he does not make any specific proposition to increase them, but contents himself with voting against the whole bill.

My colleague has additional reasons for voting against this bill inasmuch as it is propropped up, he says, by the act of 1799. I voted for the amendment, to which the gentleman refers, for this reason. When the last act on this subject passed, we heard it echoed and re-echoed through the newspapers, that an economical, saving administration had raised their own salaries; and to prove this, a contrast must be made in distinct columns between the salaries as they existed previously to the passage of the act of 1799, and as they then stood, and in some districts of the country, the people were deceived and made to believe that this administration, instead of continuing had raised the salaries. This, together with the calumny, industriously circulated, that secret service money to a vast amount, was put into the hands of the president, alarmed the people. To prevent the repetion of like misrepresentation, I voted for the amendment.

Mr. Varnum concluded his remarks by observing that he should vote for the bill on the express principle that it did not give the executive officers higher salaries in this place than they received in Philadelphia. In addition to this consideration, is it probable, enquired Mr. Varnum, that gentlemen, competent to the discharge of the high duties of the first offices under the government, will serve as low here as they would in New-York or Philadelphia? Will they have no regard to the prospect of educating a rising family? Is this circumstance no inducement to an individual to accept a lower compensation, where the means of educating his children exist, than in a place where they are not to be found?

Mr. Elliott. I feel no disposition to detain the house many minutes upon this question. I shall be brief in my remarks with the less reluctance, from the reflection that it is almost impossible, that at the commencement of the debate it was almost impossible to say any thing new on the subject. But as I represent a portion of the American people, than whom none are more attached to the principles of political œconomy, or more sparing in the compensation they afford their public officers, and as the views I take are somewhat different from those of any gentleman who has spoken, I must be indulged in a very few observations.

I candidly confess, sir, that I have not examined this subject with that minute exactness with which I wish generally to investigate subjects of consequence that come before this house. To dispose my mind for a decision, I do not wish to calculate the exact differences between the prices of house rent, beef, flour or butter, at Philadelphia or Washigton, in 1799, or 1803: I do not wish to ascertain the precise sum necessary for the support of a family in genteel life; I do not ask what were the political sentiments of the men who raised the salaries to their present state: I do not ask for the information that the governor of Massachusetts receives 2,666 dollars and 66 cents; nor do I wish to inform other gentlemen that the governor of Vermont receives but 750 dollars as an annual salary. I am satisfied with general views of the state of society, of the importance of the offices in question, and the talents requisite for the discharge of their duties. These general views satisfy me that the blanks in the bill on the table have not been filled with sums too large. I think it unnessary to attempt to form a scale of the relative usefulness of those persons who may fill those offices at different times. But is it possible to arrest the progress of society and manners? I wish we could be as simple and economical as the ancient Romans. But I think it in vain to strive to stop the progress of society to refinement, or even to luxury and extravagance. The present question is not, shall we augment salaries? But shall we continue them as they are? Fears seem to be entertained by some gentlemen, that we must raise them hereafter, and some think the present law will be unpopular. We ought undoubtedly to raise them hereafter, if it should be necessary; but it is a strong argument with me in favor of the bill, that the quantum of salary which it contemplates has been established for some years; if we now reduce it, we shall have frequent complaints, and probably just ones, of its insufficiency, and we shall annually be employed in augmenting or reducing. I wish to make these salaries permanent, and to establish them on such a liberal basis, that there will be no probability of our being called upon again very soon for a further augmentation. My constituents are attached to the principles of economy. I am attached to them myself. But I believe that the whole people, were this subject properly explained to them, would be satisfied, although the round sums with which the blanks are filled seem large to the farmer and day-labourer.

While I do my duty, I am regardless of the consequences to my own popularity, which may result from the vote which I shall now give. I wish for no popularity which is not founded on independence of sentiment, and conduct dictated by a liberal policy.

Mr. Holland said, that though it was probable he should ultimately vote for the bill, he considered it exceptionable on account of its permanency. He did not consider this a proper time to fix the permanent salaries of their officers. He looked forward to the time when those officers might execute their duties for a lower sum than that at present necessary—The present situation of this city rendered their discharge extremely inconvenient. But the time was fast approaching when the city itself would afford talents for filling these offices which were at present drawn from a distance. For these and other reasons, he was in favor of limiting the period of the bill—For this purpose he moved a recommitment of the bill to a select committee, to fix a limitation to it.

[*Debate to be continued.*]

CHARLESTON, December 3.

Arrived, brig Aurora, Jervey, Bordeaux, 52 days.

Brig Charleston Packet, Bennet, Philadelphia, 9 days, 6 from the Cape. Spoke, November 26. schooner Ann Virginia, from St. Thomas, bound to Philadelphia. November 27, spoke ship Jefferson, from St. Kitts, bound to Portsmouth; and a brig from Baltimore, bound to Martinique.

Brig Venus, Webb, Philadelphia, 6 days.

Schooner Experiment, M'Carty, Montego Bay, 13 days.

Sch'r Fair-Lady, Snow, Cape-Nichola-Mole, 12 days. At anchor off Fort Johnson, with 130 sick French soldiers on board.

December 4.

Arrived, schooner Charleston, Marshall, St. Thomas, 15 days.

Brig Thetis, Sammis, N. York, 8 days.

Ship Tippoo Saib, Flagg, London, 54 days.

Sloop Huntress, Ferguson, Montego-Bay, 14 days.

Brig Minerva, Campbell, Malaga, 45 days.

Cleared, brig Mariner, Gage, N. York; brig Norfolk, Butler, Jamaica; sloop Revenue, Malsey, New-York.

December 6.

Capt. Sammis, of the brig Thetis, arrived here on Sunday, fell in with, on Thursday last, the brig Laurel, of Boston, from the West-Indies bound home, and received from on board her the mate and two hands belonging to the brig Charlotte, from Wilmington, N. C. a short time out, bound to the West-Indies, which had sprung a leak and filled, when these men took to one of the boats, and in about 24 hours were taken up by the Laurel. The captain and three others were left on board, who refused to leave the wreck. When capt. Sammis fell in with the Laurel, she had been searching a part of two days for the wreck, but was unable to find any trace of her whatever, and it was feared they had all gone to the bottom.

BY THIS DAY's MAIL.

BOSTON, November 12.

Arrived, ship Mary, Hoyt, Rotterdam, 42 days. Left the Levant, Sillsbee, of Boston; Columbia, Marblehead; Redress, Baltimore; Brutus, Bradford, Duxbury; Magnet, Lewis, N. York; Perseverance, Dickson, Norfolk; Aberdeen, Blair, Edenton. The four last were laden with tobacco from Virginia; had been detained 5 weeks by the French commercial agent, he having all their papers, and would not permit them to discharge their cargoes, in consequence of their having touched at Falmouth for orders. The Mary having passed the examination of the Dutch commandant at Helvoetsluys, was permitted to proceed, but was detained by the French commodore, in consequence of the Dutch muster-roll of the Mary's crew, not being signed by the French commercial agent at Rotterdam, and the captain was obliged to make a journey to Rotterdam to have it signed, after which she was permitted to proceed: but this was the cause of 48 hours detention, and the loss of a good wind. October 28, arrived the Susan and Eliza, Woodbury, Gloucester. Off Goree, spoke schooner Sea-Flower, of Damariscotta, from Alexandria, and barque Nixon, Shaw, from Havre, both bound in. In half an hour after the pilot left the Mary, off Goree, she was boarded from the Caroline, British frigate, & one seaman was impressed, viz. William Foster, born at Newburyport, with a legal protection from the custom-house at that place, dated June 13, 1803. Citizen Guse, the French commercial agent at Rotterdam, had, a few day's previous to the Mary's sailing, offered the consignees of the tobacco ships liberty to unload, provided they would export two-thirds of the amount of said cargoes in produce or manufactures of the country. This, though an arbitrary proposal, was agreed to by the consignees and masters, and the bonds presented to citizen Guse, to sign; but he *spread* his wings and flew away, and left them to pursue some other mode to enable them to extricate themselves from their unpleasant situation.

Same day, a brig from Baltimore, in 20 days.

Same day, the Trial, Newcomb, Wilmington, (N. C.); Friendship, Snow, Richmond.

December 13.

FROM HOLLAND.

Captain Hoyt, who sailed from Rotterdam on the 29th of October, informs