

## Thomas Jefferson's Clause on Slavery

... he has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating it's most sacred rights of life & liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the Christian king of Great Britain. determined to keep open a market where **MEN** should be bought & sold. he has prostituted his negative<sup>1</sup> for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce; and that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact of distinguished die,<sup>2</sup> he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them, by murdering the people for whom he also obtruded them:<sup>3</sup> thus paying off former crimes committed against the liberties of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against the lives of another.]

<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/makingrev/rebellion/text6/jeffersondraftdecindep.pdf>

### **The Constitutional Convention Debates the Slave Trade**

Article I, Section 9 of the federal Constitution prohibited Congress from outlawing the slave trade before 1808. That provision replaced an earlier draft that forbade any restraint of the "importation of persons" by the national legislature. That initial clause prompted a debate among delegates Roger Sherman of Connecticut, George Mason and Edmund Randolph of Virginia, and John Rutledge and Charles Pinckney of South Carolina. What follows are notes of that debate as recorded by James Madison.

*[Roger Sherman] was for leaving the clause as it stands. He disapproved of the slave trade; yet as the States were now possessed of the right to import slaves as the public good did not require it to be taken away from them, "as it was expedient to have as few objections as possible to the proposed scheme of Government, he thought it best to leave the matter as we find it. He observed that the abolition of Slavery seemed to be going on in the U.S." that the good sense of the several States would probably by degrees complete it....*

*Col. Mason. This infernal traffic originated in the avarice of British merchants. The British Government constantly checked the attempts of Virginia to put a stop to it. The present question concerns not the importing States alone but the whole Union. The evil of having slaves was experienced during the late war. Had slaves been treated as they*

*might have been by the Enemy, they would have proved dangerous instruments in their hand. But their folly dealt by the slaves, as it did by the Tories. He mentioned the dangerous insurrections of the slaves in Greece and Sicily.... Maryland and Virginia he said had already prohibited the importation of slaves expressly. North Carolina had done the same in substance. All this would be in vain if South Carolina and Georgia be at liberty to import. The Western people are already calling out for slaves for their new lands, and will fill that Country with slaves if they can be got through South Carolina and Georgia. Slavery discourages arts manufactures. The poor despise labor when performed by slaves. They prevent the immigration of Whites, who really enrich Strengthen a Country. They produce the most pernicious effect on manners. Every master of slaves is born a petty tyrant. They bring the judgment of heaven on a Country.... By an inevitable chain of causes effects providence punishes national sins, by national calamities. He lamented that some of our Eastern brethren had from a lust of gain embarked in this nefarious traffic. As to the States being in possession of the Right to import, this was the case with many other rights, now to be properly given up. He held it essential in every point of view that the General Government should have power to prevent the increase in slavery.*

*Mr. Pinckney. If slavery be wrong, it is justified by the example of all the world. He cited the case of Greece, Rome, other ancient States; the sanction given by France, England, Holland, other modern States. In all ages one-half of mankind have been slaves. If the Southern States were let alone they will probably of themselves stop importations....An attempt to take away the right as proposed will produce serious objections to the Constitution which he wished to see adopted....*

*Mr. Rutledge. If the Convention thinks that North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia will ever agree to the plan, unless their right to import slaves be untouched, the expectation is vain. The people of those States will never be such fools as to give up so important an interest....*

*Mr. Randolph was for committing in order that some middle ground might, if possible, be found. He could never agree to the clause as it stands. He would sooner risk the constitution. He dwelt on the dilemma to which the Convention was exposed. By agreeing to the clause, it would revolt the Quakers, the Methodists, and many others in the States having no slaves. On the other hand, two States might be lost to the Union....*

From *Records of the Federal Convention*, August 22, 1787.