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ADAMS, J.
1787

A Defense of the Constitutions of the United States

by John Adams

Introduction: Published in January of 1787, six months before the Constitutional Convention by American Founder, John Adams. In it he calls for a republic consisting of a balance of powers between the executive, judicial, and legislative powers. Citing penetrating examples of the successes, but mostly failures in so-called republican experiments and the reasons for those failures which usually consisted in a failure to balance those powers. For those pushing for a more pure democracy today are many examples of what history has proven about their baneful effects including centralization of power, violent factions, and moral corruption in the extreme, and thus anarchy and tyranny. Written in typical Adams prose, a most worthy read. Of interest is Adams call for a thorough examination of the constitutions of the American Indians which had well defined these three powers, and which he said were given unfairly a bad name. Steve Farrell

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Locris & Zaleucus: Adams 'Defense' No. 51



Liberty Letters, John Adams, 1786

A Defense of the Constitutions of the United States, Letter 51

Ancient Aristocratical Republics: Locris. Zaleucus.

My dear Sir,

ZALEUCUS was of Locris in Italy, not far distant from Sybaris. He was a disciple of Pythagoras, of noble birth, and admirable morals. Having acquired the esteem and confidence of his fellow-citizens, they chose him for their legislator. Unfortunately little remains of his laws but their preamble: but this is in a style so superior to all the other legislators, as to excite regret for the loss of his code. In this preamble he declares, that all those who shall inhabit the city, ought, above all things, to be persuaded that there is a God; and if they elevate their eyes and thoughts towards the heavens, they will be convinced, that the disposition of the heavenly bodies, and the order which reigns in all nature, are not the work of men, nor of chance; that therefore they ought to adore the gods, as the authors of all which life presents us of good and beautiful; that they should hold their souls pure from every vice, because the gods accept neither the prayers, offerings, or sacrifices of the wicked, and are pleased only with the just and beneficent actions of virtuous men. Having thus, in the beginning of his laws, fixed the attention of his fellow-citizens upon piety and wisdom, he ordains, above all things, that there should never be among them any irreconcilable enmity; but, on the contrary, that those animosities which might arise among them, should be only a passage to a sure and sincere reconciliation; and that he who would not submit himself to these sentiments, should be regarded as a savage in a civilized community. The chiefs of his republics ought not to govern with arrogance nor pride; nor should the magistrates be guided in their judgments by hatred nor by friendship.

This preamble, instead of addressing itself to the ignorance, prejudices, and superstitious fears of savages, for the purpose of binding

them to an absurd system of hunger and glory for a family purpose, like the laws of Lycurgus, places religion, morals, and government, upon a basis of philosophy, which is rational, intelligible, and eternal, for the real happiness of man in society, and throughout his duration.

The principle adopted by this legislator, as the motive to action next to the sense of duty and social obligation, was the sense of honour, like that of Lycurgus. As Zaleucus was a disciple of Pythagoras, whose favourite plan of government was a well-tempered aristocracy, we may conjecture that such was the form recommended to the Locrians: but all are lost, and certainly no argument can be drawn from them in favour of one popular assembly. If, in visiting the Sybarites and Locrians, we have found nothing in favour of Mr. Turgot's system, nor any thing very material against it, we have found a greater advance towards civilization than in all the laws of Lycurgus and Solon, excepting only the trial by jury instituted by the latter; I mean in the preamble of Zaleucus, and in the general education to letters in schools, at the public expence, by Charondas.

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