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Centinel I

Philadelphia *Independent Gazetteer*, 5 October 1787 (excerpts)

Between 5 October 1787 and 9 April 1788 eighteen Antifederalist essays signed “Centinel” were published in Philadelphia. The *Independent Gazetteer* printed all of the essays except II; the *Freeman’s Journal* all but IV–VI and XII; the *Pennsylvania Herald* only III and IX; and the *Pennsylvania Packet* only VI.

Contemporaries attributed the “Centinel” essays to George Bryan (1731–1791), a justice of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court and one of the leaders of the state Constitutionalist Party. Bryan was first charged with writing the essays in an extract of a letter published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* on 31 October 1787. For the most part, this attribution was accepted throughout the United States in 1787 and 1788. However, William Shippen, Jr. believed that Bryan was part of “a club” that wrote the essays, and George Turner denied a rumor that he was “Centinel.” In essay XVIII, “Centinel” himself denied that Bryan was the author.

The “Centinel” essays, despite contemporary opinion, appear to have been written by Samuel Bryan. Bryan identified himself as “Centinel” in four letters written between 1790 and 1807 in which he attempted to obtain a federal or state office for himself or his father. In 1790 Bryan wrote to Governor George Clinton that “I have not the honor of being personally known to your Excellency, but . . . I flatter myself that in the character of Centinel I have been honored with your approbation and esteem.” In the same year, Bryan spoke with Pennsylvania Governor Thomas Mifflin and learned that he had not offended the governor in one of the “Centinel” essays. On 27 February 1801 Bryan wrote Thomas Jefferson that “I was the first person who under the signature of ‘Centinel’ pointed out the defects of the federal Constitution.”

The “Centinel” essays analyzed the nature and provisions of the Constitution and the motives and methods of its framers and supporters. “Centinel’s” language was blunt, provocative, and vituperative. Perhaps the essence of the essays is in a statement found in the fourth essay: “The evil genius of darkness presided at its [the Constitution’s] 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.” “Centinel” also charged that the Constitution

“is a most daring attempt to establish a despotic aristocracy among freemen, that the world has ever witnessed” (No. I).

“Centinel’s” objections to the Constitution, found largely in the first five essays, presented many of the standard Antifederalist arguments. The Constitution would establish a consolidated government and would annihilate the sovereignty of the states. The powers of Congress were too vast, especially in the areas of taxation and the military. The Senate was an aristocratic body. The federal judiciary would destroy the state judiciaries. Most important, the Constitution lacked a bill of rights.

In the use of personal invective, “Centinel” was perhaps unequalled among both Antifederalists and Federalists. He considered the members of the Constitutional Convention to be “*conspirators*” (No. XII). The supporters of the Constitution were described as “crafty and aspiring despots,” “avaricious office-hunters,” and “false detestable *patriots*” (Nos. II, VI, and XVIII). “Centinel’s” personal invective extended even to George Washington and Benjamin Franklin. He declared that Washington had been duped in the Convention and that Franklin was too old to know what he had been doing (No. I).

Pennsylvania Federalists reacted sharply to “Centinel,” who had come to symbolize those individuals unequivocally opposed to the Constitution. To attack him was to attack all Antifederalists. Pennsylvania Federalists answered “Centinel’s” substantive criticisms point-by-point and returned his personal vilifications. In particular, they expressed outrage over his comments on Washington and Franklin and they denied that the Constitution endangered the rights and liberties of the people. They also attacked “Centinel” because they believed him to be the influential George Bryan. “Gomez” referred to Bryan (i.e., “Centinel”) as “a poisoned rat,” while “X” called him “the indefatigable monster.”

MR. OSWALD, *As the Independent Gazetteer seems free for the discussion of all public matters, I expect you will give the following a place in your next.*

TO THE FREEMEN OF PENNSYLVANIA.

Friends, Countrymen and Fellow Citizens, Permit one of yourselves to put you in mind of certain *liberties* and *privileges* secured to you by the constitution of this commonwealth, and to beg your serious attention to his uninterested opinion upon the plan of federal government submitted to your consideration, before you surrender these great and valuable privileges up forever. Your present frame of government, secures you to a right to hold yourselves, houses, papers and possessions free from search and seizure, and therefore warrants granted without oaths or affirmations first made, affording sufficient foundation for them, whereby any officer or messenger may be commanded or required to search your houses or seize your persons or property, not particularly described in such warrant, shall not be granted. Your constitution further provides “that in controversies respecting property, and in suits between man and man, the parties have a right to *trial by jury, which ought to be held sacred.*” It also provides and declares, “*that the people have a right of FREEDOM OF SPEECH, and of WRITING and PUBLISHING their sentiments, therefore THE FREEDOM OF THE PRESS OUGHT NOT TO BE RESTRAINED.*” The constitution of Pennsylvania is yet in existence, *as yet* you have the right to *freedom of speech*, and of *publishing your sentiments*. How long those rights will appertain to you, you yourselves are called upon to

say, whether your *houses* shall continue to be your *castles*; whether your *papers*, your *persons* and your *property*, are to be held sacred and free from *general warrants*, you are now to determine. Whether the *trial by jury* is to continue as your birth-right, the freemen of Pennsylvania, nay, of all America, are now called upon to declare.

Without presuming upon my own judgement, I cannot think it an unwarrantable presumption to offer my private opinion, and call upon others for their's; and if I use my pen with the boldness of a freeman, it is because I know that *the liberty of the press yet remains unviolated*, and *juries yet are judges*.

The late Convention have submitted to your consideration a plan of a new federal government—The subject is highly interesting to your future welfare—Whether it be calculated to promote the great ends of civil society, viz. the happiness and prosperity of the community; it behoves you well to consider, uninfluenced by the authority of names. Instead of that frenzy of enthusiasm, that has actuated the citizens of Philadelphia, in their approbation of the proposed plan, before it was possible that it could be the result of a rational investigation into its principles; it ought to be dispassionately and deliberately examined, and its own intrinsic merit the only criterion of your patronage. If ever free and unbiassed discussion was proper or necessary, it is on such an occasion.—All the blessings of liberty and the dearest privileges of freemen, are now at stake and dependent on your present conduct. Those who are competent to the task of developing the principles of government, ought to be encouraged to come forward, and thereby the better enable the people to make a proper judgment; for the science of government is so abstruse, that few are able to judge for themselves; without such assistance the people are too apt to yield an implicit assent to the opinions of those characters, whose abilities are held in the highest esteem, and to those in whose integrity and patriotism they can confide; not considering that the love of domination is generally in proportion to talents, abilities, and superior acquirements; and that the men of the greatest purity of intention may be made instruments of despotism in the hands of the *artful and designing*. If it were not for the stability and attachment which time and habit gives to forms of government, it would be in the power of the enlightened and aspiring few, if they should combine, at any time to destroy the best establishments, and even make the people the instruments of their own subjugation.

The late revolution having effaced in a great measure all former habits, and the present institutions are so recent, that their exists not that great reluctance to innovation, so remarkable in old communities, and which accords with reason, for the most comprehensive mind cannot foresee the full operation of material changes on civil polity; it is the genius of the common law to resist innovation.

The wealthy and ambitious, who in every community think they have a right to lord it over their fellow creatures, have availed themselves, very successfully, of this favorable disposition; for the people thus unsettled in their sentiments, have been prepared to accede to any extreme of government; all the distresses and difficulties they experience, proceeding from various causes, have been ascribed to the impotency of the present confederation, and thence they have been led to expect full relief from the adoption of the proposed system of government; and in the other event, immediately ruin and annihilation as a nation. These characters flatter themselves that they have lulled all distrust and jealousy of their new plan, by gaining the concurrence of the two men in whom America has the highest confidence, and now triumphantly exult in the

completion of their long meditated schemes of power and aggrandisement. I would be very far from insinuating that the two illustrious personages alluded to, have not the welfare of their country at heart; but that the unsuspecting goodness and zeal of the one, has been imposed on, in a subject of which he must be necessarily inexperienced, from his other arduous engagements; and that the weakness and indecision attendant on old age, has been practised on in the other.¹

I am fearful that the principles of government inculcated in Mr. [John] Adams's treatise, and enforced in the numerous essays and paragraphs in the news-papers, have misled some well designing members of the late Convention.—But it will appear in the sequel, that the construction of the proposed plan of government is infinitely more extravagant.

I have been anxiously expecting that some enlightened patriot would, ere this, have taken up the pen to expose the futility, and counteract the baneful tendency of such principles. Mr. Adams's *sine qua non* of a good government is three balancing powers, whose repelling qualities are to produce an equilibrium of interests, and thereby promote the happiness of the whole community. He asserts that the administrators of every government, will ever be actuated by views of private interest and ambition, to the prejudice of the public good; that therefore the only effectual method to secure the rights of the people and promote their welfare, is to create an opposition of interests between the members of two distinct bodies, in the exercise of the powers of government, and balanced by those of a third. This hypothesis supposes human wisdom competent to the task of instituting three co-equal orders in government, and a corresponding weight in the community to enable them respectively to exercise their several parts, and whose views and interests should be so distinct as to prevent a coalition of any two of them for the destruction of the third. Mr. Adams, although he has traced the constitution of every form of government that ever existed, as far as history affords materials, has not been able to adduce a single instance of such a government; he indeed says that the British constitution is such in theory, but this is rather a confirmation that his principles are chimerical and not to be reduced to practice. If such an organization of power were practicable, how long would it continue? not a day—for there is so great a disparity in the talents, wisdom and industry of mankind, that the scale would presently preponderate to one or the other body, and with every accession of power the means of further increase would be greatly extended. The state of society in England is much more favorable to such a scheme of government than that of America. There they have a powerful hereditary nobility, and real distinctions of rank and interests; but even there, for want of that perfect equality of power and distinction of interests, in the three orders of government, they exist but in name; the only operative and efficient check, upon the conduct of administration, is the sense of the people at large.

Suppose a government could be formed and supported on such principles, would it answer the great purposes of civil society; If the administrators of every government are actuated by views of private interest and ambition, how is the welfare and happiness of the community to be the result of such jarring adverse interests?

Therefore, as different orders in government will not produce the good of the whole, we must recur to other principles. I believe it will be found that the form of government, which holds those entrusted with power, in the greatest responsibility to their constituents, the best calculated for freemen. A republican, or free government, can only exist where the body of the people are virtuous, and where property is pretty equally divided, in such a government the people are the

sovereign and their sense or opinion is the criterion of every public measure; for when this ceases to be the case, the nature of the government is changed, and an aristocracy, monarchy or despotism will rise on its ruin. The highest responsibility is to be attained, in a simple struction of government, for the great body of the people never steadily attend to the operations of government, and for want of due information are liable to be imposed on.—If you complicate the plan by various orders, the people will be perplexed and divided in their sentiments about the source of abuses or misconduct, some will impute it to the senate, others to the house of representatives, and so on, that the interposition of the people may be rendered imperfect or perhaps wholly abortive. But if, imitating the constitution of Pennsylvania, you vest all the legislative power in one body of men (separating the executive and judicial) elected for a short period, and necessarily excluded by rotation from permanency, and guarded from precipitancy and surprise by delays imposed on its proceedings, you will create the most perfect responsibility, for then, whenever the people feel a grievance they cannot mistake the authors, and will apply the remedy with certainty and effect, discarding them at the next election. This tie of responsibility will obviate all the dangers apprehended from a single legislature, and will the best secure the rights of the people. . . .

. . . If the foregoing be a just comment—if the United States are to be melted down into one empire, it becomes you to consider, whether such a government, however constructed, would be eligible in so extended a territory; and whether it would be practicable, consistent with freedom? It is the opinion of the greatest writers, that a very extensive country cannot be governed on democratical principles, on any other plan, than a confederation of a number of small republics, possessing all the powers of internal government, but united in the management of their foreign and general concerns.

It would not be difficult to prove, that any thing short of despotism, could not bind so great a country under one government; and that whatever plan you might, at the first setting out, establish, it would issue in a despotism.

If one general government could be instituted and maintained on principles of freedom, it would not be so competent to attend to the various local concerns and wants, of every particular district; as well as the peculiar governments, who are nearer the scene, and possessed of superior means of information, besides, if the business of the *whole* union is to be managed by one government, there would not be time. Do we not already see, that the inhabitants in a number of larger states, who are remote from the seat of government, are loudly complaining of the inconveniencies and disadvantages they are subjected to on this account, and that, to enjoy the comforts of local government, they are separating into smaller divisions. . . .

1. The “two illustrious personages” were George Washington and Benjamin Franklin.

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