



CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE AMERICAN CONSTITUTION

csac.history.wisc.edu > Document Collections > Constitutional Debates: Federalist and Antifederalist Essays > The Debate Over the Nature of Union and Republican Government > Constitution Consolidates the Union

An Old Whig IV

Philadelphia *Independent Gazetteer*, 27 October 1787
(excerpts)

Mr. PRINTER, This is certainly a very important crisis to the people of America; experience seems to have convinced every one, that the articles of confederation, under which Congress have hitherto attempted to regulate the affairs of the United States, are insufficient for the purposes intended; that we are a ruined people unless some alteration can be effected. The public mind has therefore been raised to the highest pitch of expectation, and the evident need of relief from the many distresses, public and private, in which we are involved has reduced us to such a state, that we can hardly endure a disappointment. Scarcely any thing that could be proposed by the convention, in this state of people's minds, would fail of being eagerly embraced. Like a person in the agonies of a violent disease, who is willing to swallow any medicine, that gives the faintest hope of relief; the people stood ready to receive the new constitution, in almost any form in which it could be presented to them. The zealous supporters of the proposed constitution, seem to be not unwilling to avail themselves of this disposition: and therefore it is strongly inculcated, that if we do not adopt this constitution, we shall not be able to establish another, but be left to our present weakness, confusion and distress. If I was persuaded that this is really the case, I hardly know whether I should vote for rejecting any government however unfriendly to the liberties of the people, which promised to give vigour to the councils of this country; for any government is better than none. However, I do not see that it is by any means impracticable, for us yet to correct such errors and imperfections, as appear to exist in the proposed constitution; and whilst there is a possibility of procuring a better constitution, it is the duty of every good man to accomplish it. . . .

I find that a number of pens are employed, in pointing out the defects in the proposed constitution—Without descending therefore, into minute particulars, I shall confine the remainder of my observations in this letter, to one or two of the most important considerations.

It is beyond a doubt that the new federal constitution, if adopted, will in a great measure destroy, if it do not totally annihilate, the separate governments of the several states. We shall, in effect, become one great Republic.—Every measure of any importance, will be Continental.—What will be the consequence of this? One thing is evident—that no Republic of so great a magnitude, ever did, or ever can exist. But a few years elapsed, from the time in which ancient Rome extended her dominions beyond the bounds of Italy, until the downfall of her Republic; and all political writers agree, that a Republican government can exist only in a narrow territory:

but a confederacy of different Republics has, in many instances, existed and flourished for a long time together—The celebrated *Helvetian* league, which exists at this moment in full vigor, and with unimpaired strength, whilst its origin may be traced to the confines of antiquity, is one, among many examples on this head; and at the same time furnishes an eminent proof of how much less importance it is, that the constituent parts of a confederacy of Republics may be rightly framed than it is, that the confederacy itself should be rightly organized;—for hardly any two of the Swiss cantons have the same form of government, and they are almost equally divided in their religious principles, which have so often rent asunder the firmest establishments. A confederacy of Republics must be the establishment in America, or we must cease altogether to retain the Republican form of government. From the moment we become one great Republic, either in form or substance, the period is very shortly removed, when we shall sink first into monarchy, and then into despotism.—If there were no other fault in the proposed constitution, it must sink by its own weight. The continent of North-America can no more be governed by one Republic, than the fabled Atlas could support the heavens. Is it not worthy a few months labour, to attempt the rescuing this country from the despotism, which at this moment holds the best and fairest regions of the earth in thralldom and wretchedness?—To attempt the forming a plan of confederation, which may enable us at once to support our continental union with vigor and efficacy, and to maintain the rights of the separate states and the invaluable liberty of the subject? These ideas of political felicity, to some people, may seem like the visions of an Utopian fancy; and I am persuaded that some amongst us have as little disposition to realize them, as they have to recollect the principles, which inspired us in our revolt from Great-Britain. But there is at least, this consolation in aiming at excellence, that, if we do not obtain our object, we can make considerable progress towards it.—The science of politics has very seldom had fair play. So much of passion, interest and temporary prospects of gain are mixed in the pursuit, that a government has been much oftener established, with a view to the particular advantages or necessities of a few individuals, than to the permanent good of society. If the men, who, at different times, have been entrusted to form plans of government for the world, had been really actuated by no other views than a regard to the public good, the condition of human nature in all ages would have been widely different, from that which has been exhibited to us in history. In this country perhaps we are possessed of more than our share of political virtue. If we will exercise a little patience, and bestow our best endeavours on the business, I do not think it impossible, that we may yet form a federal constitution, much superior to any form of government, which has ever existed in the world. . . .

CITE AS: John P. Kaminski et al., eds., *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, Vol. XIII: Commentaries on the Constitution, Public and Private [1] (Madison, Wis.: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 1981), 497–502.