

James Innes in the Virginia Ratification Convention, 25 June 1788

Mr. *Innes*—Mr. Chairman.—I have hitherto been silent on this great and interesting question. But my silence has not proceeded from a neutrality of sentiments, or a supineness of disposition. The session of the Court of *Oyer and Terminer*, at this time, has indispensably called my attention to the prosecutions for the Commonwealth. Had I taken an earlier part in the discussion, my observations would have been desultory and perhaps not satisfactory, being not apprised of all the arguments which had been used by Gentlemen. We are now brought to that great part of the system where it is necessary for me to take a decided part. This is one of the most important questions, that ever agitated the councils of America. When I see in this House divided in opinion, several of those brave officers whom I have seen so gallantly fighting and bleeding for their country, the question is doubly interesting to me. I thought it would be the last of human events, that I should be on a different side from them, on so awful an occasion. However painful and distressing to me, the recollection of this diversity of sentiments may be, I am consoled by this reflection—that difference in opinion has a happy consequence. It aids discussion, and is a friend to truth. We ought (and I hope we have the temper) to be regulated by candour and moderation, without which in a deliberative body, every thing with respect to the public good, evaporates into nothing. I came hither under a persuasion that the felicity of our country required that we should accede to this system; but I am free to declare, that I came in with a mind open to conviction, and a predetermination to recede from my opinion, if I should find it to be erroneous.—I have heard nothing hitherto that would warrant a change of one idea. The objections urged by the advocates of the opposition have been ably and in my conception, satisfactorily answered by the friends of the Constitution. I wish instead of reasoning from possible abuses, that the Government had been considered as an abstract position, drawn from the history of all nations, and such theoretic opinions as experience has demonstrated to be right. I have waited to hear this mode of reasoning, but in vain. Instead of this, Sir, horrors have been called up, chimeras suggested, and every terrific and melancholy idea adduced, to prevent, what I think indispensably necessary for our national honor, happiness and safety—I mean the adoption of the system under consideration....

Can it be said that liberty of conscience is in danger? I observed on the side of the Constitution, those who have been champions for religious liberty, an attack on which I would as soon resist as one on civil liberty. Do they employ consistent arguments to shew that it is in danger? They inform you that Turks, Jews, Infidels, Christians, and all other sects may be President, and command the fleet and army, there being no test to be required. And yet the tyrannical and inquisitorial Congress, will ask me as a private citizen what is my opinion on religion, and punish

me if it does not conform to theirs! I cannot think the Gentleman could be serious when he made these repugnant and incompatible objections.

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