

## LESSON 2: WHAT IS THE FEDERALIST?

*THE FEDERALIST* is a collection of 85 essays in support of the Constitution of 1787. These *Federalist* papers were conceived and written from October 1787 until May 1788, when the final essays were published, to counter arguments of Antifederalists against ratification of the new Constitution. What was the origin of *The Federalist*? Who planned and wrote these "papers" or essays? What were the purposes of the authors? What was the effect of *The Federalist* papers on the campaign to ratify the Constitution? What has been the enduring significance of *The Federalist* as an example of American ideas on constitutional government?

### Origins of The Federalist Papers

*The Federalist* was born during the debates on ratification of the Constitution, which began after Congress sent the proposed plan of government to the states on September 29, 1787. Congress acted in line with Article VII of the Constitution: "The Ratification of the Conventions of nine States shall be sufficient for the Establishment of this Constitution between the States so ratifying the Same." How would citizens and their elected representatives in each state judge this new plan for government, which had been drafted by delegates to the Constitutional Convention at Philadelphia in the summer of 1787? Would special conventions in each state ratify or reject it?

Opinion on the Constitution was sharply divided throughout the United States. Alexander Hamilton reported on his home state of New York in a letter to George Washington: "The event cannot yet be foreseen. The constitution proposed has in this state warm friends and warm enemies." Hamilton had participated in the Constitutional Convention, where he was one of three delegates from New York. He had been disappointed, however, with ideas of the majority of delegates and had spoken in favor of a much stronger national government than had been approved by the Convention. Nonetheless, he strongly preferred the proposed Constitution of 1787 to the existing frame of government, the Articles of Confederation, and was among the 39 delegates who signed it on September 17. Hamilton also resolved to campaign vigorously for ratification against strong opposition to the new Constitution, which included his fellow delegates from New York to the Constitutional Convention, John Lansing and Robert Yates, and the powerful governor of his state, George Clinton.

On September 27, 1787, Clinton and his backers began their attack on the Constitution with an article in the *New York Journal*, which was signed with a pen name, "Cato." It was common in those days for public

figures like Governor Clinton or Alexander Hamilton to mask their identities with pen names when writing published articles or letters on important political issues. Hamilton replied to "Cato" with two letters by "Caesar." He also started to plan a lengthy series of essays to refute Antifederalist objections to the Constitution of 1787.

### Authors of The Federalist Papers

Hamilton influenced John Jay and James Madison to join him as authors of essays that would become *The Federalist*. John Jay, at forty-two, was the oldest of the three authors. He had served his state and nation as (1) chief author of the New York state constitution, (2) negotiator, with Benjamin Franklin and John Adams, of the Treaty of Paris, which ended the American War of Independence in 1783, and (3) Secretary of Foreign Affairs under the Articles of Confederation. Later on, Jay would become the first Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court under the Constitution.

James Madison of Montpelier, Virginia was thirty-six years old in 1787 and had been among the most prominent leaders at the Constitutional Convention. He kept the most complete records of the debates, and had the most influence on core ideas of the new frame of government. Later, he was called "The Father of the Constitution" because of the dominant role he played in shaping the Constitution. William Pierce, delegate to the Constitutional Convention from Georgia, wrote memorable "pen portraits" of the other delegates. "Mr. Madison . . . has long been in public life; and every . . . Person seems to acknowledge his greatness. He blends together the profound politician, with the Scholar. In the management of every great question he evidently took the lead in the Convention, and tho' he cannot be called an Orator, he is a most agreeable, eloquent, and convincing Speaker. From a spirit of industry and application . . . he always comes forward the best informed Man of any point in debate. . . ." Madison went on to become a Representative to Congress from Virginia in 1789. Later, he served as Secretary of State under President Thomas Jefferson and as fourth President of the United States, 1809-1817.

Alexander Hamilton, the originator of the project to write *The Federalist*, was the youngest member of the team, thirty-two years old in 1787. Hamilton was a genius with driving ambition. During the American Revolution, he was an aide of General Washington and rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel. After the war, he became a successful lawyer in New York City and a leader in bringing about the Constitutional Convention, where he represented New York. William Pierce described Hamilton as "deservedly celebrated for his tal-

ents. He is a practitioner of the law, and reputed to be a finished Scholar. . . . Hamilton . . . enquires into every part of his subject with the searchings of philosophy . . . there is no skimming over the surface of a subject with him, he must sink to the bottom to see what foundation it rests on. . . . His manners are tinctured with stiffness, and sometimes with a degree of vanity that is highly disagreeable." Hamilton became Secretary of the Treasury under President Washington and established solid financial foundations for the new government.

Alexander Hamilton was major author of *The Federalist* and wrote fifty-one of the eighty-five essays. James Madison wrote twenty-nine essays. Illness forced John Jay to withdraw from the project, and he wrote only five essays.

### Common Ideas of the Authors

The authors agreed to have their essays printed first in major New York City newspapers, and seventy-seven were published initially this way. However, circulation of *The Federalist* papers did not depend entirely on New York newspapers and reprints elsewhere. Hamilton arranged with McLean and Company of New York City to have the essays published together as a book, which appeared in two volumes in May 1788 and included eight new essays, making a total of eighty-five.

Hamilton, Madison, and Jay agreed readily on other basic points, such as the name of their projected series of essays. By calling their work, *The Federalist*, they scored a public relations victory on their opponents, who considered themselves the real "federalists" (supporters of division of power between the states and a central government) and viewed Hamilton and his backers as nationalists (who would do away with the rights and powers of state governments). The opponents of Hamilton, Madison, and Jay were called Antifederalists, a negative label that implied only opposition, with no constructive ideas to improve the government.

There also was consensus on using "Publius" as the single pen name for all essays in this series. This pseudonym referred to Publius Valerius Publicola, a great defender of the Roman Republic. The identity of "Publius" was generally unknown until publication of a French language edition of *The Federalist* in 1792.

Most importantly, the three authors agreed on basic ideas of government in the Constitution of 1787, such as the rule of law and limited government in a federal republic. They were also united in opposition to the weak and ineffective government under the Articles of Confederation and in support of an "energetic and effective" government of the United States.

As chief architect of the new frame of government created at the Constitutional Convention, Madison was a ready and willing ally of Hamilton in the fight for rat-

ification. However, despite collaboration in the campaign to ratify the Constitution, the authors of *The Federalist* had varying and sometimes clashing ideas about government. Hamilton and Madison, for example, differed about the extent of power that a chief executive should have and on certain aspects of "federal-state" relationships. In 1788, Madison noted the variations in ideas of *The Federalist*'s co-authors: "The writers are not mutually answerable for all the ideas of each other."

After ratification of the Constitution and establishment of the federal government, Madison joined Thomas Jefferson in political clashes with Hamilton that led to formation of rival political parties. These political clashes, however, lay in the future; in 1787-88, Madison and Hamilton were a formidable team in defense of the Constitution.