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## An Old Whig VIII

### Philadelphia *Independent Gazetteer*, 6 February 1788 (excerpts)

MR. PRINTER, It is the fate of political controversies to begin with argument and end with abuse: And hence we find, in many instances, that a subject which for a time, has engaged the most earnest attention of the people, is at length quitted with horror and disgust. The question, however, concerning the total adoption of the plan of government, proposed by the late federal convention, is too important for good men to suffer themselves to be diverted from giving it a full consideration by the bouncing of squibs or the whizzing of political firebrands. I therefore persuade myself that a few candid observations on this subject will yet be heard with attention.

The real question is this;—Whether the people of this country ought to adopt the proposed constitution in its present form, without limitation or alteration, or whether we ought to insist upon amendments being made previous to its adoption.

Most men seem to agree that amendments ought to be made in the proposed plan in some stage of the business; and all seem agreed that an efficient form of continental government ought to be established. Shall we then first adopt the constitution and afterwards amend it; or shall we first amend it and afterwards adopt it? Let us for a moment consider the propriety of adopting it first, and trusting to its being afterwards amended. These necessary amendments, after the constitution is adopted, can only be made in one or two ways;—either by our future rulers in the continental legislature by their own act—or in the way provided for in the fifth article, by a convention to be called for proposing amendments, whenever two-thirds of both houses shall deem it necessary, or whenever the legislatures of two-thirds of the states shall make application for that purpose, such amendments afterwards to be valid if ratified by the legislatures of three-fourths of the states, or by conventions in three-fourths thereof, if Congress should think proper to call them. This latter mode is so intricate, that an attempt to investigate it is like endeavouring to trace the windings of a labyrinth, and I have therefore observed that people willingly turn aside from the subject, as confused and disgusting. Some former observations on this article I found were very little attended to: However I will attempt once more to find a clue to its mazes, after I shall first have considered that more inviting ground of expectation to which most of those who assume the name of federalists turn their eyes with so much confidence.

First then, the general expectation seems to be that our future rulers will rectify all that is amiss. If a bill of rights is wanting, they will frame a bill of rights. If too much power is vested in them, they will not abuse it; nay, they will divest themselves of it. The very first thing they will

do, will be to establish the liberties of the people by good and wholesome ordinances, on so solid a foundation as to baffle all future encroachments from themselves or their successors. Much good no doubt might be done in this way; if Congress should possess the most virtuous inclinations, yet there are some things which it will not be in their power to rectify. . . .

Let us then turn to the article in the proposed constitution, which provides for the making alterations at some future period; and let us figure to ourselves the time when two-thirds of both houses of Congress shall think it necessary to call a convention, or two-thirds of the legislatures of the individual states shall apply for the calling of a convention, and when a continental convention shall agree upon amendments, and when the legislatures of three-fourths of the states, or three-fourths of the conventions to be called in the several states, if Congress shall prefer that mode of proceeding, shall ratify such amendments; and again, after all these strainings, and filtrings, and refinings, of the hopes and expectations of the people through the channels of power, when the amendments so asked for, proposed, digested, twistificated, altered, and at last ratified, will be of any essential importance. For my part I would full as soon sit down and take my chance of winning an important privilege to the people, by the casting the dice 'till I could throw sixes an hundred times in succession. — There is no doubt but the thing has been purposely contrived to make alterations extremely difficult; and so it certainly ought to be if the proposed constitution were a good one. I do not therefore so much blame the late federal convention for making their constitution very difficult of alteration, as I insist upon it as an argument in favor of making our amendments beforehand. A machine which cannot be taken to pieces after it is once set a-going, ought to be very well finished at first.

Yet this is not all the difficulty. Inveterate power is at all times very hard to be controuled. Habits, connexions, dependence, and a thousand circumstances in course of time, rivet the chains of slavery 'till we grow either callous to their galling, or too feeble to shake them off, or too listless to resist. Ask the beaten Turk to resume his liberty, or the tired horse to resume his pristine freedom. — As well might you ask the galled sons of America, a few years hence, to assert the native rights of men, if the proposed constitution be once fixed upon us. It will be extremely difficult to change it for the better even in the beginning; but in a little time it will become utterly impossible.

A little prudence, a little patience, and a little serious reflection, would lead us to concur in calling a new convention, to revise the constitution proposed to us. That convention, I have no doubt, if fully, freely, and deliberately chosen, would concur in some essential amendments; and we might yet be a united and a happy people.

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