







“THAT WHICH IS ADMINISTERED IS BEST”:

The Federalists and Anti-Federalists on Form

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In this short thought-piece, I suggest a particular way of understanding the nature of the debate between the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists with respect to the form of the United States’ government. Namely, I contend that this debate is best understood as a division between first and second principles, a disagreement about the validity of Alexander Pope’s maxim: “that which is best administered is best.” Through this lens, Federalist concern to promote a particular end of government overtakes concern to retain the federal structure of government under the Articles of Confederation, the latter a secondary characteristic to men such as John Adams and Alexander Hamilton. On the opposite side, Anti-Federalists prized the league of separate and sovereign republics with a primary attachment, due in part to the localism thesis that individuals such as The Federal Farmer endorsed: government that is nearly can be controlled. I argue that the Federalists comprehended the revolutionary moment as one in which a great nation could be formed; the Anti-Federalists were more attuned to protecting the various liberties of the people. These primary attachments led to diverging secondary considerations about the form of the national authority.



INTRODUCTION

Alexander Pope's maxim—"That which is best administered is best"—appears in John Adams' "Thoughts on Government" (April 1776) as well as in the first letter of *The Federal Farmer* (October 1787), and it was referenced ad nauseum during the debates on the Constitution's ratification.¹ In the former, Adams criticizes Pope's words as flattery for tyrants and because they consider the form before the end of government, which he claims is liberty and the happiness of society. For Adams, an idiosyncratic puritan, the collective happiness of a people is enabled by the exercise of the various virtues, which contingently forms the foundation of the good republic: "an Empire of Laws, and not of men," informed by principle and virtue. In his perspective, the republican structure that is "best contrived to secure an impartial and exact execution of the laws" is best.² While written over ten years before the debates occurred between the Federalists and Anti-Federalists over the new Constitution, "Thoughts on Government" remains a foreshadowing work that details Federalist predilections. For instance, Adams sketches a structure for a powerful representative assembly with sufficient checks and limitations to secure it against the timeless flaw of ambitiousness among its membership. He claims, though, that his motivation is the promotion of a particular end of government throughout the union, for which form and administration are only secondary characteristics. I would suggest that this division of concern may help to account for the differences between the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists. The matter becomes more revealing when contrasted with the latter instantiation of Pope's maxim.

The Observations of the *Federal Farmer* – considered one of the "ablest Anti-Federalist pieces"³ – expresses the concerns of that faction to main-

tain the federal form of the contemporary order, in which the various states retained their enormous powers without intervening challenge from the national authority. In the first letter, *The Federal Farmer* writes that he is convinced of the truth of Pope's maxim and that, therefore, a federal government of some sort is necessary.⁴ The fundamental question is why? Federalists, to varying extents, supported consolidation, in which the states would cede authority to the national government in order to advance common security and protect liberty, especially since they believed the separate sovereignties of the states would lead to conflict and war, and thereby, liberty's usurpation.⁵ Some Federalists seemed to hold the states in little regard and argued that "We must forget our local habits and attachments" in order to achieve these agreed-upon ends.⁶ The Anti-Federalists not only disagreed with the Federalists on the matter that localism inhibits the aims of unity, peace, and prosperity (they resented figures like James Monroe who seemed to suggest that the state legislatures jarred the welfare of Americans by fomenting "discordant principles"), but they also claimed that strong state governments contributed to the well-functioning administration of the union.⁷ In this way, *The Federal Farmer* and other Anti-Federalists believed that a confederation of the states was best at its root because it reflected the importance of republican principles – participatory government, local practices and customs, and the development of a virtuous citizenry, among others.

At some level, this is the efficiency argument that both Anti-Federalists and Federalists developed in different ways, to either support the Articles of Confederation or detract from them. *The Federal Farmer*, for instance, noted in letter VI that the federal system permits the efficient operation of a division of powers, whereby "national concerns

may be transacted in the centre [sic]” and “local affairs in state or district governments.”⁸ What is advantageous about such a division is that liberty is guarded closely because the government is “mild and free,” and the consent of the people given continuously in close proximity to their representatives.⁹ This is the idea that small republics are best able to look after their own liberties and interests, and make laws, free from the dangers of over-powerful central authorities. Publius would,




Fifty-five delegates met in Philadelphia in 1787 to take part in a convention to improve the Articles of Confederation. After a raucous summer, they emerged from the ‘Great Debate’ with a constitution that endorsed a much stronger central government. The two camps – the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists – disagreed on first-principles about the importance of strong state governments to secure the liberties of the people. Signing of the United States Constitution by Junius Brutus Stearns, oil on canvas, 1856. *Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.*

of course, answer this contention in Federalist No. 10 by claiming larger districts are less amenable to the “mischief” of factions or “little demagogues,” as James Wilson called local politicians and organizations.¹⁰ Ambitious men and diverse interests pitted against each other create a balance of power that protects the people. Additionally, Federalist

No. 24 would criticize the notion that the contemporary order under the Articles could be considered well-functioning (and, therefore, best) given the transgressions of Shay’s rebellion and the insufficient acts of the national government to quell it by force. Nevertheless, the point I suggest is that the Anti-Federalists saw an inherent value in the existing system of small republics and collective friendship – a value that the Federalists regarded as second-order.

The Anti-Federalists supported the Articles of Confederation and therefore opposed the Constitution that emanated from the Convention of 1787, because they deemed the former a manifestation of the revolutionary principles for which the various colonies warred with England to become sovereign states, proclaiming Democratic-Republicanism.¹¹ In this way, good government was gradually improved from the framework in which it began and, in the case of the thirteen former colonies, radically reconstituting the bounds of the union posed a danger to the Law itself and the “preservation of life, liberty, and property.”¹² The Anti-Federalists would have been given pause by the great enthusiasm of many Federalists who saw the founding decade as an opportunity to forge an American Empire built up by commerce and innovation, as Federalist No. 11 advocates. Also, they would have been suspicious of Adams’ enthusiasm in “Thoughts on Government,” where he noted excitedly to his correspondent that men of antiquity would have wished to live in their moment, since Adams and his compatriots had the opportunity to establish a “great” government out of their own deliberations.¹³ While the Anti-Federalists shared in a desire for American welfare and the construction of a virtuous republic of the world’s attention, they grew concerned over Federalist understandings of formation of government. For



the Anti-Federalists, they would have remembered fondly the excitement of a decade earlier—the ratification of their state constitutions. Seventeen Seventy-Six brought with it the Declaration but also separate, various expressions of free and popular government.¹⁴ As McWilliams notes, the Federalists were influenced by a belief in the principle of representation as a finely-honed concept, matured in America; the Anti-Federalists were much more enamored of self-government, representatives being a necessary evil for matters transcending local concern.¹⁵ While the Federalists comprehended the moment to establish a great nation, it is not too far to suggest that the Anti-Federalists were more attuned to the nation’s liberty—as both of these objects are in natural tension. The Federalists were less attached to state sovereignty because their consideration of the form of government followed assessment of its proper ends – the Anti-Federalists, while committed to many of the same principles, included republicanism as first-order.

Hamilton and Madison in *The Federalist Papers* would, of course, disagree with the suggestion that the Constitution departed from this republican heritage. Federalist No. 39 argues that the form of the new government under the Constitution would be of both federal form and national form, and would therefore commit itself to republican principles, while guaranteeing a legitimate executive authority and an essential role for the states. The Anti-Federalists, however, perhaps correctly appraised the compromised position of dual sovereignty – that the division of authority would tend in one direction and serve to vastly diminish state powers over and against the national government.¹⁶ It is true also that Federalist No. 85 allayed the anxieties of many Anti-Federalists about government traversing “life, liberty, and property” by Federalists’ intention to amend the Constitution later.

Traditionally, the Federalist v. Anti-Federalist debate has been seen in the context of a mere dispute over instrumentality¹⁷ or a disagreement about the ends of government or even a much more fundamental clash of political philosophy. None of these perspectives seems to me to capture the interaction of these two groups, but the preceding has made no claim directly about any of these. Instead, I have endeavored to draw attention to Pope’s maxim – “That which is best administered is best” – to suggest that the conservative Anti-Federalists were more enchanted by their experiences in self-government as sovereign republics, which led them to a first-order attachment to such a principle in unification deliberations. This was not so for the Federalists, who were much less committed to the form of confederation, as a second-order consideration.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man*, epistle 3, lines 303-4; see: Herbert J. Storing, *The Anti-Federalist: Writings by the Opponents of the Constitution*, ed. by Murray Dry, (University of Chicago, 1985), p. 33, footnote 3.
- 2 John Adams, “Thoughts On Government” (Boston, 1776), p. 2.
- 3 Storing, *The Anti-Federalist*, p. 23.
- 4 Note that Storing’s analysis in *What the Anti-Federalists Were For* on page 9 can be put to good use here: the term ‘federal’ is used in the strict interpretation, which signifies a relationship between the “general” authority and the state governments, specifically where the states are “primary,” “equal,” and “they possess the main weight of political power.”
- 5 See: Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison (1788), *The Federalist: A Commentary on the Constitution of the United States*, ed. by Robert Scigliano (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), Nos. 6, 7, 8.
- 6 See: Herbert J. Storing, *What the Anti-Federalists Were For* (University of Chicago, 1981), p. 10.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- 8 Storing, *The Anti-Federalist*, p. 69.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 See: Wilson Carey McWilliams, “The Anti-Federalists, Representation, and Party,” *Northwestern University Law Review* Vol. 84, No. 1 (1989), pp. 17-8.
- 11 Storing, *What the Anti-Federalists Were For*, p. 8.
- 12 Storing, *The Anti-Federalist*, p. 69.
- 13 See: Adams, “Thoughts on Government,” p. 6.
- 14 See: [Anonymous], “The People the Best Governors: Or a Plan of Government Founded on the Just Principles of Natural Freedom” (New Hampshire, 1776), p. 1.
- 15 McWilliams, “The Anti-Federalists,” p. 12.
- 16 Storing, *What the Anti-Federalists Were For*, p. 12.
- 17 That is to say, a disagreement over the structural means of achieving a free, democratic government that aims at securing certain liberties. See: Jennifer Nedelsky, “Review: Confining Democratic Politics: Anti-Federalists, Federalists, and the Constitution Reviewed Work(s): *The Complete Anti-Federalist* by Herbert J. Storing; *The Oliver Wendell Holmes Devise, History of the Supreme Court of the United States, Volume II, Foundations of Power: John Marshall, 1801-15* by George Lee Haskins and Herbert A. Johnson,” *Harvard Law Review*, Vol. 96, No. 1 (Nov., 1982).

