

Samuel Johnson in the Connecticut Ratification Convention, 4 January 1788

DR. WILLIAM SAMUEL JOHNSON rose after Mr. Ellsworth and expressed himself to the following purpose.

My honorable friend has represented to us the miserable state which we are in with respect to our public affairs. It is a melancholy picture, but not too highly drawn. Our commerce is annihilated; our national honor, once in so high esteem, is no more. We have got to the very brink of ruin; we must turn back and adopt a new system. The gentleman's arguments have demonstrated that a principle of coercion is absolutely necessary, if we would have a Union to answer any beneficial purposes. All ancient leagues have had this principle. Holland has in fact had it. When a Dutch province has neglected to furnish her quota for the national expense, taxes have been levied by an army. It was necessary that each province should be compelled to pay her part. But how was this effected? There was no other way but by force of arms, a method most dangerous to the public tranquility.

Under our old Confederation, each state was bound by the most solemn obligations to pay its proportion of the national expense. If any state did not perform what it had so solemnly promised, it became a transgressor. It did an injury to the other states to which it had plighted its faith for the performance of what it had stipulated in the Articles of Confederation. The other states have a right to redress; they have a right by the law of nature and nations to insist upon and compel a performance. How shall this be done? There is no other way but by force of arms. What is the consequence? This way of enforcing federal decrees leads directly to civil war and national ruin. This was the case with the ancient leagues. The states in confederacy were bound by compact to bear certain proportions of the public burdens. Some of the states were delinquent; they failed in performing their stipulations. This injurious conduct provoked the others; they had recourse to arms for redress. While they were thus involved in civil war, neighboring powers took advantage of it and availed themselves of the forces of a part to subdue the rest. Such is the nature of this kind of confederacies, that the general decrees must either remain without efficacy or be put in execution by a military force.

The Convention saw this imperfection in attempting to legislate for states in their political capacity; that the coercion of law can be exercised by nothing but a military force. They have therefore gone upon entirely new ground. They have formed one new nation out of the individual states. The Constitution vests in the general legislature a power to make laws in matters of national concern, to appoint judges to decide upon these laws, and to appoint officers to carry them into execution. This excludes the idea of an armed force. The power which is to enforce these laws is to be a legal power vested in proper magistrates. The force which is to be employed is the energy of law; and this force is to operate only upon individuals who fail in their duty to their country. This is the peculiar glory of the Constitution, that it depends upon the mild and equal energy of the magistracy for the execution of the laws. The Convention have framed a system of government and now submit it to the wisdom of their country. We address

ourselves, not to your passions, but to your reason; we speak as to wise men. Judge ye what we say. As to the old system, we can go no further with it; experience has shown it to be utterly inefficient. The states were sensible of this. To remedy the evil, they appointed the Convention. Though no enthusiast, I cannot but impute it to a signal intervention of Divine Providence that a Convention from states differing in circumstances, interests, and manners should be so harmonious in adopting one grand system. If we reject a plan of government which with such favorable circumstances is offered for our acceptance, I fear our national existence must come to a final end.
[Connecticut Courant, 14 January]

Cite as: The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution Digital Edition, ed. John P. Kaminski, Gaspare J. Saladino, Richard Leffler, Charles H. Schoenleber and Margaret A. Hogan. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009.

Canonic URL: <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/RNCN-02-03-02-0004-0011-0005> [accessed 06 Jan 2011]

Original source: Ratification by the States, Volume III: Delaware, New Jersey, Georgia, and Connecticut

