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Speech of Mr. Clay,

ON THE SUBJECT OF ABOLITION PETITIONS.

Thursday, February 7, 1839. MR. CLAY, of Kentucky, rose to present a petition, and said :- I have received, Mr. President, a petition to the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States, which wish to present to the Senate. It is signed by quences, however calamitous they may be. With and abolition incidentally, was brought into notice several hundred of the inhabitants of the District of Columbia, and chiefly of the city of Washington. Among them I recognize the name of the highly esteemed mayor of the city, and other respectable names, some of which are personally and well known to me. They express their regret that the subject of the abolition of slavery within the District of Columbia continues to be pressed upon the consideration of Congress by inconsiderate and misguided individuals in other parts of the United States. They state that they do not desire the abolition of slavery within the District, even if Congress possess the very unquestionable power of abolishing it, without the consent of the people whose interests would be immediately and directly affected by the measure; that it is a question solely between the people of the District

and their only constitutional legislature, purely municipal, and one in which no exterior influence or interest can justly interfere; that, if at any future period the people of this District should desire the abolition of slavery within it, they will doubtless make their wishes known, when it will be time enough to take the matter into consideration; that they do not, on this occasion, present themselves to Congress because they are slaveholders-many of them are not-some of them are conscientiously opposed to slavery-but they appear because they justly respect the rights of those who own that description of property, and because they entertain a deep conviction that the continued agitation of the question by those who have no right to interfere with it, has an injurious influence on the peace and tranquillity of the community, and upon the well-being and happi- altogether separated from those under which they and absolutely excluding all power over the exis- persons concerned in the government of the United ness of those who are held in subjection; they live. finally protest as well against the unauthorized intervention of which they complain, as against any legislation on the part of Congress in compliance therewith. But, as I wish these respectable states, were only means towards the attainment of no voice in parliament. The West India slavepetitioners to be themselves heard, I request that their petitions may be read. [It was read accordingly, and Mr. CLAY proceeded.] I am informed by the committee which requested me to offer this petition, and believe, that it expresses the almost unanimous sentiments of the people of the District of Columbia,

The performance of this service affords me, said Mr. C. a legitimate opportunity, of which, with the permission of the senate, I mean now to avail myself, to say something, not only on the particular objects of the petition, but upon the great and interesting subject with which it is intimately associated.

It is well known to the senate, said Mr. CLAY, that I have thought that the most judicious course with abolition petitions has not been of late pursued by Congress. I have believed that it would have been wisest to have received and referred them, without opposition, and to have reported against their object in a calm and dispassionate and argumentative appeal to the good sense of the whole community. It has been supposed, however, by a majority of Congress that it was most expedient either not to receive the petitions at all, or, if formally received, not to act definitively upon them. There is no substantial difference between these opposite opinions, since both look to an absolute rejection of the prayer of the petitioners. But there is a great difference in the feet some of proceeding; and Mr. President some he be no more desirous of our society than we are too often prevails to seize hold of every thing grantor. The grant in the case we are considerform of proceeding; and, Mr. President, some experience in the conduct of human affairs has taught me to believe that a neglect to observe established forms is often attended with more mischievous consequences than the infliction of a positive injury. We all know that, even in private life, a violation of the existing usages and ceremonies of society cannot take place without serious prejudice. I fear, sir, that the abolitionists have acquired a considerable apparent force by blending with the object which they have in view a collateral and totally different question arising out of an illegal violation of the right of petition. know full well, and take great pleasure in testifying, that nothing was remoter from the intention of the majority of the senate, from which I differed, than to violate the right of petition in any case in which, according to its judgment, that right could be constitutionally exercised, or where the object of the petition could be safely or properly granted. Still, it must be owned that the abolitionists have seized hold of the fact of the treatment which their petitions have received in Congress, and made injurious impressions upon the minds of a large portion of the community. This, I think, might have been avoided by the course which I should have been glad to have seen pursued.

some of those topics which I think might have their proceedings is, if these should be found for that reason, from being disposed to accuse our government is not bound by it. And if the been usefully embodied in a report by a committee insufficient, to invoke, finally, the more potent adversaries of being abolitionists. of the senate, and which I am persuaded, would powers of the bayonet. have checked the progress, if it had not altogether arrested the efforts, of abolition. I am sensible, proceedings of the ultra-abolitionists that I would gress is invoked by these abolition petitioners, dorser for my friend on a note discounted in bank. sir, that this work would have been accomplished seriously invite every considerate man in the upon the subject of domestic slavery. The first He applies to me to endorse another to renew it, with much greater ability and with much happier | country solemnly to pause, and deliberately to | relates to it as it exists in the District of Columbia. | which I do in blank. Now, this gives him power effect, under the auspices of a committee, than it reflect, not merely on our existing posture, but The following is the provisions of the constitution to make any other use of my note which he can be by me. But, anxious as I always am to upon that dreadful precipice down which they of the United States in reference to that matter: pleases. But if, instead of applying it to the contribute whatever is in my power to the har- would hurry us. It is because these ultra-aboli- To exercise exclusive legislation in all cases intended purpose, he goes to a broker and sells it, be, to dissuade the public from continuing to agitate a subject fraught with the most direful conse-

and good will amongst mankind. The next class | power to abolish slavery as it existed in the several | commonwealths, and in the ceded territory, as it consists of apparent abolitionists—that is, those states, and that these states themselves had exclu- now continues to exist in all of them. Neither who, having been persuaded that the right of peti- | sive jurisdiction over the subject. The report was | Maryland nor Virginia could have anticipated tion has been violated by Congress, co-operate generally acquiesced in, and satisfaction and tran- that, whilst the institution remained within their with the abolitionists for the sole purpose of as- quillity ensued; the abolition societies thereafter respective limits, its abolition would be attempted serting and vindicating that right. And the third limiting their exertions, in respect to the black by congress without their consent. Neither of class are the real ultra-abolitionists, who are re- population, to offices of humanity within the scope | them would probably have made an unconditional solved to persevere in the pursuit of their object of existing laws. at all hazards, and without regard to any conse- The next period when the subject of slavery, result. them the rights of property are nothing; the defi- and discussion, was that on the memorable occa- tution, and the avowed object of the acquisition ciency of the powers of the general government | sion of the admission of the state of Missouri into | of the territory, two duties arise on the part of is nothing; the acknowledged and incontestable | the Union. The struggle was long, strenuous, congress. The first is, to render the District powers of the states are nothing; civil war, a and fearful. It is too recent to make it necessary dissolution of the Union, and the overthrow of a to do more than merely advert to it, and to say, government of the whole Union; the other is, to government in which are concentrated the fondest | that it was finally composed by one of those comhopes of the civilized world, are nothing. A sin- promises characteristic of our institutions, and of promote their happiness and prosperity. These gle idea has taken possession of their minds, and | which the constitution itself is the most signal | objects are totally distinct in their nature, and, in onward they pursue it, overlooking all barriers, instance. new state, comprising within its limits the institu- | slaves in the islands adjacent to our country. tion of domestic slavery, are but so many means | Such is the similarity in laws, in language, in | near forty years without the slightest inconve-

whilst I recognize in the justly wounded feelings | are? non-intercourse will exist between us. Yes, sir, other. foreign and kindred people.

our country at which the spirit of abolition dis- actual cessions which were made by the states of sive, is the affair of the liberation of six thousand There are three classes of persons opposed, or played itself. The first was immediately after | Maryland and Virginia. The object of the cession | negro slaves in this District, disconnected with apparently opposed, to the continued existence of the formation of the present federal government of the United | the three millions of slaves in the United States, slavery in the United States. The first are those | When the constitution was about going into ope- | States; and the grant in the constitution of exclu- of sufficient magnitude to agitate, distract, and who, from sentiments of philanthropy and human- ration, its powers were not well understood by sive legislation must be understood, and should be embitter this great confederacy? ity, are conscientiously opposed to the existence | the community at large, and remained to be accu- always interpreted, as having relation to the object | The next case in which the petitioners ask the of slavery, but who are no less opposed, at the rately interpreted and defined. At that period of the cession. It was with a full knowledge of exercise of the power of congress, relates to slavery same time, to any disturbance of the peace and numerous abolition societies were formed, com- this clause in the constitution that those two states in the territory of Florida. tranquillity of the Union, or the infringement of prising not merely the society of Friends, but ceded to the general government the ten miles | Florida is the extreme southern portion of the the powers of the states composing the confede- many other good men. Petitions were presented square, constituting the District of Columbia. In United States. It is bounded on all its landsides racy. In this class may be comprehended that to Congress, praying for the abolition of slavery. | making the cession, they supposed that it was to | by slave states, and is several hundred miles from peaceful and exemplary society of 'Friends,' one They were received without serious opposition, be applied, and applied solely, to the purposes of the nearest free state. It almost extends within of whose established maxims is, an abhorrence of referred, and reported upon by a committee. The a seat of government, for which it was asked. I the tropics, and the nearest important island to it

reckless and regardless of all consequences. With The third is that in which we now find our- of exclusive legislation, that distinction should be this class, the immediate abolition of slavery in | selves. Various causes, Mr. President, have con- | constantly borne in mind. Is it necessary, in order the District of Columbia, and in the territory of | tributed to produce the existing excitement on the | to render this place a comfortable seat of the Florida, the prohibition of the removal of slaves | subject of abolition. The principal one, perhaps, | general government, to abolish slavery within its from state to state, and the refusal to admit any is the example of British emancipation of the limits? No one can or will advance such a pro-

conducing to the accomplishment of the ultimate | institutions, and in common origin, between Great | nience from the presence of domestic slavery. Is but perilous end at which they avowedly and Britain and the United States, that no great mea- it necessary to the well being of the people of the boldly aim; are but so many short stages in the sure of national policy can be adopted in the one District that slavery should be abolished from long and bloody road to the distant goal at which | country without producing a considerable degree of | amongst them? They not only neither ask nor they would finally arrive. Their purpose is abo- influence in the other. Confounding the totally desire, but are almost unanimously opposed to it. lition, universal abolition, peaceably if it can, different cases together, of the powers of the British It exists here in the mildest and most mitigated forcibly if it must. Their object is no longer con- parliament and those of the United form. In a population of 39,834 there were, at the cealed by the thinnest veil; it is avowed and States, and the totally different situations of the last enumeration of the population of the United proclaimed. Utterly destitute of constitutional or | British West India islands, and the slaves in the | States, but 6,119 slaves. The number has not other rightful power, living in totally distinct sovereign and independent states of this confede- probably much increased since. They are discommunities, as alien to the communities in which | racy, superficial men have inferred from the unde- | persed over the ten miles square, engaged in the the subject on which they would operate resides, | cided British experiment the practicability of the | quiet pursuits of husbandry, or in menial offices so far as concerns political power over that sub- abolition of slavery in these states. The powers | in domestic life. If it were necessary to the ject, as if they lived in Africa or Asia, they of the British parliament are unlimited, and are efficiency of this place as a seat of the general nevertheless promulgate to the world their pur- often described to be omnipotent. The powers government to abolish slavery, which is utterly pose to be to manumit forthwith, and without of the American congress, on the contrary, are denied, the abolition should be confined to the compensation, and without moral preparation, few, cautiously limited, scrupulously excluding necessity which prompts it, that is, to the limits of three millions of negro slaves, under jurisdictions | all that are not granted, and, above all, carefully | the city of Washington itself. Beyond those limits, tence or continuance of slavery in the several | States have no more to do with the inhabitants of I have said that the immediate abolition of states. The slaves, too, upon which British legis- the District than they have with the inhabitants of slavery in the District of Columbia and in the lation operated, were not in the bosom of the the adjacent counties of Maryland and Virginia territory of Florida, and the exclusion of new kingdom, but in remote and feeble colonies having which lie beyond the District. a much more important end. Unfortunately, they | holder was neither represented nor representative | lumbia, whilst it remains in Virginia and Maryare not the only means. Another, and much more in that parliament. And whilst I most fervently land, situated, as that District is, within the very lamentable one is that which this class is endea- | wish complete success to the British experiment of | heart of those states, would expose them to great vouring to employ, of arraying one portion against | West India emancipation, I confess that I have | practical inconvenience and annoyance. The another portion of the Union. With that view, in | fearful forebodings of a disastrous termination of | District would become a place of refuge and all their leading prints and publications, the alleged | it. Whatever it may be, I think it must be ad- | escape for fugitive slaves from the two states, and horrors of slavery are depicted in the most glowing | mitted that, if the British parliament treated the | a place from which the spirit of discontent, inand exaggerated colours, to excite the imagina- | West India slaves as free men, it also treated the | subordination, and insurrection might be fostered tions, and stimulate the rage of the people in the | West India freemen as slaves. If, instead of these | and encouraged in the two states. Suppose, as free states against the people in the slave states. | slaves being separated by a wide ocean from the | was at one time under consideration, Pennsyl-The slaveholder is held up and represented as the parent country, three or four millions of African vania had granted ten miles square within its most atrocious of human beings. Advertisements | negro slaves had been dispersed over England, | limits for the purpose of a seat of the general of fugitive slaves and of slaves to be sold are care- | Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, and their owners | government: could congress, without a violation fully collected and blazoned forth, to infuse a spirit | had been members of the British parliament—a | of good faith, have introduced and established of detestation and hatred against one entire and case which would have presented some analogy | slavery within the bosom of that commonwealth, the largest section of the Union. And like a to that of our own country-does any one believe in the ceded territory, after she had abolished it notorious agitator upon another theatre, they | that it would have been expedient or practicable | so long ago as the year 1780? Yet the inconvewould hunt down and proscribe from the pale of to have emancipated them, to remain, with all nience to Pennsylvania in the case supposed civilized society the inhabitants of that entire | their embittered feelings, in the United Kingdom, | would have been much less than that to Virginia section. Allow me, Mr. President, to say, that | boundless as the powers of the British parliament | and Maryland in the case we are arguing.

of the minister of the United States at the court of Other causes have conspired with the British | Senate, at its last session, solemnly declared that St. James much to excuse the notice which he example to produce the existing excitement from it would be a violation of implied faith, resulting was provoked to take of that agitator, in my hum- abolition. I say it with profound regret, but with from the transaction of the cession, to abolish ble opinion, he would better have consulted the no intention to occasion irritation here or else- slavery within the District of Columbia. And dignity of his station and of his country in treat- | where, that there are persons in both parts of the | would it not be? By implied faith is meant that ing him with contemptuous silence. He would | Union, who have sought to mingle abolition with | when a grant is made for one avowed and deexclude us from European society—he who him- | politics, and to array one portion of the Union | clared purpose, known to the parties, the grant self can only obtain a contraband admission, and against the other. It is the misfortune in free should not be perverted to another purpose, unof his, he may rest assured that a state of eternal | which can strengthen the one side or weaken the | ing, of the territory of Columbia, was for a seat

I think the American minister would have best | Charges of fostering abolition designs have been | accomplish that object is carried along by the pursued the dictates of true dignity by regarding | heedlessly and unjustly made by one party against | grant. But the abolition of slavery is not necesthe language of the member of the British House | the other. Prior to the late election of the present | sary to the enjoyment of this site as a seat of the of Commons as the malignant ravings of the plun- president of the United States, he was charged general government. The grant in the constituderer of his own country, and the libeller of a with being an abolitionist, and abolition designs tion, of exclusive power of legislation over the were imputed to many of his supporters. Much District, was made to insure the exercise of an But the means to which I have already adverted as I was opposed to his election, and am to his exclusive authority of the general government to are not the only ones which this third class of administration, I neither shared in making nor render this place a safe and secure seat of governultra-abolitionists are employing to effect their | believing the truth of the charge. He was scarce- | ment, and to promote the well being of the inhabiultimate end. They began their operations by ly installed in office before the same charge was | tants of the District. The power granted ought to

appealing to the humanity, and enlightening the Mr. President, it is not true, and I rejoice that which it was granted. The language of the grant understandings of the slave-holding portion of the | it is not true, that either of the two great parties | was necessarily broad, comprehensive, and exclu-Union. If there were some kindness in this in this country has any designs or aim at abolition. sive, because all the exigencies which might arise avowed motive, it must be acknowledged that I should deeply lament if it were true. I should to render this a secure seat of the general governthere was rather a presumptuous display also of | consider, if it were true, that the danger to the | ment could not have been foreseen and provided an assumed superiority in intelligence and know- stability of our system would be infinitely greater for. The language may possibly be sufficiently ledge. For some time they continued to make | than any which does, I hope, actually exist. | comprehensive to include a power of abolition, these appeals to our duty and interest; but | Whilst neither party can be, I think, justly ac- | but it would not at all thence follow that the impatient with the slow influence of their logic | cused of any abolition tendency or purpose, both | power could be rightfully exercised. The case upon our stupid minds, they recently resolved to | have profited, and both have been injured in par- | may be resembled to that of a plenipotentiary change their system of action. To the agency of | ticular localities, by the accession of abstraction | invested with a plenary power, but who, at the their powers of persuasion they now propose to of abolition support. If the account were fairly same time, has positive instructions from his substitute the powers of the ballot box; and he stated, I believe the party to which I am opposed government as to the kind of treaty which he is must be blind to what is passing before us, who has profited much more, and been injured much to negociate and conclude. If he violates those And I desire now, Mr. President, to advert to does not perceive that the inevitable tendency of less, than that to which I belong. But I am far, instructions, and concludes a different treaty, his

Mr. President, it is at this alarming stage of the | the several cases in which the authority of Con- example drawn from private life. I am an en-

mony, concord, and happiness of this great people, tionists have ceased to employ the instruments of whatsoever over such District (not exceeding ten | thereby doubling my responsibility for him, he I feel myself irresistibly impelled to do whatever reason and persuasion, have made their cause miles square) as may by cession of particular commits a breach of trust, and a violation of the is in my power, incompetent as I feel myself to political, and have appealed to the ballot box that states, and the acceptance of congress, become good faith implied in the whole transaction.

war in all its forms, and the cultivation of peace report stated that the general government had no When it was made, slavery existed in both those cession, if they could have anticipated such a

> From the nature of the provision in the constiavailable, comfortable and convenient, as a seat of govern the people within the District so as best to interpreting and exercising the grant of the power position. The government has remained here

It was upon this view of the subject that the of government. Whatever power is necessary to professing to employ only persuasive means in directed against those who opposed his election. be interpreted and exercised solely to the end for foreign government is aware of the violation, it And now, Mr. President, allow me to consider acts in bad faith. Or it may be illustrated by an

I am induced, upon this occasion to address you. the seat of government of the United States.' But, Mr. President, if this reasoning were as There have been three epochs in the history of This provision preceded, in point of time, the erroneous as I believe it to be correct and conclu-