

James Wilson's Speech in Pennsylvania Convention, 24 November 1787¹ (excerpts)

Americans looked upon the Constitutional Convention with great anticipation. They hoped for much; but, with such high expectations, they feared the consequences of a lost opportunity. According to James Wilson:

"To frame a government for a single city or state is a business both in its importance and facility, widely different from the task entrusted to the Federal Convention, whose prospects were extended not only to thirteen independent and sovereign states, some of which in territorial jurisdiction, population, and resource equal the most respectable nations of Europe, but likewise to innumerable states yet unformed, and to myriads of citizens who in future ages shall inhabit the vast uncultivated regions of the continent. The duties of that body, therefore were not limited to local or partial considerations but to the formation of a plan commensurate with a great and valuable portion of the globe. The magnitude of the object before us filled our minds with awe and apprehension."

[Thomas Lloyd's version of James Wilson's entire speech can be found here.](#)

At this period, America has it in her power to adopt either of the following modes of government: she may dissolve the individual sovereignty of the states and become one consolidated empire; she may be divided into thirteen separate, independent, and unconnected commonwealths; she may be erected into two or more confederacies; or, lastly, she may become one comprehensive federal republic.

Allow me, sir, to take a short view of each of these suppositions. Is it probable that the dissolution of the state governments and the establishment of one consolidated empire, would be eligible in its nature and satisfactory to the people in its administration? I think not, as I have given reasons to show that so extensive a territory could not be governed, connected, and preserved, but by the supremacy of despotic power. All the exertions of the most potent emperors of Rome were not capable of keeping that empire together, which in extent was far inferior to the dominion of America. Would an independent, an unconnected situation, without any associating head, be advantageous or satisfactory? The consequences of this system would at one time expose the states to foreign insult and depredations, and, at another, to internal jealousy, contention, and war. Then let us consider the plan of two or more confederacies which has often been suggested, and which certainly presents some aspects more inviting than either of the preceding modes, since the subjects of strife would not be so numerous, the strength of the confederates would be greater, and their interests more united. But even here when we fairly weigh the advantages and the disadvantages, we shall find the last greatly preponderating; the expenses of

government would be considerably multiplied, the seeds of rivalry and animosity would spring up and spread the calamities of war and tumult through the country; for tho the sources of rancor might be diminished, their strength and virulence would probably be increased.

Of these three species of government, however, I must observe, that they obtained no advocates in the Federal Convention, nor can I presume that they will find advocates here, or in any of our sister states. The general sentiment in that body, and, I believe, the general sentiment of the citizens of America, is expressed in the motto which some of them have chosen, UNITE OR DIE; and while we consider the extent of the country, so intersected and almost surrounded with navigable rivers, so separated and detached from the rest of the world, it is natural to presume that Providence has designed us for an united people, under one great political compact. If this is a just and reasonable conclusion, supported by the wishes of the people, the Convention did right in proposing a single confederated republic. But in proposing it, they were necessarily led not only to consider the situation, circumstances, and interests of one, two, or three states, but of the collective body; and as it is essential to society, that the welfare of the whole should be preferred to the accommodation of a part, they followed the same rule in promoting the national advantages of the Union in preference to the separate advantages of the states. A principle of candor, as well as duty, lead to this conduct; for, as I have said before, no government, either single or confederated can exist, unless private and individual rights are subservient to the public and general happiness of the nation. It was not alone the State of Pennsylvania, however important she may be as a constituent part of the Union, that could influence the deliberations of a Convention, formed by a delegation from all the United States, to devise a government adequate to their common exigencies and impartial in its influence and operation. In the spirit of union, inculcated by the nature of their commission, they framed the Constitution before us, and in the same spirit, they submit it to the candid consideration of their constituents. . . .

1. Taken from Dallas J. Alexander's Version of James Wilson's speech.

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