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## Samuel Stillman Speech: Massachusetts Convention 6 February 1788<sup>1</sup>

I rise, with deference to gentlemen of superiour abilities, to give my opinion on the present all-important national question, and the reasons on which it is founded—An opinion the result of the most serious deliberation.

Upon entering the Convention it was my full determination, to keep my mind cool and open to conviction, that so I might profit by the discussion of this interesting subject. And now, Sir, return my sincere thanks to the gentlemen who have taken opposite sides in the course of the debates. From both I have received advantage: From one class in bringing forward a great variety of objections; from the other class in answering them. Whatever my previous opinion was, I now stand on firmer ground than ever respecting the proposed Constitution.

But my present situation, Sir, is to me extremely affecting. To be called by the voice of my fellow-citizens to give my vote *for* or *against* a Constitution of government, that will involve the happiness or misery of millions of my countrymen, is of so solemn a nature as to have occasioned the most painful anxiety.

I have no interest to influence me to accept this Constitution of government, distinct from the interest of my countrymen, at large. We are all embarked in one bottom, and must sink or swim together.

Besides, Sir, Heaven has fixed me in a line of duty, that precludes every prospect of the honours and the emoluments of office. Let who will govern, I must obey. Nor would I exchange the pulpit, for the highest honours my country can confer. I too have personal liberties to secure, as dear to me as any gentlemen in the Convention, and as numerous a family,<sup>2</sup> probably, to engage my attention. Besides which, I stand here, with my very honourable colleagues, as a representative of the citizens of this great metropolis, who have been pleased to honour me with their confidence: An honour, in my view, unspeakably greater than a peerage, or a pension.

The absolute deficiency of the articles of Confederation, is allowed by all. Nor have I seen any publication that places this subject in so convincing a point of light, as a letter written by his Excellency Governour RANDOLPH, which has appeared in several of our news-papers; whom I the rather introduce on this occasion, because he was a delegate in the late federal Convention, refused to sign the Constitution before us, and has been twice mentioned by gentlemen in the opposition. His candour, apparent in the letter referred to, does him honour, and merits the esteem of every candid mind. I declare, Sir, I revere his character, while I differ from him in opinion.

“Before my departure for the (federal) Convention, says he, I believed that the Confederation was not so eminently defective as it had been supposed. But after I had entered into a free

conversation with those who were best informed of the condition and interest of each State; after I had compared the intelligence derived from them, with the properties that ought to characterize the government of our union, I became persuaded, that the Confederation was destitute of *every energy* which a Constitution of the United States ought to possess.” And after he had in a most masterly manner proved its inefficiency, he adds, “But now, Sir, permit me to declare, that in my humble judgment, the powers, by which alone the blessings of a general government can be accomplished, cannot be interwoven in the Confederation, without a *change of its very essence*; or in other words, that that Confederation *must be thrown aside*.” Having stated his objections to it, he proceeds thus, “My inference from these facts and principles is, that the new powers must be deposited in a new body, growing out of the consolidation of the union, as far as the circumstances of the States will allow.” Thus fully and candidly does this gentleman insist on the absolute necessity of a new Constitution of general government, at the very time that he objected to the present form; and concludes his letter with these memorable words, which I most heartily wish may make a deep impression on the mind of every gentleman in the opposition—“I hesitate not to say, that the most fervent prayer of my soul is, the establishment of a firm, energetick government—that the most inveterate curse that can befall us is, a dissolution of the union; and that the *present moment* if suffered to pass away unemployed, can NEVER be recalled.—I shall therefore cling to the union as the rock of our salvation, and urge Virginia to finish the salutary work which she hath begun. And if after our best efforts for amendments, they cannot be obtained, I scruple not to declare, (notwithstanding the advantage the declaration may give to the enemies of my proposal) that I will as an individual citizen, accept the Constitution.”<sup>3</sup>

—I pause, Sir—that every gentleman present may have time to indulge those feelings, which these excellent expressions must occasion. May that God who has the hearts of all men under his controul, inspire every member of this Convention with a similar disposition! Then shall we lay aside every opposite interest, and unite, as a band of brothers, in the ratification of this Constitution of national government.

Then, Sir, will your terms of conciliation be attended to with gratitude and candour. Your Excellency, depressed with bodily infirmity, and exercised with severe pain, has stepped forth at the critical moment, and from the benevolence of your heart, presented us with a number of proposed amendments, in order, if possible to quiet the minds of the gentlemen, in the opposition, and bring us together in amity and peace. Amendments which you, Sir, declare you do not think necessary, except for the sole purpose of uniting us in a common, and most important cause.

But what has been the consequence of your Excellency’s conciliatory propositions?—Jealousy—jealousy, Sir, that there was a snake in the grass; a secret intention to deceive! I shudder at the ungenerous suggestion; nor will I dwell a moment longer on the distressing idea. Be banished forever the groundless suspicion of him whose name stands foremost in the list of American patriots!—Let love and harmony prevail.

The important hour is just arrived, when the dye will be cast, that will in great measure determine the fate of this Commonwealth, and have a mighty influence on the general interest of the union. For from the best information I have been able to collect from gentlemen of observation, and of undoubted veracity, there is the greatest reason to fear, that the rejection of this Constitution, will be followed with anarchy and confusion.

The Convention I doubt not will bear with me while I take a general view of the Constitution before us.

From all that has been said on the subject of biennial elections, it is my decided opinion, that two years in the general government will not be in proportion to one year in the local governments; because in the former, the objects of government will be great, numerous and extensive; in the latter, comparatively small and limited. The general government involves all the States now in the union—all such as shall in future accede to it—all foreign nations with whom we now are, or hereafter shall be in alliance—an extensive and growing commerce—war and peace, &c. &c.

It has been said, that this is a stride toward septennial elections, or perpetuity in office—I answer, the Constitution itself is to be the rule: That declares, that “representatives shall be chosen *every second year* by the people of the several States.” Elections then of representatives, must be *every second year*, nor can they be otherwise, without a direct violation of the Constitution. The men who shall be wicked enough to do this, would not be restrained, had the elections been annual; it being equally easy to violate the Constitution in the one case as in the other. Elections, indeed, ought to be so frequent as to make the representatives feel that they are dependent on, and amenable to the people. The difference then between annual and biennial elections is small; and in either case will answer the end just mentioned.

The powers that are granted to Congress by this instrument are great and extensive; but, sir, they are defined and limited, and in my judgment sufficiently checked; which I shall prove before I sit down. These powers have been the subject of long and ingenious debate. But the arguments that have been made use of against delegating these powers to the general government, prove too much, being applicable to all delegated power, I mean the possible abuse of it. The very term, *government*, implies a supreme, controuling power somewhere; a power to coerce, whenever coercion shall be necessary: of which necessity government must be the judge. This is admitted; if so, the power may be abused. Every gentleman must confess, that we cannot give a power to do good, but it may be abused to do evil. If a merchant commits the care of a ship and cargo to the master, he may dispose of both, and appropriate the money to his own use. If we raise a body of men, and put arms into their hands for our defence, they may turn them against us and destroy us. All these things prove, however, that in order to guard as much as possible, against the abuse of those powers we delegate to government, there ought to be sufficient checks to them; every precaution should be used, to secure the liberties of the people on the one hand, and not render government inefficient on the other. I believe, sir, such security is provided in this Constitution: If not, no consideration shall induce me to give my voice in its favour. But the people are secured by the following circumstances:

1st. All the offices in Congress are *elective*, not hereditary. The President and Senators are to be chosen by the interposition of the legislatures of the several States; who are the representatives and guardians of the people; whose honour and interest will lead them, in all human probability, to have good men placed in the general government.

The Representatives in Congress are to be chosen *every second year* by the people in the several States. Consequently it lies with the people themselves to say, who shall represent them. It will then be their own fault if they do not chuse the best men in the Commonwealth.

Who are Congress then? They are ourselves: The men of our own choice, in whom we can confide; whose interest is inseparably connected with our own. Why is it then, that gentlemen

speak of Congress as some foreign body; as a set of men who will seek every opportunity to enslave us? Such insinuations are repugnant to the spirit of the Constitution.

But a worthy gentleman from Middleborough has told us, that though they may be good men when chosen, they may become corrupt. They may so; nor is it in the power of angels or men to prevent it; but should this be the case, the Constitution has made provision for such an event. When it happens, we shall know what method to adopt, in order to bring them to punishment.

[2d.] In all governments where officers are elective, there ever has been and there ever will be a *competition of interests*. They who are in office wish to keep in, and they who are out, to get in: The probable consequence of which will be, that they who are already in place, will be attentive to the rights of the people, because they know that they are dependent on them for a future election, which can be secured by good behaviour only. Besides, they who are out of office will watch them who are in with a most critical eye, in order to discover and expose their mal-conduct, if guilty of any, that so they may step into their places. Every gentleman knows the influence, that a desire to obtain a place, or the fear of losing it hath on mankind. Mr. Burgh tells us, that towards the close of the seven years, for which the representatives are chosen in the British parliament, they become exceedingly polite to the people: Why? Because they know there is an approaching election depending. This competition of interest therefore between those persons who are in and those who are out of office, will ever form one important check to the abuse of power in our representatives.

3d. Every two years there will be a revolution in the general government, in favour of the people. At the expiration of the first two years there will be a new choice of representatives—and at the expiration of the second two years, there will be a new choice of president and representatives—and at the expiration of the third term, making six years, from the commencement of the Congress, there will be a new choice of senators and representatives. We all know, Sir, that power thus frequently reverting to the people, will prove a security to their liberties and a most important check to the power of the general government.

4th. Congress can make no laws that will oppress the people, which will not equally involve themselves in the oppression. What possible motive then can Congress have to abuse their power? Can any man suppose that they will be so lost to their own interest, as to abuse their power, knowing at the same time, that they equally involve themselves in the difficulty? It is a most improbable supposition. This would be like a man's cutting off his nose to spite his face. I place this, sir, among the securities of the liberties of my fellow-citizens, and rejoice in it.

5th. Congress guarantee to every State in the union a republican form of government, and engage to protect them against all foreign and domestick enemies—that is, as it hath been justly observed by the Hon. Gentleman (Mr. *Adams*) near me, of known and tried abilities as a politician, each State shall chuse such republican form of government as they please, and Congress solemnly engage themselves to protect it from every kind of violence, whether of faction at home, or enemies abroad. This is an admirable security of the people at large, as well as of the several governments of the States; consequently the general government cannot swallow up the local governments, as some gentlemen have suggested. Their existence is dependent on each other, and must stand or fall together. Should Congress ever attempt the destruction of the particular legislatures, they would be in the same predicament with Samson, who overthrew the house in

which the Philistines were making sport at his expense; them he killed indeed, but he buried himself in the ruins [Judges 16:25–31].

6th. Another check in favour of the people is this—That the Constitution provides for the impeachment, trial and punishment of every officer in Congress, who shall be guilty of mal-conduct. With such a prospect, who will dare to abuse the powers vested in him by the people?

7th. Having thus considered several of the checks to the powers of Congress, which are interwoven with the Constitution, we will now suppose the worst that can take place in consequence of its adoption! I mean, that it shall be found in some of its parts oppressive to the people; still we have this dernier resort, *it may be amended*. It is not like the laws of the Medes and Persians, immutable [Daniel 6:8, 15; Esther 1:19]. The 5th article provides for amendments.

It has been said it will be difficult after its ratification to procure any alterations. By no means, sir—for this weighty reason—it is a general government; and as such will have a general influence; all the States in the union will feel the difficulty and feeling it will readily concur in adopting the method provided by the Constitution. And having once made the trial, experience will teach us what amendments are necessary.

Viewing the Constitution in this light, I stand ready to give my vote for it without any amendments at all. Yet if the amendments proposed by your Excellency will tend to conciliation, I readily admit them, not as a *condition* of acceptance, but as a matter of *recommendation* only; knowing that, *Blessed are the peace-makers* [Matthew 5:9].—I am ready, Sir, to submit my life, my liberty, my family, my property, and as far as my vote will go, the interest of my constituents, to this general government.

After all, if this Constitution was as perfect as the sacred volume is, it would not secure the liberties of the people, unless they watch their own liberties. Nothing written on paper will do this. It is therefore necessary that the people should keep a watchful, not an *over-jealous eye* on their rulers; and that they should give all due encouragement to our colleges, schools of learning, &c. that so knowledge may be diffused through every part of our country. Ignorance and slavery, knowledge and freedom are inseparably connected. While Americans remain in their present enlightened condition, and warmly attached to the cause of liberty, they cannot be enslaved. Should the general government become so lost to all sense of honour and the freedom of the people, as to attempt to enslave them, they who are the descendants of a race of men, who have dethroned kings, would make an American Congress tremble, strip them of their publick honours, and reduce them to the lowest state of degradation.

1. Apparently Stillman had planned for several days to deliver a speech in support of the Constitution. On 3 February Rhode Islander George Benson wrote that Stillman intended to speak on the “Grand Question.” Another observer described the speech as “elegant.” Only Stillman and Isaac Backus, among the Convention’s five Baptist ministers, voted to ratify the Constitution. (Noah Alden, Pelatiah Tingley, and Valentine Rathbun voted against ratification.) Backus estimated that two-thirds of the Convention’s Baptist delegates voted against ratification. Working behind the scenes to obtain ratification, Stillman twice visited the lodgings of some Maine delegates who were believed to be opposed. Stillman was assisted in his pro-Constitution activities by Backus and the Reverend James Manning, the Baptist president of the College of Rhode Island (Brown University), who was in Boston from 15 to 31 January (probably at the invitation of Federalists) to hear the debates and use his influence among his fellow Baptists.

2. Stillman fathered fourteen children.

3. The italics and small capital letters in the text do not appear in the original printing of Randolph's letter. The word "(federal)" in the first sentence of this paragraph is another insertion.

CITE AS: John P. Kaminski et al., eds., *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, Vol. VI: Massachusetts [3] (Madison, Wis.: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2000), 1454–61.