

James Madison to Nicholas P. Trist, May 29, 1832. With Notes. Transcription: The Writings of James Madison, ed. Gaillard Hunt. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1900-1910.

TO N. P. TRIST. MAD. MSS.

Montpellier, May 29, 1832.

My Dear Sir, Whilst reflecting in my sick bed a few mornings ago, on the dangers hovering over our Constitution and even the Union itself, a few ideas which, tho' not occurring for the first time had become particularly impressive at the present. I have noted them by the pen of a friend on the enclosed paper, and you will take them for what they are worth. If that be anything, and they happen to accord with your own view of the subject, they may be suggested where it is most likely they will be well received; but without *naming* or *designating* in any manner, the source of them.

I am still confined to my bed with my malady, my debility, and my age, in triple alliance against me. Any convalescence therefore must be tedious, not to add imperfect.

I have not yet ventured on the perusal of the book you sent me. From passages read to me, I perceive "that the venom of its shafts" are not without "a vigor in the bow."

With all my good wishes.

29 May, 1832.

(The paper referred to as inclosed in the foregoing letter.)

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The main cause of the discords which hover over our Constitution and even the union itself, is the tariff on imports; and the great complaint against the tariff is the inequality of the burthen it imposes on the planting and manufacturing States, the latter bearing a less share of the duties on protected articles than the former. This being the case, it seems reasonable that an equality should be restored as far as may be, by duties on unprotected articles consumed in a greater proportion by the manufacturing States. Let then a selection be made of unprotected articles, and such duties imposed on them as will have that effect. The unprotected article of tea for example, known to be more extensively consumed in the manufacturing than in the planting States, might be regarded, as pro tanto, balancing the disproportionate consumption of the protected article of coarse woolens in the South. As the repeal of the duty on tea and some other articles has been represented by southern politicians as more a relief to the North than to the South it follows, that the North in these particulars, has for many years paid taxes not proportionately borne by the South.

Justice certainly recommends some equalizing arrangement; and in a compound tariff, itself necessary to produce an equilibrium of the burthen, (a duty on any single article tho uniform in law being ununiform in its operation,) such an arrangement might not be impracticable.

Two objections may perhaps be made first, that it might produce an increase of surplus revenue, which there is an anxiety to avoid. But as a *certain* provision for an *adequate* revenue will always produce a surplus to be disposed of, such an addition, if not altogether avoidable, would admit a like disposition. In any view, the evil could not be so great as that for which it is suggested as a remedy.

The second objection is, that such an adjustment between different sections of the nation might increase the difficulty of a proper adjustment between different descriptions of people, particularly between the richer and the poorer. But here again the question recurs,

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whether the evil as far as it may be unavoidable, be so great as a continuance of the threatening discords which are the alternative.

It cannot be too much inculcated that in a Government like ours, and, indeed, in all governments, and whether in the case of indirect or direct taxes, it is impossible to do perfect justice in the distribution of burthens and benefits, and

that equitable estimates and mutual concessions are necessary to approach it.