

IN HIS OWN WORDS: CHARLES PINCKNEY AND THE ISSUE OF SLAVERY

**Excerpt from *Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787*
(reported by James Madison)**

Note: Before reading the following excerpt, please note that it is taken from the debate about Article I, Section 9, Clause 1, with two major changes. The dialogue is now conveyed in the **present** tense, and from the **first person point of view** (“I” rather than “he”). Also, capitalization, punctuation, and spelling have been modernized.

August 22, 1787

Luther Martin (Maryland): I propose . . . to allow a prohibition or tax on the importation of slaves as five slaves are to be counted as 3 free men in the apportionment of Representatives; such a clause would leave an encouragement to this traffic. Slaves weaken one part of the Union, which the other parts are bound to protect: the privilege of importing them is therefore unreasonable. It is inconsistent with the principles of the revolution and dishonorable to the American character to have such a feature in the Constitution.

John Rutledge (South Carolina): I am not apprehensive of insurrections and would readily exempt the other states from the obligation to protect the southern against them. Religion and humanity have nothing to do with this question. Interest alone is the governing principle with nations. The true question at present is whether the southern states shall or shall not be parties to the Union. If the northern states consult their interest, they will not oppose the increase of slaves, which will increase the commodities of which they will become the carriers.

Oliver Ellsworth (Connecticut): I believe we should leave the clause as it stands. Let every state import what it pleases. The morality or wisdom of slavery are considerations belonging to the states themselves. What enriches a part enriches the whole, and the states are the best judges of their particular interest. The old confederation did not meddle with this point, and I do not see any greater necessity for bringing it within the policy of the new one.

Charles Pinckney (South Carolina): South Carolina can never receive the plan [the Constitution] if it prohibits the slave trade. In every proposed extension of the powers of the Congress, that state has expressly and watchfully excepted that of meddling with the importation of negroes. If the states be all left at liberty on this subject, South Carolina may perhaps by degrees do of herself what is wished, as Virginia and Maryland have already done.

Roger Sherman (Connecticut): I disapprove of the slave trade; yet as the states were now possessed of the right to import slaves, as the public good did not require it to be taken from them, and as it was expedient to have as few objections as possible to the proposed scheme of government, I think it best to leave the matter as we find it. The abolition of slavery seems to be going on in the U.S., and the good sense of the several states will probably by degrees complete it. I urge on the Convention the necessity of dispatching its business.

George Mason (Virginia): The present question concerns not the importing states alone but the whole Union. . . . Maryland and Virginia have already prohibited the importation of slaves expressly. North Carolina has done the same in substance. All this will be in vain if South Carolina and Georgia are at liberty to import. The western people are already calling out for slaves for their new lands, and will fill that country with slaves if they can be got through South Carolina and Georgia. Slavery discourages arts and manufactures. The poor despise labor when performed by slaves. They prevent the immigration of whites, who really enrich and strengthen a country. They produce the most pernicious effect on manners. Every master of slaves is born a petty tyrant. They bring the judgment of heaven on a country. As nations cannot be rewarded or punished in the next world they must be in this. By an inevitable chain of causes and effects providence punishes national sins, by national calamities. I lament that some of our eastern brethren have from a lust of gain embarked in this nefarious traffic. As to the states being in possession of the right to import, this is the case with many other rights, now to be properly given up. I hold it essential in every point of view that the general government should have power to prevent the increase of slavery.

Oliver Ellsworth (Connecticut): Since I have never owned a slave, I cannot judge of the effects of slavery on character: However, if it is to be considered in a moral light we ought to go farther and free those already in the country. . . . As population increases, poor laborers will be so plenty as to render slaves useless. Slavery in time will not be a speck in our country. Provision is already made in Connecticut for abolishing it. And the abolition has already taken place in Massachusetts.

Charles Pinckney (South Carolina): If slavery be wrong, it is justified by the example of all the world. I cite the case of Greece, Rome, and other ancient states; the sanction given by France, England, Holland, and other modern states. In all ages one half of mankind have been slaves. If the southern states were let alone they will probably of themselves stop importations. I would myself as a citizen of South Carolina vote for it. An attempt to take away the right as proposed will produce serious objections to the Constitution which I wish to see adopted.

Charles Cotesworth Pinckney [second cousin of Charles Pinckney] (South Carolina): I declare it to be my firm opinion that if I and all my colleagues were to sign the Constitution and use our personal influence, it would be of no avail towards obtaining the assent of our constituents. South Carolina and Georgia cannot do without slaves. As to Virginia she will gain by stopping the importations. Her slaves will rise in value, and she has more than she wants. It would be unequal to require South Carolina and Georgia to confederate on such unequal terms. . . . I contend that the importation of slaves would be for the interest of the whole Union. The more slaves, the more produce to employ the carrying trade; the more consumption also, and the more of this, the more of revenue for the common treasury. I admit it to be reasonable that slaves should be dutied like other imports, but should consider a rejection of the clause as an exclusion of South Carolina from the Union.

John Dickinson (Delaware): I consider it inadmissible on every principle of honor and safety that the importation of slaves should be authorized to the states by the Constitution. The true question was whether the national happiness would be promoted or impeded by the importation, and this question ought to be left to the national government, not to the states particularly interested.

Rufus King (Massachusetts): I think the subject should be considered in a political light only. If two states will not agree to the Constitution as stated on one side, I can affirm with equal belief on the other, that great and equal opposition would be experienced from the other states. I believe that the exemption of slaves from duty whilst every other import was subjected to it, as an inequality that could not fail to strike the commercial sagacity of the northern and middle states.

John Langdon (New Hampshire): We must give this power to the general government. I cannot with a good conscience leave it with the states who could then go on with the traffic, without being restrained by the opinions here given that they will themselves cease to import slaves.

Charles Cotesworth Pinckney (South Carolina): I am bound to declare candidly that I do not think South Carolina will stop her importations of slaves in any short time, but only stop them occasionally as she now does.

Source: "The Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787 reported by James Madison: August 22." The Avalon Project at Yale University Law School. <<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/debates/822.htm>>.