

CHAPTER
5

Section 3

PRIMARY SOURCE *from* Patrick Henry's
Antifederalist Speech

Patrick Henry served as a delegate at the Virginia ratifying convention in 1788. At the convention, Antifederalists Henry, George Mason, and James Monroe squared off against Federalists James Madison, Edmund Pendleton, and George Wythe. A powerful orator, Henry delivered this speech to the convention. Despite Henry's opposition to the Constitution, the Federalists won the debate—Virginia became the tenth state to ratify the Constitution.

This Constitution is said to have beautiful features; but when I come to examine these features, sir, they appear to me horribly frightful. Among other deformities, it has an awful squinting; it squints toward monarchy; and does not this raise indignation in the breast of every true American? Your President may easily become king. Your Senate is so imperfectly constructed that your dearest rights may be sacrificed by what may be a small minority; and a very small minority may continue forever unchangeably this government, although horribly defective. Where are your checks in this government? Your strongholds will be in the hands of your enemies. It is on a supposition that your American governors shall be honest, that all the good qualities of this government are founded; but its defective and imperfect construction puts it in their power to perpetrate the worst of mischiefs, should they be bad men; and, sir, would not all the world, from the Eastern to the Western Hemisphere, blame our distracted folly in resting our rights upon the contingency of our rulers being good or bad? Show me that age and country where the rights and liberties of the people were placed on the sole chance of their rulers being good men, without a consequent loss of liberty! I say that the loss of that dearest privilege has ever followed, with absolute certainty, every such mad attempt.

If your American chief be a man of ambition and abilities, how easy is it for him to render himself absolute! The army is in his hands, and if he be a man of address, it will be attached to him, and it will be the subject of long meditation with him to seize the first auspicious moment to accomplish his design; and, sir, will the American spirit solely relieve you when this happens? I would rather infinitely—and I am sure most of this convention are of the same opinion—have a king, lords, and commons, than a government so replete with such

insupportable evils. If we make a king, we may prescribe the rules by which he shall rule his people, and interpose such checks as shall prevent him from infringing them; but the President, in the field, at the head of his army, can prescribe the terms on which he shall reign master, so far that it will puzzle any American ever to get his neck from under the galling yoke. I cannot with patience think of this idea. If ever he violate the laws, one of two things will happen: he will come at the head of the army to carry everything before him; or he will give bail, or do what Mr. Chief-Justice will order him. If he be guilty, will not the recollection of his crimes teach him to make one bold push for the American throne? Will not the immense difference between being master of everything and being ignominiously tried and punished powerfully excite him to make this bold push? But, sir, where is the existing force to punish him? Can he not, at the head of his army, beat down every opposition? Away with your President! we shall have a king: the army will salute him monarch; your militia will leave you, and assist in making him king, and fight against you: and what have you to oppose this force? What will then become of you and your rights? Will not absolute despotism ensue?

from David J. Brewer, ed., *The World's Best Orations*, vols. 6–10 (Metuchen, N.J.: Mini-Print, 1970), 2495–2496.

Discussion Questions

1. What kind of government did Patrick Henry fear would develop out of the new Constitution?
2. Why did Henry feel that a king would be preferable to a president under the new Constitution?
3. How would you counteract Henry's objections?
4. Explain why you agree or disagree with Henry's opinions.