

Jonathan Mitchell Sewall Oration, Portsmouth, N.H., 4 July 1788

... Since the first pair, we all enter on the theatre of life, wholly dependent, under God, on our parents. In this respect, we are far inferior to the beasts that perish. For a long period, and sometimes to the end of our lives, we depend on those born before us for food, raiment, shelter, and protection, as well as for knowledge and instruction. This necessary dependence is doubtless what first suggested to men the idea of society, and the many evil dispositions of individuals, the necessity of government. The former, as hath been justly observed by a fine writer, being founded in the *weakness*, the latter in the *wickedness* of mankind. Yet still this innate thirst for freedom and independence has prevailed; predominating more or less as the reins of government have been relaxed, or straitened, or the subject more or less accustomed to the yoke. Nor need we confine this impatience of restraint to states and societies,—it is equally discoverable in the infant, the child, the school-boy, and the adult: all of whom love to be independent, and abhor controul. Nay, even the gentlest, and (as many suppose) the least-fallen part of our species, who seem all pliability and submission—I mean the softer sex, are not insensible to this powerful principle. The modest fair, tho' not totally averse to the tender connexion, yet sometimes starts at the word *obey*, and, perhaps, would submit to have the word *govern* substituted in its stead. However, what is wanted in the *word* is amply made up in the *thing*—'tis they at last that move the wheels of society, and indeed, every other wheel; and the haughtiest spirit is finally proud to wear their chains.

What shall we say then? Is this aversion to restraint, and love of liberty, a laudable or illaudable instinct? The answer is plain and easy. Like every other passion, if permitted to rage uncontrouled, 'tis pernicious, but laudable and salutary when properly regulated. When like Charity, it

*“Knows with just hand, and steady reins to guide;
Betwixt vile shame, and arbitrary pride.”*

—It is useful both to individuals and to society; a powerful stimulus to industry, and a strong barrier against indolence, servility and want.

But this powerful inclination requires to be checked. The *necessity* of *government*, in the present imperfect state of humanity, is therefore obvious. It is what most of us are able to see, and what all, of late, has sorely felt.

The abuse of government to the perverting its proper ends, has been equally obvious to our sight and feelings.

The arbitrary measures of Britain, with our suc[c]essful opposition thereto, exemplify the latter—our own sufferings from the want of a permanent, efficient, national government, since that success, evince the former.

At length Heaven has again graciously smiled upon us.

A Federal Constitution of government is now ratified by nine, which is, in effect, by all the United States. A constitution which no earthly power short of our own, will ever be able to frustrate, or violate! And next to him “by whom kings reign, and states decree justice,” our gratitude should arise to those patriotic sages, the members of the general and particular conventions (many of whom were also instrumental, in the cabinet, and in the field, in

promoting that revolution for which we are this day called to rejoice) who, with all the labours of wisdom and public-virtue, inforced with all the powers of eloquence, happily effected the glorious, all-important object. Long, long may they live to taste the blessings it so justly promises! ...

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-03-18-02-0065-0002>
[accessed 28 Jan 2011]

Original source: Commentaries on the Constitution, Volume XVIII: Commentaries on the Constitution, No. 6