

An Assembly of Demigods

Rufus King

Elbridge Gerry to John Adams, New York, March 5, 1785

My Friend Mr. Rufus King studied under Mr. [Theophilus] Parsons of Newburyport, is at the Age of about thirty, eminent in the Law, has in a Year or two as a Member of the General Court of our State [i.e., the legislature], so established his Reputation as to be appointed a Member of Congress, & in this Character, by a well informed firm & sensible Mind, an agreeable person, & an elegant Address has already made progress in establishing a considerable Influence—he is a true Republican in principles & is in a System of politics that I have no Doubt Will in all essential points correspond with your own. I think You will be much pleased in opening a Correspondence with him & that he will be very happy in continuing it.

John Bayard to Samuel Bayard, New York, December 1, 1785

I find Congress opens a new scene of Action to me & candidly confess it requires greater abilities than I am possessed of to make a distinguished Appearance on the Floor. There are several Gentlemen who shine as speakers particularly a Mr. Rufus King from Massachusetts. He has a graceful Attitude—a fine flow of Words & in general a thorough acquaintance of the Subject on which He speaks. This gives him an unrival'd Influence. The Debates are conducted in general with great Decency & propriety & the Members treat each other with the utmost politeness—the greatest inconvenience is, that We have so many good speakers, each willing to display their Abilities on the Subject in debate that they are frequently lengthened out, & exhausted & become rather tiresome.

James Monroe to Thomas Jefferson, New York, July 16, 1786

Two of these men [delegates from Massachusetts] whose names are Dane and King are elected for the next year. . . . The former is I believe honest but the principles of the latter I doubt.

William Pierce: Sketches of Members of the Constitutional Convention, 1787

Mr. King is a Man much distinguished for his eloquence and great parliamentary talents. He was educated in Massachusetts, and is said to have good classical as well as legal knowledge. He has served for three years in the Congress of the United States with great and deserved applause, and is at this time high in the confidence and approbation of his Country-men. This Gentleman is about thirty three years of age, about five feet ten Inches high, well formed, an handsome face, with a strong expressive Eye, and a sweet high toned voice. In his public speaking there is something peculiarly strong and rich in his expression, clear, and convincing in his arguments, rapid and irresistible at times in his eloquence but he is not always equal. His action is natural, swimming, and graceful, but there is a rudeness of manner sometimes accompanying it. But take him *tout ensemble*, he may with propriety be ranked among the Luminaries of the present Age.

Brissot de Warville: *New Travels in the United States of America*, August 1788

Mr. King, whom I also saw at this dinner [hosted by Alexander Hamilton], is reputed to be the most eloquent man in the United States. What impressed me most about him was his modesty; he seemed completely unaware of his worth.

New York Daily Gazette, July 20, 1789

In any age when rectitude is greeted with derision, and virtue reprobated with indignity, it is difficult for an honest politician to steer his course clear of the rocks and shoals that are ever cast in his way, by the hackneyed antiquated knaves of government.

Mr. K. however, exhibits an example of firmness, prudence and respectability, seldom to be met with in young senators. Possessed of talents which, when called forth in the service of his country, shone with a lustre that obscured the mean abilities of many whose influence, not their merit, had placed them in exalted stations, he has exerted his abilities with dignity and effect. His judgment is mature, his conceptions strong, his reasons seldom to be controverted.

In discharging the duties of every office hitherto delegated to him, he has come off with *ecclat*; and we have no cause to suspect that he will depart from the paths of true patriotism.

We shall only add our wishes, that he may never suffer his character to be branded with the causes which his countrymen have in store for the betrayers of their liberties. May his conduct remain exemplary as a representative, and virtuous as a man—blessed in domestic felicity, and admired by the true friends of America.

Alexander Hamilton to John Jay, Philadelphia, September 3, 1792

Perhaps it will not be amiss for you to converse with Mr. King. His judgment is sound; he has caution and energy.

Maryland Gazette, July 16, 1812

The Hon. Rufus King.—who have had an opportunity of witnessing any important discussion in the Senate, in which Mr. King has taken a part, have almost universally assigned him the palm. His talents are spoken of in more exalted terms, even by his political opponents, than any other member of that body, and we do not think it would be too much to say, that he is superior at this time to any other man of which the United States can boast. Bred up in the service of his country, and guided by the strictest integrity, he has justly acquired a reputation which entitles him to the confidence of his fellow-citizens. With such a man at the head of our government, we might soon expect to witness a change in the gloomy aspect of our affairs, and that scene of prosperity again restored which formerly spread its blessings around us. For many years he has lived in the retirement of private life, and his talents when greatly required, have been lost to his country. But since all parties now unite in speaking his praise, it is sincerely to be wished that his councils may produce that effect, which they so eminently deserve. If ever there is a time when honest men come again into fashion, it would be the pride of our nation to have a statesman like him to direct its affairs.