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An Introduction to *The Federalist*

Purpose and Authorship

The Federalist was written by Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison. The essays were published in New York City between 27 October 1787 and 28 May 1788 and were addressed to the “People of the State of New-York.” First and foremost, *The Federalist* essays were political documents intended to convince the people of New York of the absolute necessity of ratifying the Constitution. According to Alexander Hamilton—in the first essay—the purpose of the series was to show the necessity of the “UNION,” the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation, and the nature and benefits of the new Constitution. Furthermore, the essays were “to give a satisfactory answer to all the objections which shall have made their appearance that may seem to have any claim” to the public’s “attention.”

Whether or not Alexander Hamilton or John Jay originated the idea for the series is uncertain, but it is known that the two New Yorkers sought the assistance of a collaborator. Four other men were either asked to be or were considered as possible contributors. It seems likely that Gouverneur Morris was first sought out as a collaborator. Morris, an experienced political publicist, had been a Pennsylvania delegate to the Constitutional Convention, where he had played a major role in drafting the Constitution. Morris recalled years later that he had been “warmly pressed by Hamilton to assist in writing the Federalist,” but he declined the offer. This invitation was probably extended while Morris was in New York City between mid-September and late October 1787.

After Morris refused, it appears that William Duer, secretary of the Board of Treasury and Hamilton’s close friend, was asked to participate. Duer “wrote two or perhaps more papers, which tho’ intelligent & sprightly, were not continued; nor did they make a part of the printed Collection.” Duer later published his essays as “Philo-Publius” in several New York newspapers.

Hamilton apparently then asked James Madison to join him and Jay in writing *The Federalist*. Madison accepted and wrote George Washington on 18 November that “I will not conceal *from you* that I am likely to have . . . *a degree* of connection with the publication. . . .” Madison’s first contribution—No. 10—was printed on 22 November 1787.

John Jay became ill, probably at about the time his essay—No. 5—appeared on 10 November, and, for several months, he was unable to contribute to the series. Perhaps in response to the loss of Jay, Madison recommended to Hamilton that Rufus King of Massachusetts “might be a proper auxiliary, as he had been a member of the Convention, and well understood the subject to be discussed.” Hamilton, however, “spoke respectfully of Mr [King’s] talents but did not consider them as altogether of the sort required for the task in view.” Consequently, Hamilton and Madison continued the series alone, except for one more essay by Jay which appeared in March 1788.

James Madison described the manner in which *The Federalist* essays were written and published, and to what extent the authors were responsible for each other's work. He stated that the essays "were written most of them in great haste, and without any special allotment of the different parts of the subject to the several writers, J. M. being at the time a member of the then Congress, and A. H. being also a member, and occupied moreover in his profession at the bar, it was understood that each was to write as their respective situations permitted, preserving as much as possible an order & connection in the papers successively published. This will account for deficiency in that respect, and also for an occasional repetition of the views taken of particular branches of the subject. The haste with which many of the papers were penned, in order to get thro the subject whilst the Constitution was before the public, and to comply with the arrangement by which the printer was to keep his newspaper open for four numbers every week, was such that the performance must have borne a very different aspect without the aid of historical and other notes which have been used in the Convention and without the familiarity with the whole subject produced by the discussions there. It frequently happened that whilst the printer was putting into type the parts of a number, the following parts were under the pen, & to be furnished in time for the press.

"In the beginning it was the practice of the writers, of A. H. & J. M. particularly to communicate each to the other, their respective papers before they were sent to the press. This was rendered so inconvenient, by the shortness of the time allowed, that it was dispensed with. Another reason was, that it was found most agreeable to each, not to give a positive sanction to all the doctrines and sentiments of the other; there being a known difference in the general complexion of their political theories." Madison also declared that occasionally the writers did not have the time to read over their own work before it was sent to the printer.

In general, the authors did not refer by name to specific critics of the Constitution. Nevertheless, the publication of *The Federalist* essays makes it clear that "Publius" was fully aware of and concerned with the influential Antifederalist literature appearing almost daily in newspapers, broadsides, and pamphlets. "Publius" did not engage in personal attacks, but he was not above deliberately misrepresenting the position of Antifederalists. A good example of such misrepresentation was the portrayal of Antifederalists as supporters of the idea of separate confederacies.

In 1787 and 1788 the identity of "Publius" was unknown to the general public. Only two newspaper accounts insinuated that Hamilton was the author. In the preface to a Boston reprinting of essay No. 13, "Philo-Publius" referred to "a respectable and worthy member of the late Convention from New-York" who had considered the question of separate republics in "one of a series of papers on the new Constitution." On 5 March 1788 the Antifederalist Philadelphia *Freeman's Journal* printed a spurious letter from Benjamin Rush to Alexander Hamilton, in which Rush described the "60 numbers of Publius" as "your writings."

A third newspaper item, one never published, also suggested that Hamilton was "Publius." Hugh Hughes, a New York Antifederalist, drafted an attack on essay No. 15, published on 1 December 1787. Hughes states "You really Speak as tho' you had been a Member of the late Convention, and experienced, in your own Person, *all the Improperities and Excesses which a Spirit of Faction could produce by mingling its Poison in your Deliberations and which you so feelingly and emphatically now describe.*"

In private letters, the identity of “Publius” was frequently discussed. Hamilton was most often identified as either the sole author or as one of the authors of *The Federalist*. John Jay was least mentioned. James Kent, a Poughkeepsie lawyer, declared that “the Author *must be* Hamilton who I think on Genius & political Research is not inferior to Gibbon, Hume or Montesquieu.” John Montgomery, a Burgess of Carlisle, Pa., wrote that “we are told that [the] writer is Mr Jay but I Rather think that it is . . . Mr Hamilton.” Samuel B. Webb, a New York City merchant-factor, identified Hamilton as “Publius” and praised him as “one of the most sensible men in America.” Samuel Tenney, an Exeter, N.H., physician, claimed that *The Federalist* was greatly admired in New Hampshire and that “we have christened him HAMILTON.” James Iredell, an Edenton, N.C., lawyer, asserted that “Colo. Hamilton’s Federation” would “immortalize him.”

Other letter writers named two or three authors. On 18 December 1787 Joseph Jones, a member of the Virginia House of Delegates, claimed that “Publius is variously ascribed to M–d–n, H–lt–n, J–y.” According to Walter Rutherford, a New York City merchant, “Madison has the principal hand in Publius and Hamilton assists.” John Armstrong, Sr., a former Pennsylvania delegate to Congress, declared that “these Nos. are wrote by a small junto, of whos names none are gone out, but that of Coll. Hamilton.” On 10 March Henry Knox informed George Washington that “the publication signed *Publius* is attributed to the joint efforts of Mr Jay, Mr Maddison and Colo Hamilton. It is highly probable that the general conjecture on this case is well founded.” About two weeks later, Alexander Contee Hanson of Maryland, the author of a Federalist pamphlet signed “Aristides,” stated that he would not have written his pamphlet had he known that Hamilton, Madison, and Jay would publish sixty numbers in New York. John Vaughan, a Philadelphia merchant, announced “Hamilton is the reputed father & Maddison God father, Some Say that several of the letters are wholly his.” Edward Carrington told Thomas Jefferson that the essays “are written, it is supposed, by Messrs. Madison, Jay and Hamilton.” At about the same time that he received Carrington’s letter, Jefferson got a different opinion from John Brown Cutting, one of his London correspondents: “But Mr. Maddison, (who I am assured is the *genuine* author of the two volumes of essays signed *publius* and heretofore given to Col. Hamilton of New York) it is agreed transcends every politician who has attempted to explain or defend any system of foederal Polity.”

The three authors of *The Federalist* did little to end speculation about the authorship. They identified themselves to only a select few. On at least two occasions, Madison even went so far as to write in cipher about his authorship. Moreover, none of the authors identified all three of the writers until after New York—the eleventh state—had ratified the Constitution. On 30 October 1787 Hamilton mailed the first essay to George Washington and implied that he was the author. About three weeks later Madison sent the first seven numbers to Washington. After informing Washington that he was one of the authors, Madison hinted that “You will recognize one of the pens concerned in the task. There are three in the whole. . . .” On 2 December Madison forwarded two essays to Governor Edmund Randolph and told him that “You will probably discover marks of different *pens*. I *am not at liberty* to give you any other key than that I *am in myself* for a few numbers & that *one besides myself* was a member of the Convention.” On 10 August 1788 Madison informed Jefferson that *The Federalist* “was undertaken last fall by Jay Hamilton and myself. Three days later Hamilton sent Washington a two-volume set of *The Federalist* and declared that “I presume you have understood that the writers of these Papers are

chiefly Mr. Madison & myself with some aid from Mr. Jay.” John Jay was perhaps suggesting himself as an author when he sent Washington a copy of volume one of *The Federalist*.

The authorship of sixty-nine of the eighty-five essays is certain. Hamilton wrote fifty essays—Nos. 1, 6–9, 11–13, 15–17, 21–36, 59–61, 65–85; Madison fourteen—Nos. 10, 14, 37–48; and Jay five—Nos. 2–5, 64. The disputed essays are Nos. 18–20, 49–58, and 62–63. Some recent scholarship (see, e.g., Douglass Adair) suggests that Madison probably wrote all of the disputed essays.

CIRCULATION

Between 27 October 1787 and 2 April 1788, seventy-six numbers of *The Federalist* were printed in four New York City newspapers—the *Independent Journal*, the *New York Packet*, the *Daily Advertiser*, and the *New York Journal*. John and Archibald M’Lean reprinted these essays in two volumes—the first volume appeared on 22 March 1788; the second on 28 May. The second volume included eight new essays, making a total of eighty-four. The *Independent Journal* and the *Packet* printed all eighty-four essays; the *Daily Advertiser*, Nos. 1–50; and the *New York Journal*, Nos. 23–39. The numbering in the M’Lean volumes differs from that in the newspapers.

Hamilton and Madison helped to distribute *The Federalist* in Virginia. On 30 October 1787 Hamilton forwarded the first essay to George Washington. In November and December Madison transmitted the first twenty-two numbers to Washington, asking that they be printed in Richmond to impress Virginians with the “importance of the Union.” Madison also sent two numbers to Governor Edmund Randolph in Richmond. Washington complied with Madison’s request and sent *The Federalist* to Richmond partly because he believed the essays would answer those persons who wanted to divide the United States into separate confederacies. The weekly *Virginia Independent Chronicle* of Richmond reprinted Nos. 1–3 of *The Federalist* on 12, 19, and 26 December.

Edward Carrington, a Virginia delegate to Congress, sent the first twenty-four numbers to Archibald Stuart—a member of the Virginia House of Delegates in Richmond. Stuart gave them to John Dixon of the weekly *Virginia Gazette and Independent Chronicle*, and Dixon reprinted some of them. Only a few issues of Dixon’s newspaper are extant; two extant issues—22 and 29 December 1787—contain Nos. 4 and 5.

In mid-November 1787 Hamilton sent several numbers of *The Federalist* to Benjamin Rush to be used to influence the Quaker members of the Pennsylvania Convention. On 30 January 1788 Madison transmitted Nos. 44 and 45 to Tench Coxe of Philadelphia so that he could use them to answer Antifederalist arguments that the Constitution would create a consolidated government.

Early numbers of *The Federalist* also circulated in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and North Carolina. In mid-December Jeremiah Wadsworth, a delegate-elect to the Connecticut Convention, asked Rufus King and Henry Knox in New York City to send him “Publius” if it appeared as a pamphlet so that he could use it to counteract the voluminous Antifederalist material coming into Connecticut from New York. On 23 December Christopher Gore, a Boston lawyer and delegate-elect to the Massachusetts Convention, wrote George Thacher, a Massachusetts delegate to Congress, that “if any thing new turns up let me hear it and whatever is written (viz all Publius

pieces at least) on the Constitution I will thank you to send me.” Sometime in late December 1787 or early January 1788, James Iredell sent Charles Johnson, a Chowan County, N.C., planter, “papers” containing several “Publius” essays. On 22 January William R. Davie, a Halifax, N.C., planter-lawyer, heard that twenty-five numbers of *The Federalist* had been printed and asked Iredell to forward as many as he could, “as we are in greater want of its assistance here than you are in Edenton, etc.”

The newspaper circulation of *The Federalist* subsided significantly in January and February 1788. It was next to impossible for American newspapers, most of them weeklies, to continue reprinting the voluminous series. Probably more important, however, was the announcement on 2 January that the series would be published in book form.

On 22 March 1788 the first volume of *The Federalist* was published by John and Archibald M’Lean. It included an unsigned preface by Hamilton and thirty-six essays. The second volume appeared on 28 May and contained forty-nine essays. The volumes totalled more than 600 pages. In all, 500 copies of each volume were printed. Hamilton, probably as a member of a committee which had commissioned the volumes, paid for more than half the cost of printing them.

The volumes circulated widely. Individual volumes were sent to every part of the United States, many to people who had subscribed in advance. Large shipments were also distributed. For example, in April 1788—shortly before the elections to the New York Convention—at least sixty copies of volume I were forwarded to Montgomery and Albany counties. In May Hamilton, upon Madison’s request, sent fifty-two copies of volume I to the care of Governor Edmund Randolph. Three weeks later Hamilton also forwarded copies of volume II to Randolph in Richmond. Both volumes were obviously intended for use in the Virginia Convention, scheduled to meet in early June.

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE COMMENTARIES ON *THE FEDERALIST*

In 1787 and 1788 *The Federalist* was praised in private letters and newspapers. In early November 1787 “Curtius” III asserted that “the writings of Publius will reflect a pleasing lustre upon many of those beautiful intricacies, that are retired from superficial observation, and which require a master discernment to be brought into public notice.” “A Customer” wrote that the first essay revealed that succeeding numbers would be written “in the spirit of cool discussion” and would be directed “to the judgment, and not the passions, of men.” On 21 November the Norfolk, Va., *Norfolk and Portsmouth Journal* reported that “Publius” was “admired for elegance of style, persuasive expression, as also comprehensive knowledge in the intricate paths of political science. . . .”

James Kent recommended *The Federalist* “as the best thing I have seen hitherto in print on the federal side.” As “A Country Federalist,” Kent continued to praise *The Federalist* in two items printed in the Poughkeepsie *Country Journal*. He also submitted several numbers of *The Federalist* to the *Journal* for reprinting. On 14 January 1788 Archibald Stuart asserted that the “greatness” of “Publius” was “acknowledged universally.” Tench Coxe described the essays as “most valuable disquisitions of Government in its peculiar relations and connexions with this Country.” Samuel Tenney thought that the “candor, ingenuity, depth of thought & force of argument” of “Publius” placed him first among the “numerous” writers on the Constitution.

In four monthly issues from March to June 1788, the New York *American Magazine*—under the editorship of Noah Webster—summarized and reviewed the two volumes of *The Federalist*. In March the reviewer (probably Webster) claimed that “it would be difficult to find a treatise, which, in so small a compass, contains so much valuable political information, or in which the true principles of republican government are unfolded with such precision.” In June he thought that “these essays compose one of the most complete dissertations on government that ever has appeared in America, perhaps in Europe.” The essays, he continued, would “remove objections to the new Constitution” and would impress upon people “just ideas of the nature of republican governments, of the principles of civil liberty, and of the genius and probable operation” of the Constitution.

On 28 August 1788 George Washington wrote Hamilton that no other work was “so well calculated . . . to produce conviction on an unbiassed mind. . . .” Thomas Jefferson judged *The Federalist* in November 1788 to be “the best commentary on the principles of government which ever was written.” A year and a half later he declared that “descending from theory to practice there is no better book than the *Federalist*.”

Even some critics of the Constitution were impressed. The Reverend James Madison admitted to his cousin, James Madison, that “those valuable Papers . . . have well nigh worked a Conversion” on me. In 1789 William Shippen, Jr., who had opposed the Constitution in 1787, claimed that “The *Fœderalist* & the reflections which he has excited have made me an enthusiast in favor of our new Constitution. . . .”

The Federalist, however, was not immune to Antifederalist censure, especially in New York and Pennsylvania. “An Observer” criticized “Publius” for “wilfully” trying to deceive the public into thinking that Antifederalists supported the idea of separate confederacies. “An Observer” asserted that he had not read a single Antifederalist item which advocated separate confederacies. “Centinel” XI also denied that Antifederalists supported separate confederacies. He declared that this idea was a “hobgoblin [that] appears to have sprung from the deranged brain of *Publius* . . . who, mistaking sound for argument, has with Herculean labour accumulated myriads of unmeaning sentences, and *mechanically* endeavored to force conviction by a torrent of misplaced words. . . .”

“A Countryman” IV (DeWitt Clinton) remarked that all he had learned from “Publius” was “that it is better to be united than divided. . . .” “Brutus” VI and VII castigated “Publius” for his defense of the financial and military powers of Congress and for his concept of federal-state relations. “Twenty-seven Subscribers” charged that “Publius’” principles were possibly “despotic” and his ideas of government could only be achieved through the use of military force. In his *An Additional number of Letters.*, the “Federal Farmer” dismissed “Publius” because his writings had “but little relation to the great question, whether the constitution is fitted to the condition and character of the people or not. . . .”

Antifederalists also attacked “Publius” personally. An “Anecdote of PUBLIUS” pictured him as an individual “who pants for a *fat office* under the new system of government.” Hugh Hughes, in an unpublished essay, described “Publius” as “*Solicitor General* for the New Constitution (perhaps with a View of being *Attorney General or Ld. Chief-Justice* under it). . . .” An unidentified Antifederalist satirist accused “Publius” of prolixity and plagiarism.

Even some Federalists were critical of “Publius,” although their criticisms were confined to technique and style. Rufus King thought that *The Federalist* was too “elaborate.” Charles Johnson praised *The Federalist* effusively, but could not understand why “Publius” took such pains to indicate what seemed so evident, namely that a strong, efficient government was better “than the States disunited into distinct, independent governments, or separate confederacies.” Archibald Maclaine, a North Carolina lawyer, did not think that “Publius” was “well calculated for the common people.” And Louis Guillaume Otto, French charge d’affaires, stated that *The Federalist* “is not at all useful to educated men and it is too scholarly and too long for the ignorant.”

Despite these censures, *The Federalist* quickly became a textbook for the study of political science, constitutional government, and the nature of the Constitution. It has gone through dozens of editions in several languages and has been quoted as an authority to justify different political positions.

CITE AS: John P. Kaminski et al., eds., *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, Vol. XIII: Commentaries on the Constitution, Public and Private [1] (Madison, Wis.: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 1981), 486–94.