

Louis Guillaume Otto to Comte de Vergennes, New York, 10 October 1786

My Lord. The Commissioners named by various States to propose a general plan of Commerce and to give to Congress the powers necessary to execute it were meeting in Annapolis over the last month. But, only five States being represented, they did not think they should broach the principal question, and they limited themselves to addressing to Congress and to the various Legislatures a report that characterizes the present spirit of this country's politics. In translating this report, I have taken care not only to put it into French but to render it intelligible. They endeavored to give the original an obscurity that the people will see through with difficulty, but which the powerful and enlightened Citizens will not fail to turn to account.

For a very long time, My Lord, they have felt the necessity of giving the federal Government more energy and vigor, but they have also felt that the excessive independence accorded to the Citizens with regard to the States, and to the States with regard to Congress, is too dear to individuals for them to be divested of it without great precautions. The people are not unaware that the natural consequences of a greater power accorded to the Government will be a regular collecting of taxes, a strict administration of justice, extraordinary duties on imports, strict actions against debtors, and lastly a marked preponderance of the rich men and the great proprietors. It is therefore in the interest of the people to preserve, as much as possible, the absolute liberty that was accorded to them at a time when they knew no other law than necessity, and when an English army laid, so to speak, the foundations of the political Constitution. It is in these tempestuous times that it was necessary to agree that all power should emanate only from the people, that everything be submitted to its supreme will, and that the Magistrates be only its servants.

Although there were no Patricians in America, there is a class of men known under the denomination of *Gentlemen*; who by their wealth, by their talents, by their education, by their families, or by the positions that they fill, aspire to a preeminence that the people refuse to accord them, and although several of these men have betrayed the interests of their class in order to acquire popularity, there reigns among them a liaison all the more intimate, since they fear almost all the efforts of the people to despoil them of their possessions, and since they are in addition creditors, and consequently interested in strengthening the Government and attending to the execution of the laws. These men ordinarily pay the highest taxes, while the small proprietors escape the vigilance of the Collectors. Most of them being merchants, it is important to them to solidly establish the credit of the United States in Europe by the exact payment of debts and to have Congress given sufficiently extensive powers to make the people contribute thereto.

They have tried in vain, My Lord, by pamphlets and by other publications, to propagate notions of justice and of integrity, and to divest the people of a liberty of which they make such bad use. In proposing a new organization of the federal Government, they would have caused all minds to rebel. Ruinous circumstances for the Commerce of

America have happily chanced to furnish the reformers a pretext to introduce some innovations. They represented to the people that the name American had become a disgrace among all the nations of Europe; that the flag of the United States was everywhere exposed to insults and vexations; that the farmer, no longer being able to freely export his produce, would soon be reduced to the last misery; that it was time to employ reprisals and to prove to foreign nations that the United States would not suffer this violation of the freedom of Commerce with impunity, but that vigorous measures could only be taken by unanimous Consent of the thirteen States and that, Congress not having the necessary powers, it was essential to form a general assembly charged to present it with the plan that it should adopt, and to indicate to it the means to execute it. The people, generally discontented with the difficulties of Commerce, and little suspecting the secret motives of their Antagonists, embraced this measure with ardor, and named Commissioners who were supposed to meet in Annapolis at the Commencement of September.

The authors of this proposition, My Lord, had no hope or even any desire to see this Assembly of Commissioners, which should only prepare a question much more important than that of Commerce, succeed. The measures were so well taken that at the end of September, there were no more than five States represented in Annapolis, and the Commissioners of the Northern States were held up for several days in New York in order to delay their arrival. The assembled States, after having waited almost three weeks, had broken up on the pretext that they were not numerous enough to enter into the matter, and to justify this dissolution, they sent the various Legislatures and Congress a report, of which I have the honor to send You the enclosed translation. In this document, the Commissioners make use of an infinity of circumlocutions and ambiguous phrases to explain to their constituents the impossibility of taking into consideration a general plan of Commerce and the powers relative thereto without touching at the same time on other objects intimately connected with the prosperity and the national importance of the United States. Without naming these objects, the Commissioners elaborate on the present crisis of public affairs, on the dangers to which the confederation is exposed, on the discredit of the United States in foreign countries, and on the necessity of reconciling under a single point of view the interests of all the States. They conclude by proposing for the month of May next a new Assembly of Commissioners charged not only with deliberating on a general plan of Commerce, but *on other matters that might interest the harmony and the well-being of the States and on the means of adapting the federal Government to the needs of the union*. In spite of the obscurity of this document, You will perceive, My Lord, that the Commissioners do not wish to take into consideration the grievances of Commerce, infinitely interesting to the people, without perfecting at the same time the fundamental constitution of Congress. It is hoped that new Commissioners will be named with powers sufficiently extensive to deliberate on these important subjects and to put Congress in a position not only to approve resolutions for the prosperity of the union, but to execute them.

Kaminski, John P., and Leffler, Richard, Eds, *Federalists and Antifederalists: The Debate over the Ratification of the Constitution*, Madison: Madison House Publishers, Inc., 1998, pp. 180-83.