

Document Based Question: Reactions to the Philadelphia Convention and its work.

Historical Context

During and after the Philadelphia Convention, May 27 to September 17, 1787 there was much discussion and debate about the proceeding. These documents present a range of responses and reaction to the Convention that date from July 4, 1787 to May 23, 1788

Task:

This question is based on the accompanying documents. It is designed to test your ability to work with primary resources. Some of the documents have been edited for the purposes of the question.

As you analyze the documents, take into account the source of each document and any point of view that may be presented in the document.

Read each document carefully, a list of terms is below each document. Write an essay that utilizes evidence from the documents. Use proper writing conventions.

Question:

Analyze the opinions and reactions to the meeting of the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia 1787.

David Daggett, Oration Delivered in New Haven, 4 July 1787

...We must consent to a change of government.—Whether this change shall be partial or general, is not for me to say.—A more energetic, a more coercive power than at present is felt, must be vested in some public body.—This matter is submitted to a convention of the states, now sitting at Philadelphia. The unanimity of the states, in choosing delegates to this convention, is a forcible argument of the full conviction that the people feel of the weakness of the present system.—This measure has justly exalted the hopes of every patriot.—A measure from which we have nothing to fear, but every thing to hope.—At their head, sits the illustrious WASHINGTON, in description of whose finished and complete character, language fails.—There is FRANKLIN, whose penetrating mind, looks thro' all the works of nature.—There are gerry, sherman, morris, clymer, wilson, read and wythe, who made a declaration of that independence which we this day celebrate, and whose fame is coeval with our national importance.

...It is impossible for societies to exist without an energetic, coercive power; and the same principle which induced men, while in a state of nature, to enter into compacts, will soon compel these states to a change of government.

Terms:

energetic – powerful

coercive – forceful

unanimity – state of being unanimous of the same opinion

coeval – synonymous, the same

An Admirer of Anti-Federal Men, New York Daily Advertiser, 26 July 1787

—STAND FIRM, AND HAVE A JEALOUS EYE.

...In times of public danger, every citizen has a right, and should make it a duty, to come

forward, and lend an aiding hand. The present period is pregnant with the most important consequences to this country. A confidence in those illustrious characters, which form the grand convention, now sitting, will have the most salutary effect.—The united wisdom of America is now forming a government adequate to the wants of our rising empire. Receive it, then, with gratitude: if it should seem deficient, proper alterations will be made, until it is rendered agreeably to the interests of the several states.—A WASHINGTON, surely, will never stoop to tarnish the lustre of his former actions, by having an agency in any thing capable of reflecting dishonor on himself or his countrymen:—and the philosophical FRANKLIN would not be guilty of embarking in any undertaking, which appeared futile and unnecessary. Rest assured, therefore, that those worthies, in conjunction with many others, have the good of America at heart.

July 25th, 1787.

Terms:

alterations – changes

rendered – made, work on

lustre – shine

James Wilson: Speech at a Public Meeting in Philadelphia, 6 October 1787

After the Constitutional Convention adjourned, Wilson was the first Convention delegate to defend the Constitution publicly. On Saturday evening, 6 October, he delivered a speech before “a very great concourse of people” at a public meeting in the Pennsylvania State House Yard to nominate candidates to represent the city of Philadelphia in the Pennsylvania General Assembly.

...Let it be remembered then, that the business of the Foederal Convention was not local, but general; not limited to the views and establishments of a single state, but co-extensive with the continent, and comprehending the views and establishments of thirteen independent sovereignties. When therefore, this subject was in discussion, we were involved in difficulties which pressed on all sides, and no precedent could be discovered to direct our course...

...After all, my fellow citizens, it is neither extraordinary or unexpected, that the constitution offered to your consideration, should meet with opposition. It is the nature of man to pursue his own interest, in preference to the public good; and I do not mean to make any personal reflection, when I add, that it is the interest of a very numerous, powerful, and respectable body to counteract and destroy the excellent work produced by the late convention...

...I will confess indeed, that I am not a blind admirer of this plan of government, and that there are some parts of it, which if my wish had prevailed, would certainly have been altered. But, when I reflect how widely men differ in their opinions, and that every man (and the observation applies likewise to every state) has an equal pretension to assert

Terms:

sovereign – independent, self-governing

sovereignty – and independent, self-governing unit(entity)

pretension – a claim, statement

The Grand Constitution_, Massachusetts Centinel, 6 October 1787

the

Grand CONSTITUTION:

Or, *The palladium of columbia:*

A new FEDERAL SONG.

Tune—"Our Freedom we've won," &c.

From scenes of affliction—Columbia opprest—
Of credit expiring—and commerce distrest,
Of nothing to do—and of nothing to pay—
From such dismal scenes let us hasten away.

*Our Freedom we've won, and the prize let's maintain
Our hearts are all right—*

Unite, Boys, Unite,

And our EMPIRE in glory shall ever remain.

The Muses no longer the cypress shall wear—
For we turn our glad eyes to a prospect more fair:
The soldier return'd to his small cultur'd farm,
Enjoys the reward of his conquering arm.

"Our Freedom we've won," &c.

Our trade and our commerce shall reach far and wide,
And riches and honour flow in with each tide,
Kamschatka and *China* with wonder shall stare,
That the *Federal Stripes* should wave gracefully there.

"Our Freedom we've won," &c.

With gratitude let us acknowledge the worth,
Of what the Convention has call'd into birth,
And the Continent wisely confirm what is done
By Franklin the sage, and by brave Washington.

"Our Freedom we've won," &c.

The wise CONSTITUTION let's truly revere,
It points out the course for our EMPIRE to steer,
For oceans of bliss do they hoist the broad sail,
And *peace* is the current, and *plenty* the gale.

"Our Freedom we've won," &c.

With gratitude fill'd—let the great Commonweal
Pass round the full glass to Republican zeal—
From ruin—their judgment and wisdom well aim'd,
Our liberties, laws, and our credit reclaim'd.

"Our Freedom we've won," &c.

Here Plenty and Order and Freedom shall dwell,
And your *Shayes* and *Dayses* won't dare to rebel—
Independence and culture shall graciously smile,
And the *Husbandman* reap the full fruit of his toil.

"Our Freedom we've won," &c.

That these are the blessings, Columbia knows—

The blessings the Fed'ral CONVENTION bestows.
O! then let the People confirm what is done
By Franklin the sage, and by brave Washington.
Our freedom we've won, and the prize will2 maintain
By Jove we'll Unite,
Approve and Unite—
And buzza for Convention again and again.

Terms:

Columbia – historic and poetic name given to the United States of America, personified in female form
Muses – thinkers, philosophers
cypress – a twig or leaf from a cypress tree worn for ornamentation
Commonweal – the general welfare
Shayes – reference to Daniel Shay of Shay's Rebellion
Dayses - reference to Luke Day of Shay's Rebellion

Centinel II, _Philadelphia Freeman's Journal, 24 October 1787

To the people of pennsylvania.

...The abolition of that grand palladium of freedom, the liberty of the press, in the proposed plan of government, and the conduct of its authors, and patrons, is a striking exemplification of these observations. The reason assigned for the omission of a *bill of rights*, securing the *liberty of the press*, and *other invaluable personal rights*, is an insult on the understanding of the people.

The injunction of secrecy imposed on the members of the late Convention during their deliberations, was obviously dictated by the genius of Aristocracy; it was deemed impolitic to unfold the principles of the intended government to the people, as this would have frustrated the object in view.

...The new plan was accordingly ushered to the public with such a splendor of names, as inspired the most unlimited confidence; the people were disposed to receive upon trust, without any examination on their part, what would have proved either a *blessing* or a *curse* to them and their posterity.—What astonishing infatuation! to stake their happiness on the wisdom and integrity of any set of men! In matters of infinitely smaller concern, the dictates of prudence are not disregarded! The celebrated *Montesquien*, in his Spirit of Laws, says, that “slavery is ever preceded by sleep”...

.....My fellow citizens, such false detestable *patriots* in every nation, have led their blind confiding country, shouting their applauses, into the jaws of *despotism* and *ruin*. May the wisdom and virtue of the people of America, save them from the usual fate of nations...

Terms:

abolition – to end or stop
palladium – institution, state of
injunction – order, command
deliberations – discussions
posterity – future generations

Publius: The Federalist 2, New York Independent Journal, 31 October 1787

The FOEDERALIST. No. II.

To the People of the State of New-York.

...A strong sense of the value and blessings of Union induced the people, at a very early period, to institute a Foederal Government (referring to the government under the Articles of Confederation) to preserve and perpetuate it—They formed it almost as soon as they had a political existence; nay at a time, when their habitations were in flames, when many of their Citizens were bleeding, and when the progress of hostility and desolation left little room for those calm and mature enquiries and reflections, which must ever precede the formation of a wise and well balanced government for a free people—It is not to be wondered at that a Government instituted in times so inauspicious, should on experiment be found greatly deficient and inadequate to the purpose it was intended to answer.

This intelligent people perceived and regretted these defects. Still continuing no less attached to union, than enamoured of liberty, they observed the danger, which immediately threatened the former and more remotely the latter; and being persuaded that ample security for both, could only be found in a national Government more wisely framed, they, as with one voice, convened the late Convention at Philadelphia, to take that important subject under consideration.

This Convention, composed of men who possessed the confidence of the people, and many of whom had become highly distinguished by their patriotism, virtue and wisdom, in times which tried the minds and hearts of men, undertook the arduous task—In the mild season of peace, with minds unoccupied by other subjects, they passed many months in cool uninterrupted and daily consultations: and finally, without having been awed by power, or influenced by any passions except love for their Country, they presented and recommended to the people the plan produced by their joint and very unanimous counsels...

...It is worthy of remark that not only the first, but every succeeding Congress, as well as the late Convention, have invariably joined with the people in thinking that the prosperity of America depended on its Union. To preserve and perpetuate it, was the great object of the people in forming that Convention, and it is also the great object of the plan which the Convention has advised them to adopt.

...They who promote the idea of substituting a number of distinct confederacies in the room of the plan of the Convention, seem clearly to foresee that the rejection of it would put the continuance of the Union in the utmost jeopardy—That certainly would be the case, and I sincerely wish that it may be as clearly foreseen by every good Citizen, that whenever the dissolution of the Union arrives, America will have reason to exclaim in the words of the Poet, “FAREWELL, A LONG FAREWELL, TO ALL MY GREATNESS.”

Terms:

inauspicious – troublesome, not of good fortune

enamoured – full of interest and love for

arduous – hard, difficult to achieve

consultations – to deliberate, discuss

confederacies – political unions of freindsnip

jeopardy – danger, trouble

Federal Farmer, Letters to the Republican, 8 November 1787

LETTER I.

October 8th, 1787.

...A general convention for mere commercial purposes was moved for—the authors of this measure saw that the people’s attention was turned solely to the amendment of the federal system; and that, had the idea of a total change been started, probably no state would have appointed members to the convention. The idea of destroying, ultimately, the state government, and forming one consolidated system, could not have been admitted—a convention, therefore, merely for vesting in congress power to regulate trade, was proposed. This was pleasing to the commercial towns; and the landed people had little or no concern about it. September, 1786, a few men from the middle states met at Annapolis, and hastily proposed a convention to be held in May, 1787, for the purpose, generally, of amending the confederation—this was done before the delegates of Massachusetts, and of the other states arrived⁵—still not a word was said about destroying the old constitution, and making a new one—The states still unsuspecting, and not aware that, they were passing the Rubicon, appointed members to the new convention, for the sole and express purpose of revising and amending the confederation⁶—and, probably, not one man in ten thousand in the United States, till within these ten or twelve days, had an idea that, the old ship was to be destroyed, and he put to the alternative of embarking in the new ship presented, or of being left in danger of sinking—The States, I believe, universally supposed the convention would report alterations in the confederation, which would pass an examination in congress, and after being agreed to there, would be confirmed by all the legislatures, or be rejected.

...We shall view the convention with proper respect—and, at the same time, that we reflect there were men of abilities and integrity in it, we must recollect how disproportionably the democratic and aristocratic parts of the community were represented.

Terms:

“passing the Rubicon” – a decision point that carries grave consequences

American Herald, 19 November, 1787

On Dr. Franklin’s shedding TEAR at signing the DEATH-WARRANT of his COUNTRY’S LIBERTIES.

The worn-out Sage too full his joy to speak,
The puerile tear stole down his wrinkl’d cheek;
He paused a moment—but alas, too late,
He lent his Signet to his Country’s fate,
He grasped the trembling quill and signed his name,
And damn’d the Laurels of his former fame.

Boston, 12th Nov. 1787

Terms:

Signet – signature

quill – writing instrument

Laurels – honors, praise

State Gazette of South Carolina, 28 January 1788

On the New Constitution.

In evil hour his pen 'squire Adams drew
Claiming dominion to his well born few:
In the gay circle of St. James's plac'd
He wrote, and, writing, has his work disgrac'd.
Smit with the splendor of a British King
The crown prevail'd, so once despis'd a thing!
Shelburne and Pitt approv'd of all he wrote,
While Rush and Wilson echo back his note.
Tho' British armies could not here prevail
Yet British politics shall turn the scale;—
In five short years of Freedom weary grown
We quit our plain republics for a throne;
Congress and *President* full proof shall bring,
A mere disguise for Parliament and King.
...Ye, who have bled in Freedom's sacred cause,
Ah, why desert her maxims and her laws?
When *thirteen* states are moulded into *one*
Your rights are vanish'd and your honors gone;
The form of Freedom shall alone remain,
As Rome had Senators when she hugg'd the chain.
Sent to revise your systems—not to change—
Sages have done what Reason deems most strange:
Some alterations in our fabric we
Calmly propos'd, and hoped at length to see—
Ah, how deceived!—these heroes in renown
Scheme for themselves—and pull the fabric down—
Bid in its place Columbia's tomb-stone rise
Inscrib'd with these sad words—*Here Freedom lies!*

Terms:

dominion - rule, control

maxims – an expression of general truth

moulded – “molded”- shaped

sages – philosophers, thinkers

The Report of New York's Delegates to the Constitutional Convention, New York Daily Advertiser, 14 January 1788

On 6 March 1787 the New York legislature appointed Robert Yates, John Lansing, Jr., and Alexander Hamilton as delegates to the Constitutional Convention to meet in May “for the sole and express purpose of revising the Articles of Confederation. Soon after arriving at the Constitutional Convention, Yates and Lansing aligned themselves with a minority of delegates who favored a revision of the Articles of Confederation instead of their total abandonment as proposed by the Virginia Resolutions. On 19 June the Convention rejected the New Jersey Amendments and adopted the Amended Virginia Resolutions, thereby becoming unequivocally committed to the creation of a strong central government. Yates and Lansing became increasingly disenchanted and finally left the Convention on 10 July, more than two months before the Convention adjourned. They never returned.

SIR,

...It is with the sincerest concern we observe, that in the prosecution of the important objects of our mission, we have been reduced to the disagreeable alternative of either exceeding the powers delegated to us, and giving our assent to measures which we conceived destructive of the political happiness of the citizens of the United States; or opposing our opinion to that of a body of respectable men, to whom those citizens had given the most unequivocal proofs of confidence.

...decide against a consolidation of the States. These are reducible into two heads. First. The limited and well defined powers under which we acted, and which could not, on any possible construction, embrace an idea of such magnitude as to assent to a general Constitution in subversion of that of the State. Secondly. A conviction of the impracticability of establishing a general Government, pervading every part of the United States, and extending essential benefits to all.

Our powers were explicit, and confined to the *sole and express purpose of revising the articles of Confederation*, and reporting such alterations and provisions therein, as should render the Federal Constitution adequate to the exigencies of Government, and the preservation of the Union.

From these expressions, we were led to believe that a system of consolidated Government, could not, in the remotest degree, have been in contemplation of the Legislature of this State, for that so important a trust, as the adopting measures which tended to deprive the State Government of its most essential rights of Sovereignty, and to place it in a dependent situation, could not have been confided, by implication, and the circumstance, that the acts of the Convention were to receive a State approbation, in the last resort, forcibly corroborated the opinion, that our powers could not involve the subversion of a Constitution,

Terms:

aligned – sided with

unequivocally – certain, precise
disenchanted – unhappy
delegate – representative
assent – consent, permission
conceived – created
sovereignty – independent, self-governing
approbation – approval,
corroborated – to confirm
subversion – to cause the downfall

Rusticus, *New York Journal*, 23 May 1788

Mr. Greenleaf, In discussing the merits of the new constitution, one of the most favorite, and indeed one of the most plausible arguments the anti republicans adduce in support of their tenets is, the celebrity of the characters that composed the convention and their unanimity in signing the constitution—this, as the Plebeian well observes, “provokes to an investigation of characters which is an invidious task.” I believe, however, upon a candid investigation, we will be convinced that some of them, during the late war, “were hidden in the corners of obscurity,” some of them “speculating for fortune by sporting with the public money;”

...created for the purpose of establishing a government for the good of the community, deprive the state of every part of its rights, who take away annual magistracy, and the certain vicissitude of authority without which equal liberty hath no existence.” As to the boasted unanimity of the Philadelphia convention, I shall only observe in the words of a judicious writer, that “unanimity is in itself an indifferent though a specious quality—Fools may be unanimous in the pursuit of a silly end, or of a right end by silly means. *Knaves may be unanimous to cheat, pirates to plunder, assassins to destroy, even good men may be unanimous in a mistake*—but it is not surely for wise or honest men who see the *mistakes, the folly, the crimes, who felt the danger* to be *unanimous in supporting*, because others have been *so wicked, so unwise or unfortunate*—as to be unanimous in committing them.”

Goshen, Orange County, May 14.

Terms:

plausible – possible
Plebeian – commoner
magistracy – civil officer power
vicissitude – change or variation
Knaves – dishonest persons
Plunder – to steal or take
Unanimous – all together