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## Elbridge Gerry to the Massachusetts General Court *Massachusetts Centinel*, 3 November 1787

Hon. Mr. GERRY'S objections to signing the National Constitution.

(The following Letter, on the subject of the American Constitution, from the Hon. ELBRIDGE GERRY, Esq. one of the Delegates representing this Commonwealth in the late Federal Convention, to the Legislature, was on Wednesday last [31 October] read in the Senate and sent down to the House of Representatives, where it was yesterday read and sent up. As it contains opinions on a subject of the first importance to our country at this day, we have obtained a copy of it for insertion—and are happy to have it in our power thus early to communicate it to the publick.)

NEW-YORK, 18th October, 1787.

GENTLEMEN, I have the honour to inclose, pursuant to my commission, the constitution proposed by the federal Convention.<sup>1</sup>

To this system I gave my dissent, and shall submit my objections to the honourable Legislature.

It was painful for me, on a subject of such national importance, to differ from the respectable members who signed the constitution: But conceiving as I did, that the liberties of America were not secured by the system, it was my duty to oppose it.—

My principal objections to the plan, are, that there is no adequate provision for a representation of the people—that they have no security for the right of election—that some of the powers of the Legislature are ambiguous, and others indefinite and dangerous—that the Executive is blended with and will have an undue influence over the Legislature—that the judicial department will be oppressive—that treaties of the highest importance may be formed by the President with the advice of two thirds of a *quorum* of the Senate—and that the system is without the security of a bill of rights. These are objections which are not local, but apply equally to all the States.

As the Convention was called for “the *sole* and *express* purpose of revising the Articles of Confederation, and reporting to Congress and the several Legislatures such alterations and provisions as shall render the Federal Constitution adequate to the exigencies of government and the preservation of the union,” I did not conceive that these powers extended to the formation of the plan proposed, but the Convention being of a different *opinion*, I acquiesced in *it*, being fully convinced that to preserve the union, an efficient government was indispensibly necessary; and that it would be difficult to make proper amendments to the articles of Confederation.

The Constitution proposed has few, if any *federal* features, but is rather a system of *national* government: Nevertheless, in many respects I think it has great merit, and by proper amendments, may be adapted to the “exigencies of government,” and preservation of liberty.

The question on this plan involves others of the highest importance—1st. Whether there shall be a dissolution of the *federal* government? 2dly. Whether the several State Governments shall be so altered, as in effect to be dissolved? and 3dly. Whether in lieu of the *federal* and *State* Governments, the *national* Constitution now proposed shall be substituted without amendment? Never perhaps were a people called on to decide a question of greater magnitude—Should the citizens of America adopt the plan as it now stands, their liberties may be lost: Or should they reject it altogether Anarchy may ensue. It is evident therefore, that they should not be precipitate in their decisions; that the subject should be well understood, lest they should refuse to *support* the government, after having *hastily* accepted it.

If those who are in favour of the Constitution, as well as those who are against it, should preserve moderation, their discussions may afford much information and finally direct to an happy issue.

It may be urged by some, that an *implicit* confidence should be placed in the Convention: But, however respectable the members may be who signed the Constitution, it must be admitted, that a free people are the proper guardians of their rights and liberties—that the greatest men may err—and that their errors are sometimes, of the greatest magnitude.

Others may suppose, that the Constitution may be safely adopted, because therein provision is made to *amend* it: But cannot *this object* be better attained before a ratification, than after it? And should a *free* people adopt a form of Government, under conviction that it wants amendment?

And some may conceive, that if the plan is not accepted by the people, they will not unite in another: But surely whilst they have the power to amend, they are not under the necessity of rejecting it.

I have been detained here longer than I expected, but shall leave this place in a day or two for Massachusetts, and on my arrival shall submit the reasons (if required by the Legislature) on which my objections are grounded.

I shall only add, that as the welfare of the union requires a better Constitution than the Confederation, I shall think it my duty as a citizen of Massachusetts, to support that which shall be finally adopted, sincerely hoping it will secure the liberty and happiness of America.

I have the honour to be, Gentlemen, with the highest respect for the honourable Legislature and yourselves, your most obedient, and very humble servant, E. GERRY.

1. The congressional resolution of 21 February 1787 provided that the Constitutional Convention report its revision and amendment of the Articles of Confederation to Congress and the state legislatures. On 10 March the Massachusetts General Court appointed Convention delegates. Unlike three other state legislatures, the General Court did not require its delegates to report to it. Instead, the resolution appointing delegates quoted that portion of the congressional resolution which required the Convention to report to Congress and the state legislatures. Since the Convention reported only to Congress, Gerry perhaps felt obligated to address the General Court. Whether Gerry's fellow delegates, Rufus King and Nathaniel Gorham, believed themselves equally obliged is uncertain, but no record of a report from them has been found.

CITE AS: John P. Kaminski et al., eds., *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, Vol. XIII: Commentaries on the Constitution, Public and Private [1] (Madison, Wis.: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 1981), 548–50.