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The Powers and Dangerous Potentials of His Elected Majesty

"An Old Whig's" essay from The New-York Journal of December 11, 1787.

.... In the first place the office of president of the United States appears to me to be clothed with such powers as are dangerous. To be the fountain of all honors in the United States --commander in chief of the army, navy, and militia; with the power of making treaties and of granting pardons; and to be vested with an authority to put a negative upon all laws, unless two thirds of both houses shall persist in enacting it, and put their names down upon calling the yeas and nays for that purpose-- is in reality to be a king, as much a king as the king of Great Britain, and a king too of the worst kind: an elective king. If such powers as these are to be trusted in the hands of any man, they ought, for the sake of preserving the peace of the community, at once to be made hereditary. Much as I abhor kingly government, yet I venture to pronounce, where kings are admitted to rule they should most certainly be vested with hereditary power. The election of a king whether it be in America or Poland, will be a scene of horror and confusion; and I am perfectly serious when I declare, that, as a friend to my country, I shall despair of any happiness in the United States until this office is either reduced to a lower pitch of power, or made perpetual and hereditary. When I say that our future president will be as much a king as the king of Great Britain, I only ask of my readers to look into the constitution of that country, and then tell me what important prerogative the king of Great Britain is entitled to which does not also belong to the president during his continuance in office. The king of Great Britain, it is true, can create nobility which our president cannot; but our president will have the power of making all the great men, which comes to the same thing. All the difference is, that we shall be embroiled in contention about the choice of the man, while they are at peace under the security of an hereditary succession. To be tumbled headlong from the pinnacle of greatness and be reduced to a shadow of departed royalty, is a shock almost too great for human nature to endure. It will cost a man many struggles to resign such eminent powers, and ere long, we shall find some one who will be very unwilling to part with them. Let us suppose this man to be a favorite with his army, and that they are unwilling to part with their beloved commander in chief -- or to make the thing familiar, let us suppose a future president and commander in chief adored by his army and the militia to as great a degree as our late illustrious commander in chief; and we have only to suppose one thing more, that this man is without the virtue, the moderation and love of liberty which possessed the mind of our late general -- and this country will be involved at once in war and tyranny. So far is it from its being improbable that the man who shall hereafter be in a situation to make the attempt to perpetuate his own power, should want the virtues of General Washington, that it is perhaps a chance of one hundred millions to one that the next age will not furnish an example of so disinterested a use of great power. We may also suppose, without trespassing upon the bounds of probability, that this man may not have the means of supporting, in private life, the dignity of his former station; that like Caesar, he may be at once ambitious and poor, and deeply involved in debt. Such a man would die a thousand deaths rather than sink from the heights of splendor and power, into obscurity and wretchedness. We are certainly about

giving our president too much or too little; and in the course of less than twenty years we shall find that we have given him enough to enable him to take all. It would be infinitely more prudent to give him at once as much as would content him, so that we might be able to retain the rest in peace, for if once power is seized by violence, not the least fragment of liberty will survive the shock. I would therefore advise my countrymen seriously to ask themselves this question: Whether they are prepared to receive a king? If they are, to say so at once, and make the kingly office hereditary; to frame a constitution that should set bounds to his power, and, as far as possible, secure the liberty of the subject. If we are not prepared to receive a king, let us call another convention to revise the proposed constitution, and form it anew on the principles of a confederacy of free republics; but by no means, under pretense of are public, to lay the foundation for a military government, which is the worst of all tyrannies.

AN OLD WHIG