

## Antifederalist No. 50

### On Constitutional Conventions. (Part 2)

Antifederalists sought a second constitutional convention immediately after conclusion of the first. This essay by "An Old Whig," is from either *The Freeman's Journal* or *The North-American Intelligencer*, of November 28, 1787.

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It is true that the Continental Convention have directed their proposed constitution to be laid before a Convention of Delegates to be chosen in each state "for their assent and ratification," which seems to preclude the idea of any power in the several Conventions of proposing any alterations; or, indeed, even of rejecting the plan proposed if they should disapprove of it. Still, however, the question recurs, what authority the late Convention had to bind the people of the United States to any particular form of government, or to forbid them to adopt such form of government, as they should think fit. I know it is a language frequent in the mouths of some heaven-born Phaetons among us -- who, like the son of Apollo, think themselves entitled to guide the chariot of the sun -- that common people have no right to judge of the affairs of government; that they are not fit for it; that they should leave these matters to their superiors. This, however, is not the language of men of real understanding, even among the advocates for the proposed Constitution; but these still recognize the authority of the people, and will admit, at least in words, that the people have a right to be consulted. Then I ask, if the people in the different states have a right to be consulted in the new form of continental government, what authority could the late Convention have to preclude them from proposing amendments to the plan they should offer? Had the Convention any right to bind the people to the form of government they should propose? Let us consider this matter.

The late Convention were chosen by the General Assembly of each state. They had the sanction of Congress. For what? To consider what alterations were necessary to be made in the articles of Confederation. What have they done? They have made a new Constitution for the United States. I will not say that in doing so they have exceeded their authority; but, on the other hand, I trust that no man of understanding among them will pretend to say that anything they did, or could do, was of the least avail to lessen the right of the people to judge for themselves in the last resort. This right is perhaps unalienable; but, at all events, there is no pretense for saying that this right was ever meant to be surrendered up into the hands of the late Continental Convention. The people have an undoubted right to judge of every part of the government which is offered to them. No power on earth has a right to preclude them; and they may exercise this choice either by themselves or their delegates legally chosen in the state Convention. I venture to say that no man, reasoning upon Revolution principles, can possibly controvert this right.

Indeed, very few go so far as to controvert the right of the people to propose amendments. But we are told the thing is impracticable; that if we begin to propose amendments there will be no end to them; that the several states will never agree in their amendments; that we shall never unite in any plan; that if we reject this, we shall either have a worse one or none at all; that we

ought therefore to adopt this at once without alteration or amendment. Now, these are very kind gentlemen who insist upon doing so much good for us, whether we will or not. Idiots and maniacs ought certainly to be restrained from doing themselves mischief, and ought to be compelled to that which is for their own good. Whether the people of America are to be considered in this light and treated accordingly, is a question which deserves, perhaps, more consideration than it has yet received. A contest between the patients and their doctors, which are mad or which are fools, might possibly be a very unhappy one. I hope at least that we shall be able to settle this important business without so preposterous a dispute. What then would you have us do, it may be asked? Would you have us adopt the proposed constitution or reject it? The method I would propose is this:

1. Let the conventions of each state, as they meet, after considering the proposed constitution, state their objections and propose their amendments. So far from these objections and amendments clashing with each other in irreconcilable discord, as it has too often been suggested they would do, that from what has been hitherto published in the different states in opposition to the proposed constitution we have a right to expect that they will harmonize in a very great degree. The reason I say so is that about the same time, in very different parts of the continent, the very same objections have been made, and the very same alterations proposed by different writers, who I verily believe know nothing at all of each other and were very far from acting by a premeditated concert; and that others who have not appeared as writers in the newspapers in the different states, have appeared to act and speak in perfect unison with those objections and amendments, particularly in the article of a bill of rights; that in short, the very same sentiments seem to have been echoed from the different parts of the continent by the opposers of the proposed constitution. And these sentiments have been very little contradicted by its friends, otherwise than by suggesting their fears that by opposing the constitution at present proposed, we might be disappointed of any federal government, or receive a worse one than the present. It would be a most delightful surprise to find ourselves all of one opinion at last. And I cannot forbear hoping that when we come fairly to compare our sentiments, we shall find ourselves much more nearly agreed, than in the hurry and surprise in which we have been involved on this subject, we ever suffered ourselves to imagine.

2. When the conventions have stated these objections and amendments, let them transmit them to congress, and adjourn, praying that congress will direct another convention to be called from the different states, to consider of these objections and amendments, and pledging themselves to abide by whatever decision shall be made by such future convention on the subject whether it be to amend the proposed constitution or to reject any alterations, and ratify it as it stands.

3. If a new convention of the United States should meet, and revise the proposed constitution, let us agree to abide by their decision. It is past a doubt that every good citizen of America pants for an efficient federal government. I have no doubt we shall concur at last in some plan of continental government, even if many people could imagine exceptions to it. But if the exceptions which are made at present shall be maturely considered, and even be pronounced by our future representatives as of no importance (which I trust they will not), even in that case I have no doubt that almost every man will give up his own private opinion and concur in that decision.

4. If, by any means, another continental convention should fail to meet, then let the conventions of the several states again assemble and at last decide the great solemn question, whether we shall adopt the constitution now proposed or reject it. And whenever it becomes necessary to decide upon this point one, at least, who from the beginning has been invariably anxious for the liberty and independence of this country, will concur in adopting and supporting this constitution, rather than none; though, I confess, I could easily imagine some other form of confederation which I should think better entitled to my hearty approbation, and indeed I am not afraid of a worse.

*AN OLD WHIG*