



CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE AMERICAN CONSTITUTION

csac.history.wisc.edu > Document Collections > The Constitutional Convention >
Assessments of Individual Delegates > James Wilson

An Officer of the Late Continental Army Philadelphia *Independent Gazetteer*, 6 November 1787 (excerpts)

Friends, Countrymen, Brethren, and Fellow Citizens: The important day is drawing near when you are to elect delegates to represent you in a convention, on the result of whose deliberations will depend, in a great measure, your future happiness.

This convention is to determine whether or not the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania shall adopt the plan of government proposed by the late Convention of delegates from the different states, which sat in this city.

With a heart full of anxiety for the preservation of your dearest rights, I presume to address you on this important occasion. In the name of sacred liberty, dearer to us than our property and our lives, I request your most earnest attention. . . .

If you have attended to the whole with candor and unbiased minds, as becomes men that are possessed and deserving of freedom, you must have been alarmed at the result of your observations. Notwithstanding the splendor of names which has attended the publication of the new Constitution, notwithstanding the sophistry and vain reasoning that have been urged to support its principles; alas! you must at least have concluded that great men are not always infallible, and that patriotism itself may be led into essential errors. . . .

I pass over the sophistry of Mr. W[ilson], in his equivocal speech at the State House. His pretended arguments have been echoed and reechoed by every retailer of politics, and *victoriously* refuted by several patriotic pens. Indeed if you read this famous speech in a cool dispassionate moment, you will find it to contain no more than a train of pitiful sophistry and evasions, unworthy of the man who spoke them. I have taken notice of some of them in stating the objections, and they must, I am sure, have excited your *pity* and *indignation*. Mr. W[ilson] is a man of sense, learning and extensive information; unfortunately for him he has never sought the more solid fame of *patriotism*. During the late war he narrowly escaped the effects of popular rage, and the people seldom arm themselves against a citizen in vain. The whole tenor of his political conduct has always been strongly tainted with the spirit of *high aristocracy*; he has never been known to join in a truly popular measure, and his talents have ever been devoted to the patrician interest. His lofty carriage indicates the lofty mind that animates him, a mind able to conceive and perform great things, but which unfortunately can see nothing great out of the pale of power and worldly grandeur; despising what he calls the inferior order of the people. Popular liberty and popular assemblies offer to his exalted imagination an idea of meanness and contemptibility which he hardly seeks to conceal. He sees at a distance the pomp and pageantry of

courts, he sighs after those stately palaces and that apparatus of human greatness which his vivid fancy has taught him to consider as the supreme good. Men of sublime minds, he conceives, were born a different race from the rest of the sons of men. To them, and them only, he imagines, high heaven intended to commit the reins of earthly government; the remaining part of mankind he sees below at an immense distance; they, he thinks, were born to serve, to administer food to the ambition of their superiors, and become the footstool of their power. Such is Mr. W[ilson], and fraught with these high ideas, it is no wonder that he should exert all his talents to support a form of government so admirably contrived to carry them into execution. But when the people, who possess collectively a mass of knowledge superior to his own, inquire into the principles of that government on the establishment or rejection of which depend their dearest concerns, when he is called upon by the voice of thousands to come and explain that favorite system which he holds forth as an object of their admiration, he comes—he attempts to support by reasoning what reason never dictated, and finding the attempt vain, his great mind, made for nobler purposes, is obliged to stoop to mean evasions and pitiful sophistry. Himself not deceived, he strives to deceive the people, and the treasonable attempt delineates his true character, beyond the reach of the pencil of a *West* or *Peale*, or the pen of a *Valerius*. . . .

. . . The great names of WASHINGTON and FRANKLIN have been taken in vain and shockingly prostituted to effect the most infamous purposes. What! because our august chieftain has subscribed his name in his capacity of President of the Convention to the plan offered by them to the states, and because the venerable sage of Pennsylvania has *testified* by his signature that *the majority of the delegates of this state* assented to the same plan, will anyone infer from this that it has met with their entire approbation, and that they consider it as the masterpiece of human wisdom? I am apt to think the contrary, and I have good reasons to ground my opinion on. . . .

. . . We KNOW, and the long sitting of the Convention tells us, that (as it is endeavored to persuade us) concord and unanimity did not reign exclusively among them. The thick veil of secrecy with which their proceedings have been covered has left us entirely in the dark, as to the *debates* that took place, and the unaccountable SUPPRESSION OF THEIR JOURNALS, the highest insult that could be offered to the majesty of the people, shows clearly that the whole of the new plan was entirely the work of an *aristocratic majority*. . . .

CITE AS: John P. Kaminski et al., eds., *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, Vol. II: Pennsylvania (Madison, Wis.: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 1976), 210–16.