

Questions

1. Who do the authors of the petition consider to be the greatest enemies of their liberty?
2. Who do the authors claim ought to have preference when western land is distributed?

39. David Ramsay, American Innovations in Government (1789)

Source: David Ramsay, The History of the American Revolution (2 vols.: Philadelphia, 1789), Vol. I, pp. 355-57.

A member of the Continental Congress from South Carolina, David Ramsay published his history of the Revolution in the year the Constitution was ratified. In this excerpt, he lauds the principles of representative government, and the right of future amendment, embodied in the state constitutions and adopted in the national one, as unique American political principles and the best ways of securing liberty. Like many Americans of his era, Ramsay insisted that the political system of the United States was fundamentally different from that of Europe, and offered an opportunity to demonstrate to the rest of the world mankind's capacity for self-government.

THE FAMED SOCIAL COMPACT between the people and their rulers did not apply to the United States. The sovereignty was in the people. In their sovereign capacity by their representatives, they agreed on forms of government for their own security, and deputed certain individuals as their agents to serve them in public stations agreeably to constitutions, which prescribed their conduct.

The world has not hitherto exhibited so fair an opportunity for promoting social happiness. It is hoped for the honor of human

nature, that the result will prove the fallacy of those theories that mankind are incapable of self government. The ancients, not knowing the doctrine of representation, were apt in their public meetings to run into confusion, but in America this mode of taking the sense of the people, is so well understood, and so completely reduced to system, that its most populous states are often peaceably convened in an assembly of deputies, not too large for orderly deliberation, and yet representing the whole in equal proportion. These popular branches of legislature are miniature pictures of the community, and from their mode of election are likely to be influenced by the same interests and feelings with the people whom they represent. . . . These circumstances give us as great a security that laws will be made, and government administered for the good of the people, as can be expected from the imperfection of human institutions.

In this view of the formation and establishment of the American constitutions, we behold our species in a new situation. In no age before, and in no other country, did man ever possess an election of the kind of government, under which he would choose to live. The constituent parts of the ancient free governments were thrown together by accident. The freedom of modern European governments was, for the most part, obtained by concessions, or liberality of monarchs, or military leaders. In America alone, reason and liberty concurred in the formation of constitutions. . . . In one thing they were all perfect. They left the people in the power of altering and amending them, whenever they pleased. In this happy peculiarity they placed the science of politics on a footing with the other sciences, by opening it to improvements from experience, and the discoveries of future ages. By means of this power of amending American constitutions, the friends of mankind have fondly hoped that oppression will one day be no more.

Questions

1. In what ways, according to Ramsay, does the formation of governments in the United States differ from precedents in other times and places?