



“COOL HEADS ARE CLEAR”

Appeals for Calm in the Ratification Debates, 1787-1788

Amidst the whirlwind of Federalist and Anti-Federalist essays, satires, poems, and letters that filled the newspapers during the ratification debates, occasionally a brief piece would appear appealing for calm, reason, and openness to the merits of an opponent's argument. “Cool heads are clear,” wrote one anonymous letter writer; “turn your backs upon all *fiery declaimers*.”

“The American Constitution,” *The Weekly Monitor*, Litchfield, Connecticut, 19 November 1787¹

COOL heads are clear, the star of wisdom does not shine in a storm. Therefore, brethren of the United States, turn your backs upon all *fiery declaimers* for or against the constitution. — Keep the sky of reason clear, hold the scale of truth even and give every argument its *weight* and no more. Think much, hear much, read some, and talk but little. Ask wisdom of God, and act as you think in your serious hours will be for his glory and the happiness of this great nation. Then, “although our Israel should not prosper, you will be happy in your conscious rectitude,” and glorious in the sight of the Lord. ISAIAH.²

“Extract of a letter from an American gentleman in London, dated November 14, 1787,”

The New Jersey Journal, 27 February 1788, EXCERPT

A correspondent wishes the public of Pennsylvania to compare the *generous manly conduct* of the *minority of Massachusetts* [Anti-Federalists] with the *pitiful low indecency* of the *hatred minority* [Anti-Federalists] of Pennsylvania. Even though at first inimical [opposed] to the Constitution, when *convinced*, or even OUT-VOTED, THEY could eat the *bread of peace* and drink the *glass of friendship* with their friends IN TOTO [completely] — and they could declare with *transport* [emotion] they were beaten — they were out-voted — but at their return to *those who honored them with their choice*,³ they would recommend *peace* and *harmony, union* and *submission*. But when the *incendiaries* [rabble-rousers] of our own state even refused the *hand of friendship*, the *signature of consent*, and the *social feast which bind* man and man together, they not only added neglect to their malicious refusal, but strove to spread dissension and to raise rebellion *amongst* their constituents.

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¹ Originally published in the *Independent Chronicle*, date not given.

² Isaiah 48 [Old Testament].

³ I.e., when the Anti-Federalist delegates to the state ratifying convention returned home to meet those who had voted for them . . .

To you we cling as a band of brothers —
We thank you for your generous consent,
Respect you as the saviours of your country,
And *pray the head of all confederation,*
The author of the sun, the moon, the stars,
And all which feel his forcible command,
In one firm, fast-bound, mass of general union,
— TO BLESS YOU.

Letter to the Editor, *The Independent Gazetteer*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 8 March 1788, EXCERPT

IT is with very sensible regret that I have seen of late our public papers so entirely devoted to the most acrimonious party disputes, and I think every sincere well-wisher to our country must join me in lamenting them. Whatever may be the merits of the federal constitution, surely the arguments respecting [concerning] it might have been carried on with reason and moderation. Nor could there be any occasion for that violence and rancor [ill will] which can do no good to any cause and may do injury to the best. Among persons who are strangers to the city, it must surely excite [cause] an unfavorable opinion of its inhabitants to see them thus virulent [extremely hostile] on a subject which ought to be considered with the most calm deliberation. Nor can much respect be paid to the writings of those who show in every line a temper totally unsuited to the investigation of principles so weighty and so complex as those which relate to the government of so large an empire [nation] must necessarily prove. But how much more improper are all those personalities which have of late [recently] made so great a part of the political writings of the day. Surely these cannot — they ought not to have any connection with the matter in dispute. They wound the feelings of individuals on both sides, but they can advance neither as to the object in view [discussing the Constitution] unless, indeed, the people were willing to take assertion for proof⁴ and to devote to obloquy [false accusation] any character who might fall under the lash of an anonymous opponent.⁵

“On the Liberty of Sentiment [Opinion],” *The Massachusetts Gazette*, Boston, 9 Sept. 1788, EXCERPTS

AMONG the various degrees of liberty enjoyed by a people, there are none more essential than that of *Sentiment* [opinion]. To offer one’s sentiments freely, without being subject to the *sarcasms* of every dirty scribbler, is a privilege which ought to be preserved sacred and inviolate, and which everyone has a right to expect. . . .

. . . When a writer comes forward and points out the pernicious [harmful] tendency of certain practices (whether in the profession of the law, physic [medicine] or divinity [clergy], it matters not) which he apprehends is detrimental [harmful] to the public good, he ought not to be abused and treated like a scoundrel for his well-meant information; but if he has differed from others in sentiments and is in an error, he ought to be convinced of his erroneous opinions by *cool, dispassionate reasoning*. To throw dirt in the first instance shows a want of argument [a lack of reasons for one’s opinion]. Every candid and considerate mind must view such conduct as being totally inconsistent with reason and common sense, and subversive of every generous and humane sentiment. . . .

The public safety requires — and it is one of the first principles of the constitution — that the liberty of sentiment should be preserved. For whenever it shall be encroached upon and abridged [limited], what THEN will become of that bright fire which has hitherto animated our national councils and given dignity to debate? What else *was* it but the liberty of sentiment which so early roused the Americans to arms in defense of their invaded rights? And what else *is* it but this liberty which must, at the present conjuncture [moment] of our national affairs, secure to us the important blessings of a wise, firm, prudent, substantial, and equitable government?

SPECTATOR, jun.

⁴ I.e., take a writer’s assurance that something is true as adequate proof.

⁵ The writer, “Z,” goes on to defend the reputation of a convention delegate who had voted for the Constitution.

“The Federal Anti-Federalist, returned to his Neighbors,” *The Massachusetts Gazette*, 15 Feb. 1788⁶

This dialogue features a “Federal Anti-Federalist,” i.e., a delegate to the state ratifying convention who, although elected as an Anti-Federalist, voted instead for the Constitution. Returning home, he responds cordially and directly to his Anti-Federalist neighbor’s challenge to explain his reversal. While clearly a pro-Federalist piece, it provided a model of civil discourse for antagonists whose cool heads had strayed.

Federalist: GOOD MORROW. I am glad to see you.

Neighbor: How do you do, sir — but I can’t return the compliment.

Federalist: I am sorry for that — I hope we are friends.

Neighbor: No sir — I cannot be friendly to a man who I think has betrayed his country.

Federalist: But how does that apply to *me*?

Neighbor: You voted for the constitution when we expected you to vote against it.

Federalist: True perhaps — but why did you send me to the [state ratifying] convention?

Neighbor: Because you said you were opposed to the constitution.

Federalist: And so I was — But did you suppose because I was jealous [suspicious] of it that I was determined to be deaf to all that should be said by its friends? — Did you imagine that or any man could instantly comprehend so great a system and critically judge of its merits?

Neighbor: Why then did you oppose it?

Federalist: Because a people ought always to be jealous [protective] of their liberties and to guard against innovations [detrimental changes]. And because I thought I saw several dangerous encroachments.

Neighbor: And how came you to alter your opinion?

Federalist: By the superior weight of arguments on the Federal side, and the indiscriminate and (generally) principled attack of the other.

Neighbor: Who appeared to you to be the most friendly to the liberties of the people? Answer me that.

Federalist: With pleasure. The Federalists.

Neighbor: A paradox. How?

Federalist: By advocating government, without which the people are slaves to the multitude and to the chance of an hour — without which there can be no permanent security for property, nor even life.

Neighbor: But were not the opposers for government?

Federalist: So they said — but the kind of government they want was, in fact, no government at all for the purposes of national honor and safety, nor would it secure the individual from injustice in other states. In fact, they proposed no form, and as they were wholly employed in opposition to this, it seemed that they were determined to have none, at least for the present.

Neighbor: But do you think the federal constitution a perfect system?

Federalist: No. But I think it is a better one than we could expect, and I choose it rather than disunion, which I think would be the consequence of rejecting it. You have seen the amendments?⁷

Neighbor: Yes. But who supposes they will take?

Federalist: I for one of many. Their object is the security of personal rights in general, as now enjoyed, or certain exemptions from the power of Congress that will be equally in favor of all the states. Can you generally calculate more certainly upon a man than when you take his interest for your rule?

Neighbor: But why did you not make them a condition of your ratification?

⁶ Originally published in the *Massachusetts Centinel*, date not given.

⁷ Proposed bill of rights.

Federalist: Because it was not necessary, if what I said last be true — and because it would have established a precedent that would have prevent the adoption of any constitution at all. Had there been anything peculiarly disadvantageous to Massachusetts, there would have been some reason to talk of a conditional acception [ratification]— but nothing like this was shown.

Neighbor: Did nothing like it *exist*?

Federalist: Not that I know, upon my honor — except the abrogation [repeal] of the tender act⁸ — and as to that, the wisdom of our legislatures will devise a way to prepare the people before the constitution is settled.

Neighbor: But do you not apprehend [see ahead] an insurrection of the people?

Federalist: Not in the least. Against what will they rise? Against a ratification? Against an invisible immaterial thing? — No — When the future Congress abuse the [rights of the] people, if they should, I hope the people will teach them their duty. But at present, if the people should be so foolish as to rebel, not one of them could tell his object [aim].

Neighbor: But how will you satisfy the town [that sent you to the state ratifying convention]?

Federalist: I hope they will satisfy themselves. Let them peruse the debates and judge anew of the constitution. Let them be sure that while they oppose this constitution, they are not opposed to all government. Let them endeavor to substitute a new form. Let them be perfectly honest at least — and I think they will acquiesce — nay, even rejoice in the ratification.

Neighbor: But there are men of sense and property opposed.

Federalist: Doubtless, and I am glad it is so, for the honor of a people that were ever jealous [distrustful] of power; and for another reason, that their conviction may quiet the minds of many honest men — I verily [truly] think that when they shall have considered the matter they will be of my opinion.

Neighbor: And you really voted without sinister views [selfish goals]?

Federalist: I really did. Such is our present precarious situation as a people that a government is essential to our existence. This constitution in the main is a good one, and far better than thirteen states could have been expected to make. I glory in the liberality of spirit that prevails and renders the adoption of any general constitution possible. I hope this will be well administered and am determined to be a good subject until I find the contrary — and then I will take the best apparent method for redress [correction].

Neighbor: Well — I believe you are an honest man, and though I expected a different line of conduct from you, I feel disposed to think of you as I have ever done until lately.

Federalist: I thank you — and will endeavor to merit (as I think I do now) the good opinion of every honest man.

⁸ The Tender Act [official money is “legal tender”] was passed in 1782 by the Massachusetts legislature to allow indebted citizens, many of them western farmers, to pay their debts with goods such as livestock during the postwar depression when little money was available—the situation which prompted Shays’s Rebellion of 1787-88. Merchants and bankers of the eastern urban section of the state fought for the act’s repeal, in part because they usually received less than full value for the debts incurred.