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## Washington's Letters on the Constitution.

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To JOHN JAY, *August 1, 1786.*

Your sentiments, that our affairs are drawing rapidly to a crisis, accord with my own. What the event will be, is also beyond the reach of my foresight. We have errors to correct. We have probably had too good an opinion of human nature in forming our confederation. Experience has taught us that men will not adopt and carry into execution measures the best calculated for their own good, without the intervention of a coercive power. I do not conceive we can exist long as a nation without having lodged somewhere a power, which will pervade the whole Union in as energetic a manner as the authority of the State governments extends over the several States.

To be fearful of investing Congress, constituted as that body is, with ample authorities for national purposes, appears to me the very climax of popular absurdity and madness. Could Congress exert them for the detriment of the public, without injuring themselves in an equal or greater proportion? Are not their interests inseparably connected with those of their constituents? By the rotation of appointment, must they not mingle frequently with the mass of citizens? Is it not rather to be apprehended, if they were possessed of the powers before described, that the individual members would be induced to use them, on many occasions, very timidly and inefficaciously for fear of losing their popularity and future election? We must take human nature as we find it. Perfection falls not to the share of mortals. Many are of opinion that Congress have too frequently made use of the suppliant, humble tone of requisition in applications to the States, when they had a right

to assert their imperial dignity and command obedience. Be that as it may, requisitions are a perfect nullity where thirteen sovereign, independent, disunited States are in the habit of discussing and refusing compliance with them at their option. Requisitions are actually little better than a jest and a by-word throughout the land. If you tell the legislatures they have violated the treaty of peace, and invaded the prerogatives of the confederacy, they will laugh in your face. What then is to be done? Things cannot go on in the same train forever. It is much to be feared, as you observe, that the better kind of people, being disgusted with the circumstances, will have their minds prepared for any revolution whatever. We are apt to run from one extreme into another. To anticipate and prevent disastrous contingencies would be the part of wisdom and patriotism.

What astonishing changes a few years are capable of producing. I am told that even respectable characters speak of a monarchical form of government without horror. From thinking proceeds speaking; thence to acting is often but a single step. But how irrevocable and tremendous! What a triumph for our enemies to verify their predictions! What a triumph for the advocates of despotism to find that we are incapable of governing ourselves, and that systems founded on the basis of equal liberty are merely ideal and fallacious! Would to God, that wise measures may be taken in time to avert the consequences we have but too much reason to apprehend.

Retired as I am from the world, I frankly acknowledge I cannot feel myself an unconcerned spectator. Yet, having happily assisted in bringing the ship into port, and having been fairly discharged, it is not my business to embark again on a sea of troubles. Nor could it be expected that my sentiments and opinions would have much weight on the minds of my countrymen. They have been neglected, though given as a last legacy in the most solemn manner. I had then perhaps some claims to public attention. I consider myself as having none at present.

To JAMES MADISON, *November 5, 1786.*

Fain would I hope that the great and most important of all subjects, the *federal government*, may be considered with that calm and deliberate attention, which the magnitude of it so critically and loudly calls for at this critical moment. Let pre-

judices, unreasonable jealousies, and local interests yield to reason and liberality. Let us look to our national character, and to things beyond the present moment. No morn ever dawned more favorably than ours did; and no day was ever more clouded than the present. Wisdom and good examples are necessary at this time to rescue the political machine from the impending storm. Virginia has now an opportunity to set the latter, and has enough of the former, I hope, to take the lead in promoting this great and arduous work. Without an alteration in our political creed, the superstructure we have been seven years in raising, at the expense of so much treasure and blood, must fall. We are fast verging to anarchy and confusion.

By a letter which I have received from General Knox, who had just returned from Massachusetts, whither he had been sent by Congress consequent of the commotions in that State, is replete with melancholy accounts of the temper and designs of a considerable part of that people. Among other things he says:

"Their creed is, that the property of the United States has been protected from the confiscation of Britain by the joint exertions of *all*; and therefore ought to be the *common property of all*; and he that attempts opposition to this creed is an enemy to equity and justice, and ought to be swept from off the face of the earth." Again: "They are determined to annihilate all debts, public and private, and have agrarian laws, which are easily effected by the means of unfunded paper money, which shall be a tender in all cases whatever." He adds: "The number of these people amount in Massachusetts to about one fifth part of several populous counties, and to them may be collected people of similar sentiments from the States of Rhode Island, Connecticut, and New Hampshire, so as to constitute a body of about twelve or fifteen thousand desperate and unprincipled men. They are chiefly of the young and active part of the community."

How melancholy is the reflection, that in so short a space we should have made such large strides towards fulfilling the predictions of our transatlantic foes! "Leave them to themselves, and their government will soon dissolve." Will not the wise and good strive hard to avert this evil? Or will their supineness suffer ignorance and the arts of self-interested, designing, disaffected and desperate characters to involve this great country in wretchedness and contempt? What stronger evidence can be given of the want of energy in our government than these disorders? If there is not power in it to check them, what security has a man for life, liberty, or prop-

erty? To you I am sure I need not add aught on this subject. The consequences of a lax or inefficient government are too obvious to be dwelt upon. Thirteen sovereignties pulling against each other, and all tugging at the federal head, will soon bring ruin on the whole; whereas a liberal and energetic constitution, well guarded and closely watched to prevent encroachments, might restore us to that degree of respectability and consequences, to which we had a fair claim and the brightest prospect of attaining.

To HENRY KNOX, *December 26, 1786.*

In both your letters you intimate that the men of reflection, principle, and property in New England, feeling the inefficacy of their present government, are contemplating a change; but you are not explicit with respect to its nature. It has been supposed that the constitution of the State of Massachusetts was amongst the most energetic in the Union. May not these disorders then be ascribed to an indulgent exercise of the powers of administration? If your laws authorized, and your powers are equal to the suppression of these tumults in the first instance, delay and unnecessary expedients were improper. These are rarely well applied; and the same causes would produce similar effects in any form of government, if the powers of it are not exercised. I ask this question for information. I know nothing of the facts.

That Great Britain will be an unconcerned spectator of the present insurrections, if they continue, is not to be expected. That she is at this moment sowing the seeds of jealousy and discontent among the various tribes of Indians on our frontiers, admits of no doubt in my mind; and that she will improve every opportunity to foment the spirit of turbulence within the bowels of the United States, with a view of distracting our governments and promoting divisions, is with me not less certain. Her first manœuvres in this will no doubt be covert, and may remain so till the period shall arrive when a decided line of conduct may avail her. Charges of violating the treaty, and other pretexts, will then not be wanting to color overt acts, tending to effect the great objects of which she has long been in labor. A man is now at the head of their American affairs, well calculated to conduct measures of this kind, and more than probably was selected for the purpose. We ought not therefore to sleep nor to

slumber. Vigilance in watching and vigor in acting is become in my opinion indispensably necessary. If the powers are inadequate, amend or alter them; but do not let us sink into the lowest state of humiliation and contempt, and become a by-word in all the earth.

To HENRY KNOX, *February 3, 1787.*

In your letter of the 14th you express a wish to be informed of my intention, respecting the convention proposed to be held in Philadelphia May next. *In confidence* I inform you, that it is not, at this time, my intention to attend it. When this matter was first moved in the Assembly of this State, some of the principal characters of it wrote to me, requesting they might be permitted to put my name in the delegation. To this I objected. They again pressed, and I again refused, assigning among other reasons my having declined meeting the Society of the Cincinnati at that place about the same time, and that I thought it would be disrespectful to that body, to whom I owe much, to be there on any other occasion. Notwithstanding these intimations, my name was inserted in the act; and an official communication thereof made by the executive to me, to whom, at the same time that I expressed my sense for the confidence reposed in me, I declared that, as I saw no prospect of my attending, it was my wish that my name might not remain in the delegation to the exclusion of another. To this I have been requested in emphatical terms not to decide absolutely, as no inconvenience would result from the new appointment of another, at least for some time yet.

Thus the matter stands, which is the reason of my saying to you *in confidence*, that at present I retain my first intention not to go. In the mean while, as I have the fullest conviction of your friendship for and attachment to me, know your abilities to judge, and your means of information, I shall receive any communications from you on this subject with thankfulness. My first wish is to do for the best, and to act with propriety. You know me too well to believe that reserve or concealment of any opinion or circumstance would be at all agreeable to me. The legality of this convention I do not mean to discuss, nor how problematical the issue of it may be. That powers are wanting none can deny. Through what medium they are to be derived will, like other matters, engage the attention of

the wise. That which takes the shortest course to obtain them, in my opinion will, under present circumstances, be found best; otherwise, like a house on fire, whilst the most regular mode of extinguishing the flames is contended for, the building is reduced to ashes. My opinions of the energetic wants of the federal government are well known. My public announcements and private declarations have uniformly expressed these sentiments; and, however constitutional it may be for Congress to point out the defects of the federal system, I am strongly inclined to believe that it would not be found the most efficacious channel for the recommendations, more especially the alterations, to flow, for reasons too obvious to enumerate.\*

The system on which you seem disposed to build a national government is certainly more energetic, and I dare say in every point of view more desirable than the present, which from experience we find is not only slow, debilitated, and liable to be thwarted by every breath, but is defective in that secrecy, which, for the accomplishment of many of the most important national objects, is indispensably necessary; and besides, having the legislative, executive, and judiciary departments concentrated, is exceptionable. But, at the same time that I gave this opinion, I believe the political machine will yet be much tumbled and tossed, and possibly be wrecked altogether, before that or anything like it will be adopted. The darling sovereignties of each State, the governors elected and elect, the legislators, with a long tribe of et ceteras, whose political importance will be lessened, if not annihilated, would give their weight of opposition to such a revolution. But I may be speaking without book; for, scarcely ever going off my own farms, I see few people, who do not call upon me, and am very little acquainted with the sentiments of the great public. Indeed, after what I have seen, or rather after what I have heard, I shall be surprised at nothing; for, if three years since any person had told me that there would have been such a formidable rebellion as exists at this day against the laws

\*To Mr. Jay he wrote, touching upon the same subject, more than a month later: "I would fain try what the wisdom of the proposed convention will suggest, and what can be effected by their counsels. It may be the last peaceable mode of essaying the practicability of the present form, without a greater lapse of time, than the exigency of our affairs will allow. In strict propriety, a convention so holden may not be legal. Congress, however, may give it a coloring by recommendation, which would fit it more to the taste, without proceeding to a definition of the powers. This, however constitutionally it might be done, would not in my opinion be expedient."-- Mar 11<sup>th</sup>.

and constitution of our own making, I should have thought him a bedlamite, a fit subject for a mad-house.

TO JAMES MADISON, *March 31, 1787.*

I am glad to find that Congress have recommended to the States to appear in the convention proposed to be holden in Philadelphia next May. I think the reasons in favor have the preponderancy over those against it. It is idle in my opinion to suppose that the Sovereign can be insensible to the inadequacy of the powers under which they act, and that, seeing it, they should not recommend a revision of the federal system; especially when it is considered by many as the only constitutional mode by which the defects can be remedied. Had Congress proceeded to a delineation of the powers, it might have sounded an alarm; but, as the case is, I do not conceive that it will have that effect.\* . . .

I am fully of opinion that those who lean to a monarchical government have either not consulted the public mind, or that they live in a region which (the levelling principles in which they were bred being entirely eradicated) is much more productive of monarchical ideas, than are to be found in the southern States, where, from the habitual distinctions which have always existed among the people, one would have expected the first generation and the most rapid growth of them. I am also clear, that, even admitting the utility, nay, necessity of the form, yet that the period is not arrived for adopting the change without shaking the peace of this country to its foundation. That a thorough reform of the present system is indispensable, none, who have capacities to judge, will deny; and with hand [and heart] I hope the business will be essayed in a full convention. After which, if more powers and more decision is not found in the existing form, if it still wants energy and that secrecy and despatch (either from the non-attendance or the local views of its members), which is characteristic of good government, and if it shall be found (the contrary of which, however, I have always been more afraid of than of the abuse of them), that Congress will, upon all proper occasions,

\*The commissioners, who had met at Annapolis in September, 1786, sent a letter to Congress, accompanied by their address to the several States, proposing a convention at Philadelphia on the second Monday of May. These papers were taken up by Congress, and referred to a committee, consisting of one member from each State, who reported in favor of recommending to the several legislatures to send delegates.

exert the powers which are given, with a firm and steady hand, instead of frittering them back to the States, where the members, in place of viewing themselves in their national character, are too apt to be looking, — I say, after this essay is made, if the system proves inefficient, conviction of the necessity of a change will be disseminated among all classes of the people. Then, and not till then, in my opinion, can it be attempted without involving all the evils of civil discord.

I confess, however, that my opinion of public virtue is so far changed, that I have my doubts whether any system, without the means of coercion in the sovereign, will enforce due obedience to the ordinances of a general government; without which everything else fails. Laws or ordinances unobserved, or partially attended to, had better never have been made; because the first is a mere nihil, and the second is productive of much jealousy and discontent. But what kind of coercion, you may ask. This indeed will require thought, though the non-compliance of the States with the late requisition is an evidence of the necessity. It is somewhat singular that a State (New York), which used to be foremost in all federal measures, should now turn her face against them in almost every instance. . . .

It gives me great pleasure to hear that there is a probability of a full representation of the States in convention; but, if the delegates come to it under fetters, the salutary ends proposed will, in my opinion, be greatly embarrassed and retarded, if not altogether defeated. I am desirous of knowing how this matter is, as my wish is that the convention may adopt no temporizing expedients, but probe the defects of the constitution to the bottom, and provide a radical cure, whether they are agreed to or not. A conduct of this kind will stamp wisdom and dignity on their proceedings and hold up a light which sooner or later will have its influence.\*

\* It gives me pleasure to find by your letter, that there will be so full a representation from this State. If the case had been otherwise, I would in emphatic terms have urged again that, rather than depend upon my going, another might be chosen in my place; for, as a friend and in confidence, I declare to you, that my assent is given contrary to my judgment, because the act will, I apprehend, be considered as inconsistent with my public declaration, delivered in a solemn manner at an interesting era of my life, never more to intermeddle in public matters. This declaration not only stands on the files of Congress, but is I believe registered in almost all the gazettes and magazines that are published; and what adds to the embarrassment is, I had, previous to my appointment, informed by a circular letter the several State Societies of the Cincinnati of my intention to decline the presidency of that order, and excused myself from attending the next general meeting at Philadelphia on the first Monday in May; assigning reasons for so doing, which apply as well in the one case as in the other. Add to these, I very much fear that all the States will not appear in convention, and that some of them will come fettered so as to impede rather than accelerate the great

TO PATRICK HENRY, *September 24, 1787.*

In the first moment after my return, I take the liberty of sending you a copy of the constitution, which the federal convention has submitted to the people of these States. I accompany it with no observations. Your own judgment will at once discover the good and the exceptionable parts of it; and your experience of the difficulties, which have ever arisen when attempts have been made to reconcile such variety of interests and local prejudices, as pervade the several States, will render explanation unnecessary. I wish the constitution, which is offered, had been made more perfect; but I sincerely believe it is the best that could be obtained at this time. And, as a constitutional door is opened for amendment hereafter, the adoption of it, under the present circumstances of the Union, is in my opinion desirable.

From a variety of concurring accounts it appears to me, that the political concerns of this country are in a manner suspended by a thread, and that the convention has been looked up to, by the reflecting part of the community, with a solicitude which is hardly to be conceived; and, if nothing had been agreed on by that body, anarchy would soon have ensued, the seeds being deeply sown in every soil.

TO HENRY KNOX, *October, 1787.*

The constitution is now before the judgment-seat. It has, as was expected, its adversaries and supporters. Which will preponderate is yet to be decided. The former more than probably will be most active, as the major part of them will, it is to be feared, be governed by sinister and self-important motives, to which everything in their breasts must yield. The opposition from another class of them may perhaps (if they should be men of reflection, candor, and information), subside in the solution of the following simple questions: 1. Is the constitution, which is submitted by the convention, preferable to the government (if it can be called one,) under which we now live? 2. Is it probable that more confidence would at the

subject of their convening; which, under the peculiar circumstances of my case, would place me in a more disagreeable situation than any other member would stand in. As I have yielded, however, to what appeared to be the earnest wishes of my friends, I will hope for the best." — *Washington to Edmund Randolph, 9 April, 1787.*

time be placed in another convention, provided the experiment should be tried, than was placed in the last one, and is it likely that a better agreement would take place therein? What would be the consequences if these should not happen, or even from the delay, which must inevitably follow such an experiment? Is there not a constitutional door open for alterations or amendments? and is it not likely that real defects will be as readily discovered after as before trial? and will not our successors be as ready to apply the remedy as ourselves, if occasion should require it? To think otherwise will, in my judgment, be ascribing more of the *amor patriæ*, more wisdom and more virtue to ourselves, than I think we deserve.

It is highly probable that the refusal of our Governor and Colonel Mason to subscribe to the proceedings of the convention will have a bad effect in this State; for, as you well observe, they *must* not only assign reasons for the justification of their own conduct, but it is highly probable that these reasons will be clothed in most terrific array for the purpose of alarming.\* Some things are already addressed to the fears of the people, and will no doubt have their effect. As far, however, as the sense of this part of the country has been taken, it is strongly in favor of the proposed constitution. Further I cannot speak with precision. If a powerful opposition is given to it, the weight thereof will, I apprehend, come from the south side of James River, and from the western counties.

To BUSHROD WASHINGTON, *November 10, 1787.*

That the Assembly would afford the people an opportunity of deciding on the proposed constitution, I had scarcely a doubt. The only question with me was, whether it would go forth under favorable auspices, or receive the stamp of disapprobation. The opponents I expected (for it ever has been that the adversaries to a measure are more active than its friends,) would endeavor to stamp it with unfavorable impressions, in order to bias the judgment, that is ultimately to decide on it. This is evidently the case with the writers in opposition, whose objections are better calculated to alarm the fears, than to convince the judgment of their readers. They

\* Randolph explained his position in a letter to the Speaker of the House of Delegates, 10 October, 1787. It was widely circulated in the newspapers, and printed in pamphlet form. It was reprinted in Ford, *Pamphlets on the Constitution*, 150.

build their objections upon principles that do not exist, which the constitution does not support them in, and the existence of which has been, by an appeal to the constitution itself, flatly denied: and then, as if they were unanswerable, draw all the dreadful consequences that are necessary to alarm the apprehensions of the ignorant or unthinking. It is not the interest of the major part of those characters to be convinced; nor will their local views yield to arguments, which do not accord with their present or future prospects.

A candid solution of a single question, to which the plainest understanding is competent, does, in my opinion, decide the dispute: namely, Is it best for the States to unite or not to unite? If there are men who prefer the latter, then unquestionably the constitution which is offered must, in their estimation, be wrong from the words, "*We the people*," to the signature, inclusively; but those who think differently, and yet object to parts of it, would do well to consider, that it does not lie with any *one* State, or the *minority* of the States, to superstruct a constitution for the whole. The separate interests, as far as it is practicable, must be consolidated; and local views must be attended to, as far as the nature of the case will admit. Hence it is, that every State has some objection to the present form, and these objections are directed to different points. That which is most pleasing to one is obnoxious to another, and so *vice versa*. If then the union of the whole is a desirable object, the component parts must yield a little in order to accomplish it. Without the latter, the former is unattainable; for again I repeat it, that not a single State, nor the minority of the States, can force a constitution on the majority. But, admitting the power, it will surely be granted, that it cannot be done without involving scenes of civil commotion, of a very serious nature.

Let the opponents of the proposed constitution in this State be asked, and it is a question they certainly ought to have asked themselves, what line of conduct they would advise to adopt, if nine other States, of which I think there is little doubt, should accede to the constitution. Would they recommend that it should stand single? Will they connect it with Rhode Island? Or even with two others checkerwise, and remain with them, as outcasts from the society, to shift for themselves? Or will they return to their dependence on Great Britain? Or, lastly, have the mortification to come in when they will be allowed no credit for doing so?

The warmest friends and the best supporters the constitution has, do not contend that it is free from imperfections; but they found them unavoidable, and are sensible, if evil is likely to arise therefrom, the remedy must come hereafter: for in the present moment it is not to be obtained; and, as there is a constitutional door open for it, I think the people (for it is with them to judge), can, as they will have the advantage of experience on their side, decide with as much propriety on the alterations and amendments which are necessary, as ourselves. I do not think we are more inspired, have more wisdom, or possess more virtue, than those who will come after us.

The power under the constitution will always be in the people. It is intrusted for certain defined purposes, and for a certain limited period, to representatives of their own choosing; and, whenever it is executed contrary to their interest, or not agreeable to their wishes, their servants can and undoubtedly will be recalled. It is agreed on all hands, that no government can be well administered without powers; yet, the instant these are delegated, although those, who are intrusted with the administration, are no more than the creatures of the people, act as it were but for a day, and are amenable for every false step they take, they are, from the moment they receive it, set down as tyrants: their natures, they would conceive from this, immediately changed, and that they can have no other disposition but to oppress. Of these things, in a government constituted and guarded as *ours* is, I have no idea: and do firmly believe, that, whilst many *ostensible* reasons are assigned to prevent the adoption of it, the real ones are concealed behind the curtains, because they are not of a nature to appear in open day. I believe further, supposing them pure, that as great evils result from too great jealousy as from the want of it. We need look, I think, no further for proof of this, than to the constitution of some, if not all, of these States. No man is a warmer advocate for proper restraints and wholesome checks in every department of government, than I am; but I have never yet been able to discover the propriety of placing it absolutely out of the power of men to render essential services, because a possibility remains of their doing ill.

TO DAVID STUART, *November 30, 1787.*

I have seen no publication yet, that ought in my judgment to shake the proposed constitution in the mind of an impartial and candid public. In fine, I have hardly seen one, that is not addressed to the passions of the people, and obviously calculated to alarm their fears. Every attempt to amend the constitution at this time is in my opinion idle and vain. If there are characters, who prefer disunion, or separate confederacies, to the general government, which is offered to them, their opposition may, for aught I know, proceed from principle; but as nothing, according to my conception of the matter, is more to be deprecated than a disunion or these distinct confederacies, as far as my voice can go it shall be offered in favor of the latter. That there are some writers, and others perhaps who may not have written, that wish to see this union divided into several confederacies, is pretty evident. As an antidote to these opinions, and in order to investigate the ground of objections to the constitution which is submitted, the *Federalist*, under the signature of PUBLIUS, is written. The numbers, which have been published, I send you. If there is a printer in Richmond, who is really well disposed to support the new constitution, he would do well to give them a place in his paper. They are, I think I may venture to say, written by able men: and before they are finished will, or I am mistaken, place matters in a true point of light. Although I am acquainted with the writers, who have a hand in this work, I am not at liberty to mention names, nor would I have it known that they are sent by *me* to *you* for promulgation.\*

TO EDMUND RANDOLPH, *January 8, 1788.*

The diversity of sentiments upon the important matter, which has been submitted to the people, was as much expected as it is regretted by me. The various passions and *motives*,

\* "Pray, if it is not a secret, who is the author or authors of Publius?"—*Washington to Knox*, 6 February, 1788.  
 October 20th, Hamilton sent to Washington the first number of the *Federalist*, without any intimation as to the authorship. "For the remaining numbers of PUBLIUS," wrote Washington in reply, "I shall acknowledge myself obliged, as I am persuaded the subject will be well handled by the author of them." November 18th, Madison sent him seven numbers, suggesting that they be republished in Virginia, and saying that his own *degree* of connection with the publication was such as to "afford a restraint of delicacy from interesting myself directly in the republication elsewhere. You will recognize one of the pens concerned in the task. There are three in the whole. A fourth may possibly bear a part."

by which men are influenced, are concomitants of fallibility, engrafted into our nature for the purposes of unerring wisdom; but, had I entertained a latent hope (at the time you moved to have the constitution submitted to a second convention,) that a more perfect form would be agreed to, in a word, that any constitution would be adopted under the impressions and instructions of the members, the publications, which have taken place since, would have eradicated every form of it. How do the sentiments of the influential characters in this State, who are opposed to the constitution, and have favored the public with their opinions, quadrate with each other? Are they not at variance on some of the most important points? If the opponents in the *same* State cannot agree in their principles, what prospect is there of a coalescence with the advocates of the measure, when the different views and jarring interests of so wide and extended an empire are to be brought forward and combated?

To my judgment it is more clear than ever, that an attempt to amend the constitution, which is submitted, would be productive of more heat and greater confusion than can well be conceived. There are some things in the new form, I will readily acknowledge, which never did, and I am persuaded never will, obtain my cordial approbation; but I then did conceive, and do now most firmly believe, that in the aggregate it is the best constitution, that can be obtained at this epoch, and that this, or a dissolution of the Union, awaits our choice, and are the only alternatives before us. Thus believing, I had not, nor have I now, any hesitation in deciding on which to lean.

TO THE MARQUIS DE CHASTELLUX, *April 25, 1788.*

The constitution which was proposed by the federal convention has been adopted by the States of Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Georgia. No State has rejected it. The convention of Maryland is now sitting, and will probably adopt it; as that of South Carolina is expected to do in May. The other conventions will assemble early in the summer. Hitherto there has been much greater unanimity in favor of the proposed government, than could have reasonably been expected. Should it be adopted (and I think it will be), America will lift up her head again, and in a few years become respectable among the nations. It is a flattering

and consolatory reflection, that our rising republics have the good wishes of all the philosophers, patriots, and virtuous men in all nations; and that they look upon them as a kind of asylum for mankind. God grant that we may not disappoint their honest expectations by our folly or perverseness. . . .

TO THOMAS JEFFERSON, *August 31, 1788.*

The merits and defects of the proposed constitution have been largely and ably discussed. For myself, I was ready to have embraced any tolerable compromise, that was competent to save us from impending ruin; and I can say there are scarcely any of the amendments, which have been suggested, to which I have much objection, except that which goes to the prevention of direct taxation. And that, I presume, will be more strenuously advocated and insisted upon hereafter, than any other. I had indulged the expectation, that the new government would enable those entrusted with its administration to do justice to the public creditors, and retrieve the national character. But, if no means are to be employed but requisitions, that expectation was vain, and we may as well recur to the old confederation. If the system can be put in operation, without touching much the pockets of the people, perhaps it may be done; but, in my judgment, infinite circumspection and prudence are yet necessary in the experiment. It is nearly impossible for anybody who has not been on the spot (from any description) to conceive what the delicacy and danger of our situation have been. Though the peril is not past entirely, thank God the prospect is somewhat brightening.

You will probably have heard, before the receipt of this letter, that the general government has been adopted by eleven States, and that the actual Congress have been prevented from issuing their ordinance for carrying it into execution, in consequence of a dispute about the place at which the future Congress shall meet. It is probable, that Philadelphia or New York will soon be agreed upon.

I will just touch on the bright side of our national state, before I conclude; and we may perhaps rejoice, that the people have been ripened by misfortune for the reception of a good government. They are emerging from the gulf of dissipation and debt, into which they had precipitated themselves at the close of the war. Economy and industry are evi-

dently gaining ground. Not only agriculture, but even manufactures, are much more attended to than formerly. Notwithstanding the shackles under which our trade in general labors, commerce to the East Indies is prosecuted with considerable success. Salted provisions and other produce (particularly from Massachusetts,) have found an advantageous market there. The voyages are so much shorter, and the vessels are navigated at so much less expense, that we may hope to rival and supply, (at least through the West Indies,) some part of Europe with commodities from thence. This year the exports from Massachusetts have amounted to a great deal more than their imports. I wish this was the case everywhere. . . .

To HENRY LEE, *September 22, 1788.*

Your observations on the solemnity of the crisis, and its application to myself, bring before me subjects of the most momentous and interesting nature. In our endeavors to establish a new general government, the contest, nationally considered, seems not to have been so much for glory as existence. It was for a long time doubtful whether we were to survive as an independent republic, or decline from our federal dignity into insignificant and wretched fragments of an empire. The adoption of the constitution so extensively, and with so liberal an acquiescence on the part of the minorities in general, promised the former; until lately the circular letter of New York carried, in my apprehension, an unfavorable if not an insidious tendency to a contrary policy. I still hope for the best; but, before you mentioned it, I could not help fearing it would serve as a standard to which the disaffected might resort. It is now evidently the part of all honest men, who are friends to the new constitution, to endeavor to give it a chance to disclose its merits and defects, by carrying it fairly into effect in the first instance. For it is to be apprehended that, by an attempt to obtain amendments before the experiment has been candidly made, "more is meant than meets the ear," that an intention is concealed to accomplish slyly what could not have been done openly, to undo all that has been done.

If the fact so exists, that a kind of combination is forming to stifle the government in embryo, it is a happy circumstance that the design has become suspected. Preparations should

be the sure attendant upon forewarning. Probably prudence, wisdom, and patriotism were never more essentially necessary, than at the present moment; and so far as it can be done in an intepochably direct manner, no effort ought to be left unessayed to procure the election of the best possible characters to the new Congress. On their harmony, deliberation, and decision everything will depend. I heartily wish Mr. Madison was in our Assembly, as I think with you it is of unspeakable importance Virginia should set out with her federal measures under right auspices.

The principal topic of your letter is to me a point of great delicacy indeed, inasmuch that I can scarcely without some impropriety touch upon it. In the first place, the event to which you allude may never happen; among other reasons, because, if the partiality of my fellow citizens conceive it to be a means by which the sinews of the new government would be strengthened, it will of consequence be obnoxious to those who are in opposition to it, many of whom unquestionably will be placed among the electors.

This consideration alone would supersede the expediency of announcing any definite and irrevocable resolution. You are among the small number of those who know my invincible attachment to domestic life, and that my sincerest wish is to continue in the enjoyment of it solely until my final hour. But the world would be neither so well instructed, nor so candidly disposed, as to believe me uninfluenced by sinister motives, in case any circumstance should render a deviation from the line of conduct I had prescribed to myself indispensable.

Should the contingency you suggest take place, and (for argument's sake alone let me say it) should my unfeigned reluctance to accept the office be overcome by a deference for the reasons and opinions of my friends, might I not, after the declarations I have made (and Heaven knows they were made in the sincerity of my heart), in the judgment of the impartial world and of posterity, be chargeable with levity and inconsistency, if not with rashness and ambition? Nay, farther, would there not even be some apparent foundation for the two former charges? Now justice to myself and tranquillity of conscience require that I should act a part, if not above imputation, at least capable of vindication. Nor will you conceive me to be too solicitous for reputation. Though I prize as I ought the good opinion of my fellow citizens, yet, if I know

myself, I would not seek or retain popularity at the expense of one social duty or moral virtue.

While doing what my conscience informed me was right, as it respected my God, my country, and myself, I could despise all the party clamor and unjust censure, which must be expected from some whose personal enmity might be occasioned by their hostility to the government. I am conscious that I fear alone to give any real occasion for obloquy, and that I do not dread to meet with unmerited reproach. And certain I am, whensoever I shall be convinced the good of my country requires my reputation to be put in risk, regard for my own fame will not come in competition with an object of so much magnitude. If I declined the task, it would lie upon quite another principle. Notwithstanding my advanced season of life, my increasing fondness for agricultural amusements, and my growing love of retirement, augment and confirm my decided predilection for the character of a private citizen, yet it would be no one of these motives, nor the hazard to which my former reputation might be exposed, nor the terror of encountering new fatigues and troubles, that would deter me from an acceptance; but a belief that some other person, who had less pretence and less inclination to be excused, could execute all the duties fully as satisfactorily as myself. To say more would be indiscreet, as a disclosure of a refusal beforehand might incur the application of the fable in which the fox is represented as undervaluing the grapes he could not reach. You will perceive, my dear Sir, by what is here observed, (and which you will be pleased to consider in the light of a confidential communication,) that my inclinations will dispose and decide me to remain as I am, unless a clear and insurmountable conviction should be impressed on my mind that some very disagreeable consequences must, in all human probability, result from the indulgence of my wishes.

TO ALEXANDER HAMILTON, *October 3, 1788.\**

Although I could not help observing, from several publications and letters, that my name had been sometimes spoken of, and that it was possible the *contingency* which is the subject

\* See Hamilton's letter upon the importance of Washington serving as first President of the United States under the Constitution, in Ford's edition of Washington, xi. 429. "On your acceptance of the office of President," Hamilton wrote, "the success of the new government in its commencement may materially depend."

of your letter might happen, yet I thought it best to maintain a guarded silence, and to lack the counsel of my best friends, (which I certainly hold in the highest estimation,) rather than to hazard an imputation unfriendly to the delicacy of my feelings. For, situated as I am, I could hardly bring the question into the slightest discussion, or ask an opinion even in the most confidential manner, without betraying, in my judgment, some impropriety of conduct, or without feeling an apprehension, that a premature display of anxiety might be construed into a vainglorious desire of pushing myself into notice as a candidate. Now, if I am not grossly deceived in myself, I should unfeignedly rejoice in case the electors, by giving their votes in favor of some other person, would save me from the dreaded dilemma of being forced to accept or refuse.

If that may not be, I am in the next place earnestly desirous of searching out the truth, and of knowing whether there does not exist a probability that the government would be just as happily and effectually carried into execution without my aid as with it. I am *truly* solicitous to obtain all the previous information, which the circumstances will afford, and to determine (when the determination can with propriety be no longer postponed) according to the principles of right reason, and the dictates of a clear conscience, without too great a reference to the unforeseen consequences, which may affect my person or reputation. Until that period, I may fairly hold myself open to conviction, though I allow your sentiments to have weight in them: and I shall not pass by your arguments without giving them as dispassionate a consideration as I can possibly bestow upon them.

In taking a survey of the subject, in whatever point of light I have been able to place it, I will not suppress the acknowledgment, my dear Sir, that I have always felt a kind of gloom upon my mind, as often as I have been taught to expect I might, and perhaps must, ere long, be called to make a decision. You will, I am well assured, believe the assertion, (though I have little expectation it would gain credit from those who are less acquainted with me,) that, if I should receive the appointment, and if I should be prevailed upon to accept it, the acceptance would be attended with more diffidence and reluctance than I ever experienced before in my life. It would be, however, with a fixed and sole determination of lending whatever assistance might be in my power to promote the public weal, in

hopes that at a convenient and early period my services might be dispensed with, and that I might be permitted once more to retire, to pass an unclouded evening after the stormy day of life, in the bosom of domestic tranquillity.

The personal influence of Washington in securing the meeting of the Constitutional Convention, in directing its deliberations, and in commending the new constitution to the people, was the greatest and the determining influence in that critical period. The accompanying selections from his large correspondence upon this important subject while it was pending will indicate the character of that influence and of Washington's sentiments concerning the new national government. The student is referred to Volume XI. of Ford's edition of the writings of Washington for the complete collection of his letters during this period. He will also find in that volume (page 140) Washington's Diary during the Constitutional Convention, which, although but a skeleton, will give him an insight into Washington's life in Philadelphia from May to September, 1787. In the various Lives of Washington, in the last volume of Bancroft's History of the United States, in Fiske's "Critical Period of American History," and elsewhere are good accounts of the disorders following the Revolution, to which the earlier letters in the present leaflet relate, and of the successful measures, so largely directed by Washington, which gradually brought order out of chaos. In the series of Old South Leaflets are many which will be of use in this connection. Among these are Washington's Circular Letter to the governors of the States in 1783 (No. 15), Washington's Letter to Benjamin Harrison in 1784 (No. 16), Selection from the Debates in the Constitutional Convention (No. 70), Selections from the Federalist (No. 12), and Washington's Inaugural (No. 13).