Pennsylvania Packet, 7 July 1787 (excerpt)

Extract of a letter to the Honourable B. H. dated at Nashville, in Davidson County, May 1, 1787.

". . . Here then it would be natural for us to conclude, that the navigation of the Mississippi is open to the citizens of the United States, since the letter and spirit of every treaty on this subject declare, that it shall be open. But there is one title remaining, and that title appears to be vested in the crown of Spain. She is supposed to have the longest sword. She has taken possession of the river, and in contempt of arguments and treaties she continues to hold it by force. Is not this a true state of the question? Does not Spain admit that she despises the treaty, and that she is now acting towards us as a hostile nation? In this view every man on the western waters considers this subject, and we readily admit that this single argument of Spain must be considered as good and conclusive, while it retains its present force; but we are fully assured, that it must lose of its weight in every succeeding year: and we see that the time is fast coming, when every argument will be on our side. The *Lex ultima Regum*, the rule by which kings are governed, the long sword, or if you please the short rifle, will presently be a conclusive argument in our favour. We shall not fail to use it. Spain has set us a fair example. She has not been delicate on this head. She has seized the property of our fellow citizens, and converted it to her own use. Perhaps I shall be told that Spain is a powerful nation; that in case of a rupture, she can oppress the United States, and crush their commerce. I am not to learn, that the United States will not go to war with Spain, for the sake of the Mississippi. People who live on the sea coast have too much at stake; they are too much exposed to the insults of a Spanish fleet, and too little interested in our happiness ever to enter seriously into this dispute. You may remonstrate against the encroachments of Spain, but all your efforts will terminate in a harmless war on paper. Who do you think will be the chief sufferers by those cautious politics, by such a sacrifice of our privileges and property, to the mere indolence of nature, and the love of ease? Let us trace this dispute a few years in its natural progress. I formerly said, that we are strengthened by the addition of 2000 sencible inhabitants every year. When I stated the number at 2000, I was greatly below the mark. To such accessions you must add the natural increase of citizens in a country where the soil is fertile, the climate healthy, and where men are tempted to marry early in life. In the space of ten years we shall muster at least 60,000 men, capable of bearing arms. Is it probable, that at such a period we shall suffer our lands to lye without cultivation, or our produce to perish on our hands, from the want of a river by which that produce may be carried to market? Is it probable that we shall suffer a few Spanish soldiers to seize our boats? I think not. What then must happen? We can hardly forget this loss of property, especially as it was taken from us by force. The Spanish colonists may also have some boats, merchandize or silver; we shall count the interest, and shall not fail to repay ourselves by a friendly reciprocity of good offices. Spain

may possibly remonstrate against such proofs of a good memory, and the United States in Congress may reply, that they cannot possibly restrain those disorderly woodmen. You may be told in reply, that you shall be answerable for their conduct. This would be a serious and critical period, and you had best consider how you will conduct yourselves in such a case. To send an army across the mountain to punish your brethren for defending their property, would be the beginning of a very unnatural war. A war that could neither be profitable nor pleasant, and assuredly it would not be honourable. Quixotism itself would hardly attempt such a measure. However, the Spaniards would probably begin with you, because you are at hand, and you have much to lose, but we have nothing, except our houses, cattle and lands; to this short inventory may possibly be added, a considerable number of unpolished citizens, whom the Spanish negociators would count as worse than nothing. It is possible, however, that Spain may pursue other measures, for we are told that she has others in contemplation. Perhaps she may send troops up the river, and endeavour to establish posts on the Tenessee, or on some other water of the Ohio. This is a step that we look for. It would naturally bring on a serious discussion of territorial claims; or you may rather be pleased to call it, An experimental enquiry concerning the meaning of treaties and the rights of men. There may be a great deal more involved in this question, than people are apt to suspect. During the progress of the enquiry, we may possibly discover, that the claims of Spain to certain territories beyond the Mississippi are not well founded. Be it remembered, that Spain asserted her claim to that country two hundred years ago, in the presence of unarmed savages, and no body since that time has taken the trouble to examine her title deeds. I have formerly observed, that statesmen are not usually guided by the most obvious rules of justice; but when you have reviewed the several treaties that I have just mentioned, and when you have considered what will be the probable operation of those arguments that are commonly used to explain treaties, you will allow me to express my surprise, that Spain should put so much at stake for so trifling an object. That she would forfeit the reputation of good faith, and hazard other things that are more substantial, for the mere pleasure of distressing a few honest planters, who are only desirous to paddle their canoes up and down the river Mississippi."

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