

I. A Federalist (Philip Barton Key) Attacks the Embargo (1808)

With the nation militarily weak, Jefferson decided to force respect for the nation's rights by an economic boycott. In 1807 Congress passed his embargo, which prohibited shipments from leaving American shores for foreign ports, including the West Indies. Paralysis gradually gripped American shipping and agriculture, except for illicit trade. Representative Philip Barton Key, uncle of Francis Scott Key and a former Maryland Loyalist who had fought under George III, here assails the embargo. Why, in his view, did it play into Britain's hands? Why did he regard his proposed alternative as more effective?

But, Mr. Chairman, let us review this [embargo] law and its effects. In a commercial point of view, it has annihilated our trade. In an agricultural point of view, it has paralyzed industry. . . . Our most fertile lands are reduced to sterility, so far as it respects our surplus product. As a measure of political economics, it will drive (if continued) our seamen into foreign employ, and our fishermen to foreign sandbanks. In a financial point of view, it has dried up our revenue, and if continued will close the sales of Western lands, and the payment of installments of past sales. For unless produce can be sold, payments cannot be made. As a war measure, the embargo has not been advocated.

It remains then to consider its effects as a peace measure—a measure inducing peace. I grant, sir, that if the friends of the embargo had rightly calculated its effects—if it had brought the belligerents of Europe to a sense of justice and respect for our rights, through the weakness and dependence of their West India possessions—it would have been infinitely wise and desirable. . . . But, sir, the experience of near four months has not produced that effect. . . .

If that be the case, if such should be the result, then will the embargo, of all measures, be the most acceptable to Britain. By occluding [closing] our ports, you give to her ships the exclusive use of the ocean; and you give to her despairing West India planter the monopoly of sugar and rum and coffee to the European world. . . .

But, sir, who are we? What are we? A peaceable agricultural people, of simple and, I trust, virtuous habits, of stout hearts and willing minds, and a brave, powerful,

¹*Annals of Congress*, 10th Congress, 1st Sess., 2122–2123.

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and badly disciplined militia, unarmed, and without troops. And whom are we to come in conflict with? The master of continental Europe [Napoleon] in the full career of universal domination, and the mistress of the ocean [Britain] contending for self-preservation; nations who feel power and forget right.

What man can be weak enough to suppose that a sense of justice can repress or regulate the conduct of Bonaparte? We need not resort to other nations for examples. Has he not in a manner as flagrant as flagitious, directly, openly, publicly violated and broken a solemn treaty [of 1800] entered into with us? Did he not stipulate that our property should pass free even to enemy ports, and has he not burnt our ships at sea under the most causeless pretexts?

Look to England; see her conduct to us. Do we want any further evidence of what she will do in the hour of impending peril than the attack on Copenhagen? That she prostrates all rights that come in collision with her self-preservation?

No, sir; let us pursue the steady line of rigid impartiality. Let us hold the scales of impartial neutrality with a high and steady hand, and export our products to, and bring back supplies from, all who will trade with us. Much of the world is yet open to us, and let us profit of the occasion.

At present we exercise no neutral rights. We have quit the ocean; we have abandoned our rights; we have retired to our shell. Sooner than thus continue, our merchantmen should arm to protect legitimate trade. Sir, I believe war itself, as we could carry it on, would produce more benefit and less cost than the millions lost by the continuance of the embargo.