An Old Whig VII
Philadelphia *Independent Gazetteer*, 28 November 1787

Many people seem to be convinced that the proposed Constitution is liable to a number of important objections; that there are defects in it which ought to be supplied, and errors which ought to be amended; but they apprehend that we must either receive this Constitution in its present form, or be left without any continental government whatsoever. To be sure, if this were the case, it would be most prudent for us, like a man who is wedded to a bad wife, to submit to our misfortune with patience, and make the best of a bad bargain. But if we will summon up resolution sufficient to examine into our true circumstances, we shall find that we are not in so deplorable a situation as people have been taught to believe, from the suggestions of interested men, who wish to force down the proposed plan of government without delay, for the purpose of providing offices for themselves and their friends. We shall find, that, with a little wisdom and patience, we have it yet in our power, not only to establish a federal constitution, but to establish a good one.

It is true that the Continental Convention has directed their proposed Constitution to be laid before a convention of delegates to be chosen in each state, "for their assent and ratification," which seems to preclude the idea of any power in the several conventions, of proposing any alterations, or indeed of even rejecting the plan proposed, if they should disapprove of it. Still, however, the question recurs, what authority the late Convention had to bind the people of the United States, to any particular form of government, or to forbid them to adopt such form of government as they should think fit. I know it is a language frequent in the mouths of some heaven-born Phaetons amongst us, who like the son of Apollo, think themselves entitled to guide the chariot of the sun; that common people have no right to judge of the affairs of government; that they are not fit for it; that they should leave these matters to their superiors. This, however, is not the language of men of real understanding, even among the advocates for the proposed Constitution; but these still recognize the authority of the people, and will admit, at least in words, that the people have a right to be consulted. Then I ask, if the people in the different states have a right to be consulted, in the new form of continental government, what authority could the late Convention have to preclude them from proposing amendments to the plan they should offer? Had the Convention any right to bind the people to the form of government they should propose? Let us consider this matter.

The late Convention were chosen by the general assembly of each state; they had the sanction of Congress. For what? To consider what alterations were necessary to be made in the Articles

of Confederation. What have they done? They have made a new constitution for the United States. I will not say, that in doing so, they have exceeded their authority; but on the other hand, I trust that no man of understanding amongst them will pretend to say, that anything they did or could do, was of the least avail to lessen the rights of the people to judge for themselves in the last resort. This right is, perhaps, unalienable, but at all events, there is no pretense for saying that this right was ever meant to be surrendered up into the hands of the late Continental Convention.

The people have an undoubted right to judge of every part of the government which is offered to them. No power on earth has a right to preclude them; and they may exercise this choice either by themselves or their delegates legally chosen to represent them in the state convention. I venture to say that no man, reasoning upon *revolution* principles, can possibly controvert this right.

Indeed very few go so far as to controvert the right of the people to propose amendments; but we are told that the thing is impracticable; that if we begin to propose amendments there will be no end to them; that the several states will never agree in their amendments; that we shall never unite in any plan; that if we reject this we shall either have a worse or none at all; that we ought therefore to adopt this *at once*, without alteration or amendment. Now these are very kind gentlemen, who insist upon doing so much good for us, whether we will or not. Idiots and maniacs ought certainly to be restrained from doing themselves mischief, and should be compelled to that which is for their own good. Whether the people of America are to be considered in this light, and treated accordingly, is a question which deserves, perhaps, more consideration than it has yet received. A contest between the patients and their doctors, which are mad or which are fools, might possibly be a very unhappy one. I hope at least that we shall be able to settle this important business without so preposterous a dispute. What then would you have us do, it may be asked? Would you have us adopt the proposed Constitution or reject it? I answer that I would neither wish the one nor the other. Though I would be far from pretending to dictate to the representatives of the people what steps ought to be pursued, yet a method seems to present itself so simple, so perfectly calculated to obviate all difficulties, to reconcile us with one another, and establish unanimity and harmony among the people of this country, that I cannot forbear to suggest it. I hope that most of my readers have already anticipated me in what I am about to propose. Whether they have or not, I shall venture to state it, in the humble expectations that it may have some tendency to reconcile honest men of all parties with one another.

The method I would propose is this:

1st. Let the conventions of each state, as they meet, after considering the proposed Constitution, state their objections and propose their amendments.

So far from these objections and amendments clashing with each other in irreconcilable discord, as it has been too often suggested they would do, it appears that from what has been hitherto published in the different states in opposition to the proposed Constitution, we have a right to expect that they will harmonize in a very great degree. The reason I say so is, that about the same time, in very different parts of the continent, the very same objections have been made, and the very same alterations proposed by different writers, who I verily believe, know nothing at all of each other, and were very far from acting a premeditated concert, and that others who

have not appeared as writers in the newspapers, in the different states, have appeared to act and speak in perfect unison with those objections and amendments, particularly in the article of a bill of rights. That in short, the very same sentiments seem to have been echoed from the different parts of the continent by the opposers of the proposed Constitution, and these sentiments have been very little contradicted by its friends, otherwise than by suggesting their fears, that by opposing the Constitution at present proposed, we might be disappointed of any federal government or receive a worse one than the present. It would be a most delightful surprise to find ourselves all of one opinion at last; and I cannot forbear hoping that when we come fairly to compare our sentiments, we shall find ourselves much more nearly agreed than in the hurry and surprise in which we have been involved on this subject, than we ever suffered ourselves to imagine.

2d. When the conventions have stated these objections and amendments, let them transmit them to Congress and adjourn, praying that Congress will direct another convention to be called from the different states, to consider of these objections and amendments, and pledging themselves to abide by whatever decision shall be made by such future convention on the subject; whether it be to amend the proposed Constitution or to reject any alteration and ratify it as it stands.

3d. If a new convention of the United States should meet, and revise the proposed Constitution, let us agree to abide by their decision. It is past a doubt that every good citizen of America pants for an efficient federal government—I have no doubt we shall concur at last in some plan of continental government, even if many people could imagine exceptions to it; but if the exceptions which are made at present shall be maturely considered and even be pronounced by our future representatives as of no importance (which I trust they will not); even in that case, I have no doubt that almost every man will give up his own private opinion and concur in that decision.

4th. If by any means another continental convention should fail to meet, then let the conventions of the several states again assemble and at last decide the great solemn question whether we shall adopt the Constitution now proposed, or reject it? And, whenever it becomes necessary to decide upon this point, one at least who from the beginning has been invariably anxious for the liberty and independence of his country will concur in adopting and supporting this Constitution, rather than none; though I confess I could easily imagine, some other form of confederation, which I should think better entitled to my hearty approbation; and indeed I am not afraid of a worse.

CITE AS: John P. Kaminski et al., eds., *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, Vol. II: Pennsylvania (Madison, Wis.: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 1976), 300–303.