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## Benjamin Rush: Address to the People of the United States *American Museum*, January 1787

Beginning in 1776, Rush advocated the establishment of a strong central government. The essay below was among the clearest and frankest arguments for constitutional change printed just prior to the Constitutional Convention.

There is nothing more common than to confound the terms of *the American revolution* with those of *the late American war*. The American war is over: but this is far from being the case with the American revolution. On the contrary, nothing but the first act of the great drama is closed. It remains yet to establish and perfect our new forms of government; and to prepare the principles, morals, and manners of our citizens, for these forms of government, after they are established and brought to perfection.

The confederation, together with most of our state constitutions, were formed under very unfavourable circumstances. We had just emerged from a corrupted monarchy. Although we understood perfectly the principles of liberty, yet most of us were ignorant of the forms and combinations of power in republics. Add to this, the British army was in the heart of our country, spreading desolation wherever it went: our resentments, of course, were awakened. We detested the British name; and unfortunately refused to copy some things in the administration of justice and power, in the British government, which have made it the admiration and envy of the world. In our opposition to monarchy, we forgot that the temple of tyranny has two doors. We bolted one of them by proper restraints; but we left the other open, by neglecting to guard against the effects of our own ignorance and licentiousness.

Most of the present difficulties of this country arise from the weakness and other defects of our governments.

My business at present shall be only to suggest the defects of the confederation. These consist— 1st. In the deficiency of coercive power. 2d. In a defect of exclusive power to issue paper-money, and regulate commerce. 3d. In vesting the sovereign power of the united states in a single legislature: and, 4th. In the too frequent rotation of its members.

A convention is to sit soon for the purpose of devising means of obviating part of the two first defects that have been mentioned. But I wish they may add to their recommendations to each state, to surrender up to congress their power of emitting money. In this way, a uniform currency will be produced, that will facilitate trade, and help to bind the states together. Nor will the states be deprived of large sums of money by this mean when sudden emergencies require it: for they

may always borrow them as they did during the war, out of the treasury of congress. Even a loan-office may be better instituted in this way in each state, than in any other.

The two last defects that have been mentioned, are not of less magnitude than the first. Indeed, the single legislature of congress will become more dangerous from an increase of power than ever. To remedy this, let the supreme federal power be divided, like the legislatures of most of our states, into two distinct, independent branches. Let one of them be styled the council of the states, and the other the assembly of the states. Let the first consist of a single delegate—and the second, of two, three, or four delegates, chosen annually by each state. Let the president be chosen annually by the joint ballot of both houses; and let him possess certain powers in conjunction with a privy council, especially the power of appointing most of the officers of the united states. The officers will not only be better when appointed this way, but one of the principal causes of faction will be thereby removed from congress. I apprehend this division of the power of congress will become more necessary, as soon as they are invested with more ample powers of levying and expending public money.

The custom of turning men out of power or office, as soon as they are qualified for it, has been found to be as absurd in practice, as it is virtuous in speculation. It contradicts our habits and opinions in every other transaction of life. Do we dismiss a general—a physician—or even a domestic, as soon as they have acquired knowledge sufficient to be useful to us, for the sake of increasing the number of able generals—skilful physicians—and faithful servants? We do not. Government is a science; and can never be perfect in America, until we encourage men to devote not only three years, but their whole lives to it. I believe the principal reason why so many men of abilities object to serving in congress, is owing to their not thinking it worth while to spend three years in acquiring a profession which their country immediately afterwards forbids them to follow.

There are two errors or prejudices on the subject of government in America, which lead to the most dangerous consequences.

It is often said, that “the sovereign and all other power is seated *in* the people.” This idea is unhappily expressed. It should be—“all power is derived *from* the people.” They possess it only on the days of their elections. After this, it is the property of their rulers, nor can they exercise or resume it, unless it is abused. It is of importance to circulate this idea, as it leads to order and good government.

The people of America have mistaken the meaning of the word sovereignty: hence each state pretends to be *sovereign*. In Europe, it is applied only to those states which possess the power of making war and peace—of forming treaties, and the like. As this power belongs only to congress, they are the only *sovereign* power in the united states.

We commit a similar mistake in our ideas of the word independent. No individual state, as such, has any claim to independence. She is independent only in a union with her sister states in congress.

To conform the principles, morals, and manners of our citizens to our republican forms of government, it is absolutely necessary that knowledge of every kind, should be disseminated through every part of the united states.

For this purpose, let congress, instead of laying out half a million of dollars, in building a federal town, appropriate only a fourth of that sum, in founding a federal university. In this

university, let every thing connected with government, such as history—the law of nature and nations—the civil law—the municipal laws of our country—and the principles of commerce—be taught by competent professors. Let masters be employed, likewise, to teach gunnery—fortification—and every thing connected with defensive and offensive war. Above all, let a professor, of, what is called in the European universities, œconomy, be established in this federal seminary. His business should be to unfold the principles and practice of agriculture and manufactures of all kinds: and to enable him to make his lectures more extensively useful, congress should support a travelling correspondent for him, who should visit all the nations of Europe, and transmit to him, from time to time, all the discoveries and improvements that are made in agriculture and manufactures. To this seminary, young men should be encouraged to repair, after completing their academical studies in the colleges of their respective states. The honours and offices of the united states should, after a while, be confined to persons who had imbibed federal and republican ideas in this university.

For the purpose of diffusing knowledge, as well as extending the living principle of government to every part of the united states—every state—city—county—village—and township in the union, should be tied together by means of the post-office. This is the true non-electric wire of government. It is the only means of conveying heat and light to every individual in the federal commonwealth. Sweden lost her liberties, says the abbe Raynal, because her citizens were so scattered, that they had no means of acting in concert with each other. It should be a constant injunction to the post-masters, to convey newspapers free of all charge for postage. They are not only the vehicles of knowledge and intelligence, but the centinels of the liberties of our country.

The conduct of some of those strangers who have visited our country, since the peace, and who fill the British papers with accounts of our distresses, shews as great a want of good sense, as it does of good nature. They see nothing but the foundations and walls of the temple of liberty, and yet they undertake to judge of the whole fabric.

Our own citizens act a still more absurd part, when they cry out, after the experience of three or four years, that we are not proper materials for republican government. Remember, we assumed these forms of government in a hurry, before we were prepared for them. Let every man exert himself in promoting virtue and knowledge in our country, and we shall soon become good republicans. Look at the steps by which governments have been changed, or rendered stable in Europe. Read the history of Great Britain. Her boasted government has risen out of wars, and rebellions that lasted above sixty years. The united states are travelling peaceably into order and good government. They know no strife—but what arises from the collision of opinions: and in three years they have advanced further in the road to stability and happiness, than most of the nations in Europe have done, in as many centuries.

There is but one path that can lead the united states to destruction, and that is their extent of territory. It was probably to effect this, that Great Britain ceded to us so much waste land. But even this path may be avoided. Let but one new state be exposed to sale at a time; and let the land office be shut up till every part of this new state is settled.

I am extremely sorry to find a passion for retirement so universal among the patriots and heroes of the war. They resemble skilful mariners, who, after exerting themselves to preserve a ship from sinking in a storm, in the middle of the ocean, drop asleep as soon as the waves subside, and leave the care of their lives and property, during the remainder of the voyage, to sailors,

without knowledge or experience. Every man in a republic is public property. His time and talents—his youth—his manhood—his old age—nay more, life, all, belong to his country.

PATRIOTS of 1774, 1775, 1776—HEROES of 1778, 1779, 1780! come forward! your country demands your services!—Philosophers and friends to mankind, come forward! your country demands your studies and speculations! Lovers of peace and order, who declined taking part in the late war, come forward! your country forgives your timidity, and demands your influence and advice! Hear her proclaiming, in sighs and groans, in her governments, in her finances, in her trade, in her manufactures, in her morals, and in her manners, “THE REVOLUTION IS NOT OVER!”

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