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Oliver Wolcott Speech: Connecticut Convention 9 January 1788

I do not expect to throw any new light upon a subject which has been so fully discussed. Yet I cannot content myself without giving my opinion more explicitly than by a silent vote. It is generally agreed that the present Confederation is inadequate to the exigencies of our national affairs. We must therefore adopt this plan of government or some other, or risk the consequences of disunion. As the present Articles of Confederation are inadequate, we ought to consider whether this Constitution be as good as can be agreed on by so many different states or whether it be a dangerous system; whether it secures the liberties of the people or whether its tendency be unfavorable to the rights of a free people. I have given it all the consideration in my power. I have a considerable time since made up my mind upon it; and I think it my duty to give my voice in favor of adopting it. It is founded upon the election of the people. If it varies from the former system, or if it is to be altered hereafter, it must be with the consent of the people. This is all the security in favor of liberty which can be expected. Mankind may become corrupt and give up the cause of freedom, but I believe that love of liberty which prevails among the people of this country will prevent such a direful calamity.

This Constitution effectually secures the states in their several rights. It must secure them for its own sake, for they are the pillars which uphold the general system. The Senate, a constituent branch of the general legislature without whose assent no public act can be made, are appointed by the states and will secure the rights of the several states. The other branch of the legislature, the Representatives, are to be elected by the people at large. They will therefore be the guardians of the rights of the great body of the citizens. So well guarded is this Constitution throughout that it seems impossible that the rights either of the states or of the people should be destroyed.

I do not see the necessity of such a test as some gentlemen wish for.¹ The Constitution enjoins an oath upon all the officers of the United States. This is a direct appeal to that God who is the Avenger of Perjury. Such an appeal to Him is a full acknowledgment of His being and providence. An acknowledgment of these great truths is all that the gentlemen contend for. For myself, I should be content either with or without that clause in the Constitution which excludes test laws. Knowledge and liberty are so prevalent in this country that I do not believe that the United States would ever be disposed to establish one religious sect and lay all others under legal disabilities. But as we know not what may take place hereafter, and any such test would be exceedingly injurious to the rights of free citizens, I cannot think it altogether superfluous to add a clause which secures us from the possibility of such oppression. I shall only add that I give my assent to this Constitution and am happy to see the states in a fair way to adopt a system which will protect their rights and promote their welfare.

1. Evidently there was opposition to the Constitution because it did not require a religious qualification for officeholding. "Landholder" VII on 17 December went to great lengths in arguing that such a "test" was unnecessary.

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