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Rough Carver

New York *Daily Advertiser*, 3–4 September 1787¹

Some Observations on the present Political situation of the United States.

When the question of the impost was agitated in our Legislature last winter, I took the liberty of addressing the citizens of the state of New-York, respecting it, and endeavored to treat the subject with freedom and candor. Pleased with the animating hope of seeing it meet a favorable termination, I repaired to the house of Assembly; but to my astonishment, a contemptuous silence succeeded the persuasive arguments offered by a very worthy character. The members appeared predetermined, having, as I was afterwards told, *made up their minds on the subject*. This conduct seemed to me so extremely inexplicable, that I resolved to pry into the probable causes of it, and soon found, that many of them were mere machines, to back the principles of others, and creatures to Jacobitish intrigue; controled in their sentiments by menial sycophants to British influence—by men, who in the time of our distress, exulting in the idea of British power, with an unremitting hand, confiscated the property of our unfortunate citizens. The British courts of Admiralty, held in this city at that time, teem with numberless instances. Perhaps it may be said in justification, that those who were instrumental in that business, should not be censured, because they were in the line of their duty. To this I answer, that if a great villain orders one, or more, smaller ones, to cut our throats, they are all guilty, as well those who execute, as he who directs. I will never believe any man's professions of friendship, who, from choice, could be capable of robbing me of my property, under the specious sanction of compulsion. Any allegations of being forced into the business, surely cannot be offered in mitigation, when nothing obligatory was imposed on the perpetrator. This same system in our governing Head, will, as long as the same characters remain in office, continue to thwart every improvement in the art of government, which may be conceived by the good and wise. These remarks being preparatory to my general plan, I will now proceed somewhat farther. We have all, no doubt, allowed ourselves to think more or less on the interesting question of a federal government. To state this in a proper point of view, is the object of my present endeavors; much hath already been written and said concerning it, but as it is of the highest magnitude to every man, who wishes to preserve his liberties inviolate, to be acquainted with the leading features in the politics of the present day, I shall not be ashamed of throwing out any thing, which, in its nature, is pregnant with, or may be made productive of either much good or evil to this country. The present critical situation of America is sufficient to engage our most anxious attention; unexampled in history, we see her tottering under every constitutional weakness, and fondly inviting the aid of all good men, to secure to her those blessings, for which she hath toiled and suffered. Shall the fair Genius of Columbia,

in vain, wing her way from north to south, diffusing unanimity among her virtuous sons? In order to familiarize ourselves to the effects, which evils, yet at a distance, will certainly produce, let us suppose the confederation at present dissolved—and then enquire, what would be the natural consequences of such an event—to me, they stand thus. First *Those foreigners who have demands on us, would seize on the most valuable parts of our country, by way of security for their loans, and being once in possession, probably would not incline to restore them, but hold all, from a claim of right, founded on power; what the end of this would be, let every man judge for himself.*

Secondly. *Admitting that those evils would not follow a dissolution of the union; we must at least allow, that each state, would become a distinct independent sovereignty; each assuming to itself, a different interest, and rivalling each other in every political emolument.* Here, a contrariety of interests, operating on different local communities, must, of course, create a diversity of opposite pursuits, which in their turns, by an interference, will excite state cavils, producing wars, bloodshed, conquests, and doubtless slavery.—These things, from the circumstances naturally interwoven with such national commotions, generally happen. But to give the idea a full latitude, we will consider the United States at present unconnected, and independent of each other, by mutual consent. As sovereign states, a military force must be established in each, for its protection and defence, this cannot be, without an accumulation of taxes too great for the slender resources of an inconsiderable people, whose chief dependence must be on agriculture, and some commerce; not to say any thing of the dangers to which the liberties of the people would be exposed, from a standing army, which, in Republics, is at all times incompatible, unless an extensive dominion, exposed to the insults of a foreign foe, renders it necessary. The Executive in the Legislature, in this case, finds itself possessed of a balance in the scale of power, which depraved minds may use to answer the most iniquitous purposes. Thus situated, the complexion of the politics in the several States would be entirely European, if not altogether Germanic. Then, the high and mighty ones among us would bridle our tongues, and absolute dependence on the capricious favors of some ministerial brute, would be the highest reach of our warmest hopes; and seas of blood would flow throughout the land, to support the dignity of a thick-skulled and double-hearted Chief [Governor George Clinton].—To judge fairly of an object which attracts our attention, we should view it in its most natural colors: and to determine judiciously on any political question, we must strip it of every covering which may deceive the passive mind. The one now before us deserves all our attention; our own welfare, and the fate of millions yet unborn, are involved in it; another, so important, it is probable will never again rise in America. Without going into a tedious disquisition on any particular form of Federal Government, I must impress it on every friend to his country, to investigate, in order to understand, the nature and probable operation of an energetic, consolidated system of government, calculated on the broad basis of individual and state welfare.

Amid' the general bustle of popular enquiry, the most material objects are often neglected; namely, those local ingredients, which, in all good governments, are the pillars on which the liberties of the people are erected; whose happiness being the end of all just laws, no exertion of collective power should be made, but with an eye to promote it; and into this common stream the worth, merit, and best deeds of individuals must flow, before a nation can be great and happy. These are axioms, which none can contravert; yet we have men among us, who will coolly oppose every thing, which does not bear the marks of *Self*. Their intentions are as obvious, as the measures are despicable. The great Anti-Impost Man [Governor George Clinton], after having disseminated

the seeds of dissention, keeps aloof, gliding down the tide of popularity: it is, however, to be hoped, that the same wisdom which dictated the necessity of revising the Federal Government, will impress the citizens with just notions of a governing Head; and, at the same time, a due regard for the rights of individuals. The grand question. Whether we shall separate—or—UNITE MORE FIRMLY IN FEDERAL TIES?—here opens to us: it is an interesting one. The mutilated soldier—the ruined citizen—the distressed orphan—and the kindly stranger, are buried in anxious suspense for its fate. No man, in his proper senses, would prefer evil to good; and no honest American can oppose that, which is intended and calculated to render his situation eligible and happy; he detests every idea of servile dependence on ambitious Rulers, who have nothing in view but their own aggrandizement.

Sept. 1, 1787.

[4 September] We have men among us, who are assiduously striving to form a party against Federal attachments: to cover their *contracted* designs, many weak arguments are used.—They tell us, that the Confederation is sufficient, and that, by acceding to a well-balanced, energetic Government, we will delegate to the Supreme Head those powers, which we, as a State, should only possess. The alarming complexion of the times requires truth and plainness. How vague is the reasoning used by those gentlemen, in favor of their opinions!—I will ask, why do we, as citizens, delegate to the Legislature the power of ruling us? Is it not to secure to us those privileges which we enjoy? The propriety of a ruling Head is so striking, that all mankind readily give into it:—the most uncouth barbarian will tell you, that, in order to live in domestic security, he must come under some Government; that the whole community, of which he is a member, are bound in the strictest ties of reciprocal protection and preservation; and, as a member of the same social compact, he is, in common with his fellow subjects, entitled to the full protection of his life, liberty, and property. In this view the United States must be considered: they each form a constituent part of the grand body politic; by contributing to the same general stock, a power may be created, and, being vested in the ruling Head, will prove sufficient for the protection and defence of each particular State; at the same time, by being well proportioned, no dangers need be apprehended from its operation.

Without this, none of them, in case of invasion, would have a right to solicit assistance from their neighbours. It would not be politic for either State to embroil itself in foreign or unnecessary disputes; having a different interest to pursue, a different system of politics must likewise be pursued. If the Legislature, in any one of the States, should oppress the People, they will have no other arbitrators to hear their grievances, but the very men from whom they flow. With regard to oppression from a Federal body, a combination of the Legislative powers, which the several States will possess, may at any time be opposed to the unwarrantable excursions in the field of power and dominion, which the depravity of human nature may incline it to make. With regard to external dangers—while closely united, we have none to dread; foes, who might, with impunity, destroy our habitations and lay waste our lands, if unconnected in political bonds, will, while the Union is preserved, hide their heads; and evils, which daily thicken under the generating clouds of discord, will shrink away, under the influential rays of unanimity. The mighty bugbears of despotic sway, from a well constituted body, will not weigh with thinking minds; men, in an enlightened age, are not satisfied without making proper enquiries themselves into

the nature of the business before them. On a candid investigation, from the obvious tendency of the question under consideration, it must produce this rational conclusion—*That a collective energy, answering all the purposes of Government, should be lodged somewhere*. In no place, or body (provided the necessity of the Union is admitted) can this coercion be vested to advantage, but in that created by the general consent of the States. A dependent creature, of their own forming, they can always destroy; since, on their will and pleasure it must exist: and, while each State has a Legislature, such barriers can be raised, as will effectually frustrate every innovation, which an abandoned set of men might make. The method which was adopted to amend the Confederation, is a stern precedent:—a deficiency was sensibly felt by the States—their Government was weak and languid, and the people unanimously desired a more coercive one. Under such persuasions, we are easily induced to submit to impositions:—a better opportunity of rivetting chains on the Americans could not offer. Instead of this, the imbecility of the Federal Government was represented to the several States; and they, as the supreme arbitrators, nominated several of the first characters among them, to make such alterations as would be most productive of the common good. This right they will ever possess, while each State hath a distinct jurisdiction, blended with the general weal, in proportion to the cession of power which it was pleased to make. When we cease to be confederated States, we will also cease to enjoy that unbounded freedom which prevails throughout our land.

An annihilation of the Union would likewise tend to produce unhappy effects, from the ambitious views of the more powerful states; conscious of their own superior strength and importance, a thirst for dominion, would incite them to invade the rights of their weaker neighbours; and after driving the impetuous torrent of conquest and oppression, to the final subjugation of their depressed brethren, their own evident ruin would stare them in the face—the arms of their veteran bands, employed in the conquest of their best friends, would be turned against the advocates for freedom; and all their sighs, prayers, and supplications, would, with an unfeeling heart, be hurled down the common stream of unsatiated tyranny.—A revolution in the face of American politics, crowding into existence an Empire raised in blood and venality, would excite the compassion of the commiserating part of mankind, and cause the sensitive tear to flow, and the fair prospect of finding rest in a land of freedom, in being blasted would cast a gloom over the hopes of an enslaved world.—We will now reverse the picture, and indulge the anticipation of more agreeable events—instead of sinking under a hopeless despondency, we have some reason to promise ourselves, a saving turn to our national affairs—the characteristics of the present moment, should embolden us to place an assurance in the means used for that purpose. In a short time, we may reasonably expect, that from being the contempt of Europeans, America will rise triumphant, and spurn their low arts to injure her—that as mistress of her own seas, she will chastise all, who shall dare to insult her—and secure to her sons, independence, and the arts of peace. The universal tranquillity, which prevails, and the fixed confidence, dwelling in the countenance of every well-meaning individual, are strong indications of a happy issue.

New-York, Sept. 3, 1787.

1. The term “Rough Carver” is a parody on Antifederalist Abraham Yates, Jr.’s., oft-employed pseudonym “Rough Hewer.”

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