# Antoine de la Forest to Comte de la Luzerne New York, 16 August 1788

The new Constitution proposed in the United States had little hope of success for two months. The States of New-Hampshire, Virginia and Newyork ratified it in imitation of the eight that had already done so. The heads of the federal party had left nothing undone during this interval that usually strikes the imagination of the people, and there have been political processions, festivities, and repeated Rejoicings in most large Cities and towns. Whatever may be the illusion caused by these public demonstrations, the last ratifications had been obtained with so much difficulty, had been accompanied by such thorny circumstances, had been passed with the aid of so small a Majority of Votes, that enlightened minds and those who are not carried away by enthusiasm are still equally anxious about the outcome of this undertaking. The union was threatened with an immediate dissolution if the proposed Constitution had not been adopted by at least nine States; it is now adopted by eleven, and this danger is past. But it is foreseen that the party that was not able to prevent its adoption in each of the States will use all its efforts in order to reduce it to the degree of impotence of the present Government. Since the federalists in the Massachusetts Convention had been obliged, in order to obtain a majority of votes, to make the amendments called for by their adversaries, the federalists in the other states have had to make the same concession and it is a great accomplishment that they should have succeeded in preventing the adoption of amendments before the organization of the new Government. They [have?] indeed managed to put it on its feet in spite of an obstinate opposition, but the antifederalists are waiting until it is in motion to try [all?] means to limit it. It is thus hardly [doubted?] that it will be violently attacked beginning at the time of its first operations. The Newyork Convention, before breaking up its session, addressed a circular letter to all the legislatures to urge them to ask the next Congress for another general convention of the States. This measure entails dangerous consequences, and its failure or success is equally dreaded. In the first case, it is difficult to imagine how Congress [would be able to?] exercise the powers that a very sizable portion [of the?] people do not want it to have; to refrain from using them is tacitly to renounce them; to use them is to risk losing everything. In the second case, it is even less conceivable how they will be able to agree on the amendments in a convention where each delegation will bring forth a different list and will insist on its insertion in the general list. The adoption of this multitude of amendments would in a large part destroy the work of last year's general convention. It is nevertheless necessary to observe, My Lord, that the powers of the new Government to levy customs duties and to make general commercial regulations are not of the class of those that they want to nullify; so that if by means of amendments, it eventually becomes nearly as weak as that which

preceded it, things simply will find themselves again at the point at which they could have been put many years ago by granting to Congress at that time the little that it had asked for.

This Situation, My Lord, has become even more complicated by the refusal of the North Carolina Convention to ratify the new Constitution. There was a majority of 100 votes against adoption: It is supposed that it counted on the obstinacy of the antifederalists of the Newyork Convention and it was not aware that when it made this bold decision that the antifederalists had just given way for fear of compromising their State. Be that as it may, it is known that the antifederalists of North Carolina were betrayed by the influence of those from neighboring States, especially Virginia. The new Constitution is supported in almost all the States only by the maritime party; all of the backcountry is little disposed in its favor; it is this that prompted the boldness of the decision in North Carolina, where the coastal districts are deserted compared with those of the interior. The [– – –] merchants, artisans, capitalists, and large landowners, who elsewhere acted so ardently for a Government from which they hoped to gain great advantages, were very weak in this poorest and most isolated place in the union. Consequently, North Carolina now finds herself aligned with Rhodeisland, in opposition to the other eleven States. The latter will nevertheless refrain from using coercive measures; the antifederalists are everywhere too numerous and would soon make common [cause?]. The future Congress will probably follow the course of conciliation with regard to these two States that stand apart; the latter will offer to rejoin the confederated body if its powers were modified in a [new?] general convention of the States, and in this manner they will be an additional instrument that the antifederalists will use to cut, if they can, all the nerves of the Constitution.

While waiting for these events to unfold, Congress is occupied drafting the ordinance by virtue of which each State that has ratified the Constitution must have elected officials to represent it. Much time was lost in debating on the place where they would convene. Newyork, Philadelphia and Baltimore were proposed in turn, and it seems that for want of being able to agree on another place, Newyork will be the Meeting Place. The Votes of the Citizens of all the States seem [in favor?] of naming General Washington president of the United States.

CITE AS: John P. Kaminski et al., eds., *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, Vol. XVIII: Commentaries on the Constitution, Public and Private [6] (Madison, Wis.: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 1995), 331–33.