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George Mason Speech: Virginia Convention 17 June 1788

There is not a more important article in the Constitution than this. The great fundamental principle of responsibility in republicanism is here sap[p]ed. The President is elected without rotation.—It may be said that a new election may remove him, and place another in his stead. If we judge from the experience of all other countries, and even our own, we may conclude, that as the President of the United States may be re-elected, so he will. How is it in every Government where rotation is not required? Is there a single instance of a great man not being re-elected? Our Governor is obliged to return after a given period, to a private station. It is so in most of the States.¹ This President will be elected time after time—He will be continued in office for life.—If we wish to change him, the great powers in Europe will not allow us.

The Honorable Gentleman my colleague in the late Federal Convention [Edmund Randolph], mentions with applause those parts of which he had expressed his approbation; but when he comes to those parts of which he had expressed his disapprobation, he says not a word. If I am mistaken, let me be put right. I shall not make use of his name, but in the course of this investigation, I shall use the arguments of that Gentleman against it.

Will not the great powers of Europe, as France and Great-Britain, be interested in having a friend in the President of the United States; and will they not be more interested in his election, than in that of the King of Poland? The people of Poland have a right to displace their King. But do they ever do it? No. Prussia and Russia, and other European powers, would not suffer it. This clause will open a door to the dangers and misfortunes which the people of Poland undergo. The powers of Europe will interpose, and we shall have a civil war in the bowels of our country, and be subject to all the horrors and calamities of an elective Monarchy. This very executive officer, may, by consent of Congress, receive a stated pension from European Potentates. This is an idea not altogether new in America. It is not many years ago, since the revolution, that a foreign power offered emoluments to persons holding offices under our Government. It will moreover be difficult to know, whether he receives emoluments from foreign powers or not. The Electors who are to meet in each State to vote for him, may be easily influenced. To prevent the certain evils of attempting to elect a new President, it will be necessary to continue the old one. The only way to alter this, would be to render him ineligible after a certain number of years, and then no foreign nation would interfere to keep *in* a man who was utterly ineligible. Nothing is so essential to the preservation of a Republican Government, as a periodical rotation. Nothing so strongly impels a man to regard the interest of his constituents, as the certainty of returning

to the general mass of the people, from whence he was taken; where he must participate [in] their burdens. It is a great defect in the Senate, that they are not ineligible at the end of six years. The biennial exclusion of one third of them, will have no effect, as they can be re-elected. Some stated time ought to be fixed, when the President ought to be reduced to a private station. I should be contented that he might be elected for eight years: But I would wish him to be capable of holding the office only eight years, out of twelve or sixteen years. But as it now stands, he may continue in office for life; or in other words, it will be an elective Monarchy.

1. The Virginia constitution provided that the governor should have a one-year term and should “not continue in that office longer than three years successively, nor be eligible until the expiration of four years after he shall have been out of that office.” Other states that limited the re-eligibility of their executives were Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia.

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