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Debates in the Virginia Convention, 11–12 June 1788 (excerpts)

Mr. *George Mason*: If the objections be removed—If those parts which are clearly subversive of our rights be altered, no man will go further than I will to advance the Union. We are told in strong language, of dangers to which we will be exposed unless we adopt this Constitution. Among the rest, domestic safety is said to be in danger. This Government does not attend to our domestic safety. It authorises the importation of slaves for twenty odd years, and thus continues upon us that nefarious trade. Instead of securing and protecting us, the continuation of this detestable trade, adds daily to our weakness. Though this evil is increasing, there is no clause in the Constitution that will prevent the Northern and Eastern States from meddling with our whole property of that kind. There is a clause to prohibit the importation of slaves after twenty years, but there is no provision made for securing to the Southern States those they now possess. It is far from being a desirable property. But it will involve us in great difficulties and infelicity to be now deprived of them. There ought to be a clause in the Constitution to secure us that property, which we have acquired under our former laws, and the loss of which would bring ruin on a great many people. . . .

Mr. [Henry] *Lee*: The Honorable Gentleman [George Mason] abominates it, because it does not prohibit the importation of slaves, and because it does not secure the continuance of the existing slavery! Is it not obviously inconsistent to criminate it for two contradictory reasons? I submit to the consideration of the Gentleman, whether, if it be reprehensible in the one case, it can be censurable in the other? . . .

CITE AS: John P. Kaminski et al., eds., *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, Vol. IX: Virginia [2] (Madison, Wis.: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 1990), 1161, 1163–64.