

Samuel Huntington in the Connecticut Ratification Convention, 9 January 1788

SAMUEL HUNTINGTON: Upon the general discussion of the subject, His Excellency Governor Samuel Huntington expressed himself nearly as follows.

Mr. President, I do not rise to detain this Convention for any length of time. The subject has been so fully discussed that very little can be added to what has been already offered. I have heard and attended with pleasure to what has been said upon this subject. The importance of it merited a full and ample discussion. It does not give me pain, but pleasure, to hear the sentiments of those gentlemen who differ from me. It is not to be expected from human nature that we should all have the same opinion. The best way to learn the nature and effects of different systems of government is not from theoretical dissertations, but from experience from what has actually taken place among mankind. From this latter source of information, it is that mankind have obtained a more complete knowledge of the nature of government than they had in ages past. It is an established truth that no nation can exist without a coercive power, a power to enforce the execution of its political regulations. There is such a love of liberty implanted in the human breast that no nation ever willingly gave up its liberty. If they lose this inestimable birthright of man, it is from a want not of will but of the proper means to support it. If we look into history, we shall find that the common avenue through which tyranny has entered in, and enslaved nations who were once free, has been their not supporting government. The great secret of preserving liberty is to lodge the supreme power so as to be well supported and not abused. If this could only be effected, no nation would ever lose its liberty. The history of mankind clearly shows that it is dangerous to entrust the supreme power in the hands of one man. The same source of knowledge proves that it is not only inconvenient but dangerous to liberty for the people of a large community to attempt to exercise in person the supreme authority. Hence arises the necessity that the people should act by their representatives; but this method, so necessary for the support of civil liberty, is an improvement of modern times. Liberty however is not so well secured as it ought to be when the supreme power is lodged in one body of representatives. There ought to be two branches of the legislature, that the one may be a check upon the other.

It is difficult for the people at large to know when the supreme power is verging towards abuse and to apply the proper remedy. But if the government be properly balanced, it will possess a renovating principle by which it will be able to right itself. The constitution of the British nation affords us great light upon the subject of government. Learned men in other countries have admired it, but they thought it too finespun to prove beneficial in practice. But a long trial has now shown its excellence; and the difficulties which that nation now experiences arise not from their constitution but from other circumstances.

The Author of Nature has given to mankind a certain degree of insight into futurity. As far as we can see a probability that certain events will happen, so far we do well to

provide and guard. But we may attempt to go too far; it is in vain to think of providing against every possible contingency. The happiness of civil society depends not merely upon their constitution of government but upon a variety of circumstances. One constitution may suit one particular nation exceedingly well; when a different one would suit another nation in different circumstances. Even among the American states there is such a difference in sentiments, habits, and customs that a government which would be very suitable for one might not be agreeable to another.

I am fully of opinion that the great council of the Union must have a controlling power with respect to matters of national concern. There is at present an extreme want of power in the national government; and it is my opinion that this Constitution does not give too much. As to the subject of representation, at first view it appears small; but upon the whole, the purposes of the Union could not be so well answered by a greater number. It is impracticable to have the numbers of the representation as great, and the times of electing as frequent, as they are in our state governments. Nor is this necessary for the security of liberty. It is sufficient if the choice of Representatives be so frequent that they must depend upon the people, and that an inseparable connection be kept up between the electors and elected.

The state governments, I think, will not be endangered by the powers vested by this Constitution in the general government. While I have attended in Congress, I have observed that the members were quite as strenuous advocates for the rights of their respective states as for those of the Union. I doubt not but this will continue to be the case, and hence I infer that the general government will not have the disposition to encroach upon the states. But still the people themselves must be the chief support of liberty. While the great body of the freeholders are acquainted with the duties which they owe to their God, to themselves, and to men, they will remain free. But if ignorance and depravity should prevail, they will inevitably lead to slavery and ruin. Upon the whole view of this Constitution, I am in favor of it and think it bids fair to promote our national prosperity. This is a new event in the history of mankind. Heretofore, most governments have been formed by tyrants and imposed on mankind by force. Never before did a people, in time of peace and tranquility, meet together by their representatives and, with calm deliberation, frame for themselves a system of government. This noble attempt does honor to our country. While I express my sentiments in favor of this Constitution, I candidly believe that the gentlemen who oppose it are actuated by principles of regard to the public welfare. If we will exercise mutual candor for each other, and sincerely endeavor to maintain our liberties, we may long continue to be a free and happy people. [Connecticut Courant, 14 January.

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