

## A Spectator, *Massachusetts Centinel*, 2 February 1788

A short History of a recent FREAK. 1

Mr. RUSSELL, You seem to apologize for the publication of the very extraordinary letter of the Hon. Mr. *Gerry*, to the Vice-President of the State Convention, occasioned by a debate upon a question of mere order, in that body, by saying, "The publick being desirous to know the result of the conversation in Convention, on Saturday last, on the propriety of Mr. *Gerry* being permitted to give any other information than of facts *particularly asked for*, and which it appears has given Mr. *Gerry* offence, we lay before our readers a copy of that gentleman's letter, as read yesterday afternoon."

If, Sir, the desire of the publick is only to be informed of the propriety or impropriety of that hon. gentleman's giving any other information than of facts "*particularly asked after*, I think that gentleman has said enough in his letter to convince them of the impropriety of his *attempting to do more*. For, says he "on the 14th of this month, the Convention passed a vote, requesting me" "to take a seat in the house, to answer any question of fact from time to time, that the *Convention may want to ask*, respecting the passing the Constitution." Now Sir, let the publick judge (for to them has he appealed from the judgment of the Convention) whether the hon. gentleman could with propriety give any other information than of facts, *particularly asked after*, by some member of the Convention, or even then, before the Convention itself had approved of the inquiry, or in the language of their vote had signified *their "want"* of such an information from him. He indeed seems disposed not only to give information in point of fact, before it is asked after, but also to obtrude upon the Convention his *opinion* respecting the Constitution, provided such opinion has a tendency to obstruct the acceptance of it. In proof of this, we find that hon. gentleman declaring in this very letter, thus. "The strong impressions which *I* felt, and which *I* still feel, that this system without amendments will destroy the liberties of America, inferred on me an indispensable obligation to give it my negative." Had the hon. gentleman been requested to give his opinion of the consequences of accepting the Constitution without amendments? If not, was it not indecent, not to say, impertinent, in him to do it? Does that hon. gentleman think the Convention deficient in point of sagacity, to discern the probable effects and consequences of the system submitted to their consideration, and that they need a portion of his wisdom, and publick virtue, to point them out, and to prevent their sacrificing the liberties of America? Was he accountable to that hon. body for having given his negative to the system? On what other supposition, than that above-mentioned, can we then account for his very extraordinary conduct?—But slightly to pass over his officious letter to the legislature of this State, endeavouring to vindicate himself, before he had been called upon by them, for giving his negative to the proposed system of government:<sup>2</sup> I would state a few facts, necessary for the information of the publick, to enable them to make up a right judgment in the present case.

The Convention, as Mr. *E. Gerry* says, were considering that part of the Constitution which relates to the *equal* representation of the States in the senate. When Mr. STRONG, one of his honourable colleagues in the Continental Convention, rose, and informed the House, that this

was agreed to by a committee consisting of a member from each State, and that Mr. *Gerry* was one of the number: This information, however harmless in itself, roused *the very irritable* passions of Mr. *E. Gerry*; he changed his seat instantly to the table before the President, pulled forth his budget of peccadillos, displayed them in order before him, took pen, ink and paper, and, as he *now* informs us, set about writing “a letter to the President for correcting *this* error” of his honourable colleague. *Risum teneatis amici?*<sup>3</sup> But stop, what may be sport to us, might be death to him—I mean political death. What, shall it be understood in that honourable body, that Mr. *E. Gerry* had reported in favour of an *equal* representation of the States in the senate? For this is the utmost extent of the information of his honourable colleague. Yet is he greatly alarmed at it, and determines in a rage, to wipe away “the injuries resulting from its unfavourable impressions.” He writes, then strikes out, writes on, strikes out again, until at last, no longer able to keep his seat (where he was left to go on without molestation from any mortal) he rises in the midst of the debates on that paragraph, to use his own words “to inform the President that *he was preparing* a letter” (for the gentleman has chosen that mode of opposition to the federal government) “to *throw light* on the subject,” and request him to make this communication to the House. He did so. But what was to be done? Were all the debates to be suspended until Mr. *E. Gerry* had finished his very important letter to the President upon the subject? Were the Hon. Convention so benighted, in the opinion of Mr. *E. Gerry*, that it was not safe to leave them to go on in their debates, until he should have an opportunity “to *throw light*” in their path? Mr. *E. Gerry* well knew that no question was to be taken upon separate paragraphs, had he been capable of a moment’s reflection; therefore, he must have seen that by waiting until the irritation of his spirits had subsided, even to the next week, he would not have lost an opportunity to have done his utmost to rescue “the liberties of America from destruction,” of which he seems to conceive himself to be the great champion.—But so it was, friend Russell, Mr. *E. Gerry* could not rest quiet a moment under such atrocious imputations as his honourable colleague had cast upon him.

Thus matters stood, when the Hon. Gentleman [Francis Dana], with whose name and character Mr. *E. Gerry* has taken such indecent liberties, and who had but just before come into the house, rose, and asked the President, *whether there was any question in writing laid on the table for that gentleman to answer*; being told that *there was not*, he added that *it seemed to be the sense of the house that the question should be reduced to writing, and the answer also*. This idea was questioned by some, and a debate ensued: The same gentleman arose again, and said, he did not wish to exclude light from the house by his inquiry, but that it ought to come in an orderly manner: The reason why he supposed it to be the sense of the house, that both question and answer should be in writing, was, that the day before, one, and the first too, was proposed to that gentleman verbally; it was so done, and the answer also. Further, that the hon. gentleman had applied to him the evening before, and proposed, that every question to be asked him, should be reduced to writing, and laid on the table, that he might consider them deliberately, and give his answer in writing also; that he then told the gentleman, he approved of his proposal, as well for the sake of preventing unnecessary discussion in the House, as a misrepresentation to his disadvantage.—That for these reasons, he had been induced to make the inquiry. A motion was then made by Mr. WEDGERY, *that the House should depart from their vote, and leave the hon. gentleman (Mr. Gerry) at full liberty to give his reasons at large*,

respecting the Constitution, without waiting for any question whatever to be put to him. This changed the nature of the debate, and brought up a gentleman from Newbury-Port,<sup>4</sup> who said to this effect: *If this house should signify their wishes to have the hon. gentleman admitted to enter fully into their debates as a member of it, he was so far from wishing to exclude any light from this House, that he would not oppose it, but would acquiesce in their decision, however humiliating and mortifying it might be to him.* Hereupon the subject of debate was again changed, by a motion from another part of the House, by Gen. THOMPSON, *That the hon. gentleman should be admitted into the debates as a member of it.* This made the debate still more serious, when the Hon. Member from Dracut [Joseph Bradley Varnum], arose, and said, *That he considered this a violation of the right of election of the inhabitants of Cambridge, (the residence of the letter-writer) who had not thought fit to send him as their delegate—they certainly well knew he said the gentleman's sentiments upon the subject, and they had chosen others to represent them—this motion would make him a member of the House to every purpose, but that of voting. He said, he was therefore against it.* The gentleman who is the principal subject [Francis Dana] of Mr. E. Gerry's letter, said: *To admit the hon. gentleman, agreeably to this motion, would be going further under the idea of obtaining light, than this House had a right to go. To day one gentleman would wish to introduce his friend in support of his own sentiments, and to-morrow a member of opposite sentiments would expect the same indulgence, with the same view, for his friend; and thus instead of our being the representatives of the people we should convert ourselves in effect, into electors of their representatives.* The motion was then called for in writing. Mr. WEDGERY reduced it into writing to the following effect: "That the hon. gentleman should have liberty to give any information to the House he should have to communicate, respecting the passing of the Constitution, or (for I am not certain which) respecting the subject in debate."<sup>5</sup> The Hon. Gen. BROOKS, of Lincoln, then observed the motion was ambiguous, the word *information*, might mean either information in matters of fact, or information resulting from reasoning upon facts. He wished therefore to be informed which was the gentleman's meaning.—Mr. WEDGERY cried out '*both.*' The debates were then continued on this explanation, until, an adjournment was called for, which took place, without any decision of the House upon the foregoing matters. Thus have I gone through a state of facts relative to the transaction alluded to in Mr. E. Gerry's, letter, and which is all the foundation he could have had, in support of the very bitter and indelicate assertions, or charges against the Hon. Judge DANA. Nothing more personal that I recollect, fell from that gentleman, than is mentioned. The only cause of offence against him, seems to be that his first inquiry lead on to all the debates which ensued, for which he cannot justly be made responsible. His motion, or inquiry, was as certainly in order, as Mr. E. Gerry's conduct was out of order and improper. He must therefore thank himself for all the consequences of it. If his "situation was not eligible," or his "condition was humiliating": He had consented to be placed there; and had he kept up to the terms of his invitation, nothing of the sort which did happen, could have happened, to mortify his feelings.

The gentleman conceives that he was denied "leave to *speak*," and even "to address a letter merely for the purpose of setting a matter right, which, in the progress of debates, had by an erroneous statement tended to his injury." Was this the case? How easy would it have been for him to have desired leave to set his Hon. colleague right in point of fact, and to have done it

instantaneously. Surely no member would have opposed so reasonable a request. But instead of this, the gentleman rose only to request the President to inform the house “he was *preparing* a letter to *throw light* on the subject” generally; and not with any design to clear himself from any imputations which he had conceived affected his character: If therefore “he was misunderstood by the Hon. Judge DANA” as he says “he soon perceived he was,” ought not Mr. *Gerry* to have reflected that he himself had lead that gentleman into the error, (if any there was) of suggesting “that he was entering into their debates.” In short, it is questionable in any view of this matter, whether Mr. *E. Gerry* can justify the indecent, illiberal treatment of that gentleman, he has so acrimoniously dealt out in his letter; apparently written before he had given time for his passions to subside, and his reason to dictate his pen. Besides, if his charges were in fact true, does it not follow, that the Hon. Convention themselves must bear their portion of them, for permitting one of their members to persist, (according to his representation) in a course of conduct disorderly in the extreme. Certainly every one will suppose, had they viewed it in that light, they would soon have reminded that gentleman of his duty, and set him down in his turn. But I believe no member of the house thought Judge DANA’s conduct in the least disorderly or reprehensible. If it had been, Mr. *Gerry* not being destitute of friends in that house, some of them would have been ready enough to have called Judge DANA to order, and have given Mr. *Gerry* complete protection from the abuse of any man.

*Boston, Jan. 29, 1788.*

1 On 30 January the *Massachusetts Centinel* announced: “A circumstantial history of the freak, in the Hon. Convention, on Saturday, 19th inst. (alluded to in Mr. *Gerry*’s letter, published in the *Centinel* of Wednesday, last week [23 January]) which sets that affair in its proper light, we have received from a correspondent: But from its length, and our previous engagements, we are unwillingly obliged to defer its publication until Saturday.” The word “freak,” as used by “A Spectator,” probably means either a prank, a caper, a whim, or a capricious notion.

2 See “Elbridge Gerry to the General Court,” 18 October 1787.

3 Latin: “Could you help laughing, my friends.”

4 Theophilus Parsons is identified as the speaker by Jeremy Belknap.

5 The *Convention Journal*, 19 January reads, “to give what information he [*Gerry*] may have in his mind respecting the Senate.”

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