Fisher Ames was a conservative Massachusetts Federalist and one of the fiercest critics of the rising Jeffersonians. He served in Congress during the Washington administration, but poor health forced him out of politics and to an early death. He lived to see the election of Thomas Jefferson to the presidency in the United States and the French Revolution and subsequent terror and rise of Napoleon Bonaparte in France. Those events seemed to confirm his worst fears about the coming of a democratic age that would shatter not only monarchical government but also established social order and traditional civil liberty. Republicanism had given way to democracy, which in turn would give way to demagoguery and despotism. Near the end of his life, he sent a draft of a short work on the “dangers of American liberty” to a friend, noting that it would require more time that he would likely be able to give it to render it suitable for publication. He was not able to undertake the more systematic research that he thought it needed before his death.

I fear, that the future fortunes of our country no longer depend on counsel. We have persevered in our errors too long to chance our propensities by now enlightening our convictions. The political sphere, like the globe we tread upon, never stands still, but with a silent swiftness accomplishes the revolutions, which, we are too ready to believe, are effected by our wisdom, or might have been controlled by our efforts. . . . Hence it is, that, till lately, more than half our countrymen believed our public tranquility was firmly established, and that our liberty did not merely rest upon dry land, but was wedged, or rather rooted high above the flood in the rocks of granite, as immovably as the pillars that prop the universe. They, or at least the discerning of them, are at length no less disappointed than terrified to perceive that we have all the time floated, with a fearless and unregarded course, down the stream of events, till we are now visibly drawn within the revolutionary suction of Niagara, and everything that is liberty will be dashed to pieces in the descent.

There is, of course, a large portion of our citizens, who will not believe, even on the evidence of facts, that any public evils exist, or are impending. They deride the apprehensions of those who foresee, that licentiousness will prove, as it ever has proved, fatal to liberty. They consider her as a nymph, who need not be coy to keep herself pure, but that, on the contrary, her chastity will grow robust by frequent scuffles with her seducers. They say, while a faction is a minority, it will remain harmless by being outvoted; and if it should become a majority, all its acts, however profligate or violent, are then legitimate. For, with the democrats, the people is a sovereign who can do no wrong, even when he respects and spares no existing right, and whose voice, however obtained or however counterfeited, bears all the sanctity and all the force of a living divinity.

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All such men are, or ought to be, agreed, that simple governments are despotisms; and of all despotisms a democracy, though the least durable, is the most violent. It is also true, that all the existing governments we are acquainted with are more or less mixed, or balanced and checked, however imperfectly, by the ingredients and principles that belong to the other simple sorts. It is, nevertheless, a fact, that there is scarcely any civil constitution in the world, that, according to American ideas, is so mixed and combined as to be favorable to the liberty of the subject—none, absolutely none, that an American patriot would be willing to adopt for, much less to impose on, his country. . . . [A]ll the European governments, except the British, admit a most formidable portion of arbitrary power; whereas, in America, no plan of government, without a large and preponderating commixture of democracy, can, for a moment, possess our confidence and attachment.

. . . This is certain, the body of the federalists were always, and yet are essentially democratic in their political notions. The truth is, the American nation, with ideas and prejudices wholly democratic, undertook to frame, and expected tranquilly, and with energy and success, to administer a republican government.

. . . The danger obviously was, that a species of government, in which the people choose all the rulers, and then, by themselves, or ambitious demagogues pretending to be the people, claim and exercise an effective control over what is called the government, would be found on trial no better than a turbulent, licentious democracy. The danger was, that their best interests would be neglected, their dearest rights violated, their sober reason silenced, and the worst passions of the worst men not only freed from legal restraint, but invested with public power. The known propensity of a democracy is to licentiousness, which the ambitious call, and the ignorant believe to be liberty.

The great object, then, of political wisdom in framing our constitution, was to guard against licentiousness, that inbred malady of democracies, that deforms their infancy with grey hairs and decrepitude.

The federalists relied much on the efficiency of an independent judiciary, as a check on the hasty turbulence of the popular passions. They supposed the senate proceeding from the states, and chosen for six years, would form a sort of balance to the democracy, and realize the hope, that a federal republic of states might subsist. They counted much on the information of the citizens; that they would give their unremitted attention to public affairs; that either dissensions would not arise in our happy country, or, if they should, that the citizens would remain calm, and would walk, like the three Jews in Nebuchadnezzar’s furnace, unharmed amidst the fires of party.

It is needless to ask, how rational such hopes were, or how far experience has verified them.

. . . From these reflections the political observer will infer, that the American republic is impelled by the force of state ambition and of democratic licentiousness; and he will inquire, which of the two is our strongest propensity. Is the sovereign power to be contracted to a state center? Is Virginia to be our Rome? and are we to be her Latin or Italian allies, like them to be emulous of the honor of our chains, on the terms of imposing them on Louisiana, Mexico, or Santa Fe? Or, are we to run the giddy circle of popular licentiousness, beginning in delusion, quickened by vice, and ending in wretchedness?

But, though these two seem to be contrary impulses, it will appear, nevertheless, on examination, that they really lead to but one result.

The great state of Virginia has fomented a licentious spirit among all her neighbors. Her citizens imagine, that they are democrats, and their abstract theories are in fact democratic; but their state policy is that of a genuine aristocracy or oligarchy. Whatever their notions or their state practice may be, their policy, as it respects the other states, is to throw all power into the hands of democratic zealots or Jacobin knaves; for some of these may be deluded and others bought to promote her designs. And, even independently of a direct Virginia influence, every state faction will find its account in courting the
alliance and promoting the views of this great leader. Those who labor to gain a factious power in a state, and those who aspire to get a paramount jurisdiction over it, will not be slow to discern, that they have a common cause to pursue.

In the intermediate progress of our affairs, the ambition of Virginia may be gratified. So long as popular licentiousness is operating with no lingering industry to effect our yet unfinished ruin, she may flourish the whip of dominion in her hands; but, as soon as it is accomplished, she will be the associate of our shame, and bleed under its lashes. For democratic license leads not to a monarchy regulated by laws, but to the ferocious despotism of a chieftain, who owes his elevation to arms and violence, and leans on his sword as the only prop of his dominion. Such a conqueror, jealous and fond of nothing but his power, will care no more for Virginia, though he may rise by Virginia, than Buonaparte does for Corsica. Virginia will then find, that, like ancient Thebes, she has worked for Philip, and forged her own fetters.

What is there left, that can check its excesses or retard the velocity of its fall? Not the control of the several states, for they already whirl in the vortex of faction; and, of consequence, not the senate, which is appointed by the states. Surely not the judiciary, for we cannot expect the office of the priesthood from the victim at the altar. Are we to be sheltered by the force of ancient manners? Will this be sufficient to control the two evil spirits of license and innovation? Where is any vestige of those manners left, but in New-England? and even in New-England their authority is contested and their purity debased. Are our civil and religious institutions to stand so firmly, as to sustain themselves and so much of the fabric of the public order as is propped by their support? On the contrary, do we not find the ruling faction in avowed hostility to our religious institutions? In effect, though not in form, their protection is abandoned by our laws, and confided to the steadiness of sentiment and fashion; and, if they are still powerful auxiliaries of lawful authority, it is owing to the tenaciousness, with which even a degenerate people maintain their habits, and to a yet remaining, though impaired veneration for the maxims of our ancestors. We are changing, and, if democracy triumphs in New-England, it is to be apprehended, that in a few years we shall be as prone to disclaim our great progenitors, as they, if they should return again to the earth, with grief and shame to disown their degenerate descendants.

Is the turbulence of our democracy to be restrained by preferring to the magistracy only the grave and upright, the men who profess the best moral and religious principles, and whose lives bear testimony in favor of their profession, whose virtues inspire confidence, whose services, gratitude, and whose talents command admiration? Such magistrates would add dignity to the best government, and disarm the malignity of the worst. But the bare moving of this question will be understood as a sarcasm by men of both parties. The powers of impudence itself are scarcely adequate to say, that our magistrates are such men.

It never has happened in the world, and it never will, that a democracy has been kept out of the control of the fiercest and most turbulent spirits in the society; they will breathe into it all their own fury, and make it subservient to the worst designs of the worst men.

Although it does not appear, that the science of good government has made any advances since the invention of printing, it is nevertheless the opinion of many, that this art has risen, like another sun in the sky, to shed new light and joy on the political world. The press, however, has left the understanding of the mass of men just where it found it; but, by supplying an endless stimulus to their imagination and passions, it has rendered their temper and habits infinitely worse. It has inspired ignorance with presumption, so that those who cannot be governed by reason, are no longer to be awed by authority. The many, who before the art of printing never mistook in a case of oppression, because they complained from their actual sense of it, have become susceptible of every transient enthusiasm and of more than womanish fickleness of caprice. Public affairs are transacted now on a stage where all the interest and passions grow out of fiction, or are inspired by the art, and often
controlled at the pleasure of the actors. The press is a new and, certainly, a powerful agent in human affairs. It will change, but it is difficult to conceive how, by rendering men indolent and presumptuous, it can change societies for the better. They are pervaded by its heat and kept forever restless by its activity. While it has impaired the force that every just government can employ in self-defense, it has imparted to its enemies the secret of that wildfire, that blazes with the most consuming fierceness on attempting to quench it.

Shall we then be told, that the press will constitute an adequate check to the progress of every species of tyranny? Is it to be denied, that the press has been the base and venal instrument of the very men whom it ought to gibbet to universal abhorrence? While they were climbing to power, it aided their ascent; and now they have reached it, does it not conceal or justify their abominations? Or, while it is confessed, that the majority of citizens form their ideas of men and measures almost solely from the light that reaches them through the magic lantern of the press, do our comforters still depend on the all-restoring, all-preserving power of general information? . . .

Our mistake, and in which we choose to persevere, because our vanity shrinks from the detection, is, that in political affairs, by only determining what men ought to think, we are sure how they will act; and when we know the facts, and are assiduous to collect and present the evidence, we dupe ourselves with the expectation, that, as there is but one result which wise men can believe, there is but one course of conduct deduced from it, which honest men can approve or pursue. We forget, that in framing the judgment every passion is both an advocate and a witness. We lay out of our account, how much essential information there is that never reaches the multitude, and of the mutilated portion that does, how much is unwelcome to party prejudice; and, therefore, that they may still maintain their opinions, they withhold their attention. . . .

But our manners are too mild, they tell us, for a democracy—then democracy will change those manners. Our morals are too pure—then it will corrupt them.

What, then, is the necessary conclusion from the view we have taken of the insufficiency or extinction of all conceivable checks? It is such as ought to strike terror, but will scarcely raise public curiosity.

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It is undoubtedly a salutary labor, to diffuse among the citizens of a free state, as far as the thing is possible, a just knowledge of their public affairs. But the difficulty of this task is augmented exactly in proportion to the freedom of the state; for the more free the citizens, the bolder and more profligate will be their demagogues, the more numerous and eccentric the popular errors, and the more vehement and pertinacious the passions that defend them.

Yet, as if there were neither vice nor passion in the world, one of the loudest of our boasts, one of the dearest of all the tenets of our creed is, that we are a sovereign people, self-governed—it would be nearer truth to say, self-conceited. For in what sense is it true, that any people, however free, are self-governed? If they have in fact no government, but such as comports with their ever varying and often inordinate desires, then it is anarchy; if it counteracts those desires, it is compulsory. . . . For liberty obviously consists in the salutary restraint, and not in the uncontrolled indulgence of such humors. Now of all desires, none will so much need restraint, or so impatiently endure it, as those of the ambitious, who will form factions, first to elude, then to rival, and finally to usurp the powers of the state; and of the sons of vice, who are the enemies of law, because no just law can be their friend. The first want to govern the state; and the others, that the state should not govern them. A sense of common interest will soon incline these two original factions of every free state to coalesce into one.

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That government certainly deserves no honest man’s love or support, which, from the very laws of its being, carries terror and danger to the virtuous, and arms the vicious with authority and power. The essence and, in the opinion of many thousands not yet cured of their delusions, the excellence of
democracy is, that it invests every citizen with an equal proportion of power. A state consisting of a million of citizens has a million sovereigns, each of whom detests all other sovereignty but his own. This very boast implies as much of the spirit of turbulence and insubordination, as the utmost energy of any known regular government, even the most rigid, could keep in restraint. It also implies a state of agitation, that is justly terrible to all who love their ease, and of instability, that quenches the last hope of those who would transmit their liberty to posterity. . . .

. . . It is in vain, it is indeed childish to say, that an enlightened people will understand their own affairs, and thus the acts of a faction will be baffled. No people on earth are or can be so enlightened, as to the details of political affairs. To study politics, so as to know correctly the force of the reasons for a large part of the public measures, would stop the labor of the plough and the hammer; and how are these millions of students to have access to the means of information?

When it is thus apparent, that the vicious will have as many opportunities as inducements to inflame and deceive, it results from the nature of democracy, that the ignorant will join, and the ambitious will lead their combination. Who, then, will deny, that the vicious are armed with power, and the virtuous exposed to persecution and peril?

. . . On evidence thus lamentably clear, I found my opinion, that the federalists can never again become the dominant party; in other words, the public reason and virtue cannot be again, as in our first twelve years, and never will be again the governing power, till our government has passed through its revolutionary changes. Every faction that may happen to rule will pursue but two objects, its vengeance on the fallen party, and the security of its own power against any new one that may rise to contest it. . . . The revolution has no retrograde steps. Its course is onward from the patriots and statesmen to the hypocrites and cowards, and onward still through successive committees of ruffians, till someone ruffian happens to be a hero. Then chance no longer has a power over events, for this last inevitably becomes an emperor.

. . . Are not our people wholly engrossed by the pursuit of wealth and pleasure? Though grouped together into a society, the propensities of the individual still prevail; and if the nation discovers the rudiments of any character, they are yet to be developed. In forming it, have we not ground to fear, that the sour, dissocial, malignant spirit of our politics will continue to find more to dread and hate in party, than to love and reverence in our country? What foundation can there be for that political virtue to rest upon, while the virtue of the society is proscribed, and its vice lays an exclusive claim to emolument and honor? . . .

. . . There is no society without Jacobins; no free society without a formidable host of them; and no democracy, whose powers they will not usurp, nor whose liberties, if it be not absurd to suppose a democracy can have any, they will not destroy. A nation must be exceedingly well educated, in which the ignorant and the credulous are few. Athens, with all its wonderful taste and literature, poured them into her popular assemblies by thousands. It is by no means certain, that a nation, composed wholly of scholars and philosophers, would contain less presumption, political ignorance, levity, and extravagance than another state, peopled by tradesmen, farmers, and men of business, without a metaphysician or speculatist among them. The opulent in Holland were the friends of those French who subdued their country, and enslaved them. It was the well-dressed, the learned, or, at least, the conceited mob of France that did infinitely more than the mere rabble of Paris, to overturn the throne of the Bourbons. The multitude were made giddy with projects of innovation, before they were armed with pikes to enforce them.

. . .
It is the almost universal mistake of our countrymen, that democracy would be mild and safe in America. They charge the horrid excesses of France not so much to human nature, which will never act better, when the restraints of government, morals, and religion are thrown off, but to the characteristic cruelty and wickedness of Frenchmen.

The truth is, and let it humble our pride, the most ferocious of all animals, when his passions are roused to fury and are uncontrolled, is man; and of all governments, the worst is that which never fails to excite, but was never found to restrain those passions, that is, democracy. It is an illuminated hell, that in the midst of remorse, horror, and torture, rings with festivity; for experience shows, that one joy remains to this most malignant description of the damned, the power to make others wretched. When a man looks round and sees his neighbors mild and merciful, he cannot feel afraid of the abuse of their power over him: and surely if they oppress me, he will say, they will spare their own liberty, for that is dear to all mankind. It is so. The human heart is so constituted, that a man loves liberty as naturally as himself. Yet liberty is a rare thing in the world, though the love of it is so universal.

Before the French revolution, it was the prevailing opinion of our countrymen, that other nations were not free, because their despotic governments were too strong for the people. Of course, we were admonished to detest all existing governments, as so many lions in liberty's path; and to expect by their downfall the happy opportunity that every emancipated people would embrace to secure their own equal rights for ever. France is supposed to have had this opportunity, and to have lost it. Ought we not, then, to be convinced, that something more is necessary to preserve liberty than to love it? Ought we not to see, that, when the people have destroyed all power but their own, they are the nearest possible to a despotism, the more uncontrolled for being new, and tenfold the more cruel for its hypocrisy?

... What, then, is to be our condition?

Faction will inevitably triumph. Where the government is both stable and free, there may be parties. There will be differences of opinion, and the pride of opinion will be sufficient to generate contests, and to inflame them with bitterness and rancor. There will be rivalships among those whom genius, fame, or station have made great, and these will deeply agitate the state without often hazarding its safety. Such parties will excite alarm, but they may be safely left, like the elements, to exhaust their fury upon each other.

The object of their strife is to get power under the government; for, where that is constituted as it should be, the power over the government will not seem attainable, and, of course, will not be attempted.

But in democratic states there will be factions. The sovereign power being nominally in the hands of all, will be effectively within the grasp of a FEW; and, therefore, by the very laws of our nature, a few will combine, intrigue, lie, and fight to engross it to themselves. All history bears testimony, that this attempt has never yet been disappointed.

Who will be the associates? Certainly not the virtuous, who do not wish to control the society, but quietly to enjoy its protection. The enterprising merchant, the thriving tradesman, the careful farmer will be engrossed by the toils of their business, and will have little time or inclination for the unprofitable and disquieting pursuits of politics. It is not the industrious, sober husbandman, who will plough that barren field; it is the lazy and dissolute bankrupt, who has no other to plough. The idle, the ambitious, and the needy will band together to break the hold that law has upon them, and then to get hold of law. . . .