

Lesson Four:
The Debate over the Nature of the Union and
Republican Government

BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR INSTRUCTOR

Many of the same issues that had occupied the attention of Americans since 1763 continued to be discussed during the ratification debate. Americans again considered what constituted a good republic and what could be considered suitable representation within it.

Antifederalists argued that the new Constitution would destroy the states and create a large consolidated system that would eventually result in either monarchy or despotism. They espoused the theories of the baron de Montesquieu who maintained that a good republican government was based on consent and featured officials who were chosen directly by the people in elections held on a regular basis. According to Montesquieu, this was only possible in a relatively small territory to ensure that the populations shared similar values and interests. Representatives could know the minds of their constituents since there was an intimacy between the people and their representatives. In a large country this would be lost and the result would be constant clashing and disorder.

After 17 September 1787, when the public debate over the proposed Constitution began, Antifederalists acknowledged the need for a stronger central government. However, they suggested that the central government possess a minimum of delegated powers to maintain the Union and no implied powers. They desired a central government that could not act directly on the people, but one acting through the states.

Federalists believed that a confederacy was not an adequate form of government for the United States. Since many of the requisite conditions for a successful confederation were not extant in the United States, Federalists argued that it was necessary to rethink the nature of republican government. In doing so they needed to address the ideas of Montesquieu. He had insisted that “In an extensive republic the public good is sacrificed to a thousand private views. In a small one, the interest of the public is more obvious, better understood, and more within the reach of every citizen.” James Wilson suggested that Montesquieu’s theories were valid to a point. Wilson equated the states with Montesquieu’s republics. In the American context, the states were joined as “federated republics.” Seemingly there was no limit to the number of federal republics that could be joined together. Federalists “unofficially” espoused Wilson’s theory. Antifederalists attacked it, suggesting that the states were too large to fit Montesquieu’s model. Federalists denied that the Constitution would destroy the states by creating one large, consolidated republic. Instead the Constitution would form a system that was partly national and partly federal (local). Federalist also argued that the central government would in fact need the states to survive and function properly, i.e., state legislatures would elect U.S. Senators.

James Madison devised a new theory that valued a large and diverse polity. This clashing of diverse interests in the large American republic would solve the problems of instability that had afflicted all prior attempts at republican government. These factions under the new Constitution, through the refining process of deliberation, would serve the overall public interest. Although Madison’s Federalist 10 has been accepted as the most significant explanation of the idea of the extended republic, at the time, it did not generate criticism among Antifederalists or support among Federalists. James Wilson would be the official spokesman for the idea of the extended republic.

KEY IDEAS IN PRIMARY SOURCE DOCUMENTS

Brutus I, *New York Journal*, 18 October 1787

Republics Need to be Small; No Example of Large Republics Succeeding

An Old Whig IV, *Philadelphia Independent Gazetteer*, 27 October 1787

Constitution Will Destroy States and End in Tyranny

A Citizen of Philadelphia: The Weaknesses of Brutus Exposed, 8 November 1787

Necessity of Strong National Government to Control States

James Wilson's Speech in Pennsylvania Convention, 24 November 1787

Constitution Will Control Factions in a Large Republic

Publius: *Federalist 10*, *New York Daily Advertiser*, 22 November 1787

Factions Cause Problems in Small Republics, Increasing the Size of the Nation will Add Factions, Added Factions will be Neutralized in Large Republic

PRIMARY SOURCE DOCUMENTS

Brutus I, *New York Journal*, 18 October 1787

If respect is to be paid to the opinion of the greatest and wisest men who have ever thought or wrote on the science of government, we shall be constrained to conclude, that a free republic cannot succeed over a country of such immense extent, containing such a number of inhabitants, and these increasing in such rapid progression as that of the whole United States. Among the many illustrious authorities which might be produced to this point, I shall content myself with quoting only two. The one is the baron de Montesquieu, spirit of laws, chap. xvi. vol. 1. "It is natural to a republic to have only a small territory, otherwise it cannot long subsist. In a large republic there are men of large fortunes, and consequently of less moderation; there are trusts too great to be placed in any single subject; he has interest of his own; he soon begins to think that he may be happy, great and glorious, by oppressing his fellow citizens; and that he may raise himself to grandeur on the ruins of his country. In a large republic, the public good is sacrificed to a thousand views; it is subordinate to exceptions, and depends on accidents. In a small one, the interest of the public is easier perceived, better understood, and more within the reach of every citizen; abuses are of less extent, and of course are less protected." Of the same opinion is the marquis Beccarari.

History furnishes no example of a free republic, any thing like the extent of the United States. The Grecian republics were of small extent; so also was that of the Romans. Both of these, it is true, in process of time, extended their conquests over large territories of country; and the consequence was, that their governments were changed from that of free governments to those of the most tyrannical that ever existed in the world.

Not only the opinion of the greatest men, and the experience of mankind, are against the idea of an extensive republic, but a variety of reasons may be drawn from the reason and nature of things, against it. In every government, the will of the sovereign is the law. In despotic governments, the supreme authority being lodged in one, his will is law, and can be as easily expressed to a large extensive territory as to a small one.

An Old Whig IV, Philadelphia *Independent Gazetteer*, 27 October 1787

It is beyond a doubt that the new federal constitution, if adopted, will in a great measure destroy, if it do not totally annihilate, the separate governments of the several states. We shall, in effect, become one great Republic.—Every measure of any importance, will be Continental.—What will be the consequence of this? One thing is evident—that no Republic of so great a magnitude, ever did, or ever can exist. But a few years elapsed, from the time in which ancient Rome extended her dominions beyond the bounds of Italy, until the down fall of her Republic; and all political writers agree, that a Republican government can exist only in a narrow territory: but a confederacy of different Republics has, in many instances, existed and flourished for a long time together—The celebrated *Helvetian* league, which exists at this moment in full vigor, and with unimpaired strength, whilst its origin may be traced to the confines of antiquity, is one, among many examples on this head; and at the same time furnishes an eminent proof of how much less importance it is, that the constituent parts of a confederacy of Republics may be rightly framed than it is, that the confederacy itself should be rightly organized;—for hardly any two of the Swiss cantons have the same form of government, and they are almost equally divided in their religious principles, which have so often rent asunder the firmest establishments. A confederacy of Republics must be the establishment in America, or we must cease altogether to retain the Republican form of government. From the moment we become one great Republic, either in form or substance, the period is very shortly removed, when we shall sink first into monarchy, and then into despotism.—If there were no other fault in the proposed constitution, it must sink by its own weight. The continent of North-America can no more be governed by one Republic, than the fabled Atlas could support the heavens.

A Citizen of Philadelphia: The Weaknesses of Brutus Exposed, 8 November 1787

This government must have a supreme power, *superior to and able to controul* each and all of its parts. 'Tis essential to all governments, that such a power be somewhere existing in it. . . . The supreme power of government ought to be *full, definite, established, and acknowledged*. Powers of government too limited, or uncertain and disputed, have ever proved, like *Pandora's* box, a most fruitful source of quarrels, animosities, wars, devastation, and ruin, in all shapes and degrees, in all communities, states, and kingdoms on earth.

Nothing tends more to the honour, establishment, and peace of society, than public decisions, grounded on principles of right, natural fitness, and prudence; but when the powers of government are *too limited*, such decisions can't be made and enforced; so the mischief goes without a remedy: dreadful examples of which we have felt, in instances more than enough, for seven years past.

'Tis necessary in States, as well as in private families, that controversies should have a just, *speedy*, and effectual decision, that right may be done before the contention has *time* to grow up into habits of malignity, resentment, ill nature, and ill offices. If a controversy happens between two states, must it continue undecided, and daily increase, and be more and more aggravated, by the repeated insults and injuries of the contending parties, 'till they are ripe for the decision of the sword? or must the weaker states suffer, without remedy, the groundless demands and oppressions of their stronger neighbours, because they have no avenger, or umpire of their disputes?

Or shall we institute a supreme power with full and effectual authority to controul the animosities, and decide the disputes of these strong contending bodies? In the one proposed to us, we have perhaps every chance of a *righteous judgment*, that we have any reason to hope for; but I am

clearly of opinion, that even a *wrongful decision*, would, in most cases, be preferable to the continuance of such destructive controversies.

James Wilson's Speech in Pennsylvania Convention, 24 November 1787

Such a number of separate states, contiguous in situation, unconnected and disunited in government, would be, at one time, the prey of foreign force, foreign influence, and foreign intrigue; at another, the victim of mutual rage, rancor, and revenge. . . .

The aim of the Convention was to form a system of good and efficient government on the more extensive scale of the United States. . . .

When we had baffled all the menaces of foreign power, we neglected to establish among ourselves a government, that would insure domestic vigor and stability. What was the consequence? The commencement of peace was the commencement of every disgrace and distress, that could befall a people in a peaceful state. Devoid of national power, we could not prohibit the extravagance of our importations, nor could we derive a revenue from their excess. Devoid of national importance, we could not procure, for our exports, a tolerable sale at foreign markets. Devoid of national credit, we saw our public securities melt in the hands of the holders, like snow before the sun. Devoid of national dignity, we could not, in some instances, perform our treaties, on our parts; and, in other instances, we could neither obtain nor compel the performance of them on the part of others. Devoid of national energy, we could not carry into execution our own resolutions, decisions, or laws. . . .

For the confirmation of these remarks, I need not appeal to an enumeration of facts. The proceedings of Congress, and of the several states, are replete with them. They all point out the weakness and insufficiency as the cause, and an efficient general government as the only cure of our political distempers. Under these impressions . . . the late Convention met.

We now see the great end which they propose to accomplish. It was to frame, for the consideration of their constituents, one federal and national constitution—a constitution, that would produce the advantages of good, and prevent the inconveniences of bad government—a constitution whose beneficence and energy would pervade the whole Union; and bind and embrace the interests of every part—a constitution that would insure peace, freedom, and happiness, to the states and people of America.

Publius: Federalist 10, New York *Daily Advertiser*, 22 November 1787

Extend the sphere, and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens; or if such a common motive exists, it will be more difficult for all who feel it to discover their own strength, and to act in unison with each other. Besides other impediments, it may be remarked that, where there is a consciousness of unjust or dishonorable purposes, communication is always checked by distrust in proportion to the number whose concurrence is necessary. . . . Hence, it clearly appears, that the same advantage which a republic has over a democracy, in controlling the effects of faction, is enjoyed by a large over a small republic, -- is enjoyed by the Union over the States composing it. . . .

The influence of factious leaders may kindle a flame within their particular States, but will be unable to spread a general conflagration through the other States. . . .

A rage . . . for any other improper or wicked project, will be less apt to pervade the whole body of the Union than a particular member of it; in the same proportion as such a malady is more likely to taint a particular county or district, than an entire State. . . .

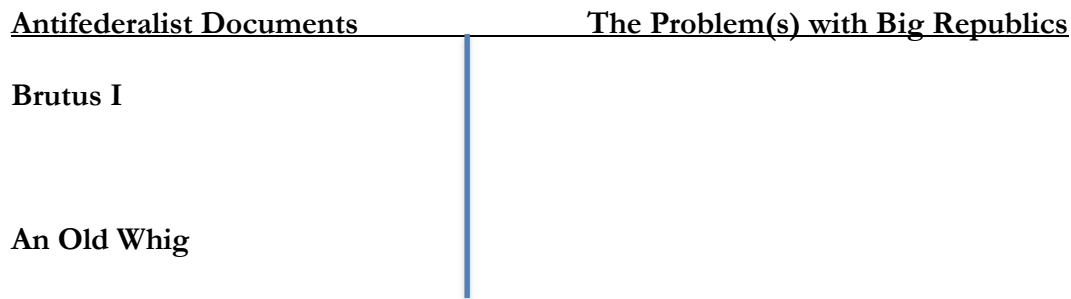
THE LESSON PLAN—The Problems with Big, the Problems with Small, the “Publius Solution”

OBJECTIVES OF THE LESSON

- * Students will read and consider the Federalist and Antifederalist debate over the merits of having a large or small republic.
- * Students will consider the effectiveness of using fear as a form of persuasion in political debate.

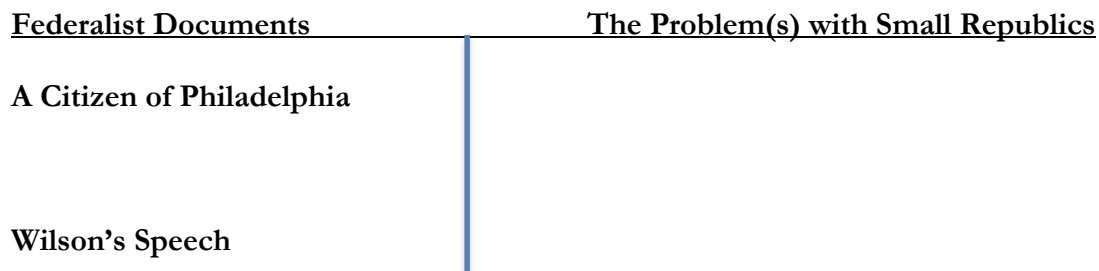
THE LESSON

1. Divide the class into groups of 3-5 students.
2. Half of the groups should be designated as Federalist groups and given “A Citizen of Philadelphia” and James Wilson’s speech. The other half should be designated as Antifederalist groups and given the “Brutus” and “An Old Whig” essays.
3. Groups should be given their specific graphic organizer below.



Brutus I

An Old Whig



A Citizen of Philadelphia

Wilson’s Speech

4. After groups have completed their work you can have them report their findings to the class.
5. You can continue the lesson by leading a discussion using the following questions.
 - a) In your opinion, are the Antifederalist essays similar or different in their reasoning?
 - b) In your estimation, do the Federalists overstate the problems facing the nation?

- c) How does the notion of fear factor into the reasoning of the each author? Would you say that one side is more prone to use fear more than the other?
 - d) What does the use of fear as a theme suggest about the nature of the debate over the Constitution?
6. To conclude the lesson have the class read "Publius." Point out that they should note the solution offers to solve the problems addressed in the other documents.
7. After students have read "Publius," you can lead a discussion using the following questions.
- a) How does "Publius" propose to manage the negative effects of factions?
 - b) Do you think his solution is effective in managing factions?
 - c) In what ways might "Publius" be considered a pessimist? Is he overly pessimistic?
 - d) In what ways might "Publius" be considered an optimist? Is he overly optimistic?