

Lord William Wyndham Grenville

Dispute with America
(1808)

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DISPUTE WITH AMERICA.

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Lord Grenville rose, pursuant to notice, to move for certain papers, which would tend to throw some light on the nature of the relations, as they now existed, between this country and America, and on the terms and tendency of the treaty which, in Dec. 1806, was concluded. between the two nations. It had fallen to his lot to be engaged more than once in discussions with the ministers of the united states, and, he had bestowed on what regarded the connection and mutual interests of the two states, all the attention, labour, and diligence, of which he was master, and which the high importance of the subject so seriously imposed on him. Indeed, the cultivating and maintaining of a good understanding with America, an understanding that included and promoted the reciprocal interests of the two countries, was, in his mind, the most material and important consideration that could possibly engage the attention of the British government and parliament, next to the care of conciliating and uniting, in one bond of union, all descriptions of his majesty's subjects in these kingdoms. He had of late taken occasion, more than once, to express this opinion, and he now wished to repeat it in the most serious and solemn manner. This disposition powerfully animated his views and his conduct, whenever any thing occurred that threatened to embarrass or interrupt the friendly intercourse and connection of the two countries. In [432] the year 1794, in consequence of events to which the war that broke out in the preceding year gave rise, he had to discuss and adjust some differences which then occurred with the united states. It was his good fortune to have to deal in that transaction with a man (Mr. Jay), whose talents and disposition eminently qualified him for the office he had undertaken. Never in the course of his public life had he met with a person on whose probity, candour, and sincerity, he could so confidently rely. Mr. Jay felt the value and the necessity of a close and amicable connection between the two nations, and he laboured most impartially duly to weigh, and to ascertain the real interests of both. These unquestionably were qualifications indispensably necessary to a negotiator; and no negotiation could be fairly carried on except in a mutual spirit of justice and

impartiality. He trusted, that such was the spirit which actuated the negotiation at that time, and which brought it to a successful termination: sure he was, that Mr. Jay acted on these principles; yet when he returned to his own country, he was accused, very unjustly indeed, of having sacrificed her interests, or yielded too far in favour of those of England. Mr. Jay had long since retired from public life; but he felt happy in having this opportunity of paying a due tribute of praise to his character. Under the influence of this disposition were the late discussions with America carried on, and brought to what was expected to be a happy termination, when circumstances arose, that might put to hazard the final issue of that negotiation. He had much to complain of the false light in which ignorance or malice had endeavoured to represent it. His noble friends who conducted that negotiation, with talents of which he could not now speak as he ought, because they were present, had been reproached as having made unwarrantable and dangerous concessions to America—concessions which had been causelessly and mischievously held out to the public as the bane of the interests of Great Britain; yet, while these reproaches were vented against the administration at home, no sooner had the treaty reached America, than the government of the united states were accused of having yielded too much to the British plenipotentiaries. Even the speech by which the session was opened, contained assertions respecting this treaty, which were not correct. It [433] said the treaty had not taken effect by the refusal of the president to ratify it. Now, the president had not refused to ratify it; but deferred the ratification, as far as the ratification depended upon him, because the treaty contained certain articles, which, though they were agreed upon between the respective plenipotentiaries, were not however signed by them, because some further explanation upon the points they contained, was to be previously had with the American government. As to the concessions that were said to be made to America, in essential points, and which were reprobated as the bane of the interests of England, no assertion could be more unfounded. It was no doubt difficult to say, what were or were not the points which might be conceded, in balancing the interests of the two countries. Since America was declared an independent state in 1782, many points had arisen in discussions, which had never before been brought into agitation,

Most of them might easily be adjusted by taking for rule, the mutual advantages resulting from an amicable convention between the two countries: but in points that could be fairly considered as essential, never had he, nor those with whom he was connected, consented to make any concession. He considered as essential, what was connected with the preservation of the naval power and pre-eminence of this country, and sooner would he see England perish in a contest for the assertion of her maritime rights, than that she should yield a tittle of them: for these rights once given up, what contest would she be afterwards able to carry on? They were connected not only with her power, but with her very existence as an independent nation; and therefore no man could ever think of sacrificing them. This was his firm resolution, and nothing could bring him to depart from it. No dangerous concessions had therefore been made to America in the late treaty; and when the two governments came coolly to consider its nature and tendency, they would discover that it equally consulted the interests of both countries; and that, he would repeat, was the only basis upon which any treaty could be solidly and permanently built.—The noble lord then entered into a minute examination of the difficulties that resulted to both countries from the practice of searching merchantmen. From a thousand circumstances, it must be obvious that it was attended with more diffi-[434]culties between American and British officers, than between the officers of any other nation: but a spirit of candour, moderation, and mutual regard, which he could not too forcibly inculcate, would tend to compose every difference upon that head. As to the right of searching national ships of war, it had never been assumed, and should not be practised. The noble lord again implored the house seriously to appreciate the value of an uninterrupted amity and intercourse with America, and expressed his anxious expectation that the mind of the Americans would become cooler and more considerate, and that this country would meet them with corresponding sentiments. his lordship concluded with moving for copies or extracts of the Dispatches which passed between his majesty's government and the government of the United States, respecting the Treaty signed by the plenipotentiaries of both governments.