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One of the People

Massachusetts Centinel, 17 November 1787

Mr. RUSSELL, In the course of the last week the attention of the publick was excited by a letter from the Hon. E. GERRY, to the two branches of the Legislature of this State, containing his reasons for not signing the Constitution for a Federal Government, agreed on by the late august Convention of the States, of which he was a member.

As this Constitution is now under consideration of the citizens of America, for their acceptance and ratification, it is not a little surprising that no one should have stepped forth to counteract the unfavourable, and dangerous impressions this letter is calculated to make upon the minds of the people in general on this all-important subject. Particularly as from the character of Mr. G. as an honest man, and well known friend to his country, there is much reason to believe his suggestions, his fears, and his cautions, may have a much greater influence than in reason they ought, on the minds of many honest men, who really wish well to their country, but from a variety of causes are by no means fully equal to the task of immediately perceiving the excellence of this system; or of discussing a subject of such magnitude, and who from the honesty of their hearts, their zeal for the natural rights of mankind, and a sincere desire of transmitting to posterity a fair inheritance, both of liberty and property, might in the present case too easily allow their judgments to be prejudiced, and consequently give their voice against the complete plan now devised for our political redemption, merely from finding so fair and respectable a character as Mr. G. could not approve of it.—That he approves of by much the greatest part of the Constitution may be gathered from his own words; and that to reject it altogether (which must be the case if it is not accepted) he acknowledges will expose us to the most dismal consequences.

For one moment, my friends and fellow citizens, advert to a few circumstances which well deserve your attention in making up your minds on this serious subject. You will, I doubt not, readily allow that many of you are not so able as you wish you were, to decide at this critical and interesting period, on what ought to be done in the present affair—but say you, we can safely rely on the knowledge, the honour, and the integrity of Mr. G. With you I admire both his virtues and his abilities;—but of you, I would wish to ask, (not with a view to derogate from Mr. G's character) whether when we cast our eyes over the list of the late members of convention, we do not find many, very many characters, equal in every particular of both wisdom, genuine patriotism, honesty, and every other amiable accomplishment, with Mr. G. To mention a WASHINGTON, a FRANKLIN, a MADDISON, a KING and a GORHAM, I think sufficient: And whether, when we observe these worthies have to a man, set their names to, and risked their well

establish[ed] fame on the Federal Constitution, we have not from this circumstance in itself considered, as much reason to be prejudiced in favour of the federal system, and determine to give it our support, as to reject it on the ground of its not comporting in every particular with Mr. G's opinion. Again, when you consider what a vast variety of jarring and opposing interests the Convention had to consult;—how zealous every member must naturally have been, to secure to his particular State as many advantages as possible, and how utterly opposed such a body of honourable characters must necessarily have been to any measure which could in the most distant manner endanger the rights and liberties of this, or any future generation in America;—that they themselves and their posterity, in common with their fellow citizens, and their posterity, must necessarily have been subjected to every inconvenience which could any way result from the regulations to which they have given their sanction;—and at the same time knowing their plan would be critically examined by the politicians of every country: I say, when we consider these and many other particulars which must occur to every one who reflects on the subject; must we not conclude that the reasons in favour of the Constitution, as now proposed to the States, are much more potent and conclusive than any which Mr. G. has to offer in favour of alterations?—*And alterations in certain parts is all he pretends to contend for.*—His reasons are no doubt perfectly satisfactory to himself—but that they were not so to the other worthy and respectable characters of the convention is clear, from their not making the alterations he appears to wish for.—You all know, my countrymen, how easy it is to find fault; and that apparent errors and defects in the constitution of things, must oftner arise from, and prove the want of, discernment of individuals, than from real defects in the things themselves—this is clearly evinced in many instances in the natural and moral world.

When Mr. G. found himself disposed to suggest that this system was not calculated to secure, but endanger, the liberties of America; methinks he would have done well in recollecting the probability of his judgment failing him in this particular, and that if this event should ever take place, it must arise from the people themselves, who by this constitution will have it forever in their power, if true to themselves, to prevent any body of men from combining against either their liberties or property. Mr. G. should consider, and the people at large I hope will consider, that should his wished for amendments take place, that then there would remain the opinion of the other forty respectable members to combat, before the delegates of the different States could agree in judgment—and that three members refusing to sign, by no means furnishes such evidence of capital defects, as arise in favour of its being as complete as the nature of circumstances would allow, from its having been signed by forty in every respect as honest men, and good judges as the three who seceded.—Again, might not a man of less abilities, more art, and less honest, than Mr. G. cry out at this time, when every man's ears are on the stretch—*beware!—beware!*—you are forging chains for yourselves and children—your liberties are at stake, &c. and would not this cry for a moment spread a general alarm, and with many excite suspicions not easy to be removed? No doubt it would—in that case, those who reflect, would naturally after recovering their first surprise be desirous candidly and cautiously to inquire whether things were really as they were represented, or whether this cry might not have proceeded from causes which rather proved the timidity, and shortsightedness, or perhaps the dishonesty of the alarmer, than the real danger—If so, why not, in the present case, make a distinction between sounds and things; and if upon a full, fair, unprejudiced attention to the subject, it should appear that we have more to

fear from rejecting, than accepting the Constitution, will not reason urge a choice of the least of two evils, even though Mr. G. and many others, should withhold their consent.

Upon the whole, I would observe that upon conversing with those among us possessed of the greatest abilities—with those who are the most anxious to see their beloved country placed upon a respectable footing among the nations of the earth—those who have ever been utterly opposed to any measures which could endanger either the liberties or property of this country, and with those who would sooner lay down their lives than surrender into the hands of any body of men on earth their privileges, either of a civil or religious nature; I find that to a man they agree in the opinion, that in determining the question either for or against the new Constitution, we shall determine one of the most important questions which ever was submitted to the people at large on the subject of government in any age or country.—That the fate of unborn millions is interested in it, and that if the influence of our worst enemies is so great as to lead us to reject it, we shall too late have reason to lament that we were born in a land where the sweets of a free government were ever tasted, or in a country in which from the cradle the citizens are taught to look upon slavery as worse than death, and usurpation more dismal than the grave.

From my heart, let me conjure you, my brethren, to attend carefully to the sentiments and characters of those you may chuse to represent you in the approaching Convention—Remember there are many snakes in the grass, and that many are hourly avowing sentiments they do not entertain, or which they would support in Convention—and that those who are opposed to the Federal Government are almost to a man, either *enemies to the late revolution—friends to tender acts, paper money*, or hold some place of honour or profit under the present confederation—or that secretly approve such measures as by involving the States in anarchy and confusion, would free them from debts, many of them have incurred in pursuits disgraceful to humanity. I conclude with advising you not too hastily to make up your minds on the opinions of any, unless of distinguished worth and integrity.

Nov. 13, 1787.

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