



CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE AMERICAN CONSTITUTION

csac.history.wisc.edu > Document Collections > Constitutional Debates: Federalist and Antifederalist Essays > The Debate Over Amendments to the Constitution > Antifederalists on Prior Amendments During Ratification

A Citizen

New York Journal, 24 November 1787 (excerpt)

... A convention was appointed by the respective legislatures, at the recommendation of Congress, for the sole purpose of *revising* and *amending* the articles of confederation; Congress had no power to concur in any measures for alteration, but such as should be assented to by all the states; nor had the legislatures the least authority to confer powers for the purposes of violating or abridging the state constitutions; the commission of the delegates to the late Fœderal Convention, consequently, could not, by any possible construction, invest them with powers which Congress and the legislatures themselves did not possess: the business of the *conventioners* was then evidently not to form a new constitution for the United States, but to revise and amend the old one, as far as was necessary and consistent with their delegation. It was well understood, that the account of provisions, for the general regulation of commerce, and for ensuring a compliance with requisitions made under the fœderal compact, were principal causes which induced the appointment of the convention. These being the main objects, the representations, from all the states, were small, principally taken from commercial cities, and composed chiefly of merchants, practitioners of the law, and judicial officers; of the two latter professions, nearly one half of the convention consisted. This imperfect representation of the people, both as to numbers and descriptions, when assembled, shut their doors against their fellow citizens, and laid themselves under obligations of secrecy, and, by keeping from the world a knowledge of the important business which they had assumed upon themselves, they were precluded from all opportunities of receiving light or information, upon so interesting a subject, from the animadversions which their constituents would probably have made upon the different points under their deliberation. Under these unfavorable circumstances, this new constitution was formed, and it must therefore be considered as an unauthorized essay, which can only receive sanction from the assent of the people; it has already become the subject of general discussion, and, besides the omission of a bill of rights (which even Medium admits to be essential) many other radical defects have been pointed out; but, instead of attempting to amend them, it is insisted that it must, for the groundless and puerile reasons above-mentioned, be accepted in toto. What is there in the nature of our situation that imposes this disagreeable necessity upon us? Is it probable, that we shall ever be in a situation, in which we can with more temper and greater safety, deliberate upon this momentous concern than at present? From abroad, we have nothing to fear—the interesting affairs of the European powers will engage their attention beyond the atlantic—at home, we are in a state of perfect tranquility—for, although there are defects in the existing articles of confederation,

yet the governments of the different states have energy sufficient to command obedience to their laws, and preserve domestic peace; America has not been subjected to as many tumults and disasters since the conclusion of the war, as countries, of an earlier foundation, have suffered in the same space of time. Some of the states have, already, with great calmness and temper, directed conventions of the people to assemble and take the proposed constitution into consideration—they ought, and it is unquestionably their duty to give every article a free and fair discussion; it would be inconsistent with, and derogatory to, every idea of the rights of freemen, to presume that they must approve of such parts as, in their opinions, are improper and dangerous, or, on the other hand, that they would reject what merited their approbation—it should also be their duty, to point out such amendments and alterations, as to them appear necessary and salutary—and they, or the legislatures, should appoint delegates to compose a new general convention; the members of which, being furnished with the remarks of the respective state conventions, will be enabled to form a system much less exceptionable, more perfect, and coincident with the wishes of the people; by this means the present animosities and divisions, which now prevail will, in all probability, be healed, and a government introduced that will engage the attachment, promote the felicity, and receive the support, of all ranks of people.

If the advocates, for the unqualified adoption of the new constitution, could be induced to divest themselves of prejudice, and reflect seriously and candidly, perhaps they would discover greater danger of anarchy and civil discord through their unjustifiable endeavors to establish a government (universally allowed to be defective) than by a concurrence in this practicable and rational mode of procecedure. They ought deliberately to consider, whether the proposed constitution will ensure to the people all those great advantages they are led to expect from the encomiums which its advocates so lavishly bestow upon it, in order to obtain its establishment; for, if the contrary (which is predicted by many) should happen, and the people, instead of having their happiness and interest promoted, find themselves deprived of their invaluable liberties, and their burdens increased by an expensive government, the inevitable consequences will be anarchy and discord, which may prove, when beyond the power of remedy, dangerous to the community, and *dreadfully fatal* to the authors of their deception.

New-York, Nov. 22, 1787.

CITE AS: John P. Kaminski et al., eds., *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, Vol. XIX: New York [1] (Madison, Wis.: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2003), 303–6.