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Thomas Jefferson to James Madison Paris, 20 December 1787 (excerpt)

. . . I do not pretend to decide what would be the best method of procuring the establishment of the manifold good things in this constitution, and of getting rid of the bad. whether by adopting it in hopes of future amendment, or, after it has been duly weighed & canvassed by the people, after seeing the parts they generally dislike, & those they generally approve, to say to them, “We see now what you wish, send together your deputies again, let them frame a constitution for you omitting what you have condemned, & establishing the powers you approve. even these will be a great addition to the energy of your government.”—at all events I hope you will not be discouraged from other trials, if the present one should fail of it’s full effect.—I have thus told you freely what I like & dislike: merely as a matter of curiosity for I know your own judgment has been formed on all these points after having heard every thing which could be urged on them. I own I am not a friend to a very energetic government. it is always oppressive. the late rebellion in Massachusets [Shays’s Rebellion] has given more alarm than I think it should have done. calculate that one rebellion in 13 states in the course of 11 years, is but one for each state in a century & a half. no country should be so long without one. nor will any degree of power in the hands of government prevent insurrections. France, with all it’s despotism, and two or three hundred thousand men always in arms has had three insurrections in the three years I have been here in every one of which greater numbers were engaged than in Massachusets & a great deal more blood was spilt. in Turkey, which Montesquieu supposes more despotic, insurrections are the events of every day. in England, where the hand of power is lighter than here, but heavier than with us they happen every half dozen years. compare again the ferocious depredations of their insurgents with the order, the moderation & the almost self extinguishment of ours.—after all, it is my principle that the will of the Majority should always prevail. if they approve the proposed Convention [Constitution] in all it’s parts, I shall concur in it chearfully, in hopes that they will amend it whenever they shall find it work wrong. I think our governments will remain virtuous for many centuries; as long as they are chiefly agricultural; and this will be as long as there shall be vacant lands in any part of America. when they get piled upon one another in large cities, as in Europe, they will become corrupt as in Europe. above all things I hope the education of the common people will be attended to; convinced that on their good sense we may rely with the most security for the preservation of a due degree of liberty. I have tired you by this time with my disquisitions & will therefore only add assurances of the sincerity of those sentiments of esteem & attachment with which I am Dear Sir your affectionate friend & servant

P.S. the instability of our laws is really an immense evil. I think it would be well to provide in our constitutions that there shall always be a twelvemonth between the ingrossing a bill & passing it: that it should then be offered to it's passage without changing a word: and that if circumstances should be thought to require a speedier passage, it should take two thirds of both houses instead of a bare majority.

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