



CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE AMERICAN CONSTITUTION

csac.history.wisc.edu > Document Collections > The Creation and Ratification of the Bill of Rights > Serial Essays Related to the Creation and Ratification of the Bill of Rights > Essays by “Foreign Spectator”

Foreign Spectator I Philadelphia *Federal Gazette*, 21 October 1788

REMARKS^(a) on the Amendments to the Federal Constitution, proposed by the Conventions of Massachusetts, New-Hampshire, New-York, Virginia, South and North-Carolina, with the minorities of Pennsylvania and Maryland, by a FOREIGN SPECTATOR.

NUMBER I.

In the history of the United States, the present æra is probably more important than any that has been or ever shall be. The declaration of independence, in 1776, was a bold measure; and its confirmation by the peace, in 1783, a glorious event. But if this independence is not secured by a solid union, fully adequate to the political and civil happiness of the states, it is at the best very doubtful, whether a longer dependance on Great-Britain would have been more calamitous than this premature political existence, fraught in its very stamina with disease and destruction. I shall not repeat the melancholy chime of *anarchy*, *civil war*, and *foreign conquest*, rung through the whole continent by the feeling and sagacious apprehensions of so many Americans, justly celebrated for political wisdom and patriotic virtue; but only beg leave to present one reflection— Neither the United States, nor any other part of the globe, are yet civilized enough to settle national disputes in the amicable way of reason and equity. Alas! the tinsels of ambition and avarice create frequent and furious contents, which are decided by the sword, that *ultima ratio* of kings and republics. In some future stage of civilization, a close union of the states will be less necessary; but till that happy period arrives, it is undoubtedly a sacred object with every man of sense and virtue.

The federal constitution has, for near a twelve month, undergone the most critical investigation, in the public prints and the conventions of the states. Politicians have been entertained with a grand and interesting spectacle— Thirteen sister-republics debating with all the force of argument, all the powers of oratory, on the form of a common government: this form embraced by great numbers as the guardian angel of America, sent from Heaven to save her from impending ruin: detested by others as a fiend come from the regions of darkness to enslave a vast continent: the constitution rejected by two; and adopted in some of the others, even great states, by small majorities, and with a pressing request of many capital amendments.

That an object of such awful magnitude should be agitated with anxious hopes and fears; that, held up in every point of view, it should, to so many eyes, present an appearance somewhat different, is a natural and pleasing symptom of that keen and solicitous love of liberty, which is the vital principle of republics.— But such difference of opinions on *first principles*, is really very

extraordinary: and the *retaking by the left hand what was given by the right*, is a mark of jealousy inconsistent with the most necessary energy of government. The federal constitution will, no doubt, like all other political institutions, require alterations in the process of time. The trial of such a complex machine in operations partly novel, may also very probably point out some very important amendments. But if no essential fault can as yet be discovered, it must be very unwise to undo what has been done with so much difficulty—to frustrate the sanguine hopes and anxious desires of the people—to irritate the numbers that have suffered so long under the cruel tyranny of anarchy—to throw so many who pant for speedy relief, into utter despair—to lock up or banish the little circulating specie and credit, that barely keeps alive our expiring trade—to confirm foreign nations in their contempt of our imbecility, and want of faith; to prevent all beneficial intercourse with any of them; and to urge those who are creditors to violent demands of public and private debts—to do all this, would be absolute folly and madness.

Though a majority in congress may be wise enough not to advise a reform of the new government before it really becomes expedient, yet a persuasion that the present form is pernicious, unjust, and dangerous, must render great numbers of people dissatisfied—make many worthy men bad federal citizens—weaken the union, and impair its benefits—perhaps enable some daring spirits to raise insurrections.

While prejudiced electors fetter their representatives with injunctions to procure visionary amendments, it is to be feared, that many excellent persons will decline a trust so incompatible with their feelings—and that the mercenary and timid will sacrifice honor and conscience to popularity.

In a candid examination of the proposed amendments, we shall find that some are repugnant to an effectual confederacy, others of dubious utility, and the most specious improper, until the union is firmly established, and experience has decided between opposite theories.

(a) The editor, with the permission of the author, informs the public that one number of these remarks will appear regularly in the Federal Gazette, every Tuesday and every Friday evening, until the subject be finished.

CITE AS: John P. Kaminski et al., eds., *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, Vol. XXXIX: Bill of Rights [3] (Madison, Wis.: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2023), 264–67.