

Pennsylvania Herald, 9 June 1787

Tacitus observes that “in all nations or cities, the government is in the hands of the people, of the nobility, or of a single person.” Or in other words, that there are three forms of government, a *democracy*, an *aristocracy* and a *monarchy*. Each of these, though none of them absolutely perfect, is well enough calculated, says a friend to order, for preserving peace and procuring plenty to those who live in subjection to it; but as there is a certain malignity in human nature, which fails not to weaken, and in time to destroy the noblest structures its better faculties are capable of raising, so each of these schemes, from the faults of its administrators and subjects, has a continual proneness to sink into an evil and corrupt form, productive only of mischief and destruction. Thus the *democracy* by the rashness and giddiness of the people is apt to dissolve into an *ochlocracy*, or turbulent state, on the borders of anarchy; the *aristocracy*, through the ambition of the nobles, uncontented with their legal share of power, is inclined to change into an *obligarchy*, or fraudulent dominion of a few, and the *monarchy* from the pride of him entrusted with sole power, too frequently degenerates into a *tyranny*. Those three general modes of rule then, are capable of being perverted into three methods of oppression, and in a continual rotation from one to another of these forms, some penetrating politicians have affirmed, all political constitutions to move, though with different degrees of velocity. But, upon the whole, it is certain, that as all *power* is a delegation from the people for their own advantage, no greater portion of it should be any where entrusted than is necessary to accomplish the end proposed; and consequently a *democracy*, fortified by a strong and efficient executive branch, is the most natural, and may be rendered the most beneficial form of government. Were we, indeed, compelled to an election between the monarchical and aristocratical systems, the experience of nations might direct our choice to the former; and, if we must encounter a monster, we should surely be induced to prefer a lion to a cerberus. But “while memory holds a seat in this distracted globe,” the citizens of America can never be reduced to so deplorable an alternative.

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-03-13-02-0037> [accessed 11 May 2011]

Original source: Commentaries on the Constitution, Volume XIII: Commentaries on the Constitution, No. 1