

Notes of the Secret Debates of the Federal Convention of 1787
Taken by the Late Hon Robert Yates, Chief Justice of the State of New York, and
One of the Delegates from That State to the Said Convention. (1)

Hamilton:

Such are the lessons which the experience of others affords us, and from whence results the evident conclusion that all federal governments are weak and distracted. To avoid the evils deducible from these observations, we must establish a general and national government, completely sovereign, and annihilate the State distinctions and State operations; and unless we do this, no good purpose can be answered. What does the Jersey plan propose? It surely has not this for its object. By this we grant the regulation of trade and a more effectual collection of the revenue, and some partial duties. These, at five or ten per cent. would only perhaps amount to a fund to discharge the debt of the corporation.

Madison:

The rights of individuals are infringed by many of the State laws-such as issuing paper money, and instituting a mode to discharge debts differing from the form of the contract.

Sherman:

We have found during the war that though congress consisted of but one branch, it was that body which carried us through the whole war, and we were crowned with success. We closed the war, performing all the functions of a good government, by making a beneficial peace. But the great difficulty now is, how we shall pay the public debt incurred during that war. The unwillingness of the States to comply with the requisitions of congress, has embarrassed us greatly.

Read:

Some gentlemen argue, that the representation must be determined according to the weight of each State-That we have heretofore been partners in trade, in which we all put in our respective proportions of stock-That the articles of our co-partnership were drawn in forming the confederation-And that before we make a new co-partnership, we must first settle the old business. But to drop the allusion-we find that the great States have appropriated to themselves the common lands in their respective States-These lands having been forfeited as heretofore belonging to the king, ought to be applied to the discharge of our public debts. -Let this still be done, and then if you please, proportion the representation, and we shall not be jealous of one another-A jealousy, in a great measure, owing to the public property appropriated by individual States-and which, as it has been gained by the united power of the confederation, ought to be appropriated to the discharge of the public debts.

Martin:

Public and domestic debts are our great distress.

Hamilton:

We have just finished a war which has established our independency, and loaded us with a heavy debt.

Judge Elsworth:

My State has always been strictly federal, and I can with confidence appeal to your excellency [the president] for the truth of it, during the war. The muster-rolls will show that she had more troops in the field than even the State of Virginia. We strained every nerve to raise them; and we neither spared money or exertions to complete our quotas. This extraordinary exertion has greatly distressed and impoverished us, and it has accumulated out State debts-We feel the effects of it even to this day. But we defy any gentleman to show that we ever refused a federal requisition. We are constantly exerting ourselves to draw money from the pockets of our citizens, as fast as it comes in; and it is the ardent wish of the State to strengthen the federal government. If she has proved delinquent through inability only, it is not more than others have been, without the same excuse.

Sherman:

I acknowledge there have been failures in complying with the federal requisition. Many States have been defective, and the object of our convention is to amend these defects.

Bedford:

The small States never can agree to the Virginia plan; and why then is it still urged? But it is said that it is not expected that the State governments will approve the proposed system, and that this house must directly carry it to THE PEOPLE for their approbation! Is it come to this, then, that the sword must decide this controversy, and that the horrors of war must be added to the rest of our misfortunes? But what have the people already said? "We find the confederation defective-go, and give additional powers to the confederation- give to it the imposts, regulation of trade, power to collect taxes, and the means to discharge our foreign and domestic debts." Can we not then, as their delegates, agree upon these points? As their ambassadors, can we not clearly grant those powers? Why then, when we are met, must entire, distinct, and new grounds be taken, and a government, of which the people had no idea, be instituted?

Sherman:

I acknowledge there have been failures in complying with the federal requisition. Many States have been defective, and the object of our convention is to amend these defects.