

Chapter 74 - JQ Adams Refuses To Comply With A House “Gag Order” To Silence Anti-Slavery Petitions

Time: March 4, 1831

JQ Adams Enters The House As An Anti-Slavery Advocate

After losing to Jackson in 1828, JQ Adams retires to his family’s “Peace fields” mansion in Quincy, Massachusetts. But once there, he grows bored and his friends encourage him to return to Washington.

In 1830, he runs and wins election on the Anti-Masonic ticket and is seated in the House on March 4, 1831 at age sixty-four.

This will be the beginning of a remarkable second chapter in his political life, one that lasts for almost seventeen years, and where his achievements outshine his time in the presidency.

His return coincides with the beginning of the organized movements to abolish slavery, coming out of the Second Great Awakening and in the hands of two separate groups each with its own strategies. In Boston, Lloyd Garrison’s approach relies on “moral suasion,” with his newspaper and touring lecturers expected to attract more public converts. In New York, the Tappan Brothers, Theodore Weld and James Birney are convinced that political support in Congress will be needed for success.

Together their efforts begin to show up in the form of “Citizen’s Petitions” against slavery which, according to the long-standing rules of the House, are to be read out loud on the floor and then assigned to a standing committee for follow-up responses.

Historically, these petitions related to abolition have trickled into the House one at a time, typically from Quakers. But soon enough, the trickle turns into a flood.

In the name of comity, Northern members hesitate to read the petitions, but not JQ Adams. Soon enough he is reading these abolitionist pleas in batches of ten or more.

All while his Southern colleagues bristle at every word.

Time: December 18, 1835

Adams Ignores A House “Gag Order” To Silence The Petitions

Finally, on December 18, 1835, the procedure is challenged on the floor.

The impetus is a petition generated by a local abolitionist society calling on Congress to repeal slavery in the District of Columbia, a “territory” not a sovereign state, where the federal government has unilateral control over legal statutes

As one more appeal from Massachusetts is about to be read on December 18, James Hammond of South Carolina rises to object.

Why, he asks, should the House waste its time on these petitions, since the Constitution specifically guarantees the continuation of slavery? Instead of officially receiving these petitions, shouldn't the rules be changes to ignore them entirely?

Hammond's challenge sets off a fiery debate with Adams. It concludes with a decision to hand the controversy over to the rules committee headed by Henry L Pinckney, another South Carolina man, who supported Calhoun in his Nullification challenge.

On May 26, 1836 the Pinckney Committee Resolution is presented:

Whereas it is extremely important and desirable that the agitation on this subject should be finally arrested for the purpose of restoring tranquility to the public mind... resolved that all petitions, memorials, propositions or papers relating in any way... to the subject of slavery or the abolition of slavery, shall, without being printed or referred, be laid on the table and that no further action shall be had thereon.

Adams is outraged by the proposal:

I hold the resolution to be a violation of the Constitution of the US, the rules of this House and the rights of my constituents.

But the proposal passes by a comfortable margin of 117 yea to 68 nay.

Those in opposition henceforth refer to this as the “Gag Rule” – and its actual effect will prove to be very different from the intent of its backers.

Instead of ceasing to send in petitions, Rule #21 only serves to spur the abolitionists on – and, when received, Adams and others will continue to attempt to bring them up, despite the ban.

As time passes, Northerners will come to regard the “Gag Rule” as another example of the South trying to unilaterally impose its will on Washington politics.