



## The Anti-Federalist Essays of PHILADELPHIENSIS

[Benjamin Workman]

*The Independent Gazetteer* and *The Freeman's Journal*, Philadelphia, Nov. 1787-April 1788\_\_EXCERPTS

Publius, Cato, Cincinnatus, Centinel, A Citizen of America, Genuine Information—pseudonyms abounded during the ratification debates of 1787-1788, as they had for decades of political discourse in America and Britain. One set of Anti-Federalist essays appeared under the name of Philadelphiensis—identified (exposed, his critics would have said) as Benjamin Workman, a mathematics instructor at the University of Pennsylvania and a recent Irish immigrant. His twelve fevered essays appeared over five months in two Philadelphia newspapers, during and after the state ratifying convention. They condemned the proposed constitution as a device to consolidate power among the “well-born” elite and relegate other citizens to the status of serfs and slaves—a prevalent Anti-Federalist warning. It is worthwhile to contrast the Philadelphiensis essays with the reasoned and dispassionate works by Publius (The Federalist Papers by Madison, Hamilton, and Jay), the Federal Farmer (Anti-Federalists Richard Henry Lee or Melancton Smith or both), and others. The debate over ratification, historian Jack Rakove reminds us, “took the form not of a Socratic dialogue or an academic symposium but of a cacophonous argument in which appeals to principle and common sense and close analyses of specific clauses accompanied wild predictions of the good and evil effects that ratification would bring.”<sup>1</sup> Philadelphiensis and his critics represent the “cacophonous argument” that flourished in the ratification debates of 1787 to 1788.

### \_\_\_Philadelphiensis II. November 28, 1787\_\_\_

My fellow citizens, the present time will probably form a new epoch in the annals of America. This important, this awful crisis bids fair to be the theme of our posterity [descendants] for many generations. We are now publicly summoned to determine whether we and our children are to be *freemen* or *slaves*<sup>2</sup>—whether the liberty which we have so recently purchased with the blood of thousands of our fellow countrymen is to terminate in a blessing or a curse.

The establishment of a new government is a matter of such immense magnitude that any other human transaction is small indeed when compared to it. Great circumspection [attention] is therefore necessary on this interesting occasion. The temporal [earthly] and in some measure even the eternal happiness of millions of souls is involved in this important work. I say even in some measure our eternal happiness is concerned [because the idea that] a good or a bad government naturally influences religion and morality is a principle indisputably confirmed by fact. Under a free and patriotic government, the bulk of the people will necessarily be virtuous, but under a tyrannical and unjust one, the greater part of the people will as necessarily be wicked. The complexion of the *governing* is ever the color of the *governed*.

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<sup>1</sup> Jack N. Rakove, *Original Meanings: Politics and Ideas in the Making of the Constitution* (New York: Knopf, 1996), p. 132.

<sup>2</sup> The terms *slave* and *slavery* were used by Patriots to refer to oppression under monarchs and despots. White and black abolitionists of the period noted the irony of the terms being used by white men, many of them slaveholders, to refer to their status under British control, or later by Anti-Federalists to describe citizens' fate under the proposed Constitution.

. . . In the adoption of the new constitution in its present form, we will lose more than all that we have fought for and gained in a glorious and successful war of seven years. Yea, and still more than this, our very character of *citizens* and *freemen* will be changed to that of *subjects* and *slaves*. In this act the bright orb of glorious liberty will go down under the horizon of cruel oppression, never, never to illuminate our western hemisphere again! How much better that she had never cast a ray on Columbia [U.S.] than thus to blaze for a moment and then to vanish forever!

In regard to religious liberty, the cruelty of the new government will probably be felt sooner in Pennsylvania than in any state in the union. The number of religious denominations in this state who are principled against *fighting* or *bearing arms*<sup>4</sup> will be greatly distressed indeed. In the new constitution there is no declaration in their favor, but on the contrary, the Congress and President are to have an absolute power over the *standing army, navy, and militia*; and the President, or rather *Emperor*, is to be commander in chief. Now, I think that it will appear plain that no exemption whatever from militia duty shall be allowed to any set of men, however conscientiously scrupulous they may be against *bearing arms*. Indeed, from the nature and qualifications of the president, we may justly infer that such an idea is altogether preposterous. He is by profession a *military man* and possibly an old soldier. Now, such a man from his natural temper necessarily despises those who have a conscientious aversion to a military profession, which is probably the very thing in which he principally piques [prides] himself. Only men of his own kind will be esteemed by him. . . .

Before I dismiss this subject, I cannot help taking notice of the inconsistency of some Pennsylvanians in respect to this new government. The very men who should oppose it with all their influence seem to be the most zealous for establishing it. Strange indeed! that the professed enemies of *negro* and every other species of *slavery*<sup>5</sup> should themselves join in the adoption of a constitution whose very basis is *despotism* and *slavery*, a constitution that militates so far against freedom that even their own religious liberty may probably be destroyed by it. Alas! What frail, what inconsistent beings we are! To the catalogue of human weaknesses and mistakes, this is one to be added!

—“a hotbed of sedition”—

The writer of this letter was the Philadelphia statesman, judge, poet, and satirist Francis Hopkinson, who wrote several Federalist pieces under the pseudonym “A.B.” Hopkinson revealed the identity of Philadelphiensis in this letter and later mocked his verbal excess in a satiric allegory entitled “The New Roof,” published ten days after Philadelphiensis V in December 1787.<sup>3</sup>

Mr. WHEELER [Editor: *United States Chronicle*]:

As some Persons here have spoken highly of the Pieces against the new Constitution under the Signature of Philadelphiensis, I wish you to publish the following,—that it may be generally known to whom we are indebted for those Publications.

. . . when base and unworthy scribblers, incapable of argument [logical discourse], to whom neither education or experience hath furnished any knowledge of the subject, shall rudely interfere in a question of so great concern, and skulking behind assumed signatures in violation of all decency, shall pour forth torrents of personal abuse and opprobrious slander against men of high esteem, approved worth, and tried integrity—when such men shall daily endeavor to disturb the public peace by seditious publications and false alarms, it becomes the duty of every good citizen . . . to hold up their names and characters to general view that the people may judge what credit is due, what attention ought to be paid to their unqualified assertions, scandalous railings, and loud outcries. . . .

. . . I have some authority for exhibiting [proving] B. Workman as the author of the abusive papers signed *Philadelphiensis*, or at least one of them . . . that *Benjamin Workman, Peter Vengelder*, and some others . . . hold frequent meetings in this schoolroom where they [teach], sometimes to eleven and twelve o'clock at night, writing inflammatory pieces to stir up the people against the new Constitution and the friends and supporters of it. . . .

. . . I now lift up the lion's skin—and behold, good people, no less a personage than BENJAMIN WORKMAN, one of the *well-born tutors in the University of Pennsylvania*. . . .

It may be worthy the consideration of the trustees of our university whether the Legislature hath so munificently endowed that institution to make it the hotbed of sedition, or whether . . . it will be prudent in them to continue in their service as an instructor of youth, a man who is so wickedly endeavoring to disturb the public tranquility. . . .

March 7, 1788. \_\_\_\_\_ A. B.  
[Pseudonym of Francis Hopkinson]

*United States Chronicle*, Philadelphia, 24 April 1788

<sup>3</sup> See “The New Roof” by Hopkinson in this Theme V: Section 3 (“Promoting the Constitution”) of this primary source collection.

<sup>4</sup> Quakers and other pacifist groups.

<sup>5</sup> Pennsylvania was the first state in which an abolition society was founded. In 1784 an earlier society to aid enslaved persons was reorganized into the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery and for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage. Benjamin Franklin and Benjamin Rush, well-known Federalists, were among its earliest members.

Ah! my countrymen, our situation is critical indeed! Let us make a solemn pause then! The eyes of the world are upon us. The patriots and friends of America in Europe are now anxiously concerned, lest the whirlwind of tyranny should raze from its tender root the hallowed plant of Columbian liberty.

### \_\_\_Philadelphiensis III. December 5, 1787\_\_\_

MY FELLOW CITIZENS,

Are you disposed to hear plain arguments, simple truths, and pure facts? If you are, then let me tell you through the voice of reason that the preservation of your little ones and yourselves, the love of mankind in general, and the liberty of your dear country now demand your most serious attention. The peace, the freedom, and happiness of the present generation, and possibly many succeeding ones, are the great subjects now under discussion. Was there ever such an important time for America as this is? Can there be greater objects than these are, presented to the human understanding? I say there cannot; and I affirm it, that there is not a man in the United States, except some base assassin or mean coward, who can be indifferent on this momentous occasion. Is there anyone now among us who can remain unconcerned or neutral? If there be, I say he is not a *man*. No, certainly he is unworthy of that character. Such a wretch can have no claim to the title of a free citizen of America. He is a pitiful sycophant [servile follower], a cringing spaniel, a menial slave. . . .

It was a common saying among many sensible men in Great Britain and Ireland in the time of the war that they doubted whether the great men of America who had taken an active part in favor of independence were influenced by pure patriotism — that it was not the love of their country they had so much at heart as their own private interest — that a thirst after dominion and power and not to protect the *oppressed* from the *oppressor* was the great operative principle that induced these men to oppose Britain so strenuously. This seemingly illiberal sentiment was however generally denied by the well-hearted and unsuspecting friends of American liberty in Europe, who could not suppose that men would engage in so noble a cause through such base motives. But alas! the truth of the sentiment is now indisputably confirmed. Facts are stubborn things, and these set the matter beyond controversy. The new constitution, and the conduct of its despotic advocates, show that these men's doubts were really well founded. Unparalleled duplicity! that men should oppose tyranny under a pretense of patriotism [so] that they might themselves become the tyrants. How does such villainy disgrace human nature! Ah, my fellow citizens, you have been strangely deceived indeed, when the wealthy of your own country assisted you to expel the foreign tyrant only with a view to substitute themselves in his stead. . . .

In the first place then [the constitution] does not protect the people in those liberties and privileges that all freemen should hold sacred — *the liberty of conscience, the liberty of the press, the liberty of trial by jury, &c.* are all unprotected by this constitution. And in respect to protecting our *property*, it can have no pretensions whatever to that, for the *taxes* must and will be so enormously oppressive for supporting this expensive government that the whole produce of our farms would not be sufficient to pay them.

. . . For a new country to become strong and energetic so as to be able to repel a foreign foe, the

#### \_\_\_ "one solemn truth in my favor" \_\_\_

"B. WORKMAN" submitted this letter to the Independent Gazetteer on April 23, 1788. "Frankey," of course, is Francis Hopkinson, who satirized *Philadelphiensis* in his allegory "The New Roof."

In the present political disputes, one *solemn truth* in my favor, and sanctioned by the authority of names in your paper of this day, has been published — namely, that I am neither the *tool* nor *hired scribbler* of a party. This circumstance removes a large portion of the charge exhibited against me, for if I be one of the writers against the proposed constitution, I must have acted as an independent freeman. The political essays which some have ascribed to me must therefore be accounted the sentiments [opinions] of a free citizen unbiased by the influence of party or hopes of a pecuniary [financial] reward. As *charcoal* and *chalk* have been plentifully and alternately applied to me since Frankey made his attack, I have at last had the good luck to be *white washed* in a part, that I hope all the ingenuity of falsehood cannot blacken again. Perhaps by another turn of the wheel of fortune all the remaining charcoal may be white-washed over, and then poor Frankey will have lost his eleven dollars in the very way he least expected. . . .

B. WORKMAN

*The Independent Gazetteer*, 24 April 1788

government must be *free* and *patriotic*, and the people must be *wealthy* and *well-affected* to it. Now if these requisites be wanting [lacking], that country is in jeopardy every moment. In fact it is on the direct road of falling a prey to the surrounding nations. In this miserable predicament, then, must America stand if we adopt the new constitution . . . .

#### \_\_\_Philadelphiensis IV. December 12, 1787\_\_\_

*My Fellow-Citizens, . . .*

Among the schemes and collusions that the friends of the new constitution have made use of to dupe the people into its adoption, that of making them believe that such a government would raise America to an eminent rank among the nations of the earth seems to have been one of the most successful. There is not a writer that I have seen on the subject that has called the truth of this matter into question. No wonder then, that the less informed should be imposed upon, when men of more enlightened understandings seem even to have swallowed the bait. . . .

. . . But probably, you will say, these are groundless conjectures and we are perfectly convinced that our new government, however it may be imperfect in some matters of an inferior nature, yet it must and will be powerful — yea, a government that will make its enemies tremble. If you mean by its enemies the helpless widow and orphan, the hardworking husbandman [farmer] sunk down by labor and poverty, I grant it; but if you mean a foreign enemy, you insult your understanding. No, my friends, instead of becoming formidable, we will be the scorn and contempt of the whole world during the existence of this contemptible government. Let us take but a rational view of its strength and respectability, and then we shall see that we have really nothing to depend on in this new constitution that can raise the national character of America, but on the contrary, we will sink into a state of insignificance and misery.

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The number of inhabitants in the United States is now probably about three millions and an half. — These are scattered over a continent twelve hundred miles long and eight hundred broad. Now, to keep such an extensive country in subjection to one general government, a *standing army*, by far too numerous for such a small number of people to maintain, must and will be garrisoned in every district through the whole. — And in case of emergency, the collecting of these scattered troops into one large body to act against a foreign enemy will be morally impossible. Besides, they will have too much business on hand at their respective garrisons, *in awing the people*, to be spared for other purposes. There is no doubt, but to carry the arbitrary decrees of the federal judges into execution, and to protect the *tax gatherers* in collecting the revenue, will be ample employment for the military. Indeed with all their strength and numbers, I am afraid, that they will find this a job of some difficulty, perhaps more than they will get through decently. Upon the whole I think it is pretty obvious that our *standing army* will have *other fish to fry* than fighting a foreign enemy. . . .

#### \_\_\_Philadelphiensis V. December 19, 1787\_\_\_

*My Fellow Citizens,*

**I**F the arbitrary proceedings of the convention of Pennsylvania do not rouse your attention to the rights of yourselves and your children, there is nothing that I can say will do it. . . . When a few Demagogues despising every sense of order and decency have rejected the petitions of the people<sup>6</sup> and in the most supercilious manner triumphed over the freemen of America as if they were their slaves and they themselves their lords and masters. I say that if such barefaced presumption and arrogance, such tyrannical proceedings of the men who, if acting constitutionally, were the servants of the people, be not sufficient to awaken you to a sense of your duty and interest, nothing less than the goad and the whip can

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<sup>6</sup> See paragraph two for elucidation.

succeed. Your condition must be like that of the careless and insecure sinner, whom neither the admonitions nor entreaties of his friends, nor even the threatenings of awaiting justice could reclaim or convince of his error. His reformation is neglected until it is too late, when he finds himself in a state of unutterable and endless woe.

It may be asserted with confidence that besides the petitions that Mr. Whitehill presented to the [Pennsylvania ratifying] convention from Cumberland County against the adoption of the new constitution, there is not a county or town in the state that should not have followed the example, if a reasonable time had been allowed for the petitions to come in. Now if we consider but for a moment how contemptuously the people were treated on this occasion, we may form some idea of the way in which they are hereafter to be governed by their *well born masters*. “The petitions being read from the chair. Mr. M’Kean said he was sorry that at this stage of the business so *improper* an attempt should be made. H he hoped therefore that the petitions would not be *attended to*.” (*Pennsylvania Herald*). . . . Is not this the language of Britain in the years 1775 and 1776 renewed? What said George the third and his pampered ministers [officials] more than this to the petitions of America? Is it improper for freemen to petition for their rights? If it be, then I say that the impropriety consisted only in their not *demanding* them. . . . Ah my friends, the days of a cruel Nero approach fast. The language of a monster, of a Caligula,<sup>7</sup> could not be more imperious. I challenge the whole continent, the *well born and their parasites*, to show an instance of greater insolence than this on the part of the British tyrant and his infernal junto<sup>8</sup> to the people of America before our glorious revolution. My fellow citizens, this is an awful crisis. Your situation is alarming indeed. Yourselves and your petitions are despised and trampled under the feet of self-important nabobs [rich merchants] whose diabolical plots and secret machinations [workings] have been carried on since the revolution with a view to destroy your liberties and reduce you to a state of slavery and dependence; and alas! I fear they have found you off your guard and taken you by surprise. These aspiring men have seized the government and secured all power, as they suppose, to themselves, now openly browbeat you with their insolence and assume majesty, and even treat you like menial servants, your representatives as so many conquered slaves that they intend to make pass under the yoke as soon as leisure from their gluttony and rioting on the industry of the poor shall permit them to attend such a pleasing piece of sport. . . .

—“these inflammatory publications”—

In a 1792 collection of his works, Francis Hopkinson, who had mocked *Philadelphiensis* as a “lunatic” and a “half crazy fellow” in his satire “The New Roof,” added this note about Benjamin Workman.

I had it in my power afterwards to detect and expose the real name of the author of these inflammatory publications, which put a stop to the productions of PHILADELPHIENSIS. He was an Irish schoolmaster who had not been more than two years in the country and who, without either property or reputation in America, endeavored under the cover of a fictitious signature not only to enflame people against the plan of government proposed by America’s best patriots and most able statesmen, but even ventured to abuse and vilify such characters as GENERAL WASHINGTON, Dr. Franklin, and the gentlemen who composed the general convention, calling them in the public papers villains and conspirators.

—Philadelphiensis VI. December 26, 1787—

*My Fellow-Citizens, . . .*

Many patriotic writers wishing to compromise matters between the friends and enemies of the proposed government have imagined that the difference might be amicably settled if a declaration of rights were prefixed to the constitution so as to become a part of it, and therefore have recommended this to the parties as a necessary measure to reconcile them again to each other. But these good men did not consider that a declaration of rights would effectually and completely annihilate the constitution. Of this however, its advocates were well aware and consequently could not consent to the amendment. No, no, the haughty lordlings and their sycophants [servile followers] must have no *limits* set to their power; they alone should rule. . . .

<sup>7</sup> Nero and Caligula were notoriously tyrannical emperors of the Roman Empire.

<sup>8</sup> *Junto*: a small group of people organized for a common goal; in this context, referring to a small despotic group in control of a nation.

## \_\_\_\_Philadelphiensis IX. February 6, 1788\_\_\_\_

*Instans tamen immemores, cacique furore,  
Et monstrum infelix sacrata sistimus arce. VIRGIL.*

TRANSLATION.

*Thus we, by madness blinded and o'ercome,  
Lodge the dire monster in the sacred dome.*

*My Fellow-Citizens, . . .*

To such lengths have these bold conspirators carried their scheme of despotism that your most sacred rights and privileges are surrendered at discretion. When government thinks proper, under the pretense of [a person's] writing a libel, &c. it may imprison, inflict the most cruel and unusual punishment, seize property, carry on prosecutions, &c. and the unfortunate citizen has no *magna charta*, no *bill of rights*, to protect him. Nay, the prosecution may be carried on in such a manner that even a *jury* will not be allowed him. Where is that base slave who would not appeal to the *ultima ratio*<sup>9</sup> before he submits to this government?

If the despots persist in pushing it on, let them answer the consequences. They may fall a sacrifice to their own obstinacy, for liberty will triumph over every obstacle, even were a *standing army* opposed to it.

To preserve the peace of the country, every patriot should exert himself at this awful crisis and use his influence to have another federal convention called as soon as possible, either to amend the old articles of confederation or to frame a constitution on revolution principles, that may secure the freedom of America to the remotest time. . . .

No evil can result from calling another general convention, but much good would be the consequence. The *No evil can result from calling another general convention, but much good would be the consequence. The distresses of America are not of that nature to be healed all of a sudden. Some of them indeed have arisen from the defects in the general government, but there are others of a different kind that must be removed by time and by the prudence of the people at large.*

Ye patriots! ye lovers of peace, of liberty, and of your fellow men! Ye are called upon at this solemn juncture to stand forth and save your country before the breach is too wide, and while the parties may still be reconciled to each other, before anarchy stalks through the land and before the sword of civil discord is unsheathed. For the sake of everything that is great and good, and as you shall answer for it at the great tribunal [final judgment], use your influence to procure another general convention with all possible speed as the only way left to preserve the union of America and to save your fellow citizens from misery and destruction.

## \_\_\_\_PHILADELPHIENSIS

By a vote of 46 to 23, Pennsylvania had ratified the Constitution on December 12, 1787, the day *Philadelphiensis IV* was published, but it was not unusual for political essayists to remain in the Federalist-Anti-Federalist dialogue after their home states' ratifying conventions. On June 21, 1788, New Hampshire ratified the Constitution, providing the ninth and final vote required for the Constitution to be implemented as the "supreme law of the land."

<sup>9</sup> *ultima ratio regium*: the final argument of kings (Latin). Francis Hopkinson also satirized Workman's use of this phrase in his Federalist allegory "The New Roof" (1787), suggesting that Workman was copying a more erudite Anti-Federalist writer, Mercy Otis Warren of Boston.