

REPORT

Of the Committee on Naval Affairs, accompanying the bill to fix the Naval Peace Establishment.

JANUARY 20, 1823.

Read, and, with the bill, committed to a Committee of the whole on the state of the Union.

The Committee on Naval Affairs, to whom was committed the message of the President of the United States, transmitting a plan for the Peace Establishment of the Navy of the United States, communicated at the present session of Congress, respectfully

REPORT:

Before the late war between the United States and Great Britain, several acts of Congress, at different periods, established the amount and character of the naval force which was then deemed commensurate with our national resources, and adapted to the state of our relations with foreign countries, existing or anticipated. The changes, however, were so frequent, and the efforts to increase our naval strength were so incessant, that it was found, in practice, unnecessary to limit the number of vessels to be constructed, except by a due appropriation of our fiscal means: and had these been greater at the period of the war, there is no doubt that the policy of our government would have increased our navy in equal proportion, at least, with our other military defences.

Since that war, which so fully developed to our country and the world the vigor and efficiency of the American naval character, even when we possessed only an inconsiderable number of officers and ships of war, our government has but fulfilled the wishes of the nation in adopting, and steadily adhering to, a liberal plan for the "gradual increase" and early respectability of our naval power.

The act appropriating the sum of eight millions of dollars to be employed in constructing nine ships of the line and twelve frigates, with a subsequent modification, extending the time for the accomplishment of the object, is still in force; and the ships proposed are in such a state of forwardness, that there is reason to expect their

completion and equipment within the time contemplated, and without requiring additional appropriations.

While such has been our policy in regard to the construction of vessels of war, the Executive, not being restrained by any provision of existing laws, has continued to increase, by occasional promotions, and by new appointments in the inferior grades, the number of officers in our naval service; yet, though the present number in some of the grades, perhaps, exceeds the indispensable complement of the vessels already built, it falls far short of such complement for those which are in a train of speedy completion. The committee have also adverted to the circumstance, that a much larger number of sloops and small vessels of war will be wanted to form a just proportion to the ships of the larger classes, in the event of a contest with any maritime power. They would remark, also, as proved by the experience of other nations, perhaps even more than our own, that ships may be constructed and equipped in far less time, on the approach of war, than is requisite to discipline and train a corps of officers, to whom the command of them might be safely entrusted. The committee, therefore, believe that it is not expedient to diminish the present number of officers in service; and they are disposed especially to refer to the discretion of the Executive the expediency of *increasing*, to a reasonable extent, the number of midshipmen, as a class of officers to whom our future navy must look for experience, discipline, and nautical science. Advantage might be supposed to accrue to the public service, by striking from the list of officers some whose age or infirmities render them no longer useful; but a power of so much delicacy ought never to be exercised by legislation. If its policy or justice were admitted, the Executive is the only organ of the constitution, which, in the discharge of such a duty, possesses the competent means of information, and which ought, therefore, to assume the responsibility. Yet it is believed, on no slight grounds, that the corps of naval officers in our service yield to no equal number of any nation in correctness of deportment and sobriety of habits, as well as in nautical skill, experience, and characteristic boldness.

A considerable expenditure will be saved by the provisions proposed in the organization of the several naval stations, and the recommendation of the Department of the Navy is deemed by the committee to be founded on just principles, in making a distinction between officers on shore and those who are either in active service, or for the most part remote from their families and their homes.

The medical department of the naval service has been fully considered by the committee, and they have had recourse to all the means of information in their power to discover the nature and extent of defects acknowledged to exist, for the purpose of proposing, if possible, an effectual remedy. They are fully convinced that appointments in that branch of service have hitherto been made with too little discrimination, and that many have entered it, who, on a due examination of their competency, would have been rejected. They are equally convinced that the pay and emoluments of surgeons and surgeons' mates, though perhaps sufficient to induce young practitioners to en-

gage for a few years, with a view to avail themselves of the superior practical advantages to be found in the service, are very incompetent to retain in service many of the most able and faithful of the faculty. The compensation for the most learned, experienced, and useful surgeon, even after a life devoted to duty, is but little greater than that of a lieutenant; and his slender compensation is not, like that of the latter, submitted to for the present in prospect of approaching promotion. Neither honors nor increasing pay encourage him to improve in knowledge, and signalize himself by superior merit. Though many of the surgeons in our navy are men of skill and eminence, it is feared that many have abandoned the service in disgust, and that, of those who remain, some of the most valuable are retained by the hope of a more suitable provision being made by an enlightened country. The committee believe that the sections in the bill, which they have submitted, will place the medical corps of the navy on such a basis as comports with the true interests of the service.

These are some of the considerations which have guided the committee in proposing a Naval Peace Establishment, of the character and extent provided in the bill which accompanies this report. They are not so sanguine as to expect that all its details, though generally founded upon the recommendation of the Secretary of the Navy, assisted by the practical experience of the Board attached to the Department, will meet the concurrence of the House. It may be proper to state, that the proposition of establishing higher grades of rank than have heretofore existed, may be deemed by some inexpedient at this time; and the committee are led to acquiesce in the recommendation of the Department, more with a view to the future condition of our navy, and to the part it must hereafter act, in any conflict with a maritime power, than from an opinion that its present circumstances render the measure indispensable. Even in peace, however, they are of opinion that superior rank, in the naval as well as in the military service, will be conducive to subordination and wholesome discipline; and the inconsiderable addition of expense which it involves, ought not to present an obstacle to the attainment of an obvious benefit.

The committee are far from intending, by the measure now proposed, to arrest the progress, or to retard the development of our naval resources, so far as may correspond with the just views of policy, and the sound discretion of our government; and they would hesitate to recommend its adoption at the present session of Congress, did they not deem its tendency propitious to that progress, and to those views. But, in case it should be found otherwise, it will be perceived by those who shall hereafter be entrusted with the regulation of our maritime defences, and the error, when discovered, will, without doubt, be promptly corrected.