



CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE AMERICAN CONSTITUTION

csac.history.wisc.edu > Document Collections > The Founding Period and Slavery > The Middle States Debate Slavery and the Constitution > Debates Over the Foreign Slave Trade

A Countryman I (Hugh Hughes) *New York Journal*, 21 November 1787 (excerpts)

DEAR SIR, As you have several Times intimated a Wish to know my Sentiments, relative to the conduct of the late Convention, as well as of the Constitution, which they have offered to the Consideration of the People, I shall freely, as often as convenient, communicate whatever occurs to me on the Subject, as most worthy of Observation, if not already publicly discussed. When the Latter is the Case, perhaps I may drop a Sentiment concerning the Propriety, or Impropriety, of the Discussion, &c. But all this, my Friend, will, in a great Measure, depend on your reciprocating; for I am too phlegmatic to write, unless answered.

In the first Place then, most unfeignedly do I wish, and that for the Sake of Humanity, that the Convention never had existed; and, for the Sake of our old illustrious Commander in chief, I wish, as they have departed from their Institution, that they had offered a Constitution more worthy of so great a Character. But, as he has acted entirely in a Ministerial Capacity, so I wish to consider him, whenever I am obliged to mention his venerable Name, or allude to it. Not that I think any Name, however great, can justify Injustice, or make Slavery more eligible than Freedom, and beg to be so understood.

Yet, when I consider the original Confederation, and Constitutions of the States which compose the Union, as well as the Resolutions of several of the States, for calling a Convention to *amend* the Confederation, which it admits, but not *a new one*, I am greatly at a Loss to account for the surprizing Conduct of so many wise Men, as must have composed that honorable Body. In fact, I do not know, at present, whether it can be accounted for; unless it be by supposing a Predetermination of a Majority of the Members to reject their Instructions, and all authority under which they acted.

If this be the Case, the Transition to prostrating every Thing that stood in their Way, though ever so serviceable or sacred to others, was natural and easy.—However, I do not even wish to think so unfavorably of the Majority; but rather, that several of them, were, by different Means, insidiously drawn into the Measures of the more artful and designing Members, who have long envied the great Body of the People, in the United States, the Liberties which they enjoy.—And, as a Proof of their being Enemies to the Rights of Mankind, permit me to refer you to the first Clause, of the 9th Section, of the first Article of the new Constitution, which is framed to deprive Millions of the human Species of their natural Rights, and, perhaps, as many more of their Lives in procuring others! That Clause, you will immediately perceive, has been purposely so contrived for reviving that wicked and inhuman Trade to Africa.—That Trade in Blood, and every Vice, of which the Avarice, Pride, Insolence and Cruelty, of Man is capable! A Trade, which, if ever permitted, will entail eternal Infamy on the United States, and all that they have ever said or done in

Defence of Freedom.—Will it not be said, that the greatest Sticklers for Liberty, are its worst Enemies?—For these Gentlemen, no doubt, mean to treat the United States, if they adopt the new Constitution, as they have some of their Colleagues; that is, make Cloaks of them, to cover their Wickedness.

At the Moment it is adopted by the States, in its present Form, that Moment the *external* Turpitude of it is transferred to the Adoptors; and the Framers of it will immediately say, it was called for by the People, of whom they were but the Servants, and, that the Adoption is a Proof of the Assertion. . . .

Perhaps you may next enquire what can be done?—If you should, I will tell you, on Condition that you pardon the Anticipation, the Legislature may, and with the greatest Propriety, as its Delegate has exceeded his Powers, or rejected them, consider all that he has done as a Nullity.—Would not this be a useful Lesson for Usurpers?

. . . as I have often told you, such is the unfortunate Lot of Humanity, that there are a Thousand brilliant Characters, to one that is always consistent, and, of this, Dr. Franklin, and Mr. John Dickinson, are two recent Examples among the Many. The Doctor is at the Head of a humane Institution for promoting the Emancipation of Slaves, or abolishing Slavery; yet lends his Assistance to frame a Constitution which evidently has a Tendency not only to enslave all those whom it ought to protect; but avowedly encourages the enslaving of those over whom it can have no Manner of Right, to exercise the least shadow of Authority.

Mr. Dickinson, a few Years before the Revolution, publicly impeached the Doctor's Conduct for offering to attempt a Change in the chartered Privileges of Pennsylvania, and now joins him in destroying a far superior Constitution, yes, thirteen far superior Constitutions, and opening a Trade which is a Disgrace to Humanity! Will not such Conduct leave these Gentlemen Monuments of much departed Fame? As I have several of their Publications by me, which, I imagine you never saw, I purpose in my Next, to let them speak for themselves, if you have no Objection. . . .

CITE AS: John P. Kaminski et al., eds., *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, Vol. XIX: New York [1] (Madison, Wis.: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2003), 272–74.