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Joshua Atherton: Speech in the New Hampshire Convention c. 18 February 1788 (excerpts)

IMPORTATION OF SLAVES.

. . . I cannot be of the opinion of the Honorable Gentleman who last spoke, that this Paragraph is either so unjust or so inoffensive, as they seem to imagine, or that the objections to it are so totally void of foundation. The idea that strikes those who are opposed to this clause so disagreeably and so forcibly, is, hereby it is conceived (if we ratify the Constitution) that we become *Consenters* to and *Partakers* in, the sin and guilt of this abominable traffic, at least, for a certain period, without any positive stipulation that it shall even then be brought to an end. We do not behold in it that valuable acquisition so much boasted of by the honorable Member from Portsmouth—“*that an end is then to be put to slavery.*” Congress may be as much or more puzzled to put a stop to it then, than we are now.—The clause has not secured its abolition.

We do not think under any obligation to perform works of supererogation in the reformation of mankind: we do not esteem ourselves under any necessity to go to Spain or Italy to suppress the inquisition of those countries; or of making a journey to the Carolinas to abolish the detestable custom of enslaving the Africans: but, Sir, we will not lend the aid of our ratification to this cruel and inhuman merchandize, not even for a day. There is a great distinction in not taking a part in the most barbarous violation of the sacred laws of God and humanity; and our becoming guarantees for its exercise for a term of years. Yes, Sir, it is our full purpose to wash our hands clear of it, and however unconcerned spectators we may remain of such predatory infractions of the laws of our nation; however unfeeling we may subscribe to the ratification of manstealing, with all its baneful consequences; yet I cannot but believe in justice to human nature, that if we reverse the consideration and bring this claimed power somewhat nearer to our own doors; we shall form a more equitable opinion of its claim to this ratification.

Let us figure to ourselves a company of these manstealers well equipped for the enterprise, arriving on our coast. They seize or carry off the whole or a part of the town of Exeter. Parents are taken and children left: or, possibly they may be so fortunate as to have a whole family taken and carried off together by these relentless robbers.—What must be their feelings in the hands of their new and arbitrary masters! Dragged at once from every thing they held dear to them—stripped of every comfort of life like beasts of prey, they are hurried on a loathsome and distressing voyage to the coast of Africa, or some other quarter of the globe, where the greatest price may waft them;—and here if any thing can be added to their miseries, comes on the heart-breaking scene! a parent is sold to one—a son to another, and a daughter to a third. Brother is cleft from brother—sister from sister—and parents from their darling offspring.—Broken with every distress that human nature can feel, and bedewed with tears of anguish, they are dragged into the last stage of

depression and slavery, never, never to behold the faces of one another again. The scene is to[o] affecting—I have not fortitude to pursue the subject.

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