


The Republican Federalist II □

Massachusetts Centinel, 2 January

To the MEMBERS of the CONVENTION of Massachusetts.

Honourable Friends, and Fellow Citizens, It clearly appeared by the resolutions quoted in my last address,¹ that the utmost extent of the views of Congress, and of the Legislature of this State; in calling a Federal Convention, was, that it should revise the articles of Confederation, and report such *alterations* and *provisions therein*, as shall render the Federal Constitution adequate to the exigencies of government and preservation of the union – that neither Congress or the Legislature had the most distant idea of conducting the matter in a mode different from that prescribed by the Confederation – but that on the other hand, they expressly provided, and would have acted unconstitutionally to have [590 ] done otherwise, that the proceedings of the Convention, before they become a part of the Federal Constitution, should be agreed to by Congress and confirmed by the Legislatures of the several states.


No one I presume will deny that the powers of the delegates of this state, were as *full* and *extensive* as either Congress or any of the Legislatures had *authority* to give – that the powers of the other delegate[s] were in general, more *limited* – and that had any of them been more *ample* than those of Massachusetts, they must have been founded

in *usurpation* and therefore have been *null* and *void*. And have the Federal Convention, in pursuance of their powers, reported the *alterations* and *provisions* mentioned in the recited resolve of Congress? If they have, let us call on Congress, to inform us, whether they have agreed to the report, and to transmit it when approved, to the Legislature for their consideration: This would be conducting upon constitutional principles, but the *call* would be vain, there is no such report, *and the original design of forming the Convention has not been carried into effect.*

The Convention nevertheless have reported a new system, and the object of it is, *a consolidation of the union*. Mr. Wilson denies this fact, and says “if this was *a just objection*, it would be *strongly against the system*”² But unfortunately for that gentleman, his *memory* appears to be very *defective*, for he forgot that he has said, in the letter to Congress, signed “George Washington, president, *by unanimous order of the Convention*” – “In all our deliberations on this subject, we kept steadily in our view, that which appears to us the greatest interest of every true American, *the consolidation of the union.*”³ There the Convention have candidly avowed their intentions, and how Mr. Wilson can reconcile his *jarring* and *contradictory* assertions, I am at a loss to determine. The Convention then having kept “*steadily in view*” “a consolidation of the union,” it is incumbent on every one who is zealous for the *infallibility* of the Convention, and liberal in abusing those who *dare* to think for themselves, to

admit that the proposed plan *completely embraces* the object of *consolidation*, for otherwise he will call in question the *ability* of the Convention to execute their design – indeed it must be evident to every one who will attentively read the new system, that it secures to all intents and purposes the *consolidation intended*. And here permit me to remark on an argument, in favour of the new plan, often urged and drawn from the respectable characters of General Washington and Doctor Franklin: Let those gentlemen have *every honour* that can be paid them, they are justly entitled to *it* – but of what consequence is it to the publick, whether the members who assented or dissented to the new plan, were influenced by *virtuous* and *disinterested*, or by *vicious* and *selfish* motives? If the plan is *properly* before the States, is *good*, and will [591] secure to them “peace, liberty and safety” should it not be adopted, were they even sure that every member who subscribed it was in principle a *Caligula* or a *Nero*? And if the plan is bad and will entail *slavery on the land*, ought it not to be rejected should every subscriber excel in wisdom and integrity *Lycurgus* or *Solon*. Surely the *good* or *bad* effects of the system, depend not on the *characters* of the original *framers*, but on the *system* itself, and on those who may administer it; and no man of candour and discernment will urge *characters*, as an argument for or against this system, however respectable the characters of any particular members, or of the members in general of the federal

convention, may be: They had no other authority to act in this matter, than what was derived from their *commissions* — when they ceased to act *in conformity thereto*, they ceased to be a federal convention, and had no more *right* to propose to the United States the new form of government, than an equal number of other gentlemen, who might voluntarily have assembled for this purpose — The members of the convention therefore, admitting they have the merit of a work of supererogation, have thereby inferred no kind of obligation on the States to *consider*, much less to adopt *this plan of consolidation*. The consolidation of the union! What a question is this, to be *taken up* and *decided* by *thirty nine gentlemen*,⁴ who had no publick authority whatever for *discussing it!* — To be submitted to the people at large, before it has been *considered* or even *agitated* by Congress, or any of the Legislatures, and to be transmitted with such precipitation to the States *merely* “for their assent and ratification?” True it is, that neither Congress or the Legislatures could decide this great question; the first are restrained by the confederation, and the last by the federal and state constitutions — but Congress and the Legislatures, if they thought it necessary, might at any time have considered the subject, expressed their sentiments on it, and recommended to the people an election of State conventions to have taken up the matter. Had this been done the important question would have been previously canvassed; and understood by Congress and the Legislatures; and

explained to the people; and the publick opinion would have been thus *united* in some salutary measure – but as the matter has been conducted, a *system of consolidation* has been formed with the most *profound secrecy*, and without the *least authority*: And has been *suddenly* and *without any previous notice* transmitted by the federal convention for ratification – Congress not disposed to give any opinion on the plan, have transmitted it to the legislatures – The legislatures have followed the example, and sent it to the people. The people of this State, unassisted by Congress or their legislature, have not had time to investigate the subject, have referred to the newspapers for information, have been divided by contending writers, [592 ] and under such circumstances have elected members for the *State Convention* – and these members are to consider whether they will accept the plan of the federal convention, with ALL its imperfections, and bind the people by a *system of government*, of the nature and principles of which they have not at present a clearer idea, than they have of the *Copernican system*.

What are we to expect, from such a mode of proceeding? Are not the people already thrown into great confusion? Are not heats, animosities, and a party spirit very prevalent and daily increasing? Are the citizens of this State in a proper temper to receive information, either of the ratification, or rejection, of the new constitution? Is there a probability of *its being supported*, if so *precipitately adopted*? Surely it must

appear that the plan, although *improperly before the State*, cannot with safety be rejected – that it cannot as it stands, be safely *accepted* – that the people will not be satisfied with a *ratification*, and the *delusive prospect of future alterations* – and that the only hope that remains of preserving the peace and happiness of this Commonwealth, is *from amending the plan in order to its adoption*.

1See “The Republican Federalist” I, *Massachusetts Centinel*, 29 December.

2On 1 December the *Pennsylvania Herald*, reporting on the Pennsylvania Convention debates of 28 November, stated that Antifederalist Robert Whitehall, traced “in an elegant, ingenious, and argumentative speech... some of the leading defects in the constitution, and endeavoured to shew that, if not in express terms, yet by inevitable consequence, it would terminate in a consolidation and not a confederation of the states. To this objection (which Mr. Wilson agreed, if taken upon true grounds, was a very serious and important one) the argument respecting the necessary relation between the state legislators, and the federal branches of government, was repeated, the latter of which could not exist, it was said, if the former were annihilated” (**RCS:Pa., 422**. The *Herald* mistakenly attributed Whitehill’s speech to John Smilie.). This report was reprinted in the *Boston Gazette* on 17 December. When the *Pennsylvania Herald* printed a fuller account of the debate on 19 December, it reported that Wilson said: “I freely confess that if its adoption will necessarily be followed by the annihilation of the state governments, the objection is of very great force, and ought to be seriously weighed” (**RCS:Pa., 404**). This later version was not reprinted in Boston.

3See the letter of the President of the Constitutional Convention to the President of Congress, 17 September 1787 (**CC:76**; and **CDR, 305–6**).

4Thirty-nine delegates signed the Constitution.

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