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The Great Divide

America Divided on the Constitution

The U.S. Constitution is often regarded as America's finest piece of legal composition within the country, but also around the world. It represents a breakaway from the traditional monarchies towards a more secular democratic form of government. However, like any form of composition, the Constitution wasn't assembled in one night. Similar to other forms of composition such as the Declaration of Independence, the constitution had its fair share of supporters and opposers who wanted to make sure that the new document would form a steady democratic foundation for the country. This essay is designed to give an in depth look at both sides of the argument in regards to the ratification of the Constitution.

In Robert Atwan's *Convergences*, Atwan has the opinion that Americans often dismiss history as unimportant and a roadblock to looking towards the future. Americans only like history when it is, "packaged as popular entertainment. If you distort the facts, play fast and loose with accuracy, introduce box office stars, and invent a romantic story line, then the public might digest a few spoonfuls of history"(Atwan, 2009, p.365). This can be proven by box office hits such as *Titanic*, *Gladiator*, and *The Patriot*. All these movies distort facts and add a plot driven story line for entertainment purposes. Does anyone really want to delve in to the real

history even if it is bland? Real history can actually be quite stimulating and also surprising when an individual takes the time to look into it. America's own history surrounding the Constitution is a perfect example of the drama that surrounded the ratification of the document. Contrary to most people's brief knowledge of the Constitution, the document itself divided Americans and put them in to two different camps, the Federalists and Anti-Federalists.

The Federalists were supporters of the new Constitution and were led by men such as James Madison who is famously known as the Father of the Constitution. The Federalists believed that the new Constitution was capable of limiting the power of the Federal government and that at the same time it provided for a strong central government. However, the Anti-Federalists believed that the new document, "provided for a far greater degree of centralization than had existed under the colonial regime" (Riker, Calvert, Mueller, & Wilson, 1996). The Anti-Federalists didn't want to revert back to a government that would be similar to Great Britain. After all, the country had just been through a bloody war to gain freedom from that form of political body. They believed that the states should retain their sovereignty and have more state's rights in regards to where the allocation of power should derive from.

The Federalists were opposed to this due to their reasoning that a weak central government would leave America vulnerable to attacks from foreign nations. Many Federalists argued that, "The operations of the federal government will be most extensive and important in times of war and danger; those of the State governments, in times of peace and security" (Hamilton, Jay, & Madison, 2009) Therefore, Federalists wanted to ensure that there was more unity among the states so in times of crisis they could fight an invading force. Both factions wanted to advertise their beliefs to the public from their respective positions through the medium of newspapers and journals.

Between 1787 and 1788, the Federalists released their own propaganda through what is now called *The Federalist Papers*. It was composed by three of the giants of the Federalists, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay. It was published in three New York Newspapers called the *Independent Journal*, *The Advertiser*, and the *New-York Packet*. This demonstrates the already democratic mode of thinking at the time which emphasized sharing the latest news on government actions through the media.

The Anti-Federalists also distributed their own rhetoric through newspapers, pamphlets and bulletins. It was authored by men such as George Mason and Patrick Henry. However, many used pseudonyms as to not give their identities away. Several of them are quite interesting such as Brutus and Montezuma("ANTI-FEDERALIST PAPERS," 2011). Both sides were competing for the country's minds as to sway them over to their side. The papers were circulated between the drafting stage and the proposal for the Constitution. The Federalists had a hard mission on their hands. In order for the Constitution to be recognized as the supreme law of the land, it had to be ratified by the state conventions. The Anti-Federalists also had a difficult task and needed to thwart the ratification process by releasing their arguments to the public. Anti-Federalists such as the man with the pseudonym Centinel declared, "It is the opinion of the greatest writers, that a very extensive country cannot be governed on democratic principles, on any other plan than a confederation of a number of small republics, possessing all the powers of internal government, but united in the management of their foreign and general concerns" (as cited in "Anti-Federalist Papers: Centinel #1," n.d.). This quote sums up the Anti-Federalists position when it was advertised to the American public. They believed again that a central government that the Federalists were calling for would simply disintegrate into tyranny.

Of course the Federalists would also offer their rebuttal and claim, "One hundred and

seventy-three despots would surely be as oppressive as one” (Hamilton, Jay, & Madison, 2009). The Federalists were basically claiming that individual states with their own powerful governments could be just as tyrannical as a centralized government. Federalists such as Madison also believed a confederation of several states could present problems. Hamilton also wanted to convey to the public the possible misfortune that a confederation could have which could lead to Civil War between the different state’s interests. Although the Anti-Federalists were offering positions on why the Constitution needed to be changed, they failed to propose any real solution to how the Federal government would govern. Many were still in favor of the old Articles of Confederation which had been the document that the Colonies followed during the Revolution. However, the whole reason the Articles were scrapped was because of its lack of specifics on how the Federal government should use its power.

Eventually the two factions had to come to a compromise in order for some of the state legislatures to ratify the Constitution. Finding a middle ground for both parties to agree on was the implementation of a Bill of Rights. This was written by Madison who was influenced by George Mason’s Virginia Declaration of Rights. The Bill of Rights is famously known as the first ten amendments of the Constitution. The Anti-Federalists wanted to make sure that individual rights were further protected from a Federal government that could be tyrannical in the future. With this addition to the Constitution the states that were opposed to the Constitution would now ratify it. In 1790, Rhode Island became the last of the thirteen states to ratify the Constitution. The Bill of Rights would also be ratified by all the states in 1791.

In conclusion, the Constitution was not a document that was agreed upon by all the colonists and state legislatures. It had its opponents on both sides who thought they knew what was best for the nation. Men who had been united during the Revolutionary war became

disgruntled with each other and the future of the American Republic would lie in the hands of these men. Only the future will tell if the Federalists were correct on their decisions. On the other hand, perhaps the Anti-Federalists warnings on an abusive central government may manifest sooner than all Americans expected.

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