

Benjamin Rush in the Pennsylvania Ratification Convention, 12 December 1787

BENJAMIN RUSH: The important question was now called for, when Doctor Rush requested the patience of the Convention for a few minutes. He then entered into a metaphysical argument, to prove that the morals of the people had been corrupted by the imperfections of the government, and while he ascribed all our vices and distresses to the existing system, he predicted a millennium of virtue and happiness as the necessary consequence of the proposed Constitution. To illustrate the depraved state of society, he remarked, among other things, the disregard which was notorious in matters of religion, so that between the congregation and the minister scarcely any communication or respect remained; nay, the Doctor evinced that they were not bound by the ties of common honesty, on the evidence of two facts, from which it appears that several clergymen had been lately cheated by their respective flocks of the wages due for their pastoral care and instruction. Dr. Rush then proceeded to consider the origin of the proposed system, and fairly deduced it from heaven, asserting that he as much believed the hand of God was employed in this work, as that God had divided the Red Sea to give a passage to the children of Israel or had fulminated the Ten Commandments from Mount Sinai! Dilating some time upon this new species of divine right, thus transmitted to the future governors of the Union, he made a pathetic appeal to the opposition, in which he deprecated the consequences of any further contention and pictured the honorable and endearing effects of an unanimous vote, after the full and fair investigation which the great question had undergone. "It is not, sir, a majority (continued the Doctor), however numerous and respectable, that can gratify my wishes—nothing short of an unanimous vote can indeed complete my satisfaction. And, permit me to add, were that event to take place, I could not preserve the strict bounds of decorum; but, flying to the other side of this room, I should cordially embrace every member, who has hitherto been in the opposition, as a brother and a patriot. Let us then, sir, this night bury the hatchet and smoke the calumet of peace!" [Dallas' Debates, Pennsylvania Herald, 15 December]

Rush: The Doctor began by recapitulating the many harsh epithets that had been given to the new government by the opposition. Mr. Findley having in a debate a few days before [3 December] said, there was a bright and dark side to every question, and having illustrated it by mentioning the doctrine of predestination, the Doctor applied the remark to the present government, and said Mr. Findley had unfortunately chosen the reprobation side of it. But as the darkness of that doctrine was in the human mind only, and not in the doctrine itself, so he hoped the misery and evil Mr. Findley had discovered in the new Constitution was in the minds of the members who opposed it, and not in the Constitution itself. The Doctor then proceeded to mention several reasons for adopting the new government. These were derived:

- 1st. From the influence which the example of a good government might have upon the nations of Europe, who had already shown a disposition to imitate us in asserting their liberties.
- 2d. From the effects of good government in securing liberty, for where there was no law, there could be no liberty. Here the Doctor remarked, that man was naturally an ungovernable animal. That in Europe it had been found necessary to add ecclesiastical and military to civil power, in order to govern him. In America it would be improper to introduce the first two species of

government; for which reason much higher degrees of civil government were necessary in this country, than had hitherto been established in the United States.

3. From the distresses of the country, which the Doctor said had been before enumerated, and which he said originated only in the want of an efficient government.

4. From the present state of morals in the country. Here the Doctor showed the connection between the want of justice and fidelity in government to individuals, and of individuals to government, and every branch of moral obligation. From this failure of political obligation arose the want of justice between man and man, the difficulty of borrowing and the danger of lending money, the oppressions of landlords, the frauds of tenants, and the numerous instances of conjugal infelicity and divorces, etc. among the lower classes of people; and lastly, the deficiency in parishes to pay their ministers agreeably to their subscriptions. This last instance of a failure in moral obligation, the Doctor lamented, as having a melancholy influence upon the happiness of our country; for, said he, where public worship is not maintained, it will be difficult to preserve religion; and where there is no religion, there will be no morals. Where there are no morals, there can be no government, and where there is no government, there can be no liberty. It is true, said the Doctor, we hear much of the liberality and humanity discovered by our citizens in the establishment of charitable and benevolent institutions; but these are the sorrowful marks of the declension of our country. They prove, that we have some virtue, but much more vice among us; and if Pennsylvania has been distinguished from her sister states by the number and perfection of these humane institutions, it is only because there is more weakness in the form, and more corruption in the administration of her government, than in any of the states in the Union.

After this the Doctor proceeded to show the source of obligation to government, and asserted from a late writer, Mr. Paley, that it was founded "in obedience to the will of God, collected from expediency." He then mentioned the unanimity of the Convention, the general approbation of the Constitution by all classes of people, and the zeal which appeared everywhere, in votes and instructions, in favor of the government, from New Hampshire to Georgia, as reasons to believe that the adoption of the government was agreeable to the will of Heaven, for the Vox Populi—Vox Dei—was a truth, when it applied to the feelings of the people. Here the Doctor added, that he believed the same voice that thundered on Mount Sinai, "thou shalt not steal," now proclaimed in our ears, by a number of plain and intelligible providences, "thou shalt not reject the new federal government."

The Doctor then proceeded as follows: "If the forms and degrees of government are so essential to the preservation of liberty, religion, and morals in our country, then," said he, "I call upon every member of this Convention to lay his hand on his heart, and to ask himself whether he can, consistent with his duty to his Maker, refuse to assent to the ratification of the proposed Constitution. If there is any man in this assembly, who feels a struggle between the inclinations of his constituents and the dictates of his conscience, let him obey the dictates of his conscience. It is the voice of God speaking in his heart. And let him reflect further, that in giving a vote upon this question, he is bound to consult the interests and wishes, not of a particular county, but of the whole state.

“I have no doubt,” concluded the Doctor, “but a respectable majority will rise to the question of the ratification, but, Mr. President, this will not come up to my wishes. Nothing will satisfy me perfectly, but an unanimous vote. Lord Belhaven, in a speech delivered in the Scotch Parliament upon the subject of the union, observes very justly, that ‘unanimity in a wrong measure is often better than division in a right one.’ Suppose the measure before us should be wrong. Unanimity would better enable us to recover from the evils that would arise from it. Think, sir, of the effects of an unanimous vote upon our sister states. It would probably check Rhode Island in her career of iniquity, and produce even paleness and distress at the Court of St. James’s. Think, sir, of its effects upon the State of Pennsylvania. Let this Constitution be the umpire of all our past disputes. Here let us this night bury the hatchet of civil discord and smoke the calumet of peace together! When the great question is called, should we be so happy as to see every chair in this assembly deserted, what a triumph would it be of reason and humanity over prejudice and party spirit! Should this be the case, Mr. President, I should find it difficult to restrain myself by the rules of the house. I should feel myself strongly disposed to run across the room, and take every member of the opposition in my arms. I should think it, sir, the beginning of a year of jubilee in Pennsylvania.” [Pennsylvania Gazette, 19 December]

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