John Hancock's Speech in the Massachusetts Convention Thursday afternoon, 31 January 1788

John Hancock, the popular governor of Massachusetts, did not take a public stance on the Constitution before the commencement of the election of Convention delegates in mid-December 1787. Despite his detachment, Hancock was easily elected as a delegate to the state ratifying Convention that convened on 9 January 1788. The Convention delegates, seemingly evenly divided between Federalists and Antifederalists, readily elected Hancock as the Convention's president even though he was unable to attend the sessions due to a recurring bout with the gout. While the outcome remained uncertain, Hancock's gout persisted, a condition that often plagued Hancock at politically opportune times.

After three weeks of debate, Convention Federalists realized that a slim majority was leaning against the Constitution. If the Massachusetts Convention rejected the Constitution, it seemed unlikely that the nine-state threshold for ratification would be achieved. Consequently, a Federalist committee formulated an ingenious political strategy. They approached the ailing governor (who was not politically aligned with them) with a deal. If he would attend the Convention and submit a list of amendments to the Constitution as recommendations, they would support him for re-election as governor in the spring gubernatorial election. Hancock should tell the delegates that he personally drafted the amendments even though they were secretly written by the Federalist committee. If the Constitution was ratified, they promised to support Hancock as vice president to serve with George Washington, who was the country's overwhelming choice to be the first president. But, if Virginia did not ratify, making Washington ineligible to be president, Hancock would be their candidate to fill the position. Hancock accepted the deal and was carried into the Convention on a litter on 30 January. The next day he delivered a proposal calling for ratification of the Constitution which would be accompanied by nine recommendatory amendments. Samuel Adams immediately seconded Hancock's "conciliatory proposition" and the delegates voted by a slim majority of nineteen (187-168) to adopt the Constitution on 6 February.

Hancock was vilified by Antifederalist who accused him of being "the ostensible Puppet" of their opponents, but was widely praised for his proposal that saved the Constitution. According to one Federalist, "Gouverour Hancock has gained himself immortal Honor, in his conduct on this occasion—it is certain if he had not taken an active—indeed a very active part in favor of the adoption, we never should have gained a vote in favor of it—all the first & leading Characters in the Towns & State have pledg'd themselves to him, to support him to the utmost [of] their power, & ability—for he has acted a most noble part in this business—& he never stood so high with the people as now." Six of the remaining seven states followed

the example of adopting the Constitution with recommendatory amendments. Without the Massachusetts procedure, it is doubtful that the Constitution would have been adopted in its unamended form.

The Convention proceeded in the consideration of the motion That this Convention do assent to and ratify the constitution agreed upon by the Convention of Delegates from the United States at Philadelphia on the 17th. day of September 1787.

The following was proposed to the Convention by His Excellency the President viz

Commonwealth of Massachusetts

In Convention of the Delegates of the People of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts 1788.

The Convention having impartially discussed and fully considered the Constitution for the United States of America, reported to Congress, by the Convention of Delegates from the United States of America, and submitted to us, by a resolution of the General Court of the said Commonwealth, passed the twentyfifth day of October last past; and acknowledging with grateful hearts, the goodness of the Supreme Ruler of the Universe, in affording the people of the United States, in the course of his providence, an opportunity deliberately and peaceably, without fraud or surprize, of entering into an explicit and solemn compact with each other, by assenting to and ratifying a new constitution, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to themselves, and their posterity, do in the name, and in behalf of the people of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, *assent to* and *ratify* the said *Constitution for the United States of America*.

And as it is the opinion of this convention that certain amendments and alterations in the said Constitution, would remove the fears, and quiet the apprehensions of many of the good people of this Commonwealth, and more effectually guard against an undue administration of the federal government; the Convention do therefore recommend, that the following alterations and provisions be introduced into the said Constitution.

First, That it be explicitly declared, that all powers not expressly delegated to Congress, are reserved to the several States, to be by them exercised.

Secondly, that there shall be one representative to every thirty thousand persons, untill the whole number of representatives amount to

Thirdly, That Congress do not exercise the powers vested in them by the 4th. section of the first article, but in cases where a State shall neglect or refuse to make adequate provision for an equal representation of the people agreeably to this constitution.

Fourthly, That Congress do not lay direct taxes, but when the monies arising from the impost and excise are insufficient for the public exigencies.

Fifthly, That Congress erect no company of merchants with exclusive advantages of commerce.

Sixthly, That no person shall be tried for any crime, by which he may incur an infamous punishment, or loss of life, untill he be first indicted by a grand jury, except in such cases, as may arise in the government and regulation of the land and naval forces.

Seventhly, The Supreme Judicial Federal Court, shall have no jurisdiction of causes between citizens of different States, unless the matter in dispute be of the value of _____ dollars, at the least.

Eighthly, In civil actions between citizens of different States, every issue of fact arising in actions at common law, shall be tried by a jury, if the parties, or either of them request it.

Ninthly, That the words "without the consent of the Congress" in the last paragraph of the ninth section of the first article be stricken out.

And the Convention do, in the name and in behalf of the people of this Commonwealth, enjoin it upon their Representatives in Congress, at all times, untill the alterations and provisions aforesaid have been considered, agreeably to the fifth article of the said constitution; to exert all their influence, and use all reasonable and legal methods to obtain a ratification of the said alterations and provisions, in such manner as is provided in the said article.

And that the United States in Congress assembled may have due notice of the assent and ratification of the said constitution by this Convention, it is

Resolved that the assent and ratification aforesaid be engrossed on parchment, together with the recommendation and injunction aforesaid, and with this resolution, and that His Excellency John Hancock Esquire President; and the Honourable William Cushing Esquire, Vice-President of this Convention transmit the same, countersigned by the Secretary of the Convention, under their hands and seals, to the United States in Congress assembled

after debate,

Adjourned to Friday morng. 10. o Clk.

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, p. 1379, 1381–83.