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A Freeholder

Virginia Independent Chronicle, 9 April 1788
(Extraordinary) (excerpts)

For the INDEPENDENT CHRONICLE.

An honest Freeholder, Farmer or Planter, whose education has not furnished him with the means of examining with any accuracy the propriety or impropriety of adopting, or rejecting the plan of the new constitution, will I suppose consult such of his friends as understand the subject, and can explain it to him—But should they tell him that it ought not to be received without amendments; and that there is mischief lurking in it—he would do well to consider whether such friends are as well acquainted with all the circumstances of the case, as the great and enlightened men who formed that plan; and whether it is not much more probable that these friends are mistaken, than that the members of the late grand convention should have ignorantly contrived a foolish plan, or have basely framed a mischievous one, with design to enslave their country—He would do well to consider that the men who composed that convention were not only of the first abilities, but of firm and well known attachment to the interests of the United States, and were as incapable of contriving a weak plan, as of meditating a wicked design, and that if the opinions of any men in the world may be relied on, theirs may on the present occasion—Let such freeholder then conclude that his friend either is incapable of judging properly respecting the constitution; or has adopted some notions of government which cannot fairly be applied to the case before him; or, is so filled with republican jealousies, as to view it in the most unfavorable light, and with unreasonable suspicions. The first conclusion will generally be found to be true; the second is actually the case of the most sensible and dispassionate objectors to the constitution; and the last supposition is undoubtedly true with respect to all those who object with warmth and violence, and insist loudly on amendments. . . .

. . . Happily the constitution requires no amendment; for, if it did, we have no time to lose in speculations on amendments, as “all government in these states hangs by a thread.”¹—The confederation has been declared by 12 state Assemblies to be insufficient for the purposes of government; and the plan of the new constitution has been declared by 12 state conventions to be the only scheme of government which can be adapted to our present situation and circumstances; and 7 states have already actually embraced it as such. What would be the situation of Virginia then, should she undertake to make amendments, and endeavor to bring the states over to her opinions respecting them? Is she in a condition to make such an experiment? granting that her situation should not grow worse before she could prevail on the other states to come into her schemes of amendment; that is that she should not suffer more for want of commerce

and its attendant money; for want of confidence between man and man; and for want of public faith, and stability in government; that she should not suffer more than she has suffered, by unwise regulations of commerce; by oppressive and unequal taxes; by violating the public faith repeatedly pledged to the officers and soldiers of the late army, and to the lenders of money in the hour of her distress; by non-compliance with requisitions of Congress—by rivalry with, and jealousy of, sister states, and by the imprudent conduct of the inhabitants of Kentucky towards the Spaniards²—I say granting that the situation of Virginia in these respects should only remain as it is, till the states or nine of them should agree in amendments, who would wish to remain in such a despicable, helpless, and critical situation, even one year, for the mere chance of procuring amendments, which after all in the opinion of the wisest and best men in the states would not deserve that name, but would really make the constitution worse? If the states should not separate, and form, as Mr. Henry, it is said, has hinted they might, two or three confederacies, which would inevitably produce civil wars without end; yet, will France, Spain, Holland and England, to whom we are so much indebted, wait any longer without making reprisals, if they see no better prospect of payment than we could show them were we to refuse the new constitution? May not these nations, provoked by our unworthy treatment of them, and at the same time invited, and tempted by our distracted and defenceless situation, resolved to divide the states amongst them, making such a partition as they are well acquainted with in Europe? It is undoubtedly their interest to do so—and it is certain they can do it with ease. It is their interest, because, they would not only acquire an additional territory; and increase their naval resources; but they would cut off at a single stroke the head of their formidable rival—of a rival, which the tyrants of Europe look upon as about to eclipse their glory, diminish the number of their subjects in that quarter of the globe, and rob them totally of them in this, annihilating their sovereignty in America. It is certainly the interest of the powers of Europe to suppress that spirit of liberty which their subjects begin to imbibe from America, where it has been the glorious instrument of a revolution which they have heard of with admiration and envy. The partition of America would undoubtedly establish the monarchs of Europe on their thrones, and deter any nation from ever making another attempt to bring about a revolution. That they could make the partition with ease must be evident to any one who will consider the weak, helpless condition of America—her incapacity to procure allies; to borrow money; or to make it again to any good purpose, after cheating so many soldiers and citizens with that made in the last war—or indeed, if it could be even seen that the states would be more honest, more attentive to their soldiers, and citizens, it is not probable, that there would be any hearty concurrence in measures which would be attended with great hazard; much more dangerous than in the war with Britain, and which should they be crowned with success, and in the same period of time, it is highly probable would lead the most virtuous patriots through the same round of distresses and mortifications as the heroes of the late war have gone through; and the states be at last, perhaps, as much involved in difficulties and disputes as they are at present; so that there could be little or no hopes of success in our opposition, and indeed when the immense resources of the powers which are interested in the division of America are considered, there can be no doubt that the division might be made in one or two campaigns—one half of the very fleets and armies which those powers keep up in constant pay as guards against each other, would with ease reduce these unhappy states, which would be said to have justly deserved that fate—it would be said that they were abandoned by

Heaven for their ingratitude, irreligion, and breaches of public faith—But let us dwell no longer on a supposition so painful—painful indeed must be the supposition that these states will be infatuated by Heaven, to reject the constitution, that they may be more compleatly chastened for their sins. Let us rather suppose, that the honest freeholders, farmers, and planters will embrace it as the gift of Heaven—that they who cannot judge of the minutiae of government will see enough of the great and evident advantages held out to them by the new constitution to embrace it at all events; and that they who can reason and are acquainted with the nature of governments will soon see how wisely the plan was framed by the convention to suit the peculiar circumstances, and the present, and future, probable situation of the United States; that the jealous republican objectors will acknowledge, that their fears were ill-grounded; promising that they will heartily concur in support of the constitution. Let us rather suppose this; and that the consequence will immediately be, a flourishing commerce, a great increase of wealth and population; an equality and lessening of internal taxes, confidence between citizen and citizen, state and state, and between these states and their allies, and perfect security against foreign invasions; not only on account of the united strength of the states; but on account of their credit abroad, and the resources they would have in alliances already formed, and which may be formed; in short the consequence would be, that the United States would soon flourish in arts, and commerce, and become the happiest nation under Heaven—That they may become so, is not only the fervent prayer; but that they will be so, if the new constitution be adopted, is the firm belief of the author of the foregoing reflections, who is

A FREEHOLDER.

March 3, 1788.

1. This metaphor was a popular one. In a 14 December letter that was printed and widely circulated, George Washington stated that “General Government is now *suspended by a Thread*.”

2. “A Freeholder” refers to the hostility of Kentuckians toward Spain which had closed the navigation of the Mississippi River to Americans in 1784. Since that time, there had been threats that the Kentuckians would “drive the Spaniards from the settlements at the mouth of the Mississippi,” especially the port of New Orleans.

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