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PURCHASE OF ALASKA.

SPEECH

OF

HON. LEONARD MYERS, OF PENNSYLVANIA,

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, JULY 1, 1868.

The Committee of the Whole on the state of the Union having under consideration the bill making an appropriation of money to carry into effect the treaty with Russia of March 30, 1867—

Mr. MYERS said:

Mr. CHAIRMAN: We are about to determine a question which must have an important bearing on our future history. The treaty-making power—the President and Senate—has, so far as it can, acquired what is known as Russian America or Alaska, an empire on the American continent, yet undeveloped it is true, but immense in its resources and extent, and it remains for the House of Representatives to approve or condemn the purchase. No one doubts that our appropriation of the purchase-money is needed to perfect the agreement. With this the possession will be an accomplished fact. Without it, to say the least, there will be difficulty in the public mind, and if Russia shall withdraw and resume authority over this territory or sell it to another Power, still greater doubt as to which would have been the better course.

I will not for a moment admit that the action of the President and Senate binds us to complete any purchase of territory whatever. If the treaty-making power extended thus far we should be required to accept a country although inhabited by millions of slaves, or thousands of miles distant, though its religion were inclosed in the Koran or its people dwelt at the feet of polygamy and barbarism. If Alaska could be thus acquired, why not China or Japan? To state the proposition that the House of Representatives need not be consulted in such an event is its own best refutation. It is unnecessary to trouble the committee with precedents. The House of Representatives asserted its right in this regard, even against the protest of Washington, as early as 1794 in relation to the British treaty, and has in no instance that I am aware of surrendered this right. Nor is the objection solely that a grant of money must be made by law before the treaty can be carried to its perfect consumma-

tion. It is for the people through their Representatives to say whether from locality or for any cause an acquisition of territory is subversive in their opinion of the interests or principles of the Government.

Whether we choose to concur in and perfect this purchase is an entirely different matter. For one, I am in favor of so doing, and in committee agreed to the report of its distinguished chairman, [Mr. BANKS,] except as to this stronger assertion than his of our own power. That the treaty is with a nation which has been our constant friend, sympathizing in our struggle for the preservation of the Union is, I confess, not without its due influence; and when it is remembered that a year has passed, and months of possession since the treaty, without protest on the part of this House, that adds much to the other considerations in favor of the appropriation.

Mr. Chairman, the acquisition of Alaska has encountered in this House an opposition of the bitterest description—an open one, however, which deserves to be met with like distinctness. Its coast is represented as dreary and inhospitable beyond belief; its interior as scarcely known, or where known uninviting and valueless; the purchase itself utterly uncalled for and reprehensible. Ridicule, the most powerful of weapons, is launched from able tongues to drive away the American flag which now floats above it. Finally, the demand is that Russia be requested to repossess this domain and relieve us from its incumbrance.

When, after the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, a similar measure was proposed, an able statesman who had not favored the Mexican war, Mr. Vinton, said:

“That this country (California and New Mexico) would never be surrendered to Mexico might be put down as a fixed fact. It was just as certain as that Georgia would never be given back to the King of England.”

I do not believe Alaska will be given up. I will notice directly the statements on which this opposition is founded. They will be shown often incorrect, and generally insufficient to overbalance the benefits of the treaty. But for

the present I choose to treat the subject in an aspect which overshadows all others. THE POSSESSION OF ALASKA IS A QUESTION OF POWER.

The North American continent for a long time was held by England, Spain, and France. The former, which, contrary to its early instincts of aggrandizement and naval science, turned away from its shores the "world-seeking Genoese," made haste to repair the error, and in less than five years afterward the Venetian Cabots from Labrador to Florida gave her the outlines of a new empire. For three centuries thus, a few European Powers, with varying fortunes, acquired and divided North America. Then came the war of the Revolution and its conquest from Great Britain, and very soon the United States began to discuss territorial questions and make assertions of doctrine in regard to them. Those assertions have been constant, until the American doctrine is unmistakable. We have kept aloof from the desire for foreign territory; we have steadily refused to acquire new territory *here* simply by conquest; Mexico was ours by the force of arms, and we restored it; but we have just as steadily endeavored to remove the interference which monarchical institutions in North America cannot fail to produce. Thus Florida was acquired *by treaty* from Spain, and Texas, its nominal exchange, came to us inevitably. Thus France bade adieu to our continent in *ceding* Louisiana, nor could the armed legions of the third Napoleon prevail over the sentiment of North American nationality, which ended in the warning fate of Maximilian. But two European States now share with us the continent, for the Central American governments are "to the manner born" and republican. England has above us a vast domain from Labrador to west of the Rocky mountains, from the Arctic ocean to the foot of Canada; Russia, which, thanks to Peter the Great, discovered that Asia and America were less than forty miles apart, holds the Northwestern Pacific slope to the Northern sea, and Behring straits, *the key to the Eastern empire.*

We are offered this northwestern continent for \$7,200,000 in gold. Much more than this sum named has lain idle and without interest in the Treasury for years, and will no doubt for years yet to come, while such an outlay would return it to us with increase. Shall we refuse to appropriate the amount? What then? Why, I think I hear our opponents say, Russia will resume its sway and matters stand as heretofore. Perhaps so, for a little time, but more probably not. The Czar consented to this sale at our own request. Our fishing trade with these Russian possessions was so valuable that the Legislature of Washington Territory, in January, 1866, petitioned our Government to obtain from Russia the privilege "to visit the ports and harbors of its possessions to the end that fuel, water, and provisions may be easily obtained, together with the privilege of curing fish and repairing vessels" there, stating that "abundance of codfish, halibut, and salmon,

of excellent quality, have been found along the shores of the Russian possessions." More than this, the charter was about to expire, in June, 1867, by which Russia had ceded its rights over the territory to a Russian-American company, which had in turn ceded them to the Hudson's Bay Company. The latter was endeavoring to get a twenty-five years' renewal of the charter. But at this appropriate time our California Senators made an effort to secure this exclusive privilege for an American fur trading company. Our Pacific coast had already known the value of Alaska, its furs, fisheries, and game; its ice supplied the California market and its timber was needed for our vessels. *How naturally the purchase came about.* Russia had enough contiguous land and had always intrusted the government of this to others, while we wanted what to us is almost contiguous.

The learned gentleman from Ohio [Mr. SHELLABARGER] says "that country is strong which is compact," and intimates that as British Columbia, with a frontage of over five degrees on the ocean, intervenes between us and Alaska it would conflict with the American doctrine to hold the latter. Just the reverse, sir. *We do wish to be compact.* The American sentiment is that we should have had British Columbia and Vancouver's Island. In this we failed. But next to that we hold that by no act of ours shall a foreign State have its compactness and strength increased on our continent. The gentleman will not tell me it is more difficult to sail three hundred miles from our northwestern boundary to Alaska than from New York to San Francisco. You need not cross British domain in the former case nor Mexican in the latter. Reject Alaska and there is scarcely a doubt that Russia, having once determined to part with it, would sell to England, and still less doubt that England to-morrow would seize the chance of taking it off our hands.

Mr. Chairman, *I wonder what the American people would say to such a result!* If such must come I will not be responsible for it. The British empire, covering us on the north from ocean to ocean, even to the North Pole, would develop a formidable rival on the Pacific to that commerce and trade which now can be ours alone. The British North American possessions, now almost land-locked on the west, hold out little promise to their settlers and Anglo-Saxon enterprise finds no incentive to exertion. Give it this new outlet and you build up a permanent, because prosperous, rival, which holding half the continent can never be dislodged. The people of the United States are in no haste, but they look forward surely to the day when the starry flag, which they have followed alike in storm and in sunshine, shall cover the continent. That day will come in its own good time. Let us not retard it as we did in settling the Oregon boundary. *No consolidation of foreign empire must be allowed between these seas.* The possessions of Russia here would

have continued an equipoise to England. She has now determined to confine her dominion beyond the Pacific. England never voluntarily contracted *her* possessions. Rest assured Alaska, if not ours, will be transferred to Great Britain. The nation which struggled so hard for Vancouver and her present Pacific boundary, and which still insists on having the little island of San Juan, will never let such an opportunity slip. Canada, as matters now stand, might become ours some day, could her people learn to be American; but never in such an event.

Ah, says my colleague on the Foreign Affairs Committee, from Wisconsin, [General WASHBURN,] "the place is worthless." He does not wish it at any price. The climate is frightful, the furs few, and the mineral deposits are not proved to his satisfaction. Well, my friend is not original—and he knows I do not use the word offensively—in the rôle of a croaker. We had then every time new territory was added to our domain; the files of the Congressional Globe are very ugly reminders of the fact. When we acquired Louisiana by the treaty of Paris, a croaker of that day called it "a dreary and barren wilderness." Yet this fertile province was divided into rich States of the Union, and its noble stream which, with the tributaries, forms an outlet for the productions of the mighty West, has a value world-wide, for the possession of which the armies of freedom and slavery reddened its very water, now forever dedicated to liberty.

California was called an ill-starred purchase and bad bargain; yet this same California, laden with wealth, its cereals and fruits unsurpassed, its vines bidding fair to rival those of France and Italy, came to us in less than three years a free young State, forming the first barrier on the southwest against the extension of slavery, which finally led us to its conquest. The \$2,000,000,000 in gold it has added to the wealth of the world sink into insignificance beside its geographical advantages and their development, of which no doubt the pursuit of that wealth was the instrument.

But, says my friend, Alaska is in a bleak and northern region. Perhaps there is no commoner error than that latitude is the controlling element of temperature. I do not pretend to be a climatologist; but it is well known that the southwest equatorial winds and thermal currents of the ocean exert a controlling influence on what are known on land as isothermal lines; and the great hot currents which, lessened in intensity, flow against the shores of Britain and Norway, are but different directions of those which lave the coast of Alaska. Western Europe, like western America, is milder in the same latitudes than on the east. If this be not so, I hope my friend will explain why London, nearly eleven degrees latitude north of New York, is eight degrees warmer. Let me illustrate by the eastern hemisphere: Peking, on the western border of Asia, at forty degrees north latitude, has winters very nearly as severe as

at St. Petersburg, in sixty degrees. My doubting colleague says facts are worth a thousand theories. So be it. It is a geographical fact that in many cold climates, like Canada, severe winters refresh the earth; and when the snow is removed the fertility of the soil is so great that vegetation is luxuriant and rapid, making their brief summers yield richer abundance than in more tropical climates.

If, however, the argument of latitude is to prevail, did it ever enter the gentleman's mind to wonder what England wanted with the barren, bleak, dismal soil of her possessions east of Alaska, or why she tried during the Crimean war to capture Sitka! Has he ever been to the beautiful city of Quebec—strange it should have been built in so inhospitable a region—eleven degrees south of Sitka, it is true, but twenty degrees colder. What barbarians to be sure!

Then go to the fashionable and elegant metropolis of Russia itself, one degree fifty-six minutes north of the parallel of Sitka, and fifteen degrees colder. Certainly one must die there of frost! And then, sir, remember that in 1845 the United States were convulsed with an insane desire. We were actually going to war with England to obtain the strip of ground between forty-nine and fifty-four degrees forty minutes. Yes, "fifty-four forty or fight" was the cry; and what for? Simply to adjoin this terrible land from which my colleague shrinks with a coldness beyond that of the climate he depicts—a territory for which we had under Van Buren and Polk twice offered five millions and been refused.

Mr. WILLIAMS, of Pennsylvania. Will my colleague furnish the proof and evidence of that statement? I would be glad to see the evidence of it.

Mr. MYERS. The Congressional Library is as open to my colleague as it is to me, and if the information is not there the archives of the State Department are as open to him as to me. If the gentleman looks to the files of the State Department he will find the evidence.

Mr. BANKS. What is the fact that is denied?

Mr. MYERS. The former offers of this Government for Alaska. But whether it be so or not the gentleman will not deny that this nation were about to go to war with Great Britain to obtain the country next to Alaska up to 54° 40'.

Mr. BANKS. If the gentleman from Pennsylvania will allow me, I will say that this Government has three times contemplated the purchase of Russian America from the Russian Government; and twice it has made the offer of \$5,000,000, which has each time been refused.

Mr. WILLIAMS, of Pennsylvania. Has the chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations [Mr. BANKS] furnished to the House and the country any evidence to this effect?

Mr. BANKS. I have not. But I understand that to be the fact, and I make the statement

on my responsibility. Once during Mr. Polk's administration the matter was discussed, but terminated without any formal offer or refusal. The offer, however, was made twice, once in Mr. Van Buren's administration, and once in Mr. Buchanan's administration.

Mr. FERRISS. I suppose the committee rely upon the authority furnished by the executive department. In Executive Document No. 177, a document furnishing the evidence in answer to a resolution of the House upon this subject, it is stated that Russia had twice offered this territory to the United States. But there is not one particle of evidence in that document that I can find that the Government of the United States ever applied to the Government of Russia for this territory.

Mr. MYERS. This is a matter which has very little to do with my argument. If my good friend from New York [Mr. Ferriss] will only be persuaded by the rest of the evidence that is contained in that document I will drop this point, for it is of very little importance. I only referred to what I believed to be a fact. It will not do to quote the document for one purpose and then throw it aside. Let him take it as evidence in regard to the riches of the country, its timber, minerals, and fisheries, and I am content.

It is a fact that Britain, Norway, Sweden, Siberia, and all the Russias produce gold, even though my colleague confines that metal to the South. It is needless, therefore, to speak of other ores, or remind him that Behring and Cook saw copper and iron in Alaska, finding them in common use as knives and arrowheads; or that his favorite voyager, La Perouse, reported copper and coal; and that Meares saw malleable lumps of copper sometimes weighing a pound. It is as useless, too, to remind him that gold is traced all the way on either side along the ranges of the Rocky mountains, as that Captain Cook, in noticing the mildness of the climates, says "cattle might exist in Oonalaska all the year round without housing." And this reminds me of my friend's partiality for poetry. Campbell never knew how cruel a thing he did for Wisconsin when, taking a poet's license, he wrote:

"The wolf's long howl from Oonalaska's shore."

Unfortunately for my colleague (Campbell's fame is too safe to suffer) there are no wolves at Oonalaska. [Laughter.] Captain Cook, Meares, and Cox state this most positively.

Some little idea of the value of the fur trade may be gleaned from the fact that as early as 1823 to 1833 the Hudson's Bay Company exported \$1,000,000 worth a year, and the annual imports thence to England alone, from 1861 to 1865, averaged a half million skins,

not to speak of the fur trade across Behring strait to Russia and China. It is strange that the falling off in the fur trade which my colleague notices is confined to Alaska, about which we know so little and he so much.

to the inhabitants, there are but seventy-five thousand all told, and were they the barbarians he represents, the number is too insignificant to prove a solid objection to the treaty.

A final word in regard to the alleged inhospitable coast. The Atlantic coast might have furnished my colleague ample statistics of storms. Labrador could have supplied him with mist, and Newfoundland with fog; but comparisons are odious—I commend him to the voyage of the Ossipee last October. When she took our flag to Sitka the air and climate were delicious as our own in the same month, and all the way from Victoria to Sitka, over eight hundred miles, except a very few resorts to the ocean, she sailed on the placid straits which, running miles inward parallel with the sea at the base of mountains whose sides were skirted with green pines, continue at slight intervals for eleven hundred miles. Their depths are like unto the sea, of which they are in fact a part, and the vista is represented both then and in November, on the return trip, as charming. It is not a marvel that our southwestern coast asked for this purchase, nor that California should send even to Kodiak, seven hundred miles above Sitka, for her ice.

With the fisheries which this acquisition will call into being and protect, a hardy trained race of seamen will fit themselves to sail the ships which soon must dot the Pacific between us and Asia, exchanging the wonders of either shore, and be ready to man our vessels of war should the emergency arise. That trade is now beyond a question. American civilization has done what olden Europe failed to accomplish. It has unlocked the seclusion of China as it is gradually doing with Japan, until its population leaps the barrier of centuries to throng our nearest border, and even to-day China chooses America to lead her to the outer world. As the Occident thus clasps the Orient and helps it shake off the custom of ages, the world will become more luminous by the contact, even as space is forgotten in the telegraphic sympathy which thrills the old and new in the same moment. These bonds must be cemented. Alaska must be ours, with its islands stretching one thousand miles outward to greet the East, and remembering that we hold our heritage in trust for posterity let no man disdain to picture the day, distant though it may be, when over the continent of North America, from ocean to ocean, from the Arctic to the Antilles, the canopy of freedom shall cover one people, one country, and one destiny.

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