

1810-1861. United States Presidents on the Slave Trade

Source: Du Bois, W.E.B. (1896/1970). *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870*. NY: Dover, p. 246-284.

1810, Dec. 5. President Madison's Message. "Among the commercial abuses still committed under the American flag, . . . it appears that American citizens are instrumental in carrying on a traffic in enslaved Africans, equally in violation of the laws of humanity, and in defiance of those of their own country. The same just and benevolent motives which produced the interdiction in force against this criminal conduct, will doubtless be felt by Congress, in devising further means of suppressing the evil." House Journal (repr. 1826), 11 Cong. 3 sess. VII. 435.

1816, Dec. 3. President Madison's Message. "The United States having been the first to abolish, within the extent of their authority, the transportation of the natives of Africa into slavery, by prohibiting the introduction of slaves, and by punishing their citizens participating in the traffick, cannot but be gratified at the progress, made by concurrent efforts of other nations, towards a general suppression of so great an evil. They must feel, at the same time, the greater solicitude to give the fullest efficacy to their own regulations. With that view, the interposition of Congress appears to be required by the violations and evasions which, it is suggested, are chargeable on unworthy citizens who mingle in the slave trade under foreign flags, and with foreign ports; and by collusive importations of slaves into the United States, through adjoining ports and territories. I present the subject to Congress, with a full assurance of their disposition to apply all the remedy which can be afforded by an amendment of the law. The regulations which were intended to guard against abuses of a kindred character, in the trade between the several States, ought also to be rendered more effectual for their humane object." House Journal, 14 Cong. 2 sess. pp. 156.

1821, Dec. 3. President Monroe's Message. "Like success has attended our errors to suppress the slave trade. Under the flag of the United States, and the sanction of their papers, the trade may be considered as entirely suppressed; and, if any of our citizens are engaged in it, under the flag and papers of other powers, it is only from a respect to the rights of those powers, that these offenders are not seized and brought home, to receive the punishment which the laws inflict. If every other power should adopt the same policy, and pursue the same vigorous means for carrying it into effect, the trade could no longer exist." House Journal, 17 Cong. 1 sess. 22.

1822, Dec. 3. President Monroe's Message. "-A cruise has also been maintained on the coast of Africa, when the season would permit, for the suppression of the slavetrade; and orders have been given to the commanders of all our public ships to seize our own vessels, should they find any engaged in that trade, and to bring them in for adjudication." House Journal, 17 Cong. 2 sess. pp. 12, 21.

1825, Dec. 6. President Adams's Message. "The objects of the West India Squadron have been, to carry into execution the laws for the suppression of the African Slave Trade: for the protection of our commerce against vessels of piratical character. . . . These objects, during the present year, have been accomplished more effectually than at any former period. The African Slave Trade has long been excluded from the use of our flag; and if some few citizens of our country have continued to set the laws of the Union, as well as those of nature and humanity, at defiance, by persevering in that abominable traffic, it has been only by sheltering themselves under the banners of other nations, less earnest for the total extinction of the trade than ours." House Journal, 19 Cong. 1 sess. pp. 20, 96, 2967, 305, 323, 329, 3945, 399, 410, 414, 421, 451, 640.

1839, Dec. 24. President Van Buren's Message. "It will be seen by the report of the Secretary of the navy respecting the disposition of our ships of war, that it has been deemed necessary to station a competent force on the coast of Africa, to prevent a fraudulent use of our flag by foreigners. "Recent experience has

shown that the provisions in our existing laws which relate to the sale and transfer of American vessels while abroad, are extremely defective. Advantage has been taken of these defects to give to vessels wholly belonging to foreigners, and navigating the ocean, an apparent American ownership. This character has been so well simulated as to afford them comparative security in prosecuting the slave trade, a traffic emphatically denounced in our statutes, regarded with abhorrence by our citizens, and of which the effectual suppression is nowhere more sincerely desired than in the United States. These circumstances make it proper to recommend to your early attention a careful revision of these laws, so that . . . the integrity and honor our flag may be carefully preserved.” House Journal, 26 Cong. 1 sess. pp. 1178.

1841, June 1. President Tyler’s Message. “I shall also, at the proper season, invite your attention to the statutory enactments for the suppression of the slave trade, which may required to be rendered more efficient in their provisions. There is reason to believe that the traffic is on the increase. Whether such increase is to be ascribed to the abolition of slave labor in the British possessions in our vicinity, and an attendant diminution in the supply of those articles which enter into the general consumption of the world, thereby augmenting the demand from other quarters, . . . it were needless to inquire. The highest considerations of public honor, as well as the strongest promptings of humanity, require a resort to the most vigorous efforts to suppress the trade.” House Journal, 27 Cong. 1 sess. pp. 31, 184.

1841, Dec. 7. President Tyler’s Message. Though the United States is desirous to suppress the slavetrade, she will not submit to interpolations into the maritime code at will by other nations. This government has expressed its repugnance to the trade by several laws. It is a matter for deliberation whether we will enter upon treaties containing mutual stipulations upon the subject with other governments. The United States will demand indemnity for all depredations by Great Britain. “I invite your attention to existing laws for the suppression of the African slave trade, and recommend all such alterations as may give to them greater force and efficacy. That the American flag is grossly abused by the abandoned and profligate of other nations is but too probable. Congress has, not long since, had this subject under its consideration, and its importance well justifies renewed and anxious attention.” House Journal, 27 Cong. 2 sess. p. 145, 86, 113.

1842, Dec. 7. President Tyler’s Message. The treaty of Ghent binds the United States and Great Britain to the suppression of the slavetrade. The Right of Search was refused by the United States, and our Minister in France for that reason protested against the Quintuple Treaty; his conduct had the approval of the administration. On this account the eighth article was inserted, causing each government to keep a flotilla in African waters to enforce the laws. If this should be done by all the powers, the trade would be swept from the ocean. House Journal, 27 Cong. 3 sess. pp 167.

1858, Dec. 6. President Buchanan’s Message. “The truth is, that Cuba in its existing colonial condition, is a constant source of injury and annoyance to the American people. It is the only spot in the civilized world where the African slave trade is tolerated; and we are bound by treaty with Great Britain to maintain a naval force on the coast of Africa, at much expense both of life and treasure, solely for the purpose of arresting slavers bound to that island. The late serious difficulties between the United States and Great Britain respecting the right of search, now so happily terminated, could never have arisen if Cuba had not afforded a market for slaves. As long as this market shall remain open, there can be no hope for the civilization of benighted Africa. .

1859, Dec. 19. President Buchanan’s Message. “All lawful means at my command have been employed, and shall continue to be employed, to execute the laws against the African slave trade. After a most careful and rigorous examination of our coasts, and a thorough investigation of the subject, we have not been able to discover that any slaves have been imported into the United States except the cargo by the Wanderer, numbering between three and four hundred. Those engaged in this unlawful enterprise have

been rigorously prosecuted, but not with as much success as their crimes have deserved. A number of them are still under prosecution. [Here follows a history of our slavetrade legislation.] “These acts of Congress, it is believed, have, with very rare and insignificant exceptions, accomplished their purpose. For a period of more than half a century there has been no perceptible addition to the number of our domestic slaves. ... Reopen the trade, and it would be difficult to determine whether the effect would be more deleterious on the interests of the master, or on those of the native born slave, ...” Senate Exec. Doc., 36 Cong. 1 sess. 1. No. 2, pp. 58.

1861, Dec. 3. President Lincoln’s Message. “The execution of the laws for the suppression of the African slave trade has been confided to the Department of the Interior. It is a subject of gratulation that the efforts which have been made for the suppression of this inhuman traffic have been recently attended with unusual success. Five vessels being fitted out for the slave trade have been seized and condemned. Two mates of vessels engaged in the trade, and one person in equipping a vessel as a slaver, have been convicted and subjected to the penalty of fine and imprisonment, and one captain, taken with a cargo of Africans on board his vessel, has been convicted of the highest grade of offence under our laws, the punishment of which is death.” Senate Exec. Doc., 37 Cong. 2 sess. 1 No. 1, p. 13.