

Antoine de la Forest to Comte de la Luzerne, New York, 16 May 1788

The accession of Maryland to the new plan of federal Government has just brought to seven the number of States that have had their ratification carried to congress. This accession took place without restriction and has the advantage over that of Massachusetts not to be accompanied by any amendments designed to obtain changes. It was nevertheless not very far from imitating the example of this last state. The Maryland Convention, after having adopted the proposed constitution by a majority of 63 votes to 11, named a committee of 13 of its members to draft the necessary alterations; it resolved at the same time that it would take into consideration only those that would be presented to it by this committee, which was composed of partisans and enemies of the new System. The latter wanted to make a last effort to destroy the system's power. They first proposed 13 restrictive amendments that were agreed to; they then added 15 others to them, the most notable of which, because it best characterizes the fears of the Southern States, stated that no regulation of commerce and navigation could take place except with the consent of two-thirds of the members of each branch of congress. These 15 amendments were rejected by their opponents with the offer to combine all their efforts in the convention in order to have the [13] amendments that they had accepted approved there. The antifederalists were not satisfied with this; they tried to come to terms, nothing came of it; and when the committee was unable to agree on a report to the convention, the latter simply held to its ratification and ended the session.

Such is, My Lord, the summary of the seventh triumph that the federalists have obtained. But the closer they approach the goal, the more it is feared we will see their cause fail. People are even beginning to ask what the operation of the new Government will be in the most favorable case, that is to say, when all the States have accepted it. One will see then the establishment of a great jealousy between the individual legislatures and the central authority; the latter always thwarted in its endeavors, always quibbled with about its powers; the former incessantly occupied with spreading alarm in the minds of men, with proposing restrictions, with welcoming the clamors of the opposition. Today the impotence of the Government is blamed for all public and private troubles; the different classes of citizens, farmers, merchants, sailors, manufacturers, artisans, capitalists, expect their fortune from the proposed constitution and are warmly in its favor; their zeal to support it may fade away with these illusions. If the new Government wants to make its powers secure from the beginning, raise taxes, pay its public debts, get the funds for its functioning, there will not be one voice there to limit it immediately. If it temporizes, if it seeks to treat the opposition with respect, if it seeks to please the people, their disobedience will grow along with the habit of not being governed, and their constitution will have power only on paper. These apprehensions are only too justified by the character of the Americans. I dare think that a nation can obtain a good constitution only by a succession of bloody revolutions, like England; or when a Ruler, powerful enough to dictate his wishes and virtuous enough to cherish civil rights, himself makes his subjects accept privileges compatible with the need to be Governed.

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