



# CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE AMERICAN CONSTITUTION

csac.history.wisc.edu > Document Collections > The Founding Period and Slavery > The Southern States Debate Slavery and the Constitution > Debates Over Slavery in General

## Luther Martin: Genuine Information VIII, Baltimore *Maryland Gazette*, 22 January 1788 (excerpts)

Mr. MARTIN'S *Information to the House of Assembly, continued.*

It was urged that by this system, we were giving the general government full and absolute power to regulate commerce, under which general power it would have a right to *restrain*, or *totally prohibit* the *slave trade*—it must appear to the world absurd and disgraceful to the last degree, that we should *except* from the exercise of that power, the *only branch* of *commerce*, which is *unjustifiable in its nature*, and *contrary* to the *rights* of *mankind*—That on the contrary, we ought *rather to prohibit expressly* in our *constitution*, the *further importation* of *slaves*; and to *authorize* the general government from time to time, to make such regulations as should be thought most advantageous for the *gradual abolition* of *slavery*, and the *emancipation* of the *slaves* which are already in the States.

That *slavery* is *inconsistent* with the *genius* of *republicanism*, and has a tendency to *destroy* those *principles* on which it is *supported*, as it *lessens the sense* of the *equal rights* of *mankind*, and habituates us to *tyranny* and *oppression*.—It was further urged, that by this system of government, every State is to be protected both from *foreign invasion* and from *domestic insurrections*; that from this consideration, it was of the *utmost importance* it should have a power to restrain the importation of slaves, since in *proportion* as the number of slaves were increased in any State, in the *same* proportion the State is *weakened* and *exposed* to foreign invasion, or domestic insurrection, and *by so much the less* will it be able to protect itself against *either*; and therefore will by so much the more, want aid from, and be a burthen to, the union.—It was further said, that as in this system we were giving the general government a power under the idea of national character, or national interest, to regulate even our *weights* and *measures*, and have prohibited all possibility of *emitting paper money*, and *passing instalment laws*, &c.—It must appear still more extraordinary, that we should prohibit the government from interfering with the slave trade, than which *nothing* could so *materially affect* both our *national honour* and *interest*.—These reasons influenced me both on the committee and in convention, most decidedly to oppose and vote against the clause, as it now makes a part of the system.

You will perceive, Sir, not only that the general government is prohibited from interfering in the slave trade *before* the year eighteen hundred and eight, but that there is no provision in the constitution that it shall *afterwards* be prohibited, nor any security that such prohibition will ever take place—and I think there is great reason to believe that if the importation of slaves is permitted until the year seventeen [i.e., eighteen] hundred and eight, it will not be prohibited afterwards—At *this time* we do not generally hold this commerce in so *great* abhorrence as we have done.—When our *own* liberties were at stake, we *warmly* felt for the *common rights* of *men*—The danger

being thought to be past, which threatened ourselves, we are daily growing *more insensible* to those rights—In those States who have restrained or prohibited the importation of slaves, it is only done by legislative acts which may be repealed—When those States find that they must in their *national character* and *connection* suffer in the *disgrace*, and share in the *inconveniences* attendant upon that detestable and iniquitous traffic, they may be desirous also to share in the *benefits* arising from it, and the odium attending it will be greatly effaced by the sanction which is given to it in the general government. . . .

CITE AS: John P. Kaminski et al., eds., *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, Vol. XI: Maryland [1] (Madison, Wis.: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2015), 196–97.