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Boston and the Calling of the Federal Convention of 1787

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In the early years of the Confederation period Bostonians who favored a stronger central government gave much of their attention to the proposed amendment of the Articles of Confederation to enable Congress to collect an impost. As hopes of securing such an amendment faded and as economic difficulties increased, many of those same people counted on vigorous state action to alleviate the crisis. But still they wondered what would be necessary "to unite all the states by bonds indissoluble, which may still leave a sufficient degree of freedom and independence."¹

One of the earliest and most determined advocates of a stronger central government was General Henry Knox of Boston. From the beginning of the period, he had been a nationalist. The economic problems that the existing governments seemed helpless to solve by the middle of the period intensified his sentiments. "Our federal government must be settled upon more rational principles," Knox wrote in March of 1785. If the change were not made soon, events would take over and eventually force it, he predicted. In the same month, Benjamin Austin, Jr., well removed from Knox on the political spectrum, expressed a similar conviction: "It is indispensably necessary to our union that we should perpetually recur to federal principles, and to the common concerns of the empire, which now languish for want of power and disunity in the common head" Another writer in the spring of 1785, bemoaning the impotence of Congress, contended that only that body, not the state governments, had the potential for protecting the interests of farmers, manufacturers, and merchants. A writer in the *American Herald* thought it "self-evident that there must be a SUPREME HEAD somewhere" in the American system of government. For this reason, he argued, Congress must be given adequate powers.²

Bostonians showed continued interest in this subject during the remainder of 1785. Several newspapers printed pieces on the central government and the union. A series of articles in the *Independent Chronicle* over the signature of "Jonathan of the Valley" is especially important, for it represents one of the few expressions of dissent among the many voices calling for a stronger union and a more powerful federal government. "Jonathan" regarded the Confederation as a "league or treaty of alliance between thirteen sovereign and independent states." He was fearful that the nationalists might "lay a foundation for one consolidated

government over the whole union, annihilate all your legislatures, and swallow up the separate sovereignty of the states so carefully preserved in the Confederation." In his view, the nation had only two alternatives: confederation, or consolidation. Reducing the sovereignty of the states by strengthening Congress would "alter totally the form of government we have so happily established," he wrote, "and change the complexion of the Confederation very materially." The end result of the consolidation that must follow the states' loss of sovereignty might be, he feared, the pulling down of the "goodly fabric of freedom in this western world."³

Responding to "Jonathan's" first article, "A Friend to Commerce" scoffed at the idea that congress would be dangerous. He was impressed by the fact that Congress had proven trustworthy during the war. It was his opinion that "any matters which concern us as a *confederated people* must be determined by those who are the representatives of the Confederation." Unlike "Jonathan," a writer styling himself "Amicus Patriae" saw three possibilities for the government of the nation. Americans could have an "unlimited monarchy," a chaotic group of states divided by "petty distinctions," or a "confederated republic." The writer preferred the last of the three possibilities, noting that it would be possible if "local prejudices" were put aside and Congress were given adequate powers.⁴

Other writers who proposed the strengthening of Congress parried the argument that such a step would be dangerous. "The Observator" thought that because of annual elections, "that great palladium of civil liberty," a strong Congress could be trusted with "our common interest" as much as any other legislative body on the continent. In one of his many anonymous letters, James Sullivan wrote: "The liberty of the people does not consist in, or depend on, the withholding [of] power where power ought to be given . . ." Their liberty rested "principally on the establishment of a government on a good foundation, on a constitution which provides for all possible cases of public necessity . . . and which clearly defines and recognizes both liberties of the people and prerogative of government." He could not agree with "Jonathan" and other opponents of reform that the preservation of American liberties was irreconcilable with strong government, including a powerful Congress. A writer in the *Massachusetts Centinel* also regretted that Congress was "not permitted to do well, for fear they should do ill."⁵

By the end of 1785 the limitations of the state governments were becoming very evident to many Bostonians. The states, by their isolated efforts, were unable to lift themselves out of the crisis into which the nation had slipped. Even Massachusetts, with what many Bostonians regarded as a model government, could not solve the problems of trade and finance that it confronted. Realizing this, the people of Boston increasingly pointed out the necessity of redesigning the central government to enable it to handle those problems, which were really the problems of the entire nation. As the year 1785 ended, Stephen Higginson wrote to John Adams of his conviction that the "individual interests of the states cannot be permanently secured till those of the union shall first be established on a firm and equitable basis." A few weeks later, James Sullivan reminded the readers of the *Centinel*: "We are citizens of a nation, as well as of a state; and as the former is the greatest, it claims the highest obligation. But

in the appellation of sovereignty, belonging to each state, we are apt to lose the idea of national obligations and obedience to national authority." In a later letter Sullivan criticized the leaders of some states for following "only narrow state policy—regardless of the great national concerns" involved. "Since the peace," he wrote, "an indecisive spirit, a sleepy jealousy, a blind avarice, and little local principles have so benumbed and darkened the heads of many members of the legislatures, in different states, as to cast a shade over the national glory." A writer in the *Boston Gazette* agreed that the strengthening of Congress "has been procrastinated by ignorant or selfish men in the states." For lack of "national government," he said, the nation "languishes in everything." Another Bostonian writing in the spring of 1786 described "our present form of federal government" as apparently "inadequate to the purpose for which it was instituted." Because Congress was "subject to be checked, controlled, and negatived by thirteen individual sovereignties," it "must ever move heavily and awkwardly, so that no business can be done to good purpose." A writer in the *American Herald* was one of many calling for the strengthening of Congress. "It is my pride," he declared, "to support the federal government; it is my firm wish to see Congress respected at home and feared abroad, to have them vested with power, with sufficient power." A strong Congress, suggested another writer, was necessary to protect Americans' "liberties and independence." As he considered the problems rampant in America, he was persuaded that the greatest danger lay in granting Congress "too little power, and not too much."⁶

By the late summer of 1786, as Boston was falling under the shadow of what would come to be known as Shays' Rebellion, there was in the town stronger support than ever for the movement to bolster federal power. Moreover, Bostonians sensed a new urgency in this movement. The evidence from Boston seems to support what Gordon S. Wood has written about the states in general in 1786 and 1787:

What had formerly been considered advisable for the functioning of the Confederation was fast becoming essential for the future of republicanism itself. It was no longer simply a matter of cementing the union or of satisfying the demands of particular creditor, mercantile, or army interests. The ability of America to sustain any sort of republican government seemed to be the issue. As long as the revision of the Articles was based solely on the need to solve specific problems of finance, commerce, and foreign policy, its support was erratic and fearful. But once men grasped, as they increasingly did in the middle eighties, that reform of the national government was the best means of remedying the evils caused by the state governments, then the revision of the Articles of Confederation assumed an impetus and an importance that it had not had a few years earlier.⁷

As the insurrection gained momentum in the closing months of 1786, so did nationalist sentiment in Boston. In late November, Stephen Higginson exclaimed: "I never saw so great change in the public mind on any occasion as has lately appeared in this state as to the expediency of increasing the powers of

Congress” And he noted that the people generally, not just the commercial interests, shared this conviction. A writer in the *Independent Chronicle* was typical of many writers of the time in hoping that “America, like every other country,” would soon have a “national power competent to national purposes.”⁸

The calls for giving Congress additional legislative power may have been more numerous and more urgent after the summer of 1786, but they were not new. A more significant development, perhaps, was the fact that a number of Bostonians now wanted a more thorough reconstruction of the central government. Comparing government in America to “a headless body, where the tremulous motion of the severed nerves is the only sign of remaining life,” one writer proposed that Congress be granted new executive and judicial powers as well as additional legislative authority. Another writer described the Articles as “very deficient even in theory.” And “One of the People” insisted that “there must be an entire new system, or no government” at all. Interest in patching up an old garment was clearly giving way to enthusiasm for making a new one.⁹

If it had not been for their preoccupation with the beginnings of the uprising in central and western Massachusetts, Bostonians might have paid more attention to the convention that met in Annapolis in September 1786 to discuss interstate commerce and related matters. Even so, the *Continental Journal* took note of the selection of delegates to represent Massachusetts at the convention. “A. B.” and “A Bostonian” were hopeful that some good would come of the convention, although they worried that the measures it might recommend would not be adopted by all of the states. Others, including Samuel Adams, favored revision of the Articles of Confederation but feared that a convention might lead to an excessively centralized government. As it turned out, the delegates from Massachusetts did not reach Annapolis in time for the convention, and so for Bostonians it remained a rather remote event.¹⁰

During the winter of 1786-1787 and then the spring of 1787, indictments of the Confederation government became harsher. Americans, wrote “A Bostonian,” were in a “state of federal debility.” “Tribunus” thought that the description of Congress as a “federal government” was “only a sound without force or efficacy.” A writer in the *Centinel* concluded that “we are no longer *United States* because we are not under any firm and energetic compact. The breath of jealousy has blown the cobweb of our Confederacy asunder. Every link of the chain of union is separated from its companion.” The problem, as “Sully” saw it, was that “when the Articles of Confederation were formed, the immediate preservation of liberty against the force of an exasperated foe was the only thought which engaged the attention of Congress.” Now that there was no longer “fear of subjugation,” the thirteen states had no “common principle of action.” As a result, they had become a “political Babel.”¹¹

More than a few critics of the existing government wrote in a tone of despair, but others were hopeful, advancing and supporting various proposals for reform. One of the more intriguing proposals appeared in mid-February of 1787 in both the *Chronicle* and the *Massachusetts Gazette*. Favoring a “new and stronger union” but apparently doubtful that all of the states would be willing to participate, the author advocated a new union of the five New England states. Those

states, "closely confederated," would have "nothing to fear," he believed. In such an event, Massachusetts could withdraw her delegates from that "shadowy meeting which still bears the name of Congress," leaving the Middle and Southern states to "pursue their own imbecile and disjointed plans." When this proposal was made, Bostonians were already discussing another plan, which most of them found more promising than a possible regional union. They were speculating about the prospects for the convention planned for Philadelphia in May 1787.¹²

The Annapolis convention had proposed that delegates from all of the states meet at Philadelphia to consider revision of the Articles of Confederation. By early February there was enough support for the proposed convention for Stephen Higginson to express his pleasure over "so good a prospect of a general convention in May." As early as 1783 Higginson himself had urged that such a convention be called. Now he found it all the more necessary because of the widespread recognition that the "Confederation is incompetent to the purposes for which it was established, the managing the affairs of the union." It had become evident that "powers delineated on paper cannot alone be sufficient," for the Union must not only have the right to make laws and requisitions, but it must have the power also of compelling obedience thereto." Higginson wanted to see the "powers of the union . . . increased and those of the states individually . . . abridged." In his opinion, they could not "both be perfectly sovereign and independent at the same time; the federal must have power to control the individual governments of the states, in some points at least." If the states would yield some of their "separate independency" and concentrate their "view to the union," disaster would be averted.¹³

Higginson was so optimistic about the forthcoming convention that he even offered his opinion about the ratification of a new constitution. In a letter to Henry Knox, he expressed his preference for ratification by "special state conventions," rather than by either the state legislatures or the "people at large throughout the union." A week later a writer in one of the Boston papers hailed the news that Virginia had chosen delegates to the May convention as "one gleam of light" in the "horrible darkness" enshrouding the nation. He hoped that all of the states would "lay aside all your antifederal baubles of state" and appoint delegates with "national ideas" who would "keep in view . . . the good of the whole." He was confident that men like George Washington and Benjamin Franklin could "adjust the scale of national capacity, and lay a foundation of our future importance among the nations of the earth." A number of weeks later, another writer was hopeful because of the knowledge that Washington and Franklin would be present at the convention. With them present, along with other "sages and patriots," the convention "cannot but produce the most salutary measures."¹⁴

Soon after the Confederation Congress endorsed the convention proposal in late February, Massachusetts accepted the invitation to participate. Writing from Boston in early March, George Richards Minot observed that the General Court had been "very decisive" about the idea of a convention. "They at once agreed to the proposal . . ." Minot was not surprised, for, as he noted, "anything that looks like bracing the federal government is immediately closed with here." Un-

questionably, the recent rebellion in Massachusetts had helped to prepare the way for enthusiastic support of the Constitutional Convention. And nowhere, it seems, did people hope for more from the convention than in Boston. A writer in the *Continental Journal* described the convention as “perhaps the last opportunity which may be presented to us of establishing a permanent system of continental government; and if this opportunity be lost, it is much to be feared that we shall fall into irretrievable confusion.” Anticipating the final result of the convention, he rejected the idea of a consolidated republic, vesting Congress with the “absolute direction and government of the continent as one single republic,” as “impracticable.” Congress simply needed more power, he wrote, to regulate trade and take care of other matters “which alike concern all the states.”¹⁵

The importance of the burgeoning nationalism in Boston is very evident. Boston was the foremost political as well as commercial center in New England. It was the capital of the most populous and influential state in the region, and that state was one of the largest and most important in the union. New England and Massachusetts, like the rest of the country, were overwhelmingly rural, but the influence of Boston, their leading urban center, would prove decisive in the triumph of nationalism in 1787 and 1788.¹⁶

NOTES

1. Tristram Dalton to Elbridge Gerry, Feb. 11, 1787, in Elbridge Gerry Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.
2. Robert A. East, “Massachusetts Conservatives in the Critical Period,” in Richard B. Morris, ed., *The Era of the American Revolution: Studies Inscribed to Evarts Boutell Greene* (New York, 1939), p. 366; Henry Knox to General Parsons, March 1, 1785, in Henry Knox Papers, MHS; “Honestus,” *The Independent Chronicle and the Universal Advertiser*, March 10, 1785; “An American,” *Ind. Chron.*, April 21, 1785; “Pro Bono-Republicae,” *American Herald*, April 25, 1785.
3. See especially numbers I and III in the series by “Jonathan of the Valley,” *Ind. Chron.*, June 16 and Oct. 20, 1785.
4. “A Friend to Commerce,” *Ind. Chron.*, June 23, 1785; “Amicus Patriae,” *The Massachusetts Centinel*, Aug. 3, 1785.
5. “The Observator,” *Am. Herald*, Sept. 12, 1785; “Americanus,” *Mass. Cent.*, Sept. 17, 1785; *Mass. Cent.*, Dec. 3, 1785.

6. Stephen Higginson to John Adams, Dec. 30, 1785, in Putnam, Jackson, and Lowell Papers, MHS; "Consideration," *Mass. Cent.*, Feb. 4 and June 17, 1786; "An American," *The Boston Gazette, and the Country Journal*, June 19, 1786; *Mass. Cent.*, May 20, 1786; "A Confederationalist," *Am. Herald*, July 10, 1786; *The Massachusetts Gazette*, April 24, 1786.
7. Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic: 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1969), p. 466.
8. Stephen Higginson to Henry Knox, Nov. 25, 1786 in Henry Knox Papers; *Ind. Chron.*, Nov. 2, 1786.
9. "A Bostonian," *Ind. Chron.*, Aug. 3, 1786; *Ind. Chron.*, Sept. 7, 1786; "One of the People," *Mass. Cent.*, Oct. 11, 1786.
10. *The Continental Journal and Weekly Advertiser*, Aug. 24, and Sept. 7, 1786; "A. B.," *Mass. Gaz.*, Aug. 22, 1786; "A Bostonian," *Ind. Chron.*, Aug. 10, 1786; Van Beck Hall, *Politics Without Parties: Massachusetts, 1780-1791* (Pittsburgh, 1972), p. 164.
11. "A Bostonian," *Ind. Chron.*, Dec. 28, 1786; "Tribunus," *Ind. Chron.*, April 26, 1787; *Mass. Cent.*, April 11, 1787; "Sully," *Mass. Cent.*, Feb. 21, 1787.
12. *Ind. Chron.*, Feb. 15, 1787; *Mass. Gaz.*, Feb. 16, 1787. See H. James Henderson, *Party Politics in the Continental Congress* (New York, 1974), p. 394.
13. Stephen Higginson to Henry Knox, Feb. 8, 1787, in Higginson Family Papers, MHS.
14. Higginson to Knox, Feb. 8, 1787, in Higginson Family Papers; "A Citizen," *Cont. Jour.*, Feb. 15, 1787; *Mass. Cent.*, April 14, 1787.
15. George Richards Minot to Nathan Dane, March 3, 1787, in Norcross Papers, MHS; "Amicus Patriae," *Cont. Jour.*, May 31, 1787.
16. See East, "Massachusetts Conservatives," in Morris, ed., *Era of the American Revolution*, p. 366.