

## To the People

American Revolution

1777

TO THE PEOPLE from Pennsylvania Packet, March 18, 1777.

THERE are particular periods both in public and domestic life, in which, the excellence of wisdom consists in a due government of the temper: Without this, zeal degenerates into rage, and affection into bitterness. And so necessary is this qualification, in every stage of life, that a person had better be a novice with a fund of temper than a wise man without it. The temper is that particular string in the heart, on which the far greater part of our happiness or misery is tuned. 'Tis capable of being set to any music rough or smooth, and when strained to its highest pitch, will command the whole man.

I am led to these reflections by observing a paper signed Phocian in the Pennsylvania Journal, and another signed Hampden in the Evening Post; who the papers came from I mean not to enquire into: If either of them be from a man whom I have ever thought or called a friend, I spare him out of pity to myself; if from an enemy, I spare him from a regard to the public peace. Were I disposed to answer either I have enough to say; but as I feel some concern at torturing a friend into a blush on one hand; so on the other, I am unwilling to take off the attention of the public from real objects by calling up their anger against a shadow.

Just at the time the Convention first met I went to camp, and continued there till a few days before Christmas. I held no correspondence with either party, for, or against, the present constitution. I had no hand in forming any part of it, nor knew any thing of its contents till I saw it published. My acquaintance, at this time, lies with persons on both sides the question. Those that are in or those that are out are alike to me, as to any dependence I have, or mean to have, on either. Thus situated and circumstanced my personal attachments are equally balanced, and all that affects me on the matter, is, that a little squabbling spirit should at this ill chosen time creep in and extinguish every thing that is civil and generous among us. — The mind of man is not sufficiently capacious to attend to every thing at once, and while it suffers itself to be eaten up by narrow prejudices or fretted by personal politics, it will have neither relish nor appetite for public virtues. In proportion as we are engrossed by one object, we abate in our ardor for another; and a man may as well talk of loving a wife and a mistress, at one time, with equal felicity, as of jangling with his neighbours and yet joining with them in public defense. It matters not how we express ourselves, or how we would be believed; the thing cannot be; for the one will be the rival of the other in spite of all the assertions we can make, or the resolutions we can form. The condition of this State the latter end of last year was deplorable; Society had taken its departure; every man's hand seemed against his brother, and all this, for the want of that happy ingredient in life, good temper. The evil was more extensive than the authors apprehended. It reached the minds of men in other States, for who could hear it and not be

affected? Scarce a day passed but some disagreeable information arrived at camp, and as the dependence of the army, at that time, was on the support they expected to receive from the country, it had frequently very unfavorable effects both on their hopes and their fortitude.

I shall sum up my opinion of the matter in a few words, for the case, as it appears to me, stands thus. In May last, the Congress recommended a dissolution of all the old governments and the forming new ones on the authority of the people. This State adopted the measure, and chose a Convention for that express purpose. It could not be every man's lot to be elected, and a little spirit of revenge and resentment seized very early on those who supposed themselves disappointed, for I have ever been of opinion, and still am, that the whole matter is more personal than political. The people had an undoubted right to choose whom they pleased, and those whom they chose had a delegated power to form a constitution. We must begin somewhere, otherwise we shall never be right. If we reject and break through every thing merely because it don't, in some points, please us, and that only upon speculation, what right have we to suppose that others will afterwards submit to what don't please them. The very example is more dangerous than any evil it is intended to cure. It is cutting the bonds of all society in sunder, and sacrificing every kind of faith and obligation to pride, passion, prejudice and party. It will be much easier to overturn a second constitution than the first, because the precedent will be before us. The fall of the third will be easier still, and so on, till all kind of security and dependence be obliterated from among us. It wants but little reflection to see those things, and before we raise the devil we ought to consider whether we can lay him again.

That the present constitution has errors and defects is not to be doubted; it would be strange indeed if it had not: But that it has some excellencies likewise, that will be the pride of ages to come, is equally true; and that it has nothing immediately dangerous in it, is as true. In short, 'tis sufficiently right to begin with, and I cannot think men serious in the present mighty out cry of tyranny, chains and slavery. Had the Convention formed it otherwise, with the same mode of amending or altering it, in regular stated periods, I should have thought it my duty to support and give it a fair trial, purely for the sake of discovering what ought to be retained, reformed or rejected.

I am as fond of my own liberty, and as strongly attached to public liberty, as any man living, but I confess that I cannot be made to see danger at present; and my intention is to give all the support in my power to the present constitution, till the enemy be driven from the country. I cannot help conceiving it an excess of error and ill judgment to be wrangling about constitution, till we know whether we shall have one of our own forming, or whether the enemy shall form one for us. We disturb the peace of other States as well as our own, because the appearance of an evil, at this time, is as dangerous as a real one at another time. I have kept clear of all argument for or against the constitution, yet I have my opinion as well as others; but were the government more defective than what the objectors would have it be, I would, nevertheless, support it in the present state of things, and thank God I had it to support. I can see no end but weakness, confusion, and ill blood that can possibly

arise from the proposal thrown out by Hampden. It is like recommending death as a cure for a disease; a remedy which few are fond of, and as few, I hope, have any opinion of the other.

Far be it from me to support an error knowing or believing it to be so; and in order to discover what is right or wrong in the constitution, so far as a fair and candid investigation can go, I will, in any future period, when called upon, take the matter up with any gentleman in Pennsylvania. I have given my name to the printer, and have a right to expect that whoever accepts the offer, will do the same. I may probably be as free in censuring some defects or omissions, as he may others, but this I can assure him, that I have no object in view but the restoration of order, nor any point to carry inconsistent with the public good.

COMMON SENSE.