

Harrington: To the Freemen of the United States, *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 30 May 1787

“Harrington,” was the only lengthy essay on the need to strengthen the central government that circulated widely during the meeting of the Constitutional Convention.

Benjamin Rush was probably the author of “Harrington.” The evidence for this assertion consists of two letters. The first, dated 1 June, was composed by an unidentified Philadelphian. The second, dated 2 June, was written by Rush to Richard Price. Both letters enclosed a recently published newspaper article. The letter of 1 June described the article as an “address” written “‘To the Freemen of the United States.’” Rush’s letter of 2 June, referring to an “enclosed newspaper [which] contains an address suited to our present hour of difficulty and danger,” included a statement sometimes made by authors who did not explicitly want to identify themselves. Rush stated that “The sentiments contained in it will discover its author.”

The two letters have other similarities, indicating that they were written by the same person. Both letters referred to the roles of Benjamin Franklin and John Dickinson in the Constitutional Convention. They also alluded to the “ardor” or “enthusiasm” for “liberty” which existed in the years 1774 and 1775.

A citizen of Pennsylvania, in a retired situation, who holds and wishes for no share in the power or offices of his country, and who often addressed you in the years 1774 and 1775, upon the interesting subject of the liberties of America, begs leave to address you again upon the important subject of her government.

It is impossible to be happy without freedom,—and it is equally impossible to preserve freedom, without such constitutions and laws as are adapted to the circumstances and habits of our country.

The *rights* of mankind are simple. They require no learning to unfold them. They are better *felt*, than explained. Hence, in matters that relate to *liberty*, the mechanic and the philosopher, the farmer and the scholar, are all upon a footing. But the case is widely different with respect to *government*. It is a complicated science, and requires abilities and knowledge of a variety of other subjects, to understand it. Unfortunately, from the general prevalence of despotism, and the monopoly of power in a few hands, mankind have had but few opportunities of profiting by the knowledge they have acquired by experience in this science. The world, for the first time, saw a number of freemen assembled in America, to compose a system of government for themselves. It now beholds a scene equally new and illustrious,—a body of freemen assembled, to correct the mistakes of this government. How different is the situation of the citizens of America from the rest of mankind!—What would be the fate of the millions of our fellow creatures in the kingdoms of Europe, should they assemble by voluntary association for this purpose?—Or, what would not the subjects of Great-Britain, who complain of the defects or corruptions of their government, give for this inestimable privilege?—Let this comparison kindle in our bosoms a due sense of the value of liberty, and let no pains be spared in framing such a form of government, as will preserve it for ever.

The present fœderal constitution was formed amidst the confusions of war, and in the infancy of our political knowledge. It has been found ineffectual to support public credit—to obtain alliances—to preserve treaties—to enforce taxes—to prevent hostilities with our neighbours, and insurrections among our citizens. Hence the name of an American, which was so respectable in the year 1782, in every part of the globe, is now treated every where with obloquy and contempt.

If the evils we have suffered, and the infamy we have incurred, have not been sufficient to induce us to alter our fœderal government, there is one argument that should possess a weight with us, that should be irresistible. Mankind insensibly glide into a stable government. The rich and the poor soon grow tired of anarchy. They prefer the order and tranquility of despotism to popular licentiousness, and the oppression of law. Hence the success of usurpers in every age and country. It becomes us, therefore, to prevent the power which is the offspring of force, by means of a regular constitution, founded in a mutual compact between rulers and the people. There never was a republic of long duration in any country, whose form was not mixed. But the mixture was in most cases, unfortunately, the effect of accidents, or popular commotions. Hence the inequality of liberty in most of them, and hence their corruption or extinction in every part of the world. I see no reason why a republic, composed of a legislature properly compounded and balanced, where representation is equal, and elections annual, should not continue to be the vehicle of liberty to the end of time. We have, therefore, my fellow-citizens, no choice left to us. We must either form an efficient government for ourselves, suited in every respect to our exigencies and interests, or we must submit to have one imposed upon us by accident or usurpation. A bramble will exercise dominion over us, if we neglect any longer to choose a vine or a fig-tree for that purpose. The present relaxed state of government in America is no common temptation to ambition. A fœderal Shays may be more successful than the Shays of Massachusetts Bay, or a body of men may arise, who may form themselves into an order of hereditary nobility, and, by surprize or stratagem, prostrate our liberties at their feet.

This view of our situation is indeed truly alarming. We are upon the brink of a precipice. Heavens! shall the citizens of America—shall the depositories of the power of George the third, and the conquerors of Britain in America—submit to receive law from a bold and successful demagogue, or a confederated body of usurpers?—Shall the United States become a theatre, on which the crimes of the Cæsars and Cromwells of past ages are to be acted over again?—Are the freemen of America to be summed up in the account of universal slavery, and transferred, like cattle at an auction, to the highest bidder?—Are our fields to be scratched (for they will not then be cultivated) by the hands of slaves? And is the product of our industry, whether in arts or agriculture, to be torn from us by arbitrary edicts, issued from a newly established court of American despots? Was it for this we drew the sword at Lexington, and submitted to, or rather embraced poverty, exile, imprisonment, flames and death, in every stage of the war? Was it for this we triumphed in the recovery of our cities, and in the reduction of the armies of Burgoyne and Cornwallis? Was it for this, we exulted in the peace which we extorted from Great-Britain in the year 1782? If it was,—then virtue has suffered—heroism has bled—and heaven itself has blessed us in vain.

America has it in her power to adopt a government which shall secure to her all the benefits of monarchy, without parting with any of the privileges of a republic. She may divide her legislature into two or three branches. She may unite perfect freedom and wisdom together, and may confer upon a supreme magistrate such a portion of executive power, as will enable him to exhibit a representation of majesty—such as was never seen before—for it will be the majesty of a free people. To preserve a sense of his obligations to every citizen of the republic, he may be elected annually, and made eligible for seven years, or for life.

The more we abridge the states of their sovereignty, and the more supreme power we concenter in an assembly of the states (for by this new name let us call our fœderal government) the more safety, liberty and prosperity, will be enjoyed by each of the states.

The ambition of the poor, and the avarice of the rich demagogue, can never be restrained upon the narrow scale of a state government. In an assembly of the states they will check each other. In this extensive reservoir of power, it will be impossible for them to excite storms of sedition, or oppression. Should even virtue be wanting in it, ambition will oppose ambition, and wealth will prevent danger from wealth. Besides, while the eyes of the whole empire are directed to one supreme legislature, its duties will be perfectly understood, its conduct will be narrowly watched, and its laws will be obeyed with cheerfulness and respect.

Let the states who are jealous of each others competitions and encroachments, whether in commerce or territory, or who have suffered under aristocratic or democratic juntos, come forward, and first throw their sovereignty at the feet of the convention. It is there only that they can doom their disputes—their unjust tender and commutation laws—their paper money—their oppressive taxes upon land—and their partial systems of finance—to destruction.

Let the public creditor, who lent his money to his country, and the soldier and citizen, who yielded her their services, come forward next, and contribute their aid to establish an effective fœderal government. It is from the united power and resources of America, only, that they can expect permanent and substantial justice.

Let the lovers of peace add their efforts to those that have been mentioned, in encreasing the energy of a fœderal government. An assembly of the states alone, by the terror of its power and the fidelity of its engagements, can preserve a perpetual peace with the nations of Europe.

Let the citizens of America who inhabit the western counties of our states fly to a fœderal power for protection. The Indians know too well the dreadful consequences of confederacy in arms, ever to disturb the peaceful husbandman, who is under the cover of the arsenals of thirteen states.

Let the farmer who groans beneath the weight of direct taxation seek relief from a government, whose extensive jurisdiction will enable it to extract the resources of our country by means of imposts and customs.

Let the merchant, who complains of the restrictions and exclusions imposed upon his vessels by foreign nations, unite his influence in establishing a power that shall retaliate these injuries, and insure him success in his honest pursuits, by a general

system of commercial regulations.

Let the manufacturer and mechanic, who are every where languishing for want of employment, direct their eyes to an assembly of the states. It will be in their power, only, to encourage such arts and manufactures as are essential to the prosperity of our country.

To beget confidence in, and an attachment to, a new fœderal government, let us attend to the characters of the men who are met to form it.

Many of them were members of the first Congress, that sat in Philadelphia in the year 1774.

Many of them were part of that band of patriots, who, with halters round their necks, signed the declaration of independence on the 4th of July, 1776.

Many of them were distinguished in the field, and some of them bear marks of the wounds they received in our late contest for liberty.

Perhaps no age or country ever saw more wisdom, patriotism and probity united in a single assembly, than we now behold in the convention of the states.

Who can read or hear, that the immortal Washington has again quitted his beloved retirement, and obeyed the voice of God and his country, by accepting the chair of this illustrious body of patriots and heroes, and doubt of the safety and blessings of the government we are to receive from their hands?

Or who can read or hear of Franklin, Dickinson, Rutledge, R. Morris, Livingston, Randolph, Gerry, Shearman, Mifflin, Clymer, Pinkney, Read, and many others that might be mentioned, whose names are synonymous with liberty and fame, and not long to receive from them the precious ark, that is to preserve and transmit to posterity the freedom of America?

Under the present weak, imperfect and distracted government of Congress, anarchy, poverty, infamy, and slavery, await the United States.

Under such a government as will probably be formed by the present convention, America may yet enjoy peace, safety, liberty and glory.

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