

Antifederalist No. 4

Foreign Wars, Civil Wars, and Indian Wars -- Three Bugbears

Patrick Henry was a somewhat the antithesis to James Madison of Federalist note. While every bit as emotional a writer, Henry (who penned the well remembered "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death" phrase) opposed the new Constitution for many reasons. He delivered long speeches to the Virginia Ratification convention June 5, 7, and 9, 1788. The following is taken from Elliot's Debates, 111, 46, 48, 141-42, 150-56.

If we recollect, on last Saturday, I made some observations on some of those dangers which these gentlemen would fain persuade us hang over the citizens of this commonwealth [Virginia] to induce us to change the government, and adopt the new plan. Unless there be great and awful dangers, the change is dangerous, and the experiment ought not to be made. In estimating the magnitude of these dangers, we are obliged to take a most serious view of them -- to see them, to handle them, and to be familiar with them. It is not sufficient to feign mere imaginary dangers; there must be a dreadful reality. The great question between us is: Does that reality exist? These dangers are partially attributed to bad laws, execrated by the community at large. It is said the people wish to change the government. I should be happy to meet them on that ground. Should the people wish to change it, we should be innocent of the dangers. It is a fact that the people do not wish to change their government. How am I to prove it? It will rest on my bare assertion, unless supported by an internal conviction in men's breasts. My poor say-so is a mere nonentity. But, sir, I am persuaded that four fifths of the people of Virginia must have amendments to the new plan, to reconcile them to a change of their government. It is a slippery foundation for the people to rest their political salvation on my or their assertions. No government can flourish unless it be founded on the affection of the people. Unless gentlemen can be sure that this new system is founded on that ground, they ought to stop their career.

I will not repeat what the gentlemen say -- I will mention one thing. There is a dispute between us and the Spaniards about the right of navigating the Mississippi ... Seven states wished to relinquish this river to them. The six Southern states opposed it. Seven states not being sufficient to convey it away, it remains now ours....

There is no danger of a dismemberment of our country, unless a Constitution be adopted which will enable the government to plant enemies on our backs. By the Confederation, the rights of territory are secured. No treaty can be made without the consent of nine states. While the consent of nine states is necessary to the cession of territory, you are safe. If it be put in the power of a less number, you will most infallibly lose the Mississippi. As long as we can preserve our unalienable rights, we are in safety. This new Constitution will involve in its operation the loss of the navigation of that valuable river.

The honorable gentleman [either James Madison or Edmund Randolph], cannot be ignorant of the Spanish transactions [the Jay-Gardoqui negotiations]. A treaty had been nearly entered into with Spain, to relinquish that navigation. That relinquishment would absolutely have taken place, had the consent of seven states been sufficient ... This new government, I conceive, will enable those states who have already discovered their inclination that way, to give away this river....

We are threatened with danger [according to some,] for the non-payment of our debt due to France. We have information come from an illustrious citizen of Virginia, who is now in Paris, which disproves the suggestions of such danger. This citizen has not been in the airy regions of theoretic speculation -- our ambassador [Thomas Jefferson] is this worthy citizen. The ambassador of the United States of America is not so despised as the honorable gentleman would make us believe. A servant of a republic is as much respected as that of a monarch. The honorable gentleman tells us that hostile fleets are to be sent to make reprisals upon us. Our ambassador tells you that the king of France has taken into consideration to enter into commercial regulations, on reciprocal terms, with us, which will be of peculiar advantage to us. Does this look like hostility? I might go farther. I might say, not from public authority, but good information, that his opinion is, that you reject this government. His character and abilities are in the highest estimation; he is well acquainted, in every respect, with this country; equally so with the policy of the European nations. Let us follow the sage advice of this common friend of our happiness.

It is little usual for nations to send armies to collect debts. The house of Bourbon, that great friend of America, will never attack her for her unwilling delay of payment. Give me leave to say, that Europe is too much engaged about objects of greater importance, to attend to us. On that great theater of the world, the little American matters vanish. Do you believe that the mighty monarch of France, beholding the greatest scenes that ever engaged the attention of a prince of that country, will divert himself from those important objects, and now call for a settlement of accounts with America? This proceeding is not warranted by good sense. The friendly disposition to us, and the actual situation of France, render the idea of danger from that quarter absurd. Would this countryman of ours be fond of advising us to a measure which he knew to be dangerous? And can it be reasonably supposed that he can be ignorant of any premeditated hostility against this country? The honorable gentleman may suspect the account; but I will do our friend the justice to say, that he would warn us of any danger from France.

Do you suppose the Spanish monarch will risk a contest with the United States, when his feeble colonies are exposed to them? Every advance the people make to the westward, makes them tremble for Mexico and Peru. Despised as we are among ourselves, under our present government, we are terrible to that monarchy. If this be not a fact, it is generally said so.

We are, in the next place, frightened by dangers from Holland. We must change our government to escape the wrath of that republic. Holland groans under a government like this new one. A stadtholder, sir, a Dutch president, has brought on that country miseries which will not permit them to collect debts with fleets or armies ... This President will bring miseries on us like those of Holland. Such is the condition of European affairs, that it would be unsafe for them to send fleets or armies to collect debts.

But here, sir, they make a transition to objects of another kind. We are presented with dangers of a very uncommon nature. I am not acquainted with the arts of painting. Some gentlemen have a peculiar talent for them. They are practiced with great ingenuity on this occasion. As a counterpart to what we have already been intimidated with, we are told that some lands have been sold, which cannot be found; and that this will bring war on this country. Here the picture will not stand examination. Can it be supposed, if a few land speculators and jobbers have violated the principles of probity, that it will involve this country in war? Is there no redress to be otherwise obtained, even admitting the delinquents and sufferers to be numerous? When gentlemen are thus driven to produce imaginary dangers, to induce this Convention to assent to this change, I am sure it will not be uncandid to say that the change itself is really dangerous. Then the Maryland compact is broken, and will produce perilous consequences. I see nothing very terrible in this. The adoption of the new system will not remove the evil. Will they forfeit good neighborhood with us, because the compact is broken? Then the disputes concerning the Carolina line are to involve us in dangers. A strip of land running from the westward of the Allegheny to the Mississippi, is the subject of this pretended dispute. I do not know the length or breadth of this disputed spot. Have they not regularly confirmed our right to it, and relinquished all claims to it? I can venture to pledge that the people of Carolina will never disturb us. . . . Then, sir, comes Pennsylvania, in terrible array. Pennsylvania is to go in conflict with Virginia. Pennsylvania has been a good neighbor heretofore. She is federal -- something terrible -- Virginia cannot look her in the face. If we sufficiently attend to the actual situation of things, we shall conclude that Pennsylvania will do what we do. A number of that country are strongly opposed to it. Many of them have lately been convinced of its fatal tendency. They are disgorged of their federalism. . . . Place yourselves in their situation; would you fight your neighbors for considering this great and awful matter? . . . Whatever may be the disposition of the aristocratical politicians of that country, I know there are friends of human nature in that state. If so, they will never make war on those who make professions of what they are attached to themselves.

As to the danger arising from borderers, it is mutual and reciprocal. If it be dangerous for Virginia, it is equally so for them. It will be their true interest to be united with us. The danger of our being their enemies will be a prevailing argument in our favor. It will be as powerful to admit us into the Union, as a vote of adoption, without previous amendments, could possibly be.

Then the savage Indians are to destroy us. We cannot look them in the face. The danger is here divided; they are as terrible to the other states as to us. But, sir, it is well known that we have nothing to fear from them. Our back settlers are considerably stronger than they. Their superiority increases daily. Suppose the states to be confederated all around us; what we want in numbers, we shall make up otherwise. Our compact situation and natural strength will secure us. But, to avoid all dangers, we must take shelter under the federal government. Nothing gives a decided importance but this federal government. You will sip sorrow, according to the vulgar phrase, if you want any other security than the laws of Virginia....

Where is the danger? If, sir, there was any, I would recur to the American spirit to defend us; that spirit which has enabled us to surmount the greatest difficulties -- to that illustrious spirit I address my most fervent prayer to prevent our adopting a system destructive to liberty. Let not gentlemen be told that it is not safe to reject this government. Wherefore is it not safe? We are

told there are dangers, but those dangers are ideal; they cannot be demonstrated....

The Confederation, this despised government, merits, in my opinion, the highest encomium -- it carried us through a long and dangerous war; it rendered us victorious in that bloody conflict with a powerful nation; it has secured us a territory greater than any European monarch possesses -- and shall a government which has been thus strong and vigorous, be accused of imbecility, and abandoned for want of energy? Consider what you are about to do before you part with the government. Take longer time in reckoning things; revolutions like this have happened in almost every country in Europe; similar examples are to be found in ancient Greece and ancient Rome -- instances of the people losing their liberty by their own carelessness and the ambition of a few. We are cautioned . . . against faction and turbulence. I acknowledge that licentiousness is dangerous, and that it ought to be provided against. I acknowledge, also, the new form of government may effectually prevent it. Yet there is another thing it will as effectually do -- it will oppress and ruin the people.