



These historical excerpts are abridged. Ellipses mark omitted text; bracketed names identify people. Paragraph breaks were adjusted for readability. The simplified explanations are modern paraphrases.

## Document A: John Lansing Jr.

**Date and place:** June 20, 1788, Poughkeepsie, New York

**Focus question:** Where should power be placed, and can the Articles of Confederation be repaired?

### Original historical text



We ought, therefore, to be extremely cautious how we establish a government which may give distinct interests to the rulers and governed, so as to induce the former to pursuits adverse to the happiness of the United States.

It has been observed, that, as the people must, of necessity, delegate essential powers either to the individual or general sovereignties, it is perfectly immaterial where they are lodged; but, as the state governments will always possess a better representation of the feelings and interests of the people at large, it is obvious that those powers can be deposited with much greater safety with the state than the general government.

I am equally averse to cherishing, on this occasion, the idea of obtaining a perfection which never existed, and to despairing of making important amendments to the system now offered for consideration; for, sir, however much I may be disposed to perpetuate union, however sensible of the defects of the existing Confederation, I cannot help differing from those gentlemen who are of opinion it is incapable of amelioration.

I would ask, What are the objections which have been so ably urged against it? They are comprised under two heads. First, it affords no defence against foreign assault; second, no security to domestic tranquillity. Both these objects might be compassed if Congress could be vested with a power to raise men and money.

Requisitions made under the existing Confederation by Congress, it is allowed, are insufficient; but this defect might, in a great measure, have been remedied by permitting the United States to legislate on individuals after the requisitions had been made, and not been complied with. If the requisition could be thus enforced, loans of money might be negotiated when necessary, and Congress be authorized to raise money to replace them.

**Source note:** Jonathan Elliot, ed., *The Debates in the Several State Conventions on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution*, vol. 2. Excerpts abridged; paragraph breaks adjusted.



## Simplified explanation of the text

We must be very careful when creating a government. The people who rule may develop interests that are different from the interests of ordinary citizens. State governments are closer to the people and better understand what people need. For that reason, important powers may be safer with the states than with a distant national government.

The present Confederation has real weaknesses, but that does not mean it cannot be improved. Its two largest problems are that it cannot protect the country well from foreign attacks and cannot keep peace at home. Congress could be given specific new powers to fix these problems, including the power to raise soldiers and money. Congress could also be allowed to act directly when a state refuses to provide its required share. These repairs might strengthen the union without replacing the entire system with a much more powerful national government.

## Vocabulary in context

| Word or phrase        | Student-friendly meaning                        |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| delegate              | to give power or responsibility to someone else |
| sovereignty           | the authority to govern                         |
| amelioration          | improvement                                     |
| domestic tranquillity | peace and order inside the country              |
| requisition           | an official demand for money or supplies        |

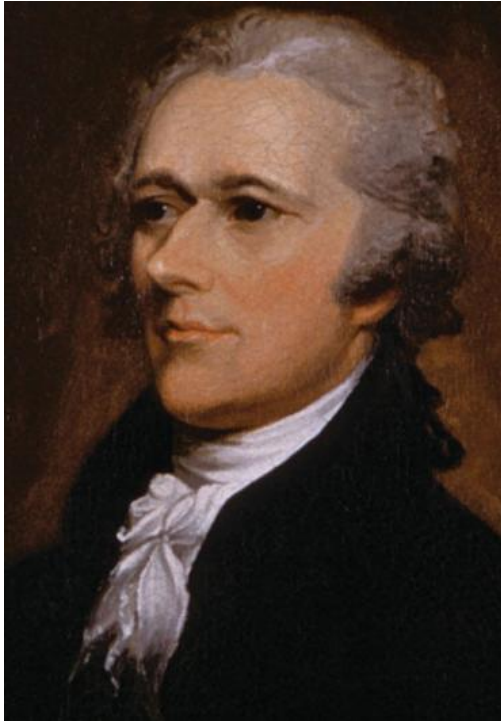


## Document B: Alexander Hamilton

**Date and place:** June 21, 1788, Poughkeepsie, New York

**Focus question:** Is the proposed House of Representatives large enough to protect the people?

### Original historical text



In my reasonings on this subject of government, I rely more on the interests and opinions of men, than on any speculative parchment provisions whatever. I have found that constitutions are more or less excellent as they are more or less agreeable to the natural operation of things. I am, therefore, disposed not to dwell long on curious speculations, or pay much attention to modes and forms; but to adopt a system whose principles have been sanctioned by experience, adapt it to the real state of our country, and depend on probable reasonings for its operation and result.

I contend that sixty-five and twenty-six, in two bodies, afford perfect security, in the present state of things; and that the regular progressive enlargement, which was in the contemplation of the general Convention, will leave not an apprehension of danger in the most timid and suspicious mind. It will be the interest of the large states to increase the representation. This will be the standing instruction to their delegates.

But, say the gentlemen, the members of Congress will be interested not to increase the number, as it will diminish their relative influence. In all their reasoning upon this subject, there seems to be

this fallacy: They suppose that the representative will have no motive of action, on the one side, but a sense of duty; or on the other, but corruption. They do not reflect that he is to return to the community; that he is dependent on the will of the people, and that it cannot be his interest to oppose their wishes. Sir, the general sense of the people will regulate the conduct of their representatives...

All governments, even the most despotic, depend, in a great degree, on opinion. In free republics, it is most peculiarly the case. In these, the will of the people makes the essential principle of the government; and the laws which control the community receive their tone and spirit from the public wishes.

**Source note:** Jonathan Elliot, ed., *The Debates in the Several State Conventions on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution*, vol. 2. Excerpts abridged; paragraph breaks adjusted.



## Simplified explanation of the text

When evaluating a framework for governance, it is crucial to observe actual human behavior rather than relying solely on written guarantees. This suggested framework is rooted in practical experience and corresponds with the nation's current realities.

The proposed Congress would initially have 26 senators and 65 representatives. Hamilton argues that these numbers are sufficient for the country's present needs. He expects the House to grow as the population increases because larger states will want more representatives.

Critics worry that representatives will resist increasing the House because it would reduce their individual influence. Hamilton responds that representatives depend on voters and must pay attention to public opinion. He therefore argues that New York should not insist on a larger House as a condition of accepting the Constitution.

## Vocabulary in context

| Word or phrase          | Student-friendly meaning                        |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| speculative             | based on guesses or theory rather than evidence |
| sanctioned              | approved or supported                           |
| progressive enlargement | growth over time                                |
| fallacy                 | an error in reasoning                           |
| despotic                | using absolute and oppressive power             |



## Document C: Melancton Smith

**Date and place:** June 20, 1788, Poughkeepsie, New York

**Focus question:** Must New York choose between national union and liberty?

### Original historical text



He was as strongly impressed with the necessity of a union as any one could be. He would seek it with as much ardor. In the discussion of this question, he was disposed to make every reasonable concession, and, indeed, to sacrifice every thing for a union, except the liberties of his country, than which he could contemplate no greater misfortune. But he hoped we were not reduced to the necessity of sacrificing, or even endangering, our liberties, to preserve the Union. If that was the case, the alternative was dreadful. But he would not now say that the adoption of the Constitution would endanger our liberties; because that was the point to be debated, and the premises should be laid down previously to the drawing of any conclusion...

Why, said he, are we told of our weakness? of the defenceless condition of the southern parts of our state? of the exposed situation of our capital? of Long Island, surrounded by water, and exposed to the incursions of our neighbors in Connecticut? of Vermont having separated from us, and assumed the powers of a distinct government? and of the north-west parts of our state being in the hands of a foreign enemy? Why are we to be alarmed with apprehensions that the Eastern States are inimical, and disinclined to form alliances with us?...

Surely it could not be supposed that those states would make war upon us for exercising the rights of freemen, deliberating and judging for ourselves, on a subject the most interesting that ever came before any assembly. If a war with our neighbors was to be the result of not acceding, there was no use in debating here; we had better receive their dictates, if we were unable to resist them. The defects of the old Confederation needed as little proof as the necessity of a union. But there was no proof in all this that the proposed Constitution was a good one. Defective as the old Confederation is, he said, no one could deny but it was possible we might have a worse government.

**Source note:** Jonathan Elliot, ed., *The Debates in the Several State Conventions on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution*, vol. 2. Excerpts abridged; paragraph breaks adjusted.

### Simplified explanation of the text

National unity is very important, and reasonable compromises may be necessary to preserve it. However, liberty should not be sacrificed just because people fear disunion or attack. The convention must first examine the evidence before deciding that the Constitution protects or threatens freedom.



## NEW YORK RATIFICATION CONVENTION | POUGHKEEPSIE, 1788

Supporters describe New York as weak and exposed. They point to New York City, Long Island, Vermont, British-held forts in the northwest, and possible hostility from neighboring states. But fear should not decide the question. Other states should not attack New Yorkers simply because they exercise their right to think and decide for themselves.

Everyone agrees that the Articles of Confederation have problems and that the states need a union. Neither fact proves that this particular Constitution is good. Replacing a weak system without carefully examining the replacement could produce an even worse government. The delegates must judge the proposed Constitution on its own merits.

**Vocabulary in context**

| Word or phrase | Student-friendly meaning              |
|----------------|---------------------------------------|
| ardor          | strong enthusiasm                     |
| concession     | something given up to reach agreement |
| incursion      | a sudden invasion or attack           |
| inimical       | hostile or harmful                    |
| acceding       | agreeing to or accepting              |



## Document D: John Jay

**Date and place:** July 1, 1788, Poughkeepsie, New York

**Focus question:** Should the national government have direct access to the country's money and resources?

### Original historical text



He [John Jay] began with a description of the general characteristics of a government proper for the United States. It had, he said, been justly laid down, that a government which was to accomplish national purposes should command the national resources. Here a question had been raised. Would it be proper that the state governments should limit the powers of the general government, relative to its supplies? Would it be right or politic that the sovereign power of a nation should depend for support on the mere will of the several members of that nation? that the interest of a part should take place of that of the whole, or that the partial views of one of the members should interfere with and defeat the views of all?

He said that, after the most mature reflection, he could see no possible impropriety in the general government having access to all the resources of the country. With respect to direct

taxes, it appeared to him that the proposed amendment would involve great difficulties. Suppose a state should refuse to comply; would not the same motives, the same reasons, which produced the non-compliance, induce such state to resist the imposing and collecting of the tax? Would not a number of states, in similar circumstances, be apt to unite to give their resistance weight? They could not all be forced...

He apprehended that ambitious men might be found, in such emergencies, ready to take advantage of turbulent times, and put themselves at the head of such an association...

The legislatures of the several states would furnish their delegates with the systems of revenue, and give them the most particular information with regard to the modes of taxation most agreeable to the people. From the comparison of these, Congress would be able to form a general system, as perfect as the nature of things would admit.

**Source note:** Jonathan Elliot, ed., *The Debates in the Several State Conventions on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution*, vol. 2. Excerpt abridged; paragraph breaks adjusted; bracketed name added.



## Simplified explanation of the text

A national government needs authority over collective resources to achieve national goals. Relying on individual states for funding is risky; if one state fails to comply, the entire nation's well-being is jeopardized.

Jay warns that a state that refuses to provide money might also resist federal efforts to collect it. Other states might join the resistance, and ambitious leaders could use the conflict to gain power.

State legislatures can explain their tax systems and local preferences to Congress. Jay argues that Congress can compare this information to develop a national tax system.

## Vocabulary in context

| Word or phrase     | Student-friendly meaning                              |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| national resources | the country's available money, property, and supplies |
| sovereign          | having the highest governing authority                |
| impropriety        | something unsuitable or wrong                         |
| non-compliance     | failure or refusal to obey                            |
| turbulent          | disorderly or unstable                                |