

A Newport Man, *Newport Mercury*, 17 March 1788

Mr. BARBER,

Please to insert the following in your impartial paper.

Trusting to the force of truth, and the ingenuity of abler men, I had determined to continue, as I have hitherto been, silent on the subject of the new Constitution; but seeing the unwearied attempts for innovation by a set of men who seem to consider government as

“intended

For nothing else, but to be mended.”

I think it my duty, however feeble the effort, to throw in my mite to oppose the torrent of sophistry and misrepresentation that is weekly obtruded on the public.

I perceive in your last a piece signed “*A Rhode-Island Man*,” it seems wrote with an air of confidence and triumph—he speaks of reason and reasoning, I wish he had known or practised some of that reasoning he so much pretends to, his essay had been much shorter—We are told in this piece, as well as others on the same side, that an ability given to British subjects to recover their debts in this country will be one of the blessings of a new government, by inducing the British to abandon the frontiers, or be left without excuse,—but the British have no other reason for holding the posts, after the time named in the treaty for their evacuation,³ than the last reason of Kings, that is, their guns,—and giving them the treasure of the United States is a very unlikely means of removing that,—if the British subject met with legal impediments to the recovery of his debts in this country, for [the] British government to have put the same stop on our citizens would have been a proper, an ample retaliation; but there is nothing within the compass of possibility, of which I am not perfectly sure, that I am more fully persuaded of, than I am, that the British will never relinquish the posts in question until compelled by force; because no nation pays less regard to the faith of treaties than the British, witness their conduct to the French in 1755, when they took a very great number of men of war and merchant ships before war was declared, because the French had built some forts on the south side of an imaginary line in the wilds of America,—and again, the violation of the articles by which the people of Boston resigned their arms, and the violation of the capitulation of Charles-Town,—again we are told that Congress has no credit with foreigners, because they have no power to fulfill their engagements, and this we are told, with a boldness exceeded by nothing but its falshood, perhaps in the same paper that announces to the world the loan of a million of Holland guilders, if I mistake not the sum—a sum equal to 250,000 Spanish Dollars, and all this done by the procurement of that very Congress whose insignificancy and want of power had been constantly proclaimed for two or three years before,—The Dutch are the most cautious people on earth, and it is reasonable to suppose they were abundantly persuaded of the permanency and efficacy of our government by their risking so much money on it.

We are told that so long as we withhold this power from Congress we shall be a weak, despised people—we were long contending for Independence, and now we are in a

passion to be rid of it—but let us attempt to reason on this subject, and see to which side that will lead us—Reason is truly defined, in all cases short of mathematical demonstration, to be a supposing that the like causes will produce the like effects; let us proceed by this rule—the Swiss Cantons for an hundred years have remained separate Independent States, consequently without any controlling power; even the little Republic of St. Marino, containing perhaps but little more ground than the town of Newport, and about five thousand inhabitants, surrounded by powerful and ambitious neighbours, has kept its freedom and independence these thirteen hundred years, and is mentioned by travellers as a very enlightened and happy people; if these small republics, in the neighbourhood of the warlike and intriguing Courts of Paris, Vienna, and Berlin, have kept their freedom and original form of government, is it not reasonable to suppose, that the same good sense and love of freedom, on this side the Atlantic, will secure us from all attempts within and without; and the only internal discord that has happened in Switzerland was on a religious account, and a supreme controuling power is no security against this, as appears by what happened in Ireland in the time of Charles the first, and in France in the time of Henry the fourth,—It seems rational in a case of this importance to consult the opinion of the ablest men, and to whom can we better appeal than to J. J. Rousseau, a republican by birth and education, one of the most exalted geniuses and one of the greatest writers of his age, or perhaps any age, a man the most disinterested and benevolent towards mankind, a man the most industrious in the acquisition of knowledge and information, by travel, conversation, reading, and thinking, and one who has wrote a Volume on Government entitled the Social Contract, wherein he inculcates, that the people should examine and determine every public act themselves, his words are, that “every law that the people have not ratified in person, is void, it is no law. The people of England think they are free, they are much mistaken, they are never so but during the election of members of Parliament, as soon as they are elected, they are slaves, they are nothing, and by the use they make of their liberty, during the short moments they possess it, they well deserve to lose it.”—This is far from advising that thirty thousand souls should resign their judgments and wills intirely to one man for two years, to a man, who, perhaps, may go from home sincere and patriotic, but by the time he has dined in pomp for a week with the wealthy citizens of New-York or Philadelphia, will have lost all his rigid ideas of œconomy and equality—he becomes fascinated with the elegancies and luxuries of wealth, these splendid appearances with some hints from his prerogative acquaintance, that if Government were fixed, and the perquisites of office sufficient to induce a man of abilities to accept, no doubt you, or one of your sons, would be the man for your quarter; objects and intimations like these soon change the champion for the people to an advocate for power, and the people finding themselves thus basely betrayed, cry that virtue is but a name. We are not sure that men have more virtue at this time and place than they had in England in the time of George the 2d. let any one look into the history of those times, and see with what boldness men changed sides and deserted the people in pursuit of profit and power. If to take up the cross and renounce the pomps and vanities of this sinful world, is a hard lesson for divines, ’tis much harder for politicians,—a Cincinnatus, a Cato, a Fabricious, and a Washington, are rarely to be found. We are told that the Trustees of our powers and freedom being mostly married

men, and all of them inhabitants and proprietors of the country, is an ample security against an abuse of power, whether human nature be less corrupt than formerly I will not determine; but this I know that Julius Cæsar, Oliver Cromwell, and the nobles of Venice, were natives and inhabitants of the countries whose power they usurped and drenched in blood. Again, our country is compared to a ship of which we are all part owners, and from thence 'tis gravely concluded that no officer can ever betray or abuse his trust; but that men will sacrifice the public to their private interest, is a saying too well known to need repeating, and the instances of designed shipwrecks, and ships run away with by a combination of masters, supercargoes, and part owners, is so great that nothing can equal them, but those instances in which pretended patriots and politicians have raised themselves and families to power and greatness, by destroying that freedom, and those laws, they were chosen to defend.

If it were necessary to cite more precedents to prove that the people ought not to trust or remove their power any further from them, the little Republic of Lucca may be mentioned, which, surrounded by the Dukedom of Tuscany, has existed under its present constitution about five hundred years, and as Mr. Addison says, is for the extent of its dominion the richest and best peopled of all the States of Italy—and he says further, that “the whole administration of the government passes into different hands every two months.” This is very far from confirming the doctrine of choosing those officers for two years who were before chosen for one. The want of a decisive efficient power is much talked of by the discontented, and that we are in danger of being conquered by the intrigues of European powers.—But it has already been shewn that we have delegated a more decisive power to our Congress than is granted by the Republic Swiss Cantons to their General Diet; these Republics have enjoyed peace some hundreds of years, while those governments which possess this decisive, efficient power, so much aimed at, are as often as twenty or thirty years, drawing their men from the plough and loom to be shot at and cut each others throats for the honour of their respective nations. And by how much further we are from Europe than the Swiss Cantons with their allies, and Lucca and St. Marino are from France, Prussia, and Austria, by so much less are we in danger of being conquered than those Republics, which have existed some earlier than others, but the youngest of them one hundred and thirty years, without being conquered. As for the United Provinces of Holland they are but nominal Republics, their Stadtholder, very much like our intended President, making them in reality a monarchy, and subject to all its calamities; but supposing that the present constitution penned by the ablest men, four or five years in completion, and its adoption considered as the happiest event—supposing, I say, the present Constitution destroyed, can a new one be ratified with more solemnity, agreed to in stronger or more binding terms? What security can be given that in seven years hence, another Convention shall not be called to frame a third Constitution? And as ancient Greece counted by olympiads, and monarchies by their Kings reigns, we shall date in the first, second, or third year, of the seventh, eighth, or ninth Constitution.

In treating this subject I have not presumed to advise, and have intruded but few comments. I have mentioned the state of those countries which most resemble our own and leave to the natural sense of the reader to make his own conclusions. The malecontents, the lovers of novelty, delight much in allegory. Should I be indulged a few words

in that way, I should not compare the new Constitution to a house, I should fetch my simile from the country, and compare it to Siberian Wheat (otherwise called Siberian chear) which is known to have been the most praised, the most dear, the most worthless, and most short lived thing that was ever adopted—but if the freemen of this continent are weary of that power and freedom they have so dearly bought, and so shortly enjoyed—the power of judging and determining what laws are most wholesome, what taxes are requisite and sufficient, I say, if the people are tired of these privileges, now is the time to part with them forever. Much more might be said to shew the bitterness and mischief contained in this gilded pill, but being fond of brevity, I shall rely on the good sense of the public to keep themselves out of the trap, and sign myself in plain English, A NEWPORT MAN.

March 3, 1788.

1. See Samuel Butler, *Hudibras. The First Part . . .* (London, 1663), 8: “As if Religion were intended/For nothing else but to be mended.”

2. See “A Rhode-Island Man,” *Newport Mercury*, 25 February (above).

3. See a reference to the act concerning the Treaty of Peace (1783) passed by the legislature in September 1787 (William Ellery to the Commissioners of the Treasury, 18 September, at note 6, above).

Because British creditors had difficulty in American courts obtaining debts owed them, the British government retaliated by refusing to abandon seven forts in American territory near the Great Lakes.

4. On 1 June 1787, John Adams signed an agreement for a loan from Dutch bankers of one million florins (\$400,000). The loan was necessary, in part, to pay the interest on previous Dutch loans. On 11 October 1787, Congress approved the loan (JCC, XXXIII, 412–15, 649).

5. The landlocked and mountainous Republic of San Marino embraces twenty-four square miles in north central Italy near the Adriatic Sea. John Adams stated that “This petty republic has lasted thirteen hundred years, while all the other states of Italy have several times changed their masters and forms of government” (*A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America* [3 vols., London, 1787–1788], I, Letter III, pp. 8–16).

6. Jean Jacques Rousseau, *A Treatise on the Social Contract . . .* (London, 1764), Book III, chapter 15, pp. 163–64. The volume originally appeared in Amsterdam in 1762.

7. A reference to Article I, section 2, clause 3, of the Constitution: “The Number of Representatives shall not exceed one for every thirty Thousand, but each State shall have at Least one Representative.”

8. Fabricius, a Roman plebeian, was consul in 282 and 278 B.C., and censor in 275 B.C. A hero of the war against Pyrrhus, he was known for his austerity and incorruptibility. He was a prime example of Roman virtue.

9. Joseph Addison, *Remarks on Several Parts of Italy, &c. In the Years 1701, 1702, 1703* (London, 1705), 406.

10. Siberian wheat was introduced into New Hampshire in 1774 and produced good crops in the early 1780s before yields declined.

Published in Volume XXIV of *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution, Rhode Island*, Vol. 1, edited by John P. Kaminski, Charles H. Schoenleber, Gaspare J. Saladino, Richard Leffler, Jonathan M. Reid, Margaret R. Flamingo, Patrick T. Conley, Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2011.