

An Assembly of Demigods

Edmund Randolph

William Pierce: Sketches of Members of the Constitutional Convention

Mr. Randolph is Governor of Virginia,—a young Gentleman in whom unite all the accomplishments of the Scholar, and the States-man. He came forward with the postulata, or first principles, on which the Convention acted, and he supported them with a force of eloquence and reasoning that did him great honor. He has a most harmonious voice, a fine person and striking manners. Mr. Randolph is about 32 years of age.

Martin Oster to Comte de la Luzerne, Norfolk, 4 February 1788

Attached, My Lord, I have the honor to transmit to you two pamphlets, against the Constitution. One is by the dissidents of Pennsylvania, and the other by the Governor of Virginia.

The Pamphlet by the dissidents is considered the best of all those that have appeared.

As for that by the Governor, no one is pleased with it. He expresses in it the greatest apprehension of the frightful misfortunes that would result from a dissolution of the Union, whether the States become 13 disconnected sovereignties, or whether they are divided into two, or three Confederations. He also fears the most fatal consequences, if this chance to establish a firm and energetic government is allowed to escape. He does not mention that any artifice or wickedness was employed in the federal Convention, and he says, that if the Constitution is adopted, it will be his duty to acquiesce in it.

It is not known here, My Lord, what to think of the indecision and the assertions of the Governor, on the new form of Government. His arguments, his principles, are too confused, and have something of sophistry; but the attentive observer, nevertheless discovers, a duplicity there that no longer allows a doubt as to the active motives of the person. They consist principally of egoism, of the consuming desire to take the lead; and of a jealousy mingled with the most active fear of seeing the functions and prerogatives of the governors reduced to only internal regulations. According to this understanding, one judges of his Pamphlet:

1st. that he tried to become the hero of a new scene, by frightening and stirring feelings.

2nd. that he lacks that sound judgment, and that boldness of spirit that make true republicans.

3rd. that he is of a character that bends according to how his interest varies, and in addition that always follows the strongest party.

That, My Lord, is what I think I perceive in the conduct of the current Governor, relative to the new Constitution which all good citizens ardently desire, and without which it will perhaps come to pass that the dissidents will divide the continent into several Confederations that will be perpetually agitated by internal divisions and that, by their weakness, will remain languid, and will only be of short duration.

Cyrus Griffin to James Madison, New York, April 14, 1788

. . . the Governor by nature timid and undecided.

Elbridge Gerry to James Warren, Cambridge, June 28, 1788

Patrick Henry has been brilliant in that [Virginia] convention, and very severe on ————— who is reprobated for his duplicity and versatility.

Francis Corbin to James Madison, October 21, 1788

A proposition will be brought forward in the assembly for a Second Convention of the States—and I fear it will be carried—although I have not yet been able to ascertain the Complexion of the House—this being but the 2d. Day of our meeting. This proposition it is said will be introduced not by [Patrick]

Henry—but—(mirabile dictu!) by our friend Randolph. He will injure his political Reputation by his doublings and turnings. He is *too Machiavelian* and not *Machiavelian Enough*.

I wish, I sincerely wish that he could be advised and would take advice—but this, I fear, is out of the question. We Virginians are too much accustomed to Solitude and Slavery—too much puff'd up with our own foolish Pride and Vanity ever to Entertain any other Idea than that we alone are wise and all the rest of the World Fools.

Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, Philadelphia, August 11, 1793

I can by this confidential conveyance speak more freely of R. He is the poorest Cameleon I ever saw having no color of his own, & reflecting that nearest him. When he is with me he is a whig, when with H. [Alexander Hamilton] he is a tory, when with the P. [President Washington] he is what he thinks will please him. The last is his strongest hue, though the 2nd tinges him very strongly. The first is what I think he would prefer in his heart if he were in the woods where he could see nobody, or in a society of *all whigs*. . . . it is not the less true that his opinion always makes the majority [in the Cabinet], & that the President acquiesces *always* in the majority; consequently that the government is now solely directed by him. As he is not yet openly thrown off by the whig party, it gives to the public a false security that fair play is given to the whiggism of the Pr. by an equal division of whig & tory among his counselors. I have kept on terms of strict friendship with him hitherto, that I might make some good out of him, & because he has really some good private qualities. But he is in a station infinitely too important for his understanding, his firmness, or his circumstances.

Benjamin Henry Latrobe: Journals, May 31, 1796

The public opinion gives the next rank [after James Innes] as an Orator to Edmund Randolph, cidevant secretary of State. He speaks slowly, smilingly, in a musical voice, a selected phraseology, a polished gentlemanly manner, and with a plentiful flow of words. But his slowness gives his hearer time to anticipate and renders him impatient for the end of his period; his smiles seem to swim only upon the surface of his countenance, the sweetness of his tones do not reconcile to a corrected turn of language, and a selection of words apparently laborious, his manner appears to have been polished in the school of dissimulation, and the Storehouse of his words seems to be his head not his heart. At the instant he labors to persuade the jury, he seems to be unconvinced himself and to be ignorant that "*artis est celare artem*." [It belongs to art to conceal art.] The coarse praise bestowed by a country man upon honest [James] Innes will never be earned by the quondam Secretary, "he has his belly full of words, and they come pouring along like a great fresh." Perhaps he would have said, "Randolph has his head full of words, and there seems to be no end of them." Considering all the circumstances of the political history of Edmund Randolph, I cannot help thinking the perpetual political allusions in his speeches upon all sorts of law cases are [torn page] ed. . . . But the boldness of innocence if such it be, ought to be respected.

*N.B.**This opinion was written while I was prejudiced against, before I had any personal acquaintance with Mr. Randolph. It is correct as to the *general* effect of his speaking. But notwithstanding the partial view of his character which, at the time I wrote, was unavoidable, and is here exhibited, I freely acknowledge that my subsequent intimacy with him has shown him in a light infinitely amiable.

Mr. Randolph is convicted of several political inconsistencies if to change parties, be a political inconsistency; for it will always remain for discussion whether the *party* or the individual have deviated from the original sentiment. In his resignation of his Office as Secretary of State, he appears to me to have been sacrificed to the malignity of a man [Alexander Hamilton] as detestable in his private character, as Mr. Randolph is amiable. To respect, nay to love Mr. Randolph it is only necessary to see him at his fireside, the father, the husband, and the friend. In a soil which virtues, such as he there exhibits, occupy, there cannot be room for a single depraved intention. And though that suavity of disposition which renders him an object of affection may perhaps give way to the pressure of artifice in others, I should think impossible for him to act wrong, but when he has been deceived.

* The last two paragraphs were written at a later date.