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Introduction: The Idea of Separate Confederacies

On 21 February 1787—the day that Congress called the Constitutional Convention—congressman James Madison noted that “For the first time the idea of separate Confederacies had got into the Newspapers.” The idea was the fruition of long-developing differences among the states. Before 1776, it was agreed that the colonies were divided into three distinct sections—the four New England or “Eastern,” the four Middle, and the five Southern colonies—and that each section had differing social and political attitudes and economic interests. In fact, the Reverend Andrew Burnaby, a British traveler, observed in 1760 that “fire and water are not more heterogeneous than the different colonies in North America. Nothing can exceed the jealousy and emulation which they possess in regard to each other.”

The differences in 1776 were so great that it seemed impossible Americans could ever unite to declare independence; and, that if they did, they would never be able to agree on a common government for the United States. John Adams thought that the accomplishment of independence “in so short a time and by such simple means, was perhaps a singular example in the history of mankind. Thirteen clocks were made to strike together—a perfection of mechanism, which no artist had ever before effected. In November 1777 the delegates to Congress were impressed that they had agreed to the Articles of Confederation, combining “in one general system the various sentiments and interests of a continent divided into so many sovereign and independent communities.”

By 1783, however, various Americans, especially New Englanders, began voicing threats of separate confederacies to pressure for a stronger central government. Nathaniel Gorham of Massachusetts, for instance, warmly asserted in Congress that if Congress were not given the ability to do justice to public creditors, “the fœderal system” would fail and “some of the States might be forming other confederacies adequate to the purposes of their safety.”

In November 1785 Congress’ commercial powers were considered so inadequate that a discouraged Rufus King of Massachusetts privately recommended that, in case the Southern States refused to grant Congress commercial powers, the Northern States “are *competent* to form, and in the event must form, a sub-confederation remedied of all their present embarrassment.” A few months later, Benjamin Lincoln of Massachusetts wrote King that if Congress were not given coercive power over commerce, which he believed unlikely, the alternative would be “a division” of the Union.

The bitterness between the North and South during the congressional debate over the navigation of the Mississippi River in the summer of 1786 prompted several disgruntled Northerners to recommend that the Northern States establish a separate confederacy. On 6 August 1786 Theodore Sedgwick, a Massachusetts delegate to Congress, charged that on commercial matters

the Eastern and Middle states could expect “nothing” from the Southern States. “Should their conduct continue the same,” declared Sedgwick, “and I think there is not any prospect of an alteration, an attempt to perpetuate our connection with them, which at last too will be found ineffectual, will sacrifice everything to a meer chimera. Even the appearance of a union cannot in the way we now are long be preserved. It becomes us seriously to contemplate a substitute; for if we do not controul events we shall be miserably controuled by them. No other substitute can be devised than that of contracting the limits of the confederacy to such as are natural and reasonable, and within those limits instead of a nominal to institute a real, and an efficient government.”

On 12 August James Monroe, a Virginia delegate to Congress, reported that committees of New Englanders and New Yorkers had met in New York City to discuss the division of the Union at the Hudson River—an idea “supposed to have originated” in Massachusetts. Monroe was alarmed that the proposed confederacy might even extend southward to include Maryland. He feared that some Pennsylvanians, including two congressmen, favored this scheme and warned Southerners to do everything possible to prevent Pennsylvania from being “added to the eastern scale.” “It were as well to use force to prevent it as to defend ourselves afterwards.”

In late October 1786 Benjamin Rush of Pennsylvania reported that “Some of our enlightened men who begin to despair of a more complete union of the States in Congress have secretly proposed an Eastern, Middle, and Southern Confederacy, to be united by an alliance offensive and defensive.” James Madison believed that most New Englanders, especially those in Connecticut, were opposed to separate confederacies and monarchy; but he suspected that “some leading minds” in New England supported such ideas because of “The late turbulent scenes in Massts. & infamous ones in Rhode Island.” If the Articles of Confederation were not radically amended, Madison felt that either monarchy or separate confederacies, especially the latter, would take place.

On 24 March and 2 April respectively, “Reason” and “Lycurgus,” two New Yorkers, recommended the establishment of three or four separate confederacies. On 5 August James McClurg of Virginia informed Madison that “The doctrine of three Confederacies, or great Republics, has it’s advocates here.”

Most political commentators, however, opposed the establishment of separate confederacies. Richard Price, an English friend of the American government, dreaded the idea, while John Adams saw “such manifest danger, both from foreign powers and from one another, as cannot be looked upon without terror.” The “West-Chester Farmer” agreed with Adams and added that any quarrel between separate confederacies would be decided by the sword.

On 9 April 1787 David Humphreys of Connecticut, commenting on the Constitutional Convention, informed Washington that he expected that “a serious proposal” would be made “for dividing the Continent into two or three separate Governments, Local politics & diversity of interests will undoubtedly find their way into the Convention.”

As for the Convention delegates, only Luther Martin of Maryland appears to have raised the idea of separate confederacies and then only in passing. In the debate on suffrage in Congress, Martin declared that he would “rather see partial Confederacies take place” than have a consolidated government dominated by the large states. After the Convention, Madison reported that “It appeared to be the sincere and unanimous wish of the Convention to cherish and preserve

the Union of the States. No proposition was made, no suggestion was thrown out, in favor of a partition of the Empire into two or more Confederacies.”

During the debate over ratification, Federalists and Antifederalists generally disavowed the idea of separate confederacies. Federalists argued that the failure to ratify the Constitution would lead to a division of the United States into separate confederacies. They concluded that since Antifederalists opposed the Constitution, they must of necessity favor separate confederacies. Federalists also accused certain unnamed people of advocating the idea of separate confederacies because they wanted to improve their political positions.

Antifederalists supported the notion of a confederation of thirteen republican states under the direction of a central government having specific powers. They opposed the Constitution on the grounds that it created a consolidated republic which would act directly on the people. Antifederalists maintained that a consolidated republic covering a vast expanse of territory would degenerate into despotism. However, some Antifederalists, such as Patrick Henry of Virginia, asserted that separate confederacies, when compared to the consolidated government of the Constitution, “are little evils.”

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