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Introduction: Monarchical Tendencies in America

During the years after 1776, some men advocated monarchy or measures tending toward monarchy whenever Congress or the states appeared unable to resolve a crisis. As students of history, monarchists maintained that republican governments could not endure. Others used the threat of monarchy in order to obtain a strong central government or some other desired end. Such individuals and monarchists were a distinct minority, but their challenge to the prevailing republican sentiment caused genuine concern.

In 1780—the darkest year of the war—there was a movement in New York “for appointing a Dictator with a vice dictator in each state, invested with all the powers conferred formerly by the roman people on theirs . . .” As in Roman times, these dictators were to remain in power only for a limited time until the emergency or crisis was over. The idea of dictatorship was discussed in both houses of New York’s legislature “as if it was a thing that was already determined on.” Even in Congress the idea of appointing George Washington “sole dictator” was discussed “as the only means under God by which we can be saved from destruction.” In September John Mathews of South Carolina moved in Congress that Washington be vested with power to do all “matters and things as shall appear to him necessary to promote the Welfare of these United States . . .” But Mathews and his motion were vehemently denounced.

Even after the war seemed won, monarchical schemes still lay under the surface. Many army officers, disgruntled over the lack of pay and their poor peacetime prospects, favored some kind of action to strengthen their position. One officer, Colonel Lewis Nicola, went so far as to write General Washington in May 1782 recommending the establishment of a monarchy, supported by the army, with Washington as king. A month later, James M. Varnum, formerly a Rhode Island delegate to Congress and a brigadier general in the Continental Army, wrote Washington that the Articles of Confederation were a “baseless Fabric” and that, “absolute Monarchy, or a military State, can alone rescue” America.

In his reply to Varnum, Washington stated only that he did not agree with Varnum’s conclusions. However, Washington sternly rebuked Colonel Nicola, declaring that he was greatly surprised and astonished to see that these ideas existed in the army. Nicola’s suggestions seemed “big with the greatest mischiefs that can befall my Country.” Nicola, he continued, could not have picked a person to whom his schemes were “more disagreeable.” Washington ordered Nicola “to banish these thoughts from your Mind, and never communicate, as from yourself, or any one else, a sentiment of the like Nature.” He himself promised to keep the suggestion “in my own bosom.”

In 1786 and 1787 interest in and fear of monarchical government was revived by the failure of Congress and the state governments to alleviate the economic depression and to deal effectively with the widespread agrarian unrest. In June 1786 John Jay, the Secretary for Foreign Affairs,

wrote George Washington that the defects of the federal government might lead some people into anti-republican ideas. Jay feared that “the better kind of people . . . will be led by the insecurity of property, the loss of confidence in their rulers, and the want of public faith and rectitude, to consider the charms of liberty as imaginary and delusive.” Washington, in reply to Jay, expressed the concern of many Americans when he wrote: “What astonishing changes a few years are capable of producing. I am told that even respectable characters speak of a monarchical form of Government without horror. From thinking proceeds speaking, thence to acting is often but a single step.”

One man who appears to have changed his attitude toward monarchy was Noah Webster, who wrote an anonymous essay in the *Connecticut Courant* on 20 November 1786. “I confess, I was once as strong a republican as any man in America. Now, a republican is among the last kinds of governments I should choose. I should infinitely prefer a limited monarchy, for I would sooner be subject to the caprice of one man, than to the ignorance and passions of a multitude.” Circumstantial evidence even exists showing that in late 1786 President of Congress Nathaniel Gorham had invited Prince Henry of Prussia to be king of America.

In February 1787—when Congress was considering a constitutional convention—congressman James Madison reported that “The Eastern members were suspected by some of leaning towards some antirepublican establishment, (the effect of their late confusions) or of being less desirous or hopeful of preserving the Unity of the Empire.” This “propensity towards Monarchy” manifested itself primarily in some of the “leading minds.” Madison was confident, however, that monarchists throughout the country would “abandon an unattainable object whenever a prospect opens of rendering the Republican form competent to its purposes.”

George Washington was amazed that there was such strong sentiment for monarchy in New England. He believed that monarchical tendencies should have first appeared in the Southern States because of “the habitual distinctions which have always existed among the people” there. George Mason, a Virginia delegate to the Constitutional Convention, explained this “extraordinary Phœnomenon” in New England: “Men disappointed in Expectations too hastily, & sanguinely formed, tired and disgusted with the unexpected Evils they have experienced, & anxious to remove them as far as possible, are very apt to run into the opposite Extreme . . .”

Others associated monarchical ideas with military men. Jeremy Belknap, a Boston clergyman, declared that “some geniuses, particularly of the military order, are frequently condemning” “the present republican system,” and “setting up a more decisive and efficacious mode.” In addressing Secretary at War Henry Knox, General Benjamin Tupper, a retired Continental officer and a Massachusetts state representative, had declared himself “in favor of Majesty for which” Knox had given him “a gentle check.” Despite this, Tupper would not be swayed. He responded that “I cannot give up the Idea that Monarchy in our present situation is become absolutely necessary to save the States from Sinking into the lowest abbiss of Misery.” Tupper had expressed the idea in “all companies” and was “exceedingly pleased to find such a respectable number of my sentiments.” He was “clearly of Opinion if matters were properly arranged it would be easily and soon effected.” The Society of the Cincinnati “must once more consult and affect the Salvation of a distracted Country.”

In spring 1787 reports circulated in Nova Scotia that Congress had asked Washington either to become “DICTATOR for six years” or to be invested “with the dignified *Title of Protector.*”

According to the reports, Washington refused, “declaring he would not again meddle with public affairs.” “The general conjecture” was, however, “that a revolution, of some sort, is not very far distant, as Congress do not possess power sufficient to support either the honour or credit of their government.”

Perhaps no writings excited more nationwide hostility than John Adams’s *Defence of the Constitutions*. Adams’s critics contended that his proposed powerful executive was in reality a monarch. One writer stated flatly that Adams appeared “to be clear for monarchy.” The most biting criticism came from the Reverend James Madison of Virginia, who charged that the plain, republican ideals of Adams had been corrupted by the British Court. He feared that Adams wanted the “Days of Kings, Nobles & Priests . . . to rise in America with new Splendour.”

Newspapers also contained several attacks upon the supporters of monarchy. Fisher Ames of Massachusetts, writing as “Camillus,” claimed that royal government for America “is very absurd.” Americans were, by nature, republicans. The *Pennsylvania Herald* of 2 June also referred to the absurdity of an American monarchy. To “invest anyone with the attributes of sovereignty,” continued the *Herald*, “would amount to suicide. . . .” “Civis” labelled monarchists as “treacherous and pretended friends” of America, “who would rejoice at its downfall, and glory in the idea of our not being able to exist without a King.” In his Fourth of July oration in Philadelphia, James Campbell insisted that “every proposition to add kingly power to our fœderal system be regarded as treason to the liberties” of America.

Federalist writers also used monarchy as a threat to obtain a stronger central government. Employing the widely accepted cyclical theory of government, they suggested that the anarchic conditions brought on by the weak central government of the Confederation would give rise to a tyrant, and a tyrant, in turn, would eventually lead to either an aristocracy or a monarchy. Either of these two forms would end in despotism. The only way to prevent this from happening was to strengthen the central government. Many men believed that the Constitutional Convention offered the last and best chance to save the Confederation. If the Convention failed to establish a strong central government, “all classes of the People” would be convinced “of the necessity of a change.”

The issue of monarchy received increased attention in August and September 1787. On 25 July the Connecticut *Fairfield Gazette* printed an extract of a letter from Philadelphia, under a Portsmouth, N.H., dateline. The letter stated that a scheme had originated for making the Bishop of Osnaburg, the second son of George III, the king of America, and it outlined the advantages of such an action. The idea of a monarch was said to be making rapid progress, but it still had to be disseminated among the people at large. On 2 August the *New Haven Gazette* printed a brief summary of this letter and suggested that royal government could be averted if Americans adopted the recommendations of the Constitutional Convention. The *Gazette’s* summary was reprinted in twenty-eight newspapers. News of the monarchical scheme even reached Great Britain, where it appears to have been considered seriously.

The scheme reported by the *Gazette* disturbed several members of the Constitutional Convention. On 18 August the *Pennsylvania Herald* declared that the delegates, who were receiving letters about the scheme, wanted to assure the public that they had no intention of establishing a monarchy. Two days later Alexander Martin, a North Carolina delegate, gave similar assurances to the governor of his state.

Alexander Hamilton, a New York delegate to the Convention, tried to trace the *Gazette's* report to its source. On 20 August Hamilton wrote to Jeremiah Wadsworth, a Hartford merchant, that some believed the circular was intended “to excite jealousies against the Convention with a view to an opposition to their recommendations.” Wadsworth replied on 26 August that he had originally believed the circular letter was a good effort to frighten Antifederalists into accepting the work of the Convention, but he had since had second thoughts about it. He passed Hamilton’s letter on to David Humphreys of New Haven. On 1 September Humphreys wrote that the circular letter was the work of former Loyalists who wanted to determine if people were receptive to monarchy. These former Loyalists had been disturbed by Shays’s Rebellion and the ineffectiveness of the central government. It is uncertain whether or not Wadsworth and Humphreys alleviated Hamilton’s concerns.

The sensitivity of the Convention delegates to the charges of monarchy was understandable because certain recommendations made in the Convention were considered by some to have monarchical tendencies. New Hampshire delegate Nicholas Gilman, soon after his arrival in the Convention in late July, reported that “vigorous minds and warm Constitutions advocate a high toned Monarchy.” Such recommendations possibly caused Maryland delegate John Francis Mercer to make a list of over twenty Convention delegates who he believed favored a monarch. Several months after the Convention adjourned, Luther Martin, also a Maryland delegate, reiterated the charge that “One party” in the Convention openly sought a central government “of a monarchical nature” and that this government was supported by “a considerable number” of delegates, “who did not openly avow it” but who were “covertly endeavouring to carry into effect what they well knew openly and avowedly could not be accomplished.”

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