



## Anti-Federalists' Letters to Newspapers

### DURING THE CONSTITUTION RATIFICATION DEBATES, 1787-1788

Core readings for a study of the Constitution include the carefully reasoned Federalist and Anti-Federalist essays written by the most accomplished political theorists of the day—including the Federalist Papers by “Publius” (James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay), and Anti-Federalist essays by “Cato,” “Centinel,” the “Federal Farmer,” the “Columbian Patriot,” and other Constitution critics.<sup>1</sup> All these works first appeared in newspapers, and most were soon reprinted as pamphlets and books. Offering an intriguing companion to these essays are the shorter opinion pieces submitted by readers throughout the nation to their local newspapers. Eight short Anti-Federalist pieces are presented here from the peak months of national debate over the proposed Constitution. What perspective do they add to a study of the ratification of the Constitution?

“The CRISIS,” *The Massachusetts Centinel*, Boston, 17 November 1787

“These are the times that try men’s souls” —and he who now espouses the cause of his country will receive the thanks thereof and of posterity, and the applause of the world.

### THE CRISIS.

E’EN now, my Countrymen, before our eyes,  
At our own option, FAME or RUIN lies.  
Ye brave COLUMBIANS<sup>2</sup> (if you *now* can claim,  
The glorious boon, to bear so great a name),  
Arouse! Let all that’s dear to men inspire  
Those breasts which *once* display’d a gen’rous fire;  
Secure that Empire firm, for which you fought—  
Which many lives and free-spent treasure bought.  
Can you soon, in dark oblivion waste  
Such ard’ous [arduous/difficult] toils, and ills so lately past?  
Will you your country into factions break—  
Bow down your necks—the yoke of bondage take?  
No! you reply—We’ll join in Freedom’s cause,  
To prop her strength, consolidate her laws,  
And firmly fix her government, to sway  
’Till time shall cease, and nature fade away.

An AMERICAN.

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<sup>1</sup> *Cato*: Gov. George Clinton of New York. *Centinel*: Samuel Bryan of Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania. *The Federal Farmer*: Melancton Smith of New York or Richard Henry Lee of Virginia. *The Columbian Patriot*: Mercy Otis Warren of Boston, Massachusetts.

<sup>2</sup> *Columbians*: Americans, referring to the representation of the United States as the goddess-like “Columbia.”

**“Extract of a letter . . .,”** *The Newport Herald*, Rhode Island, 13 December 1787

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*Extract of a letter from a fellow in Newport (Rogue Island) to a gentlemen in this town* [Lansingburgh, NY, Nov. 20]

We have nothing new this way but the new constitution — it will not go down *here* — *nine tenths* of the people are against it — In MY opinion it is a DAM’D *impudent* composition, and an *insult* on the *understandings* and *liberty* of the *KNOW YE*’s.<sup>3</sup>

**“On the ABUSE bestowed upon RHODE ISLAND—A SCRAP,”** *The United States Chronicle*, Providence, Rhode Island, 13 December 1787, EXCERPTS

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Mr. Wheeler [editor]: *By republishing in your free Chronicle a Piece in the Boston Paper taken from the Freeman’s Journal* <sup>4</sup> *respecting [concerning] the Conduct of Rhode Island, you will oblige many of your Country Customers, and in particular your Friend, A. F.*

[A correspondent says] that the abuse which has been thrown upon the State of Rhode Island seems to be greatly unmerited. Popular favor is variable, and those who are now despised and insulted may soon change situations with the present idols of the people. Rhode Island has outdone even Pennsylvania in the glorious work of freeing the Negroes in this country, without which the patriotism of some States appears ridiculous. [The writer continues listing noteworthy achievements of the state.]

The State of Rhode Island refused to send delegates to the Federal Convention, and the event has manifested [the decision has shown] that their refusal was a happy one, as the new constitution which the Convention has proposed to us is an elective monarchy which is proverbially<sup>5</sup> the worst government. This new government would have been supported at a vast expense, by which our taxes — the right of which is solely vested in Congress (a circumstance which manifests [shows] that that various Sates of the union will be merely corporations — would be doubled or trebled. The liberty of the press in not stipulated for and therefore may be invaded at pleasure [at Congress’s whim]. The supreme continental court is to have almost in every case “appellate jurisdiction, both as to law and fact,” which signifies — if there is any meaning in words — the setting aside of trial by jury. Congress will have the power of guaranteeing to every State a right to import Negroes for twenty-one years, by which some of the States who have now declined that iniquitous traffic [wicked trade] may re-enter into it — for the private laws of every State are to submit to the superior jurisdiction of Congress. A standing army is to be kept on foot, by which the vicious, the sycophantic [those seeking political favors], and the time-serving will be exalted, and the brave, patriotic, and the virtuous will be depressed [kept powerless].

The writer, therefore, thinks it the part of wisdom to abide — like the State of Rhode Island — by the old Articles of Confederation which, if re-examined with attention, we shall find worthy of great regard, that we should give high praise to the manly and public-spirited sixteen members who lately [recently] seceded from our House of Assembly, and that we should all impress with great care this truth on our minds — That it is very easy to change a free government into an arbitrary one, but that it is very difficult to convert tyranny into freedom.

**“To CONCILIATOR,”** *The Independent Gazetteer*, Philadelphia, 11 January 1788, EXCERPT

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. . . Is it not an acknowledged principle in all legislative bodies that whatever law is enacted at one session may be repealed at any succeeding one? However well disposed, then, the first or any other Congress may be to secure [protect] the liberty of conscience — the liberty of the press — trial by jury — the sovereignty of the particular states, &c., yet can anything short of a formal declaration of these in a *constitution* [i.e., a bill of rights] by which alone any future Congress can be bound, afford to the people any rational assurance for the continued enjoyment of these sacred rights?

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<sup>3</sup> *Know Ye*’s: supporters of the Articles of Confederation, i.e., Anti-Federalists. The term “Know Ye” appears in the conclusion of the Articles.

<sup>4</sup> *Freeman’s Journal*, 21 November 1787.

<sup>5</sup> i.e., generally accepted and believed, as a proverb is generally held to be valid wisdom.

"Ship News," American Herald, Boston, Massachusetts, 28 January 1788

In this allegorical satire published during the Massachusetts ratifying convention, the ship CONSTITUTION is being inspected for seaworthiness before launch, while the [Anti-Federalist] owners of the dry-docked OLD CONFEDERATION deem her seaworthy—with a few repairs. In the middle paragraph, a skirmish between two ships is described, representing a notably tumultuous day of debate over power and representation in Congress. The satire follows the standard format for "shipping news" updates that appeared in all coastal newspapers of the time.

IT is expected that the Ship CONSTITUTION will be soon launched from Massachusetts dock, the workmen having been near three weeks in examining her Bottom, but notwithstanding the *greatest part* of them are convinced of many *defects*, yet some who expect to be Officer on board (particularly the Candidate for PURSER)<sup>6</sup> are willing to hazard the chance of stopping her LEAKS after she has been at sea. — However, it is thought by many *old Sailors* that it would be most prudent to make her *tight* while she is on the stocks [construction frames], though this precaution may be disgusting to certain *fresh Water* sailors who regard but little the fatigues of the hands at the *Pump*<sup>7</sup> — provided they can secure to *themselves* the State Rooms and other warm berths [beds] in the cabin.

On Saturday se'night,<sup>8</sup> the Ship JUDICIARY and Ship REPUBLICAN had a slight Engagement [skirmish] in Constitution harbor amidst the Federal and Antifederal Squadron.<sup>9</sup> — A few random shot were fired on both sides, but a number of ships slipped their cables and ran between them, which gave an opportunity for the Combatants to get clear of each other. — The damage sustained on either side was but trifling, as the JUDICIARY was quickly taken under convoy of the KING-FISHER,<sup>10</sup> and the REPUBLICAN was seen under full sail making for a safe harbor, followed by the AGRIPPA<sup>11</sup> Tender. — Both Ships have since left the main Squadron, the Captain of the JUDICIARY resenting the attack of the REPUBLICAN as an affront to the FEDERAL FLAG, the REPUBLICAN being admitted as a distressed Ship to ride at anchor with the Convention Fleet. — The ship W—D—Y,<sup>12</sup> in company with the *Bomb-Frigate* BRIGADIER, fired a few stern shot, but was silenced by the KING-FISHER.

[Jan.] 23. — Yesterday a select body of REAL FEDERALISTS examined the ship OLD CONFEDERATION as she now lays hauled up in Congress dockyard. — They report she is sound Bottom and strong built, and that no further repairs are wanting [needed] than a thorough CAULKING, which might be done in a few weeks — provided the Owners would unite to set the workmen about the business. — They are wholly averse to *breaking her up*, as they think it a needless expense to put another [ship] on the stocks upon a *New Construction* while they are in possession of One of *good seasoned* Timber which might be completely fitted to answer every purpose.<sup>13</sup>

Jan. 23, 1788. Mr. [Samuel] Thompson: . . . Don't let us go too fast. Shall not Massachusetts be a mediator? It is my wish she may be one of the four dissenting states. Then we shall be on our old ground and shall not act unconstitutionally. Some people cry, It will be a great charge; but it will be a greater charge and be more dangerous to make a new one. Let us amend the old Confederation. . . . Let us be cautious how we divide the states. By uniting we stand, by dividing we fall, We are in our childhood yet. Don't let us grow too fast, lest we grow out of shape. . . . Why all this racket? . . . where is the bill of rights which shall check the power of this Congress, which shall say Thus far shall ye come and no farther. The safety of the people depends on a bill of rights. . . . There are some parts of this Constitution which I cannot digest; and, sir, shall we swallow a large bone for the sake of a little meat? Some say, Swallow the whole now and pick out the bone afterwards. But I say, Let us pick off the meat, and throw the bone away.

*Elliot's Debates*, Vol. II, Massachusetts Convention, p. 80.

<sup>6</sup> *Purser*: ship official responsible for the ship's financial accounts and all handling of money. Many Anti-Federalists suspected financial motives among the wealthy and influential supporters of the Constitution, i.e., that a central government would work to augment their wealth and dominance.

<sup>7</sup> I.e., do not know the exhausting labor of pumping salt water out of a large seagoing vessel.

<sup>8</sup> *Se'ennight*: Seven-nights, i.e., a week ago.

<sup>9</sup> There were several contentious days of deliberations over the powers of Congress (Article II of the proposed Constitution). The records of Saturday night, Jan. 19, do not reveal as acerbic a debate as that of the previous day, in which a "long and desultory debate ensued" over taxation and representation. The identities of JUDICIARY, REPUBLICAN, etc., are not certain.

<sup>10</sup> *King-Fisher*: Perhaps Rufus King, one of several delegates who initially supported amending the Articles of Confederation but voted with Federalists to adopt the Constitution. He participated in the debate of January 19.

<sup>11</sup> *Agrippa*: James Winthrop, an Anti-Federalist delegate in the state convention, who had penned under the pseudonym "Agrippa" a series of eighteen essays that appeared in the *Massachusetts Gazette*. A *tender* is a small boat used for transportation and communication between ships.

<sup>12</sup> William Widgery, an Anti-Federalist delegate.

<sup>13</sup> On January 23, Thompson argued for moving slowly and considering the merits of the Articles of Confederation, especially for Massachusetts.

*Men, Brethren, and Sisters,*

**H**EARKEN! it is now a critical time with us, and a time in which we ought to be upon our watch and upon our guard. Now is the time for us to look out; now is the time for us to take care; now is the time for us to see that nothing is done to deprive us of our religious or our civil liberties.

Our government at present is democratical, that is, the power is in the people. We are allowed to choose our rules, make our own laws, and perform religious worship according to the dictates of our own consciences; and by our constitution a freedom of speech and the liberty of the press are allowed to every one of us.<sup>14</sup> But although we are under such an excellent constitution, behold a new one is presented to us for our reception which appears much like an aristocratical form, and will, if it is established, demolish a part of our democratical government and deprive us of a part of our liberties.

Before we suffer [allow] this new constitution to be established, we ought to consider seriously what it contains and whether it is calculated to promote our felicity [happiness] or whether, like a wolf in sheep's clothing, it is calculated to vest certain men with more power, deprive us of our liberties, and bring our land into lordships and lead us into vassalage and slavery like the poor people of Holland who, after they had obtained their independence, lost their power and were not suffered [allowed] to have any voice in their government — no, not so much as to choose their representatives.<sup>15</sup>

How often has it been ringing in our ears from every quarter of the United States that our present constitution is the best that ever was or ever could be established? If that be true, pray what need is there of an alteration — what need have we to alter a constitution that is in every way perfect? If we should suffer our democratical government to be demolished and an aristocratical one established, it is probable that in a few years some designing [plotting/deceitful] men will attempt to pull that down and set up one that is monarchical, and so bring the country under a military government.

Permit me then, my beloved brethren and sisters, to point out wherein this new constitution is deficient.<sup>16</sup>

- 1<sup>st</sup>. There is no bill of rights in it.
- 2<sup>d</sup>. Although different religions are allowed to set in Congress, yet there is no liberty given to the people to perform religious worship according to the dictates of their consciences.
- 3<sup>d</sup>. There is a door opened for the Jews, Turks [i.e., Muslims], and Heathen [atheists] to enter into public office and be seated at the head of the government of the United States.
- 4<sup>th</sup>. There is nothing said about the people being allowed the freedoms of speech and the liberty of the press.
- 5<sup>th</sup>. It divides Congress into three branches, as President, Senate, and a House of Representatives, which will be a great clog to business and a hindrance to the making of laws with expedition and dispatch [with order and speed].<sup>17</sup>
- 6<sup>th</sup>. It deprives men that are endowed with the wisdom that is from above from entering into Congress unless they have arrived at a certain age and have abode [residence] in the states a certain quantity of time.
- 7<sup>th</sup>. It augments [increases] the members of Congress and makes the government more expensive.
- 8<sup>th</sup>. It deprives the people of the liberty of choosing their delegates to Congress annually, and of recalling them when they please.
- 9<sup>th</sup>. It almost annihilates the state governments, and deprives their legislation of the power of making their own laws.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The Articles of Confederation did not contain a bill of rights, but it was assumed that the central government could not violate rights and privileges protected by the state constitutions.

<sup>15</sup> After a brief rebellion in 1785 inspired in part by the American Revolution, the Netherlands (Holland) returned to autocratic rule.

<sup>16</sup> The sixteen objections are included here in their entirety.

<sup>17</sup> While the President can promote bills and veto laws, the writer incorrectly places the President in the legislative branch of the government.

- 10<sup>th</sup>. It makes no provision against the keeping a standing [permanent] army in a time of peace.
- 11<sup>th</sup>. It deprives the people of the power of levying and collecting their own taxes.<sup>19</sup>
- 12<sup>th</sup>. It vests Congress with power to tax all the states, to send forth collectors, and enforce the payment of taxes by a standing army.<sup>20</sup>
- 13<sup>th</sup>. It vests Congress with power to run the people into debt by borrowing money of foreign nations upon the credit of the United States, and it doth not oblige the members of that assembly to render any account of the expenditure of the same, if they shall see fit to secret it [keep the accounts secret].
- 14<sup>th</sup>. No provision is made in it against having the civil power subject to the military, nor against having people that do not belong to any army or navy tried and punished by the military laws.<sup>21</sup>
- 15<sup>th</sup>. It deprives the people in the several states of the liberty of making their own constitutions and vests it in the hand of Congress.<sup>22</sup>
- 16<sup>th</sup>. It deprives the inhabitants of each state of the power of choosing their superior and inferior judges.<sup>23</sup>
- ...

Thus, my beloved friends, have I given you the foregoing hints that you may be upon your guard and ward off the impending danger. Keep the power in your own hands and let nothing be established that may deprive you of your liberties and make you unhappy.

### A W A T C H M A N.

**"To the People of North Carolina,"** *The Wilmington Centinel*, NC, reprinted in the *New York Journal and Daily Patriotic Register*, 21 April 1788, EXCERPTS

**I**T is proper you should be reminded that most of you have taken an oath to support the present [state] government consistently with the [state] constitution. By that constitution all the power of the government is vested in the general assembly, the governor, and the chief judges. It is now proposed to you to adopt a new system which gives every essential part of that power, that is, all legislative, executive, judicial, military, and pecuniary [financial] authority to a Congress who will sit at or near Philadelphia, 4 or 500 miles from you. — This I understand to be subverting our government . . . and therefore a plan which ought to be opposed by every citizen. . . .

Some people may think that the adopting of the new system will not alter the government because we shall have our assembly, governor, and judges, but probably nobody will retain that opinion after reflecting that the government really is where the supreme power is — that the chief power will be in the Congress, and that what is left of our government will be a mere shadow is plain, because a citizen may be deprived of the privilege of keeping arms for his own defense, he may have his property taken without a trial by jury, he may be ordered to march with the rest of the militia to New Hampshire or anywhere else, he may be forced to go to the new seat of government 500 miles off to oppose an oppressive appeal in spite of our assembly, governor, and judges. These things are entirely contrary to our constitution, and the possibility of them by no means to be admitted [allowed to become real].

### C O M M O N S E N S E.

<sup>18</sup> The Constitution did not remove states' authority to make their own laws, but many opponents felt this would be the effective result of a strong national government.

<sup>19</sup> As with objection #8, the Constitution does not remove states' authority to enact statewide taxation, but opponents were concerned that the states' authority was only marginally protected in the proposed Constitution.

<sup>20</sup> The taxation authority of Congress in the proposed Constitution seemed to invite autocratic excess similar to Britain's heavy-handed collection of colonial taxes after 1763.

<sup>21</sup> I.e., protections against a military takeover of the government, an Anti-Federalist concern that "The Watchman" stated early in his letter.

<sup>22</sup> This is inaccurate; states continue to write and amend their own constitutions. It reflects the anxiety among many Anti-Federalists that the controls on the national governments built into the Constitution (e.g., checks and balances, impeachment, president's veto power, civil control of the military) would be insufficient to maintain states' authority within their borders and in their relationships with other states and nations.

<sup>23</sup> States continue to elect or appoint state judges, while federal judges are appointed by the president of the United States. Federal judges make decisions on state laws when cases based on those laws are appealed to the federal courts (by the state or an affected individual or group).



This satirical letter was written by the Boston merchant Benjamin Austin, Jr., who penned numerous Anti-Federalist pieces under several pseudonyms. Sardonicly tongue-in-cheek throughout, Honestus bashes the Federalists for dismissing Anti-Federalists as too ignorant and unthinking to support the proposed Constitution, a document “far beyond the reach of common capacities.”

MR. GREENLEAF,

I WAS led to the following reflections by accidentally falling in company some evenings since with a number of characters (chiefly mechanics) at an ale-house [tavern], who were making absurd comments on the constitution proposed by the general convention — which convention was composed of the greatest and most enlightened characters in this country. It must be considered that government is a very abstruse [complex], and political disquisition [discussion] a very arduous task — far beyond the reach of common capacities; and that no men but those who have a liberal [i.e., humanities] education and have time to study can possibly be competent to such an important matter as the framing a government for an extensive country as is comprehended [included] within the United States. Whenever men of neither abilities or education presume to meddle with such matters as are above the reach of their knowledge or abilities, they will find themselves out of their proper sphere.<sup>24</sup>

The *blacksmith* will find that he had better attend to his hammer and anvil — and hammer out hobnails for country hoof [horses’ hooves] than concern himself with affairs of state. should he be weak enough to suppose that he has abilities equal to such an undertaking, he will find that there is a material difference between welding together two pieces of steel or iron and that of uniting heterogeneous and jarring interests so as to make them productive of the public good.

The *mariner* [sailor] may very well understand how to take an [celestial] observation and navigate his ship, but he cannot possibly be acquainted with every point of the political compass, or so to steer the ship of state as to avoid the hidden and dangerous rock and shelves that may lay in the way — and whenever he makes the attempt, he will undoubtedly find himself out of his latitude. . . .

The *farmer* may have a sufficiency of knowledge to guide and govern the plow and team and understand the best method to thrash his grain — but he must be incompetent to the great purpose of guiding the machinery of state or to suggest the best and most effectual method to thrash the enemies of his country.

The *carpenter* may be a perfect master of his trade and understand the rules of architecture. He may frame an edifice, complete in all its parts, and sufficiently strong to secure the proprietor [owner] from the attempts of the midnight robber, but he will be totally ignorant how to frame laws for the security of society so as to prevent the artful and designing from preying upon the ignorant and innocent. . . .

The *sadler* may be a proficient in his business and may know what kind of curb is proper to restrain an unruly and restive horse — but he cannot possibly be a judge what laws or curbs will be proper and necessary to restrain the unruly passions of men so as to prevent their injuring one another.

The *turner* [potter] may be a very expert artisan, but he cannot possibly be acquainted with all the turns and windings that are used by bad men to evade the laws and escape the punishment which they justly deserve. . . .

The *barber* may know very well how to make a wig to suit either the priest, physician or gentleman of the long robe [lawyer], or how to shave his customer with dexterity — but whenever he attempts to meddle with affairs of state, he will find that his razors have lost their edge and that he is himself completely in the suds.<sup>25</sup>

If this production [letter] should operate in such a manner as to prevent people’s neglecting their business and meddling with public matters beyond their capacities, it will be a sufficient compensation to the writer who has no other object in view than that of confining every man within his proper sphere.

H O N E S T U S.

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<sup>24</sup> “*Proper sphere*”: referring to the norm in class-stratified societies that people should remain within the prescribed limits of their social class. Austin here is deriding Federalists for exhibiting a haughty attitude of superiority.

<sup>25</sup> The satire includes similar paragraphs for other tradesmen—distiller, brewer, baker, miller, mason, cooper, and clock and watch maker.