

Center *for the Study of the* American Constitution

NO. 10: ELBRIDGE GERRY (1744-1814)

Born in Marblehead, Massachusetts, Elbridge Gerry graduated from Harvard in 1762. He joined his father and two elder brothers in their successful mercantile business that focused primarily on shipping dried codfish to Barbados and the Spanish West Indies. In 1773 Gerry was elected to the colonial legislature where he met and allied with Samuel Adams in opposing Great Britain's imperial policy toward its American colonies. Serving in the Second Continental Congress (1776–1780), Gerry supported independence and signed the Declaration of Independence and the Articles of Confederation. While a member of the Confederation Congress (1783–1785), Gerry often served as president of the Treasury Board.

In state politics Gerry belonged to the anti-Hancock party. After turning down several lucrative appointments, he chose to serve in the state House of Representatives (1776–1777, 1780–1781, 1786–1787). In 1786 the state legislature appointed him a commissioner to the Annapolis Convention but he resigned. In 1787 the legislature appointed him to the Constitutional Convention. Fearing the “excesses of democracy” that gave rise to popular uprisings like Shays’s Rebellion, Gerry became one of the most frequent speakers in the Convention, where he initially advocated strengthening the powers of Congress at the expense of the states. But when in his opinion the strength of the new central government had increased too much, he refused to sign the Constitution, favoring instead another general convention.

Gerry became an important Antifederalist leader albeit a moderate one. His letter of 18 October 1787 to the Massachusetts legislature summarizing his objections to the Constitution was reprinted throughout the country. Federalists greatly vilified him. Because Gerry had served in drafting the Constitution, he felt that it would be inappropriate for him to serve in the state ratifying Convention. But he was asked to attend the Massachusetts Convention to provide information about the intent of the Constitutional Convention. He angrily and abruptly left the state Convention when Federalists limited his comments to written responses to specific questions.

Despite his opposition to the new plan of government, Gerry on several occasions said publicly that he would willingly live under the Constitution if it were adopted. He reluctantly agreed to stand for and was elected one of the eight Massachusetts representatives to the first federal Congress where he served two terms in the U.S. House of Representatives (1789–1793). He was a presidential elector in 1796 supporting John Adams, his close personal friend. In 1797 President Adams appointed Gerry to serve with John Marshall and Charles Cotesworth Pinckney as a special envoy to France. Marshall and Pinckney returned as heroes when the French Directory demanded bribes. Gerry stayed on and continued negotiations much to the chagrin of Federalists in America. But he helped to clear the way for President Adams to avoid war with France.

Gerry was an unsuccessful Republican candidate for governor in 1800–1803. He served again as a presidential elector in 1804 supporting Thomas Jefferson. As Massachusetts governor from 1810 to 1812, Gerry was highly partisan in support of Jefferson’s controversial foreign policy that was overwhelmingly unpopular in Massachusetts. Gerry’s support of an extremely partisan re-districting plan in the election of the state Senate earned condemnation as “gerrymandering.” Defeated for reelection as governor in 1812, Gerry, at the age of sixty-seven, was nominated and elected as President James Madison’s second vice president, replacing George Clinton who had died in office in 1812. Gerry served for a year and a half when he died in office. ■

QUOTATIONS

John Adams: Autobiography, February 1776

Mr. Gerry was chosen [as a delegate to Congress], who went with me to Philadelphia, and We took our Seats in Congress on Friday 9 February 1776. In this Gentleman I found a faithful Friend, and an ardent persevering Lover of his Country, who never hesitated to promote with all his abilities and Industry the boldest measures reconcilable with prudence.

John Adams to James Warren, 15 July 1776

The News, you will learn from my very worthy Friend Gerry. He is obliged to take a Ride for his Health, as I shall be very soon or have none. God grant he may recover it for he is a Man of immense Worth. If every Man here was a Gerry, the Liberties of America would be safe against the Gates of Earth and Hell.

Abigail Adams to John Adams, Boston, 5 August 1776

I entreat you to return, and that speedily, Mr. Gerry has recovered his Health and Spirits by his journey. He called upon me a few moments. I knew Him by the same instinct by which I first discovered him, and ventured to call him by Name though his person was never described to me. I cannot account for it but so it was. He appeared a modest Man, and has a fine intelligent Eye.

Nathaniel Peabody to Meshech Weare, Morristown, N.J., 11 June 1780

I have only at this time to recommend to your particular Notice the Honorable Elbridge Gerry Esq—Gentleman of distinguished Honor, integrity & Abilities—whose long and unremitting exertion in the Cause of America—Zeal & attachment to her Interest, has Justly entitled him to the most entire Esteem & Confidence of those Citizens who have had the Honor of an acquaintance with him.

Charles Thomson to Hannah Thomson, Princeton, 20 October 1783

. . . though he is far from being distinguished for his talents in Oratory, and cannot boast of the thunder of his voice, the harmony of his periods or any of those high strokes of eloquence which transport and captivate the hearers, nor of a just arrangement of arguments or soft insinuating address which commands the attention of an Audience and leads them insensibly and almost involuntarily to the point he means to carry, yet with his feeble voice and uncouth delivery broken and interrupted with many a heck & hem & repetition of ofs & ands he assumed such a superiority over [his opponents].

Francis Dana to Elbridge Gerry, Annapolis, 17 June 1784

You are out of your element when you are out of politicks: to talk of making pleasure *your* business, is to attempt a violence upon your disposition. You have not that levity of mind which is alone fitted for the pursuits of pleasure. Be yourself Man, and you will be happy. When I seem to interdict to you pleasurable pursuits, remember I do not mean to oppose an *inkling*, or as the French say the *penchant*, you seem to have to Matrimony. No, quite the contrary, I wou'd encourage it by every means in my power. This is a duty you still owe to God & your Country. "Take unto thyself a wife, & obey the ordinance of God." But look well to your choice, in that indeed is involv'd much happiness or much misery.

Francis Dana to Elbridge Gerry, Annapolis, 20 July 1784

I agree you have attacked my position "that out of politicks you are out of your element" with your wonted ingenuity, and shall be thoroughly satisfied if you keep out of them for a short time with a view of entering *bona fide* into the holy state of matrimony. There are many duties incumbent upon us in this life, perfectly consistent with each other; but unless you can settle it in your own mind, that a proper attention to the woman of your choice, will not require of you a renunciation of your political career: I must urge it upon you to remain as you are. For without flattery, my friend, I know of no one in our State, whose experience and abilities have better fitted him to assist in the deliberation & guidance of our great national concerns. And it appears there never was a moment which called louder for the attention of such characters to them. . . . Remember the important matters which have been affected of late, by your personal exertions and perseverance, and which, I verily believe, wou'd not otherwise have been obtained. I know your feelings must have been frequently very sensibly touched by that sort of barbarous opposition you have met with; but have

you not almost constantly borne it down, & carried your points? And what grateful sensations and reflections hath success brought along with it! I renew my charge to you then, *persevere*.

John Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, Auteuil, France, 6 May 1785

I promise myself from Mr. Gerry's Attendance in Congress all those changes for the better in the Management of the general Affairs of the Union, which I have often seen proceed from the Clearness of his Head and the goodness of his heart. I know of scarcely any Man of more Address, more Industry or Perseverance. He never appeared in Congress without a great Influence. He deserves to stand higher in the Estimation of Massachusetts than he has appeared to me at this distance to stand. He has merited more of that State than I am afraid they know of.

John Jay to John Adams, New York, 4 May 1786

Our friend Gerry has retired from Congress with a charming, amiable lady, whom he married here. I regret his absence, for he discharged the trust reposed in him with great fidelity, and with more industry and persevering attention than many are distinguished by.

Elbridge Gerry to Ann Gerry, Philadelphia, 29 August 1787

What is the Cause my Dearest Love that you are of late so liable to fainting? I am quite distressed about it. If you do not find relief soon, I shall quit the convention, and let their proceedings take their chance. Indeed I have been a Spectator for some time, for I am very different in political principles from my colleagues. I am very well but sick of being here.

William Pierce: Sketches of Members of the Constitutional Convention, 1787

Mr. Gerry's character is marked for integrity and perseverance. He is a hesitating and laborious speaker; possesses a great degree of confidence and goes extensively into all subjects that he speaks on, without respect to elegance or flower of diction. He is connected and sometimes clear in his arguments, conceives well, and cherishes as his first virtue, a love for his Country. Mr. Gerry is very much of a Gentleman in his principles and manners;—he has been engaged in the mercantile line and is a Man of property. He is about 37 years of age.

Unknown to Thomas Jefferson, Philadelphia, 11 October 1787

After four months session the house [i.e., the Constitutional Convention] broke up. The represented states, eleven & a half, having unanimously agreed to the act handed to you, there were only three dissenting voices; one from New England, a man of sense, but a Grumbletonian. He was of service by objecting to every thing he did not propose.

Portland, Maine *Cumberland Gazette*, 24 January 1788

Why gentlemen should be opposed to the introduction of Mr. Gerry [as a guest] to the [Massachusetts ratifying] Convention, we are unable to determine.—His greatest enemies allow him to be a man of ability, integrity, and to use their own expressions, “a politician of mathematical nicety.”

Elbridge Gerry to James Warren, Cambridge, 28 June 1788

I wish you would so order your arrangements as to favour us with a part of your time, although the alarm of our being together might be such as to station sentries at Charlestown bridge, and the fortifications for the defense of the federalists in Boston.

It is diverting to hear the manner in which these people amuse themselves at our expense. They suggest that I shall not be able to keep this place; and should it be true, I tell them I hope to find purchasers out of Boston. Others say I am much affected by political events, and disposed to grow melancholy, and so long as this is attended with a *mens conscia recti*,* they may think as they please; for melancholy is like madness, which has a pleasure none but madmen know.

*A mind conscious of rectitude.

Abigail Adams Smith to Abigail Adams, New York, 13 August 1788

Mr. G___ called upon me this morning; he tells me that he saw my father and yourself in Boston. He is just the same precise, formal being as he used to be; and speaks so *prettily* that I could not understand him.

“Adolphus,” Boston *Independent Chronicle*, 1 January 1789

In the year 1774, Mr. Gerry, being as he now is, a man of generous fortune, and a liberal education, he had no place to seek, no debts to pay, or avoid, nor any post to wish for. He embraced the cause of his country, and risked his life and fortune, from the purest principles of patriotism, and the most ardent, and disinterested love to his fellow citizens. Those who were with him in the Provincial Congress, and in the General Court, in the years 1774, 1775, and 1776, are witnesses to his unshaken firmness, and distinguished abilities. Take not the word of an unknown writer for this; there is not a town in your county which has not many witnesses on this head—*ask them*. From the year 1777 he has been constantly employed in public, and generally in the Congress of the United States, and no day has passed without exhibiting the highest proofs of his zeal for, and ability in, the interest of the states in general, and this state in particular. And it is well known that no man possessed more entirely the confidence of the people than he did, until October 1787.

We will now inquire by what fault of his, he has in any degree lost this confidence; and should it appear, that it was by *honesty, united with an ardent love for the liberty, and political happiness of his fellow citizens, you will certainly restore him*.

He was a member from this state, appointed to meet in a general Convention, to *revise the Confederation*. When that body met, they, instead of a revision of the Confederation, agreed upon a new form of government for the United States. Whether this was within their commission, or whether this was a good, or bad form of government, we have now no authority to decide; it is adopted by more than nine states, and is to be carried into force, and execution. Mr. Gerry did not approve of it. He had honor and integrity enough, to declare his sentiments. He foresaw undoubtedly, from divers circumstances peculiar to that crisis, that he should lose a share of his popularity, but he knew that an honest man like a light substance overwhelmed by a flood would finally rise on the surface of the public opinion.

New York *Daily Advertiser*, 30 April 1789

[Gerry] has become the avowed friend of the Constitution.

Samuel Henshaw to Theodore Sedgwick, Boston, 14 June 1789

Consult Mr. Gerry—I advise you to take pains to be on good terms with Mr. Gerry—I am sure you wont find a better Man—a better friend.

John Fenno to Joseph Ward, 5 July 1789

Gerry has his politics and is very obstinate; though generally deep in the minority.

Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, New York City, 12 July 1789

The Senate is composed of many men of great abilities, who appear to be liberal in their sentiments and candid towards each other. The House is composed of some men of equal talents. Others, the debates will give you the best Idea of them, but there is not a member whose sentiments clash more with my Ideas of things than Mr. G—y. He certainly does not comprehend the Great National System which must Render us respectable abroad & energetick at Home and will assuredly find himself lost amidst Rocks & sands. . . . I really believe Mr. G—y to be an honest Man.

Benjamin Goodhue to Samuel Phillips, 11 August 1789

He [Gerry] has as high notions of profusive grants as any person I ever knew, and has manifested such an illiberal and ugly a disposition since he has been in Congress that I believe no man has fewer friends than Mr. Gerry.

James Sullivan to Elbridge Gerry, New York, 30 August 1789

Your Enemies wish to find you in an unpopular Singularity that they may the more completely foil you. They represent you as Speaking often and in opposition to all measures but the people have Confidence in you.

Abigail Adams to Cotton Tufts, New York, 1 September 1789

Mr. G ____What can I say. You see him always in the minority, you see him very frequently wrong and the poor man looks ghastly. I believe he is worried, mortified and quite in the horrors. A constant correspondent of W[arre]n and his Wife, all of whom see nothing but ruin & destruction before them, & who will again Set our State by the ears if possible. Watch them closely.

William Ellery to Benjamin Huntington, Newport, 8 September 1789

I don't think the amendments [to the Constitution] will do any hurt, and they may do some good, and therefore I don't consider them as of much importance. I am glad that the gentleman who talks so much from his stick, was disappointed in all his efforts to procure amendments. He is a restless creature, and if he don't take care, he will weaken the reputation for honesty to which I used to think he was justly entitled.

James Iredell to Hannah Iredell, Boston, 7 October 1792

He is certainly a very agreeable Man, and I am persuaded from every thing I have heard & observed a very worthy one.

John Adams to Abigail Adams, Philadelphia, 21 June 1795

One of the Company expressed such Inveteracy against my old Friend Gerry that I could not help taking up his Vindication. The future Election of a Governor, in Case of an empty Chair, excites Jealousy which I have long perceived. These Things will always be so. Gerry's Merit is inferior to that of no Man in Massachusetts, except the present Governor [i.e., Samuel Adams], according to My Ideas and Judgment of Merit. I wish he was more enlarged however and more correct in his Views. He never was one of the threads tyed into the knot, and was never popular with that Sett.

John Adams to Abigail Adams, Philadelphia, 11 January 1797

Gerry is Steady, while so many prove as Slippery as Eels.

John Adams to Abigail Adams, Philadelphia, 14 January 1797

[He wishes the public] would dig up Gerry [i.e., call him out of retirement].

Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, Philadelphia, 23 June 1797

The President has now nominated Mr. Gerry [as an envoy to France]. This I know will be cavilled at by some, and he will be blamed for it, but the responsibility rests with him, and he must bear it. He would not have nominated him if he had not thought him an honest Man and a Friend to his Country, who will neither be deceived nor warped. I hope he will not refuse.

Rufus King to Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, London, 17 October 1797

Though in some small particulars I am not partial to Mr. G. still I am thoroughly convinced of his Integrity, Patriotism and Honor; entire confidence in which serves to extenuate those subordinate Defects to bear with and to get over which require only patience and a little management. I however know nothing concerning him for the last four years, which have wrought great changes in America as well as elsewhere. I speak of him as of former times.

Fulwar Skipwith to Thomas Jefferson, Paris, 17 March 1798

When we heard that Mr. Gerry was nominated to the Mission the Directory were pleased, and the patriots in Paris of both Countries were delighted in the idea of seeing here one of the tried patriots of 75 and one of the remaining republican chiefs of the American States; but painful is it to me to add that we behold him moving here but as the shadow of what we presumed he was, and we much fear that the longer he stays, the more apt will public opinion be to subscribe the neutrality of his character to the feebleness of his diplomatic talents. We learn in secret whispers from this good old Gentleman (for I venerate the chastity of his moral character while I regret that he has not the courage to shape a political course congenial to the crisis here) that he has a hard and cruel task to think and act with his two associates, and that were he alone he would be able to stop the frightful breach between the two Countries—But I am apprehensive that his paralytic mind would prove too weak to invent, and his arm to feeble to apply the remedy which the disease demands.

Charles Cotesworth Pinckney to Rufus King, Paris, 4 April 1798

I never met with a man of less candor and so much duplicity as Mr. Gerry.

William Vans Murray to John Quincy Adams, The Hague, 13 April 1798

Though I know that he is a very well informed one upon Congress business, and of a most friendly turn of heart, good husband, father and neighbor, yet I know him so well as to say that of all men I know in America he is perhaps the least qualified to play a part in Paris, either among the men or the women. He is too virtuous for the last, too little acquaint-

ed with the world and with himself for the first, and could do no possible good but in a relative character as one of three envoys.

William Short to Thomas Jefferson, Jagouville near Havre, 6 August 1798

As I have mentioned Mr. G. I cannot help adding how much he seems to be really attached to you—& how true & good a friend he appears to me to be to his country. . . . Mr. G. seems to feel sensibly all the efforts that will have been made to separate you & the President from each other—he is equally a friend to both & regrets for his own sake & that of his country, that two of the most upright disinterested & enlightened patriots that any country can boast, men that would do honor to any age—men that have been so useful by their joint exertions—men that have the same decided object, the good of their country, as their only aim, should risk being put asunder, & as it were pitted one against the other; & all this by men, who perhaps have different views from both—but so go the affairs of men.

Benjamin Rush to William Marshall, Philadelphia, 15 September 1798

I hope the account you have given me of the pacific disposition of France towards the United States may prove true. If it should, Mr. Gerry will deserve more from his country than ever she can pay him.

John Quincy Adams to John Adams, Berlin, 25 September 1798

Even Mr. Gerry returned home with a full persuasion that the dispositions in France towards us were altogether pacific. That gentleman unfortunately was not qualified for negotiation with such men as now govern France. He was charmed with words; he was duped by professions; he had neither the spirit nor the penetration absolutely necessary for dealing with adversaries at once so bold, so cunning, and so false. Since his departure they have redoubled their pretences of moderation and peaceable positions. They have totally changed their system of conduct but their purposes remain the same.

Robert Troup to Rufus King, New York, 2 October 1798

As to Mr. Gerry, I can say nothing honorable to him, or pleasing to you. *De mortuis nil nisi bonum** is a maxim as applicable to him as if he was in his grave.

*Of the dead say nothing but good.

Timothy Pickering to John Marshall, Trenton, 19 October 1798

The President ought to be acquainted with Mr. Gerry's whole conduct. Your journal shows it to have been characterized, not only with timidity, indecision and meanness, but with *treachery*.

Timothy Pickering to George Cabot, Trenton, 10 November 1798

Gerry has the foolish vanity to imagine that he himself represents the sense and virtue of his immediate countrymen; and, as it was impossible for Marshall, fatigued with his delays and pertinacity in trifling objections, disgusted with his wrongheadedness and indignant at his duplicity, ultimately not to manifest his contempt for him, Gerry has transferred this contempt to his country [i.e., New England].

George Cabot to Timothy Pickering, Brookline, Mass., 17 November 1798

Mr. Wolcott can tell you that in a dispute with the President at his (Mr. Wolcott's) table, concerning the character of Mr. Gerry, I was provoked to be rude; and that I pronounced him "totally unfit to conduct any great affair of himself, and from his captious and jealous temper altogether unqualified to act with others." Such he has always been; such his late colleagues have found him; and such, I am persuaded, even the French now think him.

Abigail Adams to John Adams, Quincy, Mass., 25 January 1799

On Wednesday I received a visit from president Willard and Mr. Gerry. . . . Whoever questions the integrity of Mr. Gerry's Heart, does him an injury, tho I thought yesterday from his Slowness of Speech and his round about and about manner of conveying his Ideas, I would as soon vote for a valuable old woman to be an Embassy, as for him.

George Washington to Timothy Pickering, Mount Vernon, 10 February 1799

I am sorry to hear that Mr. Gerry is pursuing a mischievous path. That he was led astray by his own vanity & self importance, and was the dupe of *Diplomatic Skill*, I never had a doubt; but these doubts were accompanied by faint

hopes (faint indeed they were) that he possessed candor, fortitude & manliness enough to have come forward with an open declaration that, he had been practiced upon, & was deceived—But Mr. Gerry's Mind is not enlarged enough for such conduct as this.

George Cabot to Timothy Pickering, Brookline, Mass., 14 February 1799

I think it impossible for any man of common sense to avoid seeing that Gerry is too great a fool to have been employed by a wise government in a business of so much consequence.

Robert Troup to Rufus King, New York, 6 November 1799

Little Gerry is crawling out of his obscurity and giving entertainments as a candidate for the office of Governor of Massachusetts. I understand he expects to be supported by the independent of both parties.

Fisher Ames to Oliver Wolcott, Jr., Dedham, Mass., 2 January 1800

Massachusetts is threatened with Gerry, who, though a weak creature, would unite the confidence of the anarchists and would gain and abuse a portion of that of his adversaries.

Benjamin Rush's Sketches, c. 1800

He was a respectable young merchant, of a liberal education, and considerable knowledge. He was slow in his perceptions and in his manner of doing business, and stammering in his speech, but he knew and embraced truth when he saw it. He had no local or state prejudices. Every part of his conduct in 1775, 1776, and 1777 indicated him to be a sensible, upright man, and a genuine friend to republican forms of government.

Mercy Otis Warren, *History of the American Revolution*, 1805

This gentleman entered from principle, early in the opposition to British encroachments, and continued one of the most uniform republicans to the end of the contest. He was the next year chosen a delegate to the continental Congress. Firm, exact, perspicuous, and tenacious of public and private honor, he rendered essential service to the union for many years that he continued a member of that honorable body.

John Adams to Benjamin Rush, Quincy, Mass., 21 June 1811

You ought to read Gerry's speech [of 1775]. It is in the genuine Whiggish style of 1765 and 1775. He is the same enlightened, indefatigable and persevering Patriot.

John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, Quincy, Mass., 21 May 1812

Though Mr. Gerry is not too old for the most arduous Service, he is one of the earliest and oldest Legislators in the Revolution and has devoted himself, his fortune and his family in the Service of his Country.

Edward Coles to Thomas Jefferson, Quincy, Mass., 23 November 1814

Edward Coles is desired by the President to send Mr. Jefferson the enclosed papers; and to inform him of the sudden death of the Vice President, who expired after a few moments illness, with a kind of paralytick fit, about one hour since.

Rufus King to John Adams, 23 November 1814

Another of the patriots of the revolution is gone; the Vice President was dressed as usual to attend the Senate this morning, went in his carriage to call upon Mr. [Joseph] Nourse of the Treasury department, complained while there of feeling unwell, was helped by Mr. Nourse into the carriage to return to his quarters, distant not more than a quarter of a mile, was senseless when he arrived there & being taken out & laid upon a bed immediately expired without a groan or a struggle. Knowing your long & constant friendship for Mr. Gerry, I have thought it to be my duty to impart to you the melancholy information.

John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, Quincy, Mass., 11 December 1814

Paine, Lovel and Gerry are gone and I am left alone. Gerry is happy in his Death; for what horrors of Calumny has he not escaped in the Electioneering campagne of next Summer? But what is to be the destiny of an amiable Widow and nine Children all as amiable as they are destitute?