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(Oliver Ellsworth) Attacks Elbridge Gerry

Nobody: To Elbridge Gerry

Hartford, Conn., *American Mercury*, 19 November 1787

(excerpts)

Sir, Your letter to the Honorable Samuel Adams,¹ etc., containing your reasons for dissenting from the opinion of your colleagues in Convention claims (in my humble opinion) the thanks of the public at large, not so much for the ingenuous composition, as the opportunity it affords of detecting its fallacy and dissipating any impression which so extraordinary a piece, written with such extraordinary art, might make on the minds of men unacquainted with the nature and good policy of government.

Your conduct therein appears to me more ambiguous than the Constitution you reprobate, and yet methinks I am not mistaken in my constructions thereon. Your dissenting from the unanimous voice of so respectable a body as composed the Convention, every way equal, if not superior to yourself, borders more of arrogance than genuine public spirit, as it certainly implies a consciousness on your part of superior wisdom; and you doubtless conceived that you had a peculiar talent of representing your conduct in a most plausible and conspicuous point of view, and thereby display a greatness of soul, not only in having dared to stand alone in opposition to many great men, but in publishing your fortitude to the world, vainly concluding that the most favorable construction would attend that independent rectitude thereby manifested; and that in case you could by any specious pretense or ambiguous innuendoes defeat the completion of the new Constitution (for you have taken great care not to elucidate, to any kind of proof, the facts you have stated, artfully supposing that it was much easier for you, with all your abilities, to say that the adoption of the new Constitution would deprive the people of all liberty, than to prove it), your greatness would rise in proportion to the magnitude of the feat you had performed, that your wisdom and integrity would then be established as immovable as Atlas. While all your brethren, colleagues in Convention, must sink in public esteem for having presumed to form a constitution so glaringly big with errors that even common capacities could discover its insidiousness, altho you by yourself remonstrated and bore testimony against it, which alone was sufficient reason for its abolition; could you, sir, effect this, you might reasonably expect that no constitution would take place, but such as you should model and approve. Our worthy General [Washington], who was at the head of the Convention (whose wisdom and zeal for the welfare of America never has been called in question, and who, under God, may be considered as the savior of our country), would no longer be able to vie with you. His conduct must be censured, while yours would be extolled, and your greatness built upon his ruins. . . .

P.S. The foregoing, having been written in haste, should anything illiberal have escaped my pen, I sincerely ask your pardon, for altho there appears nothing laudable in your line of conduct, yet, as it was a great stride towards *fame* (tho I fear a leap in the dark), it merits some palliation, but between you and that *City* is a great gulf, a purgatory, and Father Dominic is severe and will exact the uttermost farthing; and his fees of office rise or fall in a certain ratio with the crime committed and magnitude of the object in view to be obtained.

Had you, sir, acquiesced with your brethren in Convention, you could have claimed no more than a proportionable share of the merit and thanks due from the public to that respectable body. That proportion being too small to satisfy your ambition, you have stepped aside upon an eminence higher than Etna, where you are now viewed by those nations, who, possessing some traces in their government to which perchance our new Constitution bore some little resemblance, are your principal reasons for rejecting the same, from which eminence methinks I hear you saying,

“I’ll rail, I’ll rant, I’ll stamp, I’ll swear,
“And all this I will do, because I dare.”

1. Gerry’s letter to the Massachusetts General Court was addressed to Samuel Adams, President of the Senate, and James Warren, Speaker of the House of Representatives.

CITE AS: John P. Kaminski et al., eds., *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, Vol. III: Delaware, New Jersey, Georgia, and Connecticut (Madison, Wis.: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 1978), 465–67.