Charles Pettit to Robert Whitehill
Philadelphia, 5 June 1788

The Business respecting the proposed Constitution for the United States early took a Turn so different from my Ideas of Propriety, especially as to the Mode of conducting it, that if I had been more desirous than I really am of taking a part in public Affairs, I have scarcely perceived an Opportunity of being useful; and my services on the Occasion, not having been offic[i]ally called for, I have considered Silence as not only prudent with regard to my self, but justifiable respecting my Duties as a Citizen.

You, on the Contrary, have been called upon in a Conspicuous Station. You have, I doubt not, discharged your Duty conscientiously, tho' with less success than you wished. The Business, however, is not yet over; much remains to be done; and while a Business is depending in which every Individual is interested and has a right of Suffrage, there seems to be a Call of Duty upon every Citizen who may have a Chance of giving it a right Direction, to use his Endeavours for that Purpose. Under the Impression of this Idea, permit me to suggest to you some Observations which have occurred to me. If they shall be improved to the Public Good my End will be answered; if they fail of that I hope they will at least be innocent.

I am among those who find much to approve in the proposed Constitution, and who think it may be so amended as to make it a better plan than we shall be likely to agree upon again if it should be wholly rejected: At the same Time I consider some Amendments necessary to the safety of the People, as well as to the operation of the Plan as a System of Government. I should have been better pleased if I could percieve that the Temper of the Times would admit of making the necessary Amendments previously to its Adoption or ye Organization of the Government under it; but it now appears to me that this cannot be safely attempted. The old Confederation is less faulty in itself, than misadapted to the Subjects of it. With the Degree of Virtue, Public Spirit and other Attributes of Patriotism which the framers of it counted upon, it might have continued to merit our Applause & Veneration for many Years at least; but Experience has already too certainly assured us that the People of the United States require Stronger and more influential Obligations to the Performance of Social Duty than that System afforded, even when they all professed to respect and regard it; but now even those Ties are so far dissolved as to have lost their Force with so great a proportion of the People that the rest must of necessity cease to feel themselves bound by them. Wholly to reject the New Plan and attempt again to resort to the old would therefore be worse than vain: it would throw us into a State of Nature, filled with internal Discord, without the surrounding Barrier of immediate common Danger from without to com-

bine us in the necessary Measures for our Safety. A Politician will readily imagine the Danger of such a Situation, and deprecate the Horrors most likely to be attendant on it; I shall therefore not attempt to describe them to you.

Eight States have already voted an Adoption of the new Plan, & most of the rest are as likely to carry it in the same Manner as some of those who have given it their Fiat. And tho' many of the People in some of the adopting States may be far from satisfied with the Determination, yet the Decisions of their Conventions will throw into that side of the Scales most of the Doubtful, the Wavering & the Negligent, who form a large Proportion of the People in every State. Hence direct Opposition, however well founded in just principles, may become imprudent Rebellion, & produce greater Hazards and more certain Mischeifs than any real Patriot would wish to see his Country involved in. In this View of the Matter it becomes a Question worthy of the serious attention of those who wish for Amendments, whether the most likely way to obtain the End, be not by directing their Efforts to a point after the Adoption of nine States or upwards. Many who are zealous Advocates for the Adoption will also be Advocates for Amendments. I am not unaware, however, that a considerable proportion of those who profess to be of this Class may want Sincerity; that their professions are intended to deceive by lulling the Opposition for the present, and that when the Adoption shall be attained, they will become Adherents in *toto*, and express great Apprehensions of the Danger of attempting Amendments at present. They will urge the Propriety of trying for some time, as it is, in order to find out the more certainly what Amendments are necessary so that the whole may be effected at once. Specious Arguments of this kind will be used, accompanied with general Expressions that Amendments must undoubtedly be made in a few Years, by some who will never consent to any Alterations but such as shall make the system still more exceptionable to those who are now opposed to it. These are Obstacles which the Friends to real Amendments must expect to meet with in the Course I am suggesting; but they are of less Moment than such as I apprehend would occur in any other Mode.

If then difficulties will certainly oppose Amendments in any Mode in which they can be proposed, it seems to be the part of Prudence to choose that Mode in which such Difficulties may be most likely to be overcome;—that Mode which is most likely to succeed;—and that Mode which is least likely in the Experiment to produce Anarchy, or the still more dreadful Event—a Civil War. Should the latter take place I make no Calculation of the Probability of success on either side of the question: Victory on either side would be destructive—

The Mode that appears to me most eligible, all things considered, is to endeavour to combine the Friends to Amendments in some plan in which they may confidently draw together, and by which they may increase the probability of Success. This Plan, I take it, must be so moderate in its object as to obtain the Approbation of the moderate part of those who call themselves Federalists; that is, of those who on a supposition that no Modification could be made between the full Adoption and the total Rejection of the proposed system, prefer the former to the latter. Of these I believe a large Proportion are desirous of having Amendments made, tho' many of them have not digested in their own Minds precisely what those Amendments should be. The Convention of Massachusetts have defined the principles on which Amendments satisfactory to them may be made. The Convention of south Carolina have done the same, and some other state Conventions will probably express their Opinions in like manner at the Time of their Adoption. I should therefore wish that the States who have adopted the System without Suggesting Amend-

ments, would by their Assemblies propose such Amendments as would be pleasing to them, and Instruct their Members of Congress at their first Meeting to take into early Consideration *all* such Amendments as are or shall be proposed by any State in its collective Capacity, either by its Convention or Assembly, and recommend it to the several States to elect (by the People at large in every State) Members to meet in general Convention with full Power to Adopt all or any of the Amendments so proposed, & to alter the System conformably thereto, but no farther; and that the System so altered and amended should be the Constitution of the United States till farther amended according to the Mode therein provided for.

One weighty Objection will rise against this Mode, if any of the States should suspend their Adoption till satisfactory amendments are actually made; because in such Case the Choice of a President and Vice President will be made without their participation; and the Organization of the Congress and the several great Departments and Officers must be performed by a Body in which they will not be represented. On the other Hand if these Operations are to be suspended till after the Amendments are actually made, still greater Difficulties appear to me in getting the Business compleated. Indeed I am of Opinion that nine States or upwards will shortly have adopted; & whenever that shall be the Case they will proceed to the Arrangements under the new Constitution—and tho' they may not proceed to Legislate for, nor to exercise Jurisdiction over such States as shall have rejected, they may nevertheless choose all the Officers and make all the necessary Arrangements without the aid or participation of the non-adopting States, tho' such Arrangements and Appointments will be binding on them when they do accede to the Plan, either on farther consideration, or on obtaining satisfactory Amendments. Hence it appears to me most advisable for all the States to entitle themselves to a full participation in the first Arrangement & Organization of the Government, and, indeed, the most likely way to obtain the Amendments necessary to the safety and Satisfaction of the People. It will be considered that the Adherents to the System, whether amended or not, act under a kind of legitimate Authority. They will therefore derive weight from Organization and Systematic order. The Opposers will have none of these Advantages; they will be moreover weakened by falling into various Classes from differing in opinion as to ye Amendments they desire, and from their dispersed Situation; and be more likely to counteract each other in effect, if not directly, than to Act in general Concert.

It appears to me that the Friends to Amendments, as well those who have given their Influence in favour of the Adoption of the new Form, as those who, for want of Amendments have hitherto opposed it, would do well to fall upon some plan of acting in concert, & forming their Minds in unison with each other. It is not to be expected that we should all spontaneously think alike, nor is it likely that the Calmest Conferences may bring us to an exact uniformity of Opinions; but I am nevertheless of Opinion that reasonable men, coming together with a Disposition to conciliate, and duly considering the greatness of the Object to be obtained & of the Evils to be avoided, may so far accord as to be productive of much real Good. I should therefore wish to see a Meeting of some of the most enlightened Men take place in every County, and that they would have in View, the meeting of a small Delegation from each County in some one Place in the State for the purpose of devising a Plan most likely to succeed in obtaining the desired Amendments.[1] It is probable that similar Consultations will be held in other States; a Communication, and if need be, a Conference with them, might also be had in Contemplation. If some

such plan as this were adopted I should hope for happy Effects from it; but if it is to take place, the sooner it happens the better.

I have presumed upon the Strength of our former Acquaintance & connection in public Business, to suggest these Thoughts to you, trusting that our Mutual Opinion of each other's Integrity and uprightness of Intention will insure them a friendly Reception & candid Consideration.

1. In September 1788 Pettit and Whitehill were delegates to such a convention which met in Harrisburg.

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