Helvidius Priscus I
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The authorship of "Helvidius Priscus" is uncertain. Christopher Gore thought that Samuel Adams was the author (to Rufus King, 30 December). "Honorius" strongly implied that "Helvidius Priscus" was an old revolutionary, referring to him as "this *Nestor*," a wise old man. Adams fits both descriptions. Historian Charles Warren thought that James Warren was "Helvidius Priscus."

To the PUBLIC.

MR. WILSON observes, in his late celebrated speech, "that after a lapse of six thousand years America has now presented the first instance of a people assembled to weigh deliberately, and calmly, and to decide leisurely, and peaceably, on a form of government, by which they shall bind themselves and their posterity." Has he not here suggested the strongest reason that can be urged, for postponing the adoption of the new system? If the assertion is true, is it prudent for this extensive Continent implicitly to accept, and rapidly and irrevocably adopt, the propositions of thirty or forty men, some of whom were infants, when the principles of the late revolution animated the patriots of this country to a noble resistance, and led them to bear the bold arm to shake the sceptre of foreign dominion: And as Mr. WILSON himself observes, "Government is a science as yet in infancy; and with all its various modifications, has been the result of force, fraud or accident." May not these gentlemen be considered as yet in their pupilage, with regard to the origin, the end, and the most perfect mode of civil government? It is also well known, that some of the late Convention were the professed advocates of the British system; that others stood suspended in equilibrio, uncertain on which side to declare, until the scale of fortune balanced in favour of America; that the political manœuvres of some of them have always sunk in the vortex of private interest, and that the immense wealth of others has set them above all principle. These several classes selected, a correspondent would inquire; how many of the disinterested worthies who ventured every thing for the support of the rights of their country, and the liberties of mankind, will be left to adorn that assembly, who have ambitiously and daringly presumed (without any commission for that purpose) to annihilate the sovereignties of the thirteen United States; to establish a DRACONIAN CODE; and to bind posterity by their *secret councils*? It may perhaps be replied that one third part of the body were of this generous description. Let us candidly grant it and examine their conduct; several of them left the assembly in disgust before the decision of the question. Others expressly reprobated the proceedings of a *conclave*, where it has been ridiculously asserted all the wisdom of America was concentered; and a RANDOLPH,

Mason, and Gerry, the firmness to avow their dissent to support their opinions in the Legislatures of their several States; and submit them to the observation of the world. It is true indeed that the *ancient Doctor*, who has been always republican in principle and conduct, doubted, trembled, hesitated, wept, and signed: While the illustrious President, not called upon to decide or necessitated to give his opinion, kept the chair, but undoubtedly painfully agitated for the fate of a country he had heroically lent his arm to defend. All the powers of eloquence are exerted to catch the ear, and the utmost pathos of expression employed to warm the imagination, in Mr. Wilson's insiduous speech; but as it will doubtless be the subject of critical discussion by those who have leisure to examine both its principles, and its tendency, I will but cursorily observe that he discovers no less *dexterity* and *address*, in his oratorical explanation of the system, than he acknowledges was necessary to *reconcile the jarring interests that opposed it*—and finally to prevail with several whose objections were insurmountable, to lend their signature to an instrument for which he is obliged to ransack the annals of ancient and modern story to find a name. But he acknowledges that neither *Rome*, nor *Britain*, nor *Switzerland*, or *Holland*, bear much resemblance to the newly fabricated *fœderal republic*.—And that he cannot find a precedent any where for the *Heterogeneous Monster*, unless it may be admitted in the *Lycian league* or the *Amphictionic Council*. It is here natural for every one acquainted with ancient history to turn their thoughts to the miserable fate of the *Lycians*. They were a sober, & virtuous people, who maintained their independence, and their freedom, for several centuries; and supported their own simple institutions, under twenty-three distinct sovereignties; until the reign of *Leomitian*, when they fell under the Roman yoke, with other cities of Greece, while the *tyrant* alledged the same excuse for his encroachment, that we hear hacknied in the streets of our capitals, for subjugating the Americans to the arms of power *because they were no longer capable of enjoying their liberties*. Nor is *Mr. Wilson* more fortunate in calling our attention to the ruin of the Amphictionic union. Every one will recollect that the *Locrians*, (a people bearing a strong resemblance to a party in America) had crept in among them, and that an ambitious *Phillip* had his emissaries in that body, who by political intrigue, and well timed *plausible speeches*, enabled him by the aid of a *standing army*, to set himself at the head of the Grecian States; to annihilate their constitutions, and to degrade them to the most abject submission to the will of a despotic tyrant. The application and the semblance is left for the consideration of every lover of his country.

America has fought for her liberties; she has purchased them by the most costly sacrifices; she embarked in the enterprize with a spirit that gained her the applauses of mankind; and procured her emancipation from tyranny by the blood of her heroes, and her friends. And shall her honour, her character, her freedom, be sported away by the duplicity, and the intrigues of those, who never participated in her sufferings? Or by the machinations of such as have no pole star for their guide but the mad ambition of a mind ready to sacrifice the finest feelings of humanity for its gratification? Forbid it Heaven! and may the people awake from a kind of apathy which seems to pervade them, before they are aroused by the thunder of arms, or the insolence of dragooning parties, to arrest from the peasant, and the mechanic, the last farthing of their hard earnings, to support the splendid fabrick of *Mr. Wilson's* Federal Republic.[1] What an insiduous term! But this people are too wise to be long deceived by the extortion, or misapplication of words. Let the youth of America who are yet ignorant of the characters, and the causes that occasioned the dismemberment of the United States from the crown of Britain, read

for themselves the many excellent publications, on the origin of government, and the rights of human nature, that appeared between the years 1763 and 1775.—And instead of indulging a rapturous admiration for the modern superficial speechifyers in favour of an American monarchy; let them examine the principles of the late glorious revolution, and see how far they comport with the opinions in vogue. And before they embrace the chains of survitude, let them scrutinize their own hearts, and inquire, if their pride and their independency of spirit, will suffer them to lick the hand of a despotic master. And may the delegates for the ensuing convention consider well the importance of their decision. They will be applauded by the admiring world for making a stand at this critical conjuncture; or they will be execrated by all posterity for co-operating with the ambitious and intriguing spirits, who wish for the sake of their own advancement, to manacle a free and independent people, who have made the most astonishing and successful exertions to support their own rights, and to establish their rank among the nations. And when they shall have time to look around and be convinced, even *Mr. Wilson* acknowledges, "*they will then spurn at every attempt to shackle them with despotic power.*"

Let them call for the name of the audacious man, who dared to say to his associates, in the late convention, "*that unless they hurried the constitution through before the people had time for consideration, there was no probability that it would ever be adopted.*"[2] And let him be stigmatized with the odium that is due to the base betrayer of the rights of his country, and not absurdly trusted, though he may artfully have obtained an election, to decide a second time on a question in which he is so manifestly interested.

It is obvious that there is not the smallest propriety that any of the members of that body, who have held out a system for the people to judge of, should themselves set in any of the State conventions, and have a voice to enforce their own alarming proceedings.

Let the old Patriots come forward, and instead of secretly wraping up their opinions within their own breasts, let them lift up the voice like a trumpet, and shew this people their folly, and the trembling *Columbia*, her impending danger. Let none of them fear the arbitrary frown of either *Otho, Galba*, or *Vitellius*, nor the fate of HELVIDIUS PRISCUS.[3]

1. Discussing the choices the Constitutional Convention faced concerning the kind of government to be established, Wilson said: ". . . a federal republic naturally presented itself to our observation as a species of government which secured all the internal advantages of a republic, at the same time that it maintained the external dignity and force of a monarchy. The definition of this form of government may be found in Montesquieu, who says, I believe, that it consists in assembling distinct societies, which are consolidated into a new body capable of being increased by the addition of other members; an expanding quality peculiarly fitted to the circumstances of America."

2. On 31 August 1787 the Constitutional Convention considered Article XXII of the report of the Committee of Detail. This article provided that the Constitution be submitted to the states whose legislatures were to call conventions to consider it. Gouverneur Morris of Pennsylvania and Charles Pinckney of South Carolina moved to amend the article, directing the state legislatures to call state conventions "as speedily as circumstances will permit." According to James Madison's notes of debates, Morris "said his object was to impress in stronger terms the necessity of calling Conventions in order to prevent enemies to the plan, from giving it the go by. When it first appears, with the sanction of this Convention, the people will be favourable to it. By degrees the State officers, & those interested in the State Govts will intrigue & turn the popular current against it." Luther Martin of Maryland "believed Mr. Morris to be right, that after a while the people would be agst. it. but for a different reason from the alledged. He believed they would not ratify it unless hurried into it by surprize." Elbridge Gerry "enlarged on the idea of Mr. L. Martin in which he concurred." Gerry was possibly "Helvidius Priscus'" source for the Morris statement.

3. Galba, Otho, and Vitellius were Roman emperors from 68 to 69 A.D. Helvidius Priscus, a Stoic philosopher and republican statesman, was banished and killed under Vespasian, Vitellius' successor.

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