

# How a Cynic Crafted the Constitution and Fell for the Romance of America

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“We the people” begins the Preamble of the Constitution of the United States. These are the words of 35-year-old Gouverneur Morris, the talented wordsmith who fine-tuned this Founding document. New Yorker Morris represented Pennsylvania at the Constitutional Convention in 1787. The language of the final draft can be attributed to the committee on style that Morris headed.

Virginia’s James Madison, no admirer of Morris, acknowledged four decades later: “A better choice could not have been made, as the performance of the task proved.” Madison wrote: “It is but due to Mr. Morris to remark that, to the brilliancy of his genius, he added what is too rare, a candid surrender of his opinion when the lights of discussion satisfied him that they had been too hastily formed, and a readiness to aid in making the best of measures in which he had been overruled.”

Other Founders did not disagree with Madison: “Gouverneur Morris is one of those Genius's in whom every species of talents combine to render him conspicuous and flourishing in public debate: — He winds through all the mazes of rhetoric, and throws around him such a glare that he charms, captivates, and leads away the senses of all who hear him,” wrote Georgia delegate William Pierce. “With an infinite stretch of fancy he brings to view things when he is engaged in deep argumentation, that render all the labor of reasoning easy and pleasing. But with all these powers he is fickle and inconstant, — never pursuing one train of thinking, — nor ever regular. He has gone through a very extensive course of reading, and is acquainted with all the sciences. No Man has more wit, — nor can any one engage the attention more than Mr. Morris. He was bred to the Law, but I am told he disliked the profession, and turned merchant.”

Gouverneur Morris was a colorful character, but he was hardly of “we-the-people” variety. He was a bon-vivant, an unapologetic elitist, a brilliant cynic. What Morris lacked, said his critics, was character that might be admired. Morris was known for his mind and wit, not his morals and manners. Theodore Roosevelt would later observe that Morris “was a ready speaker, and among all the able men present there was probably no such really brilliant thinker. In the debates he spoke more often than any one else.”

Morris “shone by his cleverness and quick wit as well as by his wonderful command of language,” wrote historian Max Farrand. “But Morris was admired more than he was trusted; and, while he supported the efforts for a strong government, his support was not always as great a help as might have been expected. A crippled arm and a wooden leg might detract from his personal appearance, but they could not subdue his spirit and audacity.”

Unfortunately, noted Roosevelt of Morris, his “keen, masterful mind, his far-sightedness, and the force and subtlety of his reasoning were all marred by his incurable cynicism and deep-rooted distrust of mankind. He throughout appears as *advocatus diaboli*; he puts the lowest interpretation upon every act, and frankly avows his disbelief in all generous and unselfish motives.” Not exactly true because where slavery was concerned, Morris was a leading and eloquent anti-slavery man at the Constitutional Convention.

Morris was a nationalist who was an early proponent of a strong federal government. However, the cynical Morris was not necessarily fond of the form of the new government the convention created. Historian Forrest McDonald wrote that Hamilton’s “friend Gouverneur Morris – who had intended not to support the Constitution until Hamilton convinced him it was the nation’s only hope – put the matter more succinctly. ‘The moment this plan goes forth all other considerations will be laid aside – and the great question will be, shall there be a national Government or not?’”

“Once Morris put his name to the final document,” noted historian Leonard L. Richards, “he turned his attention to making money and played virtually no part in the ensuing battle over the Constitution’s ratification.” The ever-practical Morris later wrote: “In adopting a republican form of government, I not only took it as a man does his wife, for better, for worse, but, what few men do with their wives, I took it knowing all its bad qualities.”

Surely an elitist, Morris was primarily a realist. “The poor and rustic...weren’t the only victims of Morris’s barbs,” wrote Richards. “He had an equally contemptuous view of men and women of his own social class. ‘The Rich,’ he told the Constitutional Convention, ‘will strive to establish their dominion and enslave the rest. They always did. They always will.’”

After graduating from college at 16, Morris had studied law. The young attorney was slow to join the Revolution but he did so enthusiastically. His mother took the Tory side. One half-brother served as an officer in the British army. Another half-brother signed the Declaration of Independence. Gouverneur Morris himself represented New York in the Continental Congress in 1778 and 1779. He was then dismissed as a delegate as a fellow New Yorker wrote, “from a vulgar prejudice which prevailed in the assembly that he ridiculed the Christian religion and was a man of very bad morals.”

Self-exiled from New York, Gouverneur resettled in Philadelphia where he became the principal assistant to Robert Morris (no relation), the creative “Financier of the Revolution.” In May 1780, a carriage accident in Philadelphia shattered Gouverneur Morris’s left leg. It was amputated. For the rest of his life, Morris let neither his new wooden leg nor an earlier burn injury (to his right arm while a teenager) interfere with his dancing or his social life. He was a womanizer.

Indeed, Morris continued to be self-assured, impulsive, romantic, and arrogant. He could be vulgar in his conduct and brilliant in conversation. Morris had preferences; he liked

wine, women, and fun-making. He was not always wise, but almost always witty. “Morris was the type of man that others liked to talk about,” noted historian Richards. Massachusetts patriot Mercy Otis Warren wrote of him in 1805: “A character eccentric from youth to declining age; a man of pleasure, pride, and extravagance, fond of the trappings of monarchy, and implicated by a considerable portion of the citizens of America, as deficient in principle.”

Business interests took Morris to Paris in 1789 – in part representing his colleague Robert Morris. Gouverneur “found ready admission to the most influential circles of French society and was an instant success.” He carried on an affair, advised the king’s government and witnessed the French Revolution. “None of Morris’s sage advice was taken,” however, noted historians Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick.

In 1792, President Washington decided to utilize Morris’s contacts more formally by appointing him as U.S. minister to France. Washington admired men of intellect. When President Washington appointed Gouverneur Morris to Paris, he warned him to govern his manners. Morris, already in Europe, responded: “I *now promise you* the Circumspection of Conduct which has hitherto I acknowledge formed no Part of my Character.”

Secretary of State Jefferson was not so easily impressed by Morris’s implied transformation. Jefferson wrote “that Gouverneur Morris, a high flying monarchy-man, shutting his eyes & his faith to every fact against his wishes, & believing everything he desires to be true, has kept the President’s mind constantly poisoned with his forebodings.”

Replaced by James Monroe in 1794, having returned to New York by 1800, he was elected to the U.S. Senate. Accustomed to the refined capitals of Europe, he was not impressed by America’s new rural capital on the banks of the Potomac. “We want nothing here – nothing but houses, cellars, kitchens, well-informed men, amiable women, and other little trifles of the kind, to make our city perfect,” wrote the former resident of Paris.

Morris was not, after all, a romantic. “To see things as being what they are, to estimate them aright, and to act accordingly, are of all attainments the most important,” Morris wrote John Jay in 1794, Jay having been sent by President George Washington to negotiate a treaty with Great Britain.

Although a political cynic, Morris was an unabashed admirer of George Washington. The anecdote is famously told of Gouverneur’s cheek and familiarity run amok. As Morris himself reportedly told the story, President Washington “was standing with his arms behind him– his usual position – his back to the fire. I started up and spoke, stamping, as I walked up and down, with my wooden leg, and, as I was certain I had the best of the argument, as I finished I stalked up to the President, slapped him on the back, and said, ‘Ain’t I right, General?’ The President did not speak, but the majesty of the American people was before me. Oh, his look! How I wished the floor would open and I could

descend to the cellar! You know me, and you know my eye would never quail before any other mortal.”

Morris embraced the idea of Washington as the father of our country. Noting that Washington had no natural offspring, Morris declared in his eulogy for the country’s first president: “AMERICANS! He had no child – BUT YOU – and HE WAS ALL YOUR OWN.”

*Mr. Lehrman’s Lincoln at Peoria: The Turning Point was brought out in 2008 by Stackpole.*