

William R. Davie, Speech in the Ratifying Convention, 31 July 1788

Mr. DAVIE. Mr. Chairman, it is said that there is a great majority against the Constitution, and in favor of the gentleman's proposition. The object of the majority, I suppose, is to pursue the most probable method of obtaining amendments. The honorable gentleman from Halifax has said this is the most eligible method of obtaining them. My opinion is the very reverse. Let us weigh the probability of both modes proposed, and determine with candor which is the safest and surest method of obtaining the wished-for alterations. The honorable gentleman from Anson has said that our conduct in adhering to these resolutions would be modest. What is his idea or definition of modesty? The term must be very equivocal. So far from being modest, it appears to me to be no less than an arrogant, dictatorial proposal of a constitution to the United States of America. We shall be no part of that confederacy, and yet attempt to dictate to one of the most powerful confederacies in the world. It is also said to be most agreeable to *prudence*. If our real object be amendments, every man must agree that the most likely means of obtaining them are the most prudent. Four of the most respectable states have adopted the Constitution, and recommended amendments. New York, (if she refuses to adopt,) Rhode Island, and North Carolina, will be the only states out of the Union. But if these three were added, they would compose a majority in favor of amendments, and might, by various means, compel the other states into the measure. It must be granted that there is no way of obtaining amendments but the mode prescribed in the Constitution; two thirds of the legislatures of the states in the *confederacy* may require Congress to call a convention to propose amendments, or the same proportion of both houses may propose them. It will then be of no consequence that we stand out and propose amendments. Without adoption we are not a member of the confederacy, and, possessing no federal rights, can neither make any proposition nor require Congress to call a convention.

Is it not clear, however strange it may be, that we are withholding our weight from those states who are of our own opinion, and by a perverse obstinacy obstructing the very measure we wish to promote? If two thirds of both houses are necessary to send forward amendments to the states, would it not be prudent that we should be there, and add our vote to the number of those states who are of the same sentiment? The honorable member from Anson has likened this business to a copartnership, comparing small things to great. The comparison is only just in one respect: the dictatorial proposal of North Carolina to the American confederacy is like a beggarly bankrupt addressing an opulent company of merchants, and arrogantly telling them, "I wish to be in copartnership with you, but the terms must be such *as I please*." What has North Carolina to put into the stock with the other states? Have we not felt our poverty? What was the language of Congress on their last requisition on this state? Surely gentlemen must remember the painful terms in which our delinquency was treated. The gentleman has also said that we shall still be a part of the Union, and if we be separated, it is not our fault. This is an obvious solecism. It is our *own fault*, sir, and the direct consequence of the means we are now pursuing. North Carolina stands foremost in the point of delinquency, and has repeatedly violated the Confederation. The conduct of this state has been among the principal causes which produced this revolution in our federal government. The honorable gentleman has also added, "that it was a rule in law that the same solemnities were necessary to annul, which were

necessary to create or establish, a compact; and that, as thirteen states created, so thirteen states must concur in the dissolution of the Confederation." — This may be talking like a lawyer or a judge, but it is very *unlike* a politician. A majority is the rule of republican decisions. It was the voice of a majority of the people of America that gave that system validity, and the same authority can and will annul it at any time. Every man of common sense knows that political power is *political right*. Lawyers may cavil and quibble about the necessity of unanimity, but the true principle is otherwise. In every republican community, the majority binds the minority; and whether confederated or separated, the principle will equally apply. We have no right to come into the Union until we exercise the right of deciding on the question referred to us. Adoption places us in the Union — rejection extinguishes the *right* forever. The scheme proposed by these gentlemen will certainly be considered as an absolute rejection; it may amuse the people, and answer a purpose *here*, but will not answer any purpose *there*.

The honorable gentleman from Halifax asserts, "We may come in when we please." The gentleman from Hanover, on the same side of the question, endeavored to alarm and frighten us about the dangerous influence of the Eastern States. If he deserves any credit, can we expect they will let us into the Union, until they have accomplished their particular views, and then but on the most disadvantageous terms? Commercial regulations will be one of the great objects of the first session of Congress, in which our interests will be totally neglected. Every man must be convinced of the importance of the first acts and regulations, as they will probably give a tone to the policy of ages yet to come; and this scheme will add greatly to the influence of the Eastern States, and proportionably diminish the power and interests of the Southern States.

The gentleman says he has a project in his pocket, which, he risks his life, will induce the other states to give us a share of the general impost. I am fully satisfied, sir. this project will not answer the purpose, and the forfeiture of his life will be no compensation for irretrievable public loss. Every man who knows the resources of our commerce, and our situation, will be clearly convinced that the project cannot succeed. The whole produce of our duties, both by land and water, is very trifling. For several years past, it has not exceeded £10,000 of our own paper money. It will not be more — probably less — if we were out of the Union. The whole proportion, of this state of the public debts, except this mere pittance, must be raised from the people by direct and immediate taxation.

But the fact is, sir, it cannot be raised, because it cannot be paid; and without sharing in the general impost, we shall never discharge our quota of the federal debt. What does he offer the other states? The poor pittance I have mentioned. Can we suppose Congress so lost to every sense of duty, interest, and justice? Would their constituents permit them to put their hands into their pockets to pay *our debts*? We have no equivalent to give them for it. As several powerful states have proposed amendments, they will, no doubt, be supported with zeal and perseverance, so that it is not probable that the object of amendments will be lost. We may struggle on for a few years, and render ourselves wretched and contemptible; but we must at last come into the Union on their terms, however humiliating they maybe. The project on the table is little better than an absolute rejection, and is neither rational nor politic, as it cannot promote the end proposed.

Jonathan Elliot, ed., *The Debates in the Several State Conventions, on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution*, Vol. 4, Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott and Company, pp. 236-239.