8. For an American Republic

To Mercy Warren

Brantree, January 8, 1776

... Pray Madam, are you for an American monarchy or republic? Monarchy is the genteelst and most fashionable government, and I don't know why the ladies ought not to consult elegance and the fashion as well in government as gowns, bureaus or chariots.

For my own part I am so tasteless as to prefer a republic, if we must erect an independent government in America, which you know is utterly against my inclination. But a republic, although it will infallibly beggar me and my children, will produce strength, hardiness, activity, courage, fortitude, and enterprise, the manly, noble, and sublime qualities in human nature, in abundance. A monarchy would probably, somehow or other, make me rich, but it would produce so much taste and politeness, so much elegance in dress, furniture, equipage, so much music and dancing, so much fencing and skating, so much cards and backgammon; so much horse racing and cockfighting, so many balls and assemblies, so many plays and concerts that the very imagination of them makes me feel vain, light, frivolous, and insignificant.

It is the form of government which gives the decisive color to the manners of the people, more than any other thing. Under a well-regulated commonwealth, the people must be wise, virtuous, and cannot be otherwise. Under a monarchy they may be as vicious and foolish as they please, nay, they cannot but be vicious and foolish. As politics therefore is the science of human happiness, and human happiness is clearly best promoted by virtue, what thorough politician can hesitate who has a new government to build whether to prefer a commonwealth or a monarchy?

But, Madam, there is one difficulty which I know not how to get over.

Virtue and simplicity of manners are indispensably necessary in a republic among all orders and degrees of men. But there is so much rascality, so much venality and corruption, so much avarice and ambition, such a rage for profit and commerce among all ranks and degrees of men even in America, that I sometimes doubt whether there is public virtue enough to support a republic. There are two vices most detestably predominant in every part of America that I have yet seen which are as incompatible with the spirit of a commonwealth as light is with darkness; I mean servility and flattery. A genuine republican can no more fawn and cringe than he can domineer. Show me the American who cannot do all. I know two or three, I think, and very few more.