

TO THE PEOPLE OF THE SECOND CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT OF THE STATE OF ALABAMA.

Fellow citizens: A serious question of propriety has arisen between me and the House of Representatives, of which I deem it my duty to advise you, and which will be better explained by an examination of the following proceedings of the House, as published in the *Sentinel* of the 17th instant, to which I invite your attention:

Mr. Orr, under leave of the House, rose to a personal explanation. He had the Clerk to read an article from the *Sentinel* of the 14th instant, headed "Treason." He then said:

Mr. Speaker, the editor of this paper is the public and private printer of this House, and it is the commonly received organ of the Executive. This is my apology for noticing the slanderous article which I have had the Clerk to read. It is apparent to this House, and to those who are familiar with our proceedings, that the article is intended as a criticism upon the report from the Committee on Foreign Affairs, submitted by me on last Thursday. It is no less, then, than a grave charge of treason against that committee, and an implication of like import against the members of this House, who were cognizant of the substance of the report, and voted to receive it in secret session. I trust that the reputation of the members composing the committee is sufficient to satisfy the country that the article is false and slanderous. The deliberations of the committee upon the report were presided over by the venerable, pure and distinguished member from Virginia, Mr. Rives. Would he have so presided, from week to week, where treason was plotted?— Would he have voted, as he did in open session, to go into secret session to receive that report? Would his colleague (Mr. De Jarnette); General Atkins, of Tennessee; Mr. Witherspoon, of South Carolina; Mr. Turner, of North Carolina, and Mr. Smith, of Alabama, have given their sanction to a "treasonable" report? Are they capable of "treachery of the most infamous character"? Are they "traitorous Congressmen"? Can it be that they have brought forward "a disorderly, ruinous and fatal proposition"—"reprehensible and intolerable," and baying "neither dignity, honor nor safety" in it? But of the Virginia delegation, Messrs. Rives and De Jarnette were not alone in voting to receive the report: Mr. Wickham, Mr. Baldwin and Mr. McMullin voted with them, aware, at the time, of its substance; and thus they, too, fell under the rod of the power behind the throne of the *Sentinel*.

In refuting this calumny against members of this House, it is unnecessary to divulge the contents of the report, or the action of the House thereon, although it is with me (as announced when I presented it) a matter of indifference whether it should be considered in open or secret session. If the writer of the article ever saw the resolutions, he has knowingly falsified them. If he has not seen them, but supposes them to be as he states, then, according to his own report, he betrays gross ignorance in asserting that "a resolution to open irregular negotiations, through commissioners, with Mr. Lincoln for peace" would constitute treason, and greater criminality in presuming to smother worthy and patriotic men for something of which he is ignorant. Why

should they be subjected to this malignant criticism? For the sake of the argument, let it be conceded that they have proposed to send commissioners to Washington "to open irregular negotiations for peace." These commissioners might be sent with no other power than to confer and consult with the authorities there on terms of an honorable peace, with instructions to report the results of such conference to the President and to this House. Such negotiations would be "irregular," and yet they might, I think would, if ratified by the treaty-making power, secure an honorable and satisfactory peace.— Who but a madman would denounce these means and this result "as treachery of the most infamous character"?

From the supposed relationship of this journal to men in power, it may have been intended, in indulging in bitter denunciation, to have the effect of intimidating the advocates of an honorable and peaceful settlement of the war. If this was the design, allow me to assure you, Mr. Speaker, that a greater mistake was never made. Denunciation will be met by defiance. This movement is not in the hands of timid or time serving men. Sustained, as they are, by a volume of sentiment in the country and in the army, and by their own sense of duty, they are determined that, in some form, the statesmanship of the country shall be invoked in an honest effort to end this carnival of death by negotiation.

"The *Sentinel* thinks it "foolish, treasonable and ruinous" for this House to send commissioners to Washington, with powers limited, as prescribed. This is to assume that no terms could be obtained which would not be "ruinous." Is there any reason for this assumption? That journal professed a few days since, to abolish slavery for foreign intervention. Who is authorized to say that better terms cannot be obtained from the United States? Who is authorized to say that terms could not be agreed upon with them without abolition or reconstruction? We certainly could make it to their interest to recognize us as an independent people without involving either slavery or reconstruction; and nations usually follow their interest. The question of reconstruction, however, does not arise in the proposition to negotiate, and I shall not, therefore, discuss it.

Nor is it "foolish or treasonable," and I will add that it is neither unpolitic nor unmanly, while we are gathering up all our military strength to meet the enemy, to resort to every laudable and proper effort to give peace to a distracted and bleeding country by negotiation. On the contrary, the statesman who would refuse to do this is a hideous moral deformity.

When Mr. Orr had finished reading the foregoing,

Mr. Lester, of Georgia, moved to suspend the rules in order to allow him to introduce the following resolution:

Whereas, on the 14th of this month, there appeared in the columns of the *Richmond Sentinel* a correspondence over the signature of "Q," and headed with the words, "Treason, Treason, Treason," printed in conspicuous capitals, and marked with points of exclamation, in which the writer announced that it was rumored on the street that there was a resolution before Congress, in secret session, to "open irregular negotiations, through commissioners, with Lincoln for peace," and asserting that such a proceeding was "not only treason, but, under the circumstances,

treachery of the most infamous character," and avowing that "the people of Virginia certainly," and, in the opinion of the writer, "the people of the Confederacy generally, would not allow themselves to be sold by traitorous Congressmen after this fashion";

And whereas, the said correspondence was accompanied by an approving editorial, characterized by the same tone and spirit as the correspondence itself;

And whereas, the said correspondence and editorial, headed and paraded as aforesaid, are calculated to mislead the public judgment, and, in their temper and spirit, impute to Congress folly, disloyalty, treason and treachery; be it therefore

Resolved, That, so far as the statements and imputations contained in the said correspondence and editorial were intended to apply to this branch of Congress, they are false in fact and inference; are an infringement of the privileges of its members; and merit the emphatic rebuke and unqualified denunciations of this House.

The motion to suspend, to allow the introduction of the resolution, resulted—ayes, 32; noes, 36.

A two thirds vote being required to suspend the rules, the resolution was not introduced.

When this was announced, I felt extremely indignant. You will appreciate my feelings when I say that, being a member of the assailed committee, looking upon the House as the natural guardian of that committee, and of all its committees, I expected protection, and not abandonment.

I immediately determined to withdraw from the House, not willing to sit there under the shadow of an impeachment. In pursuance of this determination, I said:

Mr. Speaker, I should not, myself, have paid any attention to the article in the *Sentinel*. I should have allowed it to pass in silence, as I have ever made it a rule of action to let editors alone. But the vote of this House, in refusing to allow the introduction of the resolution of the gentleman from Georgia (Mr. Lester) places this matter in a more serious aspect. I consider that vote as, to some extent, endorsing the *Sentinel*. As long as that vote stands as the sense of this body, I can take no part in its deliberations. I say this in perfect respect to the members here; and I do not wish my withdrawal to be considered as at all contemptuous, but dictated solely by that self-respect which I feel, and by which I have, through life, endeavored to be governed.

I accordingly withdrew from the House, and have not since attended its meetings.

I appreciate the delicacy of my position; and, holding myself as responsible to you alone for my course on the occasion, I expect to return home as soon as I can close up my business here, and will hold myself ready to act in accordance to your wishes.

The article in the *Sentinel* did not refer to me in person, or to any individual member of the House, but was a sweeping charge against those members of Congress who favored the proposed peace measure. What that measure is, I am not at liberty to say; but, as your representative, I am under the deepest conviction that there are not one hundred men in the district who would object to it. I have the honor to be

Your obedient servant,
W. R. SMITH.

Richmond, January 20, 1865.

676854

5737
1004
1004

