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Centinel IV

Philadelphia *Independent Gazetteer*, 30 November 1787

To the PEOPLE of PENNSYLVANIA.

Friends, Countrymen and fellow Citizens, That the present confederation is inadequate to the objects of the union, seems to be universally allowed. The only question is, what additional powers are wanting to give due energy to the federal government? We should, however, be careful in forming our opinion on this subject, not to impute the temporary and extraordinary difficulties that has hitherto impeded the execution of the confederation, to defects in the system itself. Taxation is in every government, a very delicate and difficult subject; hence it has been the policy of all wise statesmen, as far as circumstances permitted, to lead the people by small beginnings and almost imperceptible degrees, into the habits of taxation; where the contrary conduct has been pursued, it has ever failed of full success, not unfrequently proving the ruin of the projectors. The imposing of a burdensome tax at once on a people, without the usual gradations, is the severest test that any government can be put to, despotism itself has often proved unequal to the attempt. Under this conviction, let us take a review of our situation before and since the revolution. From the first settlement of the country^(a) until the commencement of the late war, the taxes were so light and trivial as to be scarcely felt by the people; when we engaged in the expensive contest with Great Britain, the Congress sensible of the difficulty of levying the monies necessary to its support, by *direct* taxation, had recourse to an anticipation of the public resources, by emitting bills of credit, and thus postponed the necessity of taxation for several years; this means was pursued to a most ruinous length; but about the year 80 or 81, it was wholly exhausted, the bills of credit had suffered such a depreciation from the excessive quantities in circulations, that they ceased to be useful as a medium. The country at this period, was very much impoverished and exhausted; commerce had been suspended for near six years; the husbandman, for want of a market, limited his crops to his own subsistence; the frequent calls of the militia and long continuance in actual service, the devastations of the enemy, the subsistence of our own armies, the evils of the depreciation of the paper money, which fell chiefly upon the patriotic and virtuous part of the community, had all concurred to produce great distress throughout America. In this situation of affairs, we still had the same powerful enemy to contend with, who had even more numerous and better appointed armies in the field than at any former time. Our allies were applied to in this exigence, but the pecuniary assistance that we could procure from them, was soon exhausted; the only resource now remaining, was to obtain by direct taxation, the monies necessary for our defence; the history of mankind does not furnish a similar instance

of an attempt to levy such enormous taxes at once, of a people so wholly unprepared and uninured to them—the lamp of sacred liberty^(b) must indeed have burned with unsullied lustre, every sordid principle of the mind must have been then extinct, when the people not only submitted to the grievous impositions, but cheerfully exerted themselves to comply with the calls of their country; their abilities however, were not equal to furnish the necessary sums—indeed the requisition of the year 1782, amounted to the whole income of their farms and other property, including the means of their subsistence; perhaps the strained exertions of *two* years, would not have sufficed to the discharge of this requisition; how then can we impute the difficulties of the people to a due compliance with the requisitions of Congress to a defect in the confederation, for any government, however energetic, in similar circumstances, would have experienced the same fate. If we review the proceedings of the states, we shall find that they gave every sanction and authority to the requisitions of Congress, that their laws could confer, that they attempted to collect the sums called for in the same manner as is proposed to be done in future by the general government, instead of the state legislatures.

It is a maxim that a government, ought to be cautious not to govern over much, for when the cord of power is drawn too tight, it generally proves its destruction, the impracticability of complying with the requisitions of Congress has lessened the sense of obligation and duty in the people, and thus weakened the ties of the union; the opinion of power in a free government is much more efficacious than the exercise of it; it requires the maturity of time and repeated practice to give due energy and certainty to the operations of government, especially to such as affect the purses of the people.

The thirteen Swiss Cantons confederated by more general and weaker ties than these United States are by the present articles of confederation, have not experienced the necessity of strengthening their union by vesting their general diet with further or greater powers; this national body has only the management of their foreign concerns and in case of a war can only call by requisition on the several Cantons for the necessary supplies, who are sovereign and independent in every internal and local exercise of government—and yet this rope of sand, as our confederation has been termed, which is so similar to that, has held together for ages without any apparent charm.^(c)

I am persuaded that a due consideration, will evince, that the present inefficacy of the requisitions of Congress, is not owing to a defect in the confederation, but the peculiar circumstances of the times.

The wheels of the general government having been thus clogged and the arrearages of taxes still accumulating, it may be asked what prospect is their of the government resuming its proper tone, unless more compulsory powers are granted? To this it may be answered, that the produce of imposts on commerce which all agree to vest in Congress, together with the immense tracts of land at their disposal, will rapidly lessen and eventually discharge the present incumbrances; when this takes place, the mode by requisi[tion] will be found perfectly adequate to the extraordinary exigencies of the union. Congress have lately sold land to the amount of eight millions of dollars, which is a considerable portion of the whole debt.

It is to be lamented that the interested and designing have availed themselves so successfully of the present crisis, and under the specious pretence of having discovered a panacea for all the ills of the people, they are about establishing a system of government, that will prove more

destructive to them, than the wooden horse filled with soldiers did in ancient times to the city of Troy; this horse was introduced by their hostile enemy the Grecians, by a prostitution of the sacred rights^(d) of their religion; in like manner, my fellow citizens are aspiring despots among yourselves prostituting the name of a Washington to cloak their designs upon your liberties.

I would ask how is the proposed government to shower down those treasures upon every class of citizens as is so industriously inculcated and so fondly believed? Is it by the addition of numerous and expensive establishments? Is it by doubling our judiciaries, instituting federal courts in every county of every state? Is it by a superb presidential court? Is it by a large standing army? In short is it by putting it in the power of the future government to levy money at pleasure, and placing this government so independent of the people as to enable the administration to gratify every corrupt passion of the mind, to riot on your spoils, without check or controul?

A transfer to Congress of the power of imposing imposts on commerce and the unlimited regulation of trade, I believe is all that is wanting to render America as prosperous as it is in the power of any form of government to render her; this properly understood would meet the views of all the honest and well meaning.

What gave birth to the late Continental Convention? Was it not the situation of our commerce, which lay at the mercy of every foreign power, who from motives of interest or enmity could restrict and controul it, without risking a retaliation on the part of America, as Congress was impotent on this subject? Such indeed was the case with respect to Britain, whose hostile regulations gave such a stab to our navigation as to threaten its annihilation, it became the interest of even the American merchant to give a preference to foreign bottoms; hence the distress of our seamen, shiprights, and every mechanic art dependent on navigation.

By these regulations too we were limited in markets for our produce, our vessels were excluded from their West-India Islands, many of our staple commodities were denied entrance in Britain; hence the husbandmen were distressed by the demand for their crops being lessened and their prices reduced. This is the source to which may be traced every evil we experience, that can be relieved by a more energetic government. Recollect the language of complaint for years past, impare^(e) the recommendations of Congress founded on such complaints, pointing out the remedy, examine the reasons assigned by the different states for appointing delegates to the late Convention, view the powers vested in that body; they all harmonize in one sentiment, that the due regulation of trade and navigation was the anxious wish of every class of citizens, was the great object of calling the Convention.

This object being provided for, by the proposed Constitution, the people overlook and are not sensible of the needless sacrifice they are making for it.—Of what avail will be a prosperous state of commerce, when the produce of it will be at the absolute disposal of an arbitrary and unchecked government, who may levy at pleasure the most oppressive taxes; who may destroy every principle of freedom; who may even destroy the privilege of complaining.^(f)

If you are in doubt about the nature and principles of the proposed government, view the conduct of its authors and patrons, that affords the best explanation, the most striking comment.

The evil genius of darkness presided at its birth, it came forth under the veil of mystery, its true features being carefully concealed, and every deceptive art has been and is practising to have this spurious brat received as the genuine offspring of heaven-born liberty. So fearful are its patrons that you should discern the imposition, that they have hurried on its adoption, with the

greatest precipitation; they have endeavored also to preclude all investigation, they have endeavored to intimidate all opposition; by such means as these, have they surreptitiously procured a Convention in this state, favorable to their views; and here again investigation and discussion are abridged, the final question is moved before the subject has been under consideration; an appeal to the people is precluded even in the last resort, lest their eyes should be opened; the Convention have denied the minority the privilege of entering the reasons of their dissent on its journals— Thus despotism is already triumphant, and the genius of liberty is on the eve of her exit, is about bidding an eternal adieu to this once happy people.

After so recent a triumph over British despots, after such torrents of blood and treasure have been spent, after involving ourselves in the distresses of an arduous war, and incurring such a debt, for the express purpose of asserting the rights of humanity, it is truly astonishing that a set of men among ourselves, should have the effrontery to attempt the destruction of our liberties. But in this enlightened age to hope to dupe the people by the arts they are practising, is still more extraordinary.

How do the advocates of the proposed government, combat the objections urged against it? Not even by an attempt to disprove them, for that would the more fully confirm their truth, but by a species of reasoning that is very congenial to that contempt of the understandings of the people, that they so eminently possess, and which policy cannot even prevent frequent ebullitions of; they seem to think that the oratory and facination of great names and mere sound will suffice to ensure success; that the people may be diverted from a consideration of the merits of the plan, by bold assertions and mere declamation. Some of their writers for instance, paint the distresses of every class of citizens with all the glowing language of eloquence, as if this was a demonstration of the excellence, or even^(g) the safety of the new plan, which, notwithstanding the reality of this distress, may be a system of tyranny and oppression; other writers tell you of the great men who composed the late convention, and give you a pompous display of their virtues, instead of a justification of the plan of government; and others again urge the tyrant's plea, they endeavor to make it a case of necessity, now is the critical moment; they represent the adoption of this government as our only alternative, as the last opportunity we shall have of peaceably establishing a government; they assert it to be the best system that can be formed, and that if we reject it, we will have a worse one or none at all, nay, that if we presume to propose alterations, we shall get into a labyrinth of difficulties from which we cannot be extricated, as no two states will agree in amendments, that therefore it would involve us in irreconcilable discord. But they all seduously avoid the fair field of argument, a rational investigation into the origination^(h) of the proposed government. I hope the good sense of the people will detect the fallacy of such conduct, will discover the base juggle and with becoming resolution resent the imposition.

That the powers of Congress ought to be strengthened, all allow, but is this a conclusive proof of the necessity to adopt the proposed plan; is it a proof that because the late convention, in the first essay upon so arduous and difficult a subject, harmonised in their ideas, that a future convention will not, or that after a full investigation and mature consideration of the objections, they will not plan a better government and one more agreeable to the sentiments of America, or is it any proof that they can never again agree in any plan? The late convention must indeed have been inspired, as some of its advocates have asserted, to admit the truth of these positions, or even to admit the possibility of the proposed government, being such a one as America ought to

adopt; for this body went upon original ground, foreign from their intentions or powers, they must therefore have been wholly uninformed of the sentiments of their constituents in respect to this form of government, as it was not in their contemplation when the convention was appointed to erect a new government, but to strengthen the old one. Indeed they seem to have been determined to monopolize the exclusive merit of the discovery, or rather as if darkness was essential to its success they precluded all communication with the people, by closing their doors; thus the well disposed members unassisted by public information and opinion, were induced by those arts that are now practising on the people, to give their sanction to this system of despotism.

Is there any reason to presume that a new Convention will not agree upon a better plan of government? Quite the contrary, for perhaps there never was such a coincidence⁽ⁱ⁾ on any occasion as on the present, the opponents to the proposed plan, at the same time in every part of the continent, harmonised in the same objections; such an uniformity of opposition is without example and affords the strongest demonstration of its solidity. Their objections too are not local, are not confined to the interests of any one particular state to the prejudice of the rest, but with a philanthropy and liberality that reflects lustre on humanity, that dignifies the character of America, they embrace the interests and happiness of the whole union, they do not even condescend to minute blemishes, but shew that the main pillars of the fabric are bad, that the essential principles of liberty and safety are not to be found in it, that despotism will be the necessary and inevitable consequence of its establishment.

[Errata for Centinel IV.]¹

- (a) Insert “this country” instead of “the country.”
- (b) The errata stated: “An amendment proposed in case of republishing, viz. to say ‘the lamp of patriotism’ instead of ‘liberty.’”
- (c) Insert “chasm” instead of “charm.”
- (d) Insert “rites” instead of “rights.”
- (e) Insert “compare” instead of “impare.”
- (f) Insert “who may deprive you even of the privilege of complaining” instead of “destroy, &c.”
- (g) Insert the word “of” after the word “even.”
- (h) Insert “organization” instead of “origination.”
- (i) Insert after “coincidence” the words “of sentiments.”

1. This errata was published in the Philadelphia Independent Gazetteer on 1 December.

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