The Federalist and the Founding: Two Views of the Intellectual Origins

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Introduction

The Federalist Papers, written primarily by James Madison and Alexander Hamilton under the pseudonym Publius, have been the focal point for the study of American political philosophy for almost two hundred years. The papers were written as editorials arguing for the ratification of the Philadelphia draft of the Constitution, and appeared in several New York newspapers before being collected in a single volume. They are "America's premier book about politics." Even more important to this study, they are the "premier book" about the politics which shaped America's founding. The authors of the Federalist played key roles in the formation and the enactment of the American government, and the papers are considered by many to be the most profound expression of the political science of the framers. Thus, to study the "science of politics," to use Hamilton's phrase from the Federalist, is to study the "science of politics" that played the key role in the founding of American government. This report, however, is not limited strictly to studies of the Federalist, but will examine several general studies of the

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intellectual origins of the founding and relate them to the Federalist.

The general studies of the founding examined in this report are expressive of a range of scholarly opinion concerning the intellectual origins of American government. Scholars generally, especially when they are not writing biographies, consider the founding's intellectual origins not on the basis of single individuals but on the basis of the group that created the American government. Although a great diversity of opinion may have existed among the framers at the time of the founding, when the thought and motivations of the framers are examined, they are often examined collectively.

The plurality of political opinions which existed at the time of the founding, and which the Federalist predicted would continue to exist in America (while prescribing measures in hopes of diminishing the negative effects of widely divergent political opinions), seem to have only foreshadowed the range of opinions which have developed about The Federalist Papers themselves over the past seventy years. From the publishing of the first paper, individuals of varying political orientations have expressed markedly different opinions about Publius's work. However, in 1913, the publishing of "Charles A. Beard's An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States started a new turn in the debate."

Beard, in his attempt to examine the motivations of the framers, discovered evidence which, he argued, strongly suggested that the major influence upon the framers was material self-interest. Douglass Adair, however, added a second "turn in the debate" and accepted the validity of Beard's theory only in a limited sense. Adair felt "Beard's research threw a brilliant
beam of light on certain facets of the Constitution, [but] his aim was selective, and by highlighting special features of the document he thereby cast others into deep obscurity." Other scholars, before Adair, may have felt similarly about some of the detail in Beard's work. Beard, himself, later allowed that forces other than economics played a significant role in the founding. Adair, however, was the first to actually throw significant "beams of light" into the areas obscured by the shadows of Beard's examination of 1913.

In his attempt to determine what these shadows contained, Adair examined the desire shown by the framers for a sort of eternal fame, their attempt to incorporate the philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment, and the careful study of history made by a few of the framers. These, he believed, were the keys to a more complete understanding of the framers' motivations.

The arguments of these two scholars, and some of those who have followed in their footsteps, as it were, will constitute the main body of this study.

The Founders of the Theories

Charles A. Beard

Charles A. Beard said, "interpretative schools seem always to originate in social antagonisms." This statement is certainly correct with regard to the interpretative school he founded. Richard Hofstadter, who acclaims Beard's Economic Interpretation as "a high point" in modern critical scholarship, describes the context in which the work was written:
The antagonism, long latent, between the philosophy of the Constitution and the philosophy of American democracy again came into the open. Professor Beard's work appeared in 1913 at the peak of the Progressive era, when the muckraking fever was still high; some readers tended to conclude from his findings that the Fathers were selfish reactionaries who do not deserve their high place in American esteem.

If some readers concluded that the framers were selfish reactionaries, then Beard's book served its purpose well, for this was his intention in writing the work. Beard and others felt that reverencing the past, particularly the founding, was affecting the present negatively. It seemed to breed a sort of conservatism that was holding back "social progress"; thus, they sought to debunk the founding in hopes of eliminating some of this conservatism.

Despite its rather pointed intentions, the Economic Interpretation has had a powerful effect on the scholarly view of the founding. A school of political scientists and historians has followed, creating a school of thought which sees the founding as the product of a politically elite group of men responding to the economic and social forces of their times.

Douglass Adair

Douglass Adair, who began the main body of his work in the late 1940s and early 1950s, has, like Beard, been accused of responding to "social antagonisms." James Conniff argues that "Adair . . . sought to dispute the claims of Charles Beard and to reassert the integrity of those who wrote and enacted the American Constitution." Conniff continues, criticizing
Adair for being "more interested in finding some intellectual and philosophic influence on the formation of Madison's thought than in [finding the correct source] or in spelling out the precise nature of its influence." Many, however, would disagree with Conniff's criticisms, and Adair's theory has spawned a number of followers, creating a school of thought which sees the framers as motivated more by the individual desire for fame and by intellectual forces than by the socioeconomic forces which were asserted by the Beardians.

The Theories

Charles A. Beard and Economic Determinism

Charles Beard, in his Economic Interpretation, asserts that Madison and Hamilton were America's premier economic determinists:

The Federalist . . . presents in a relatively brief and systematic form an economic interpretation of the Constitution by the men best fitted, through intimate knowledge of the ideals of the Framers, to expound the political science of the new Government. This is . . . in fact the finest study on the economic interpretation of politics which exists in any language; and whoever would understand the Constitution as an economic document need hardly go beyond it.

Beard also asserts, rather ironically, that the Constitution, which the Federalist authors played key roles in creating and enacting, is the product of economic forces. He argues that there were several powerful economic interest groups who stood to gain materially if the Constitution
were to be enacted and a strong central government created. He concludes that the commercial interests looked "upon the adoption of the Constitution as the sure guarantee" that their property interests would be protected. 12

Beard continues by asserting that the weak central government created by the Articles of Confederation was unfavorable to property rights and that the movement for the Constitution was, at its highest levels, fundamentally a movement to protect property rights. 13

Beard further contends that the delegate selection process to the Constitutional Convention was essentially rigged so that only members of certain economic groups arrived in Philadelphia as delegates. He cites as prime evidence the fact that the delegates were chosen, not by the people, but by the state legislatures, and that there were property qualification laws placed on voters and legislators before 1787. 14

In order to further strengthen his assertions, Beard examines the financial status of each delegate in an attempt to determine if the delegates "represent[ed] distinct groups whose economic interests they understood and felt in concrete, definite form through their own personal experience with identical property rights, or [if they] were . . . working merely under the guidance of abstract principles of political science." 15

This survey brings Beard to the following conclusions:

Not one member [delegate] represented in his immediate personal economic interests the small farming or mechanic classes. The overwhelming majority of members, at least five-sixths, were
immediately, directly, and personally interested in the outcome of their labors at Philadelphia, and were to a greater or lesser extent economic beneficiaries from the adoption of the Constitution.

Having shown that the delegates were, economically at least, a homogeneous group that stood to gain from a strong national government, Beard finally concludes that the Constitution itself, despite its lack of economic terms and no mention of social class, is fundamentally an economic document.

Beard's Assertions and the Federalist

Beard's assertions, as they relate to the authors of The Federalist Papers, are that Madison and Hamilton were not influenced by any historical or philosophical forces, but were only influenced by intellectual forces insofar as those forces were pliable to the economic force which really molded their thinking. Simply put, economic forces created the Constitution and consequently the Federalist; and, as Beard views it, those forces were material self-interest. Thus, the arguments for the Constitution in the Federalist must be the subtle expression of self-interest, and therefore constitute propaganda for the cause of ratifying an economically inspired document—the Constitution of the United States.

Douglass Adair and Fame, the Scottish Enlightenment, and the Importance of History

Adair felt Beard's definition of self-interest in purely economic terms was "simple-minded" and represented an "artful selectivity." He does not directly dispute Beard's assertion that economic forces played a role in motivating the framers. However, the conclusions he draws after studying the framers' motivations severely
limit the role economic forces played in the founding.

Adair did not consider economic and other social or intellectual forces to be mutually exclusive. Beard, however, in his Economic Interpretation founds his theory on a belief that these forces are fundamentally mutually exclusive. He does this by arguing that the power of material self-interest is so much greater than the power of ideas that the power of ideas is negligible in comparison with material self-interest. Beard is essentially arguing that men are never idealogues except when ideology serves their material self-interest. Adair felt that the framers were self-interested, but that their self-interest was much more subtle than the overt economic self-interest depicted in Beard's Economic Interpretation.

Fame and the Founding. Adair, in his examination of the possible motivations of the framers, discovered a profound "sense of history" that seemed to overtake the framers as they worked. He describes them as becoming fantastically concerned with posterity's judgment of their behavior. And since they are concerned with the image that will remain in the world's eye, "that love of fame which is the ruling passion of the noblest minds," to quote Hamilton, becomes a spur and a goad that urges some of them to act with a nobleness and a greatness that their earlier careers had hardly hinted at.

Adair shows that many of the framers did not begin their work with lofty ambitions. However, between the time of the issuing of the Declaration of Independence and the Philadelphia Convention many of these men developed a
growing sense of the potential for lasting fame their situation had provided them. This "sense of history," which Adair describes as molding a change in the Framers thinking, is summarized by the statement, cited by Adair, of John Adams to Richard Henry Lee: "You and I, my dear friend, have been sent into life at a time when the greatest lawgivers of antiquity would have wished to be alive." The Founders began to realize that what they were doing would live in history, and that consequently they too, like the famed ancient lawgivers, might be immortal. Adair argues that, as a result, the Founders went beyond themselves in order to achieve a form of secular immortality. He cites as evidence Virginia, which had in 1787 only 400,000 white inhabitants; and yet that small population produced, in the short space of a single generation, a number of men that history will never forget.

Adair also shows that this desire for fame was not looked upon pejoratively in the eighteenth century. The desire for fame was considered an ennobling emotion because it led one to do things which were worthy of remembrance.

Adair concludes: "The love of Fame is a noble passion because it can transform ambition and self-interest into dedicated effort for the community, because it can spur individuals to spend themselves to provide for the common defense, or to promote the general welfare, and even on occasion to establish justice in a world where justice is extremely rare."

Fundamentally, Adair's argument is that the economic forces, which Beard saw as the prime motivator, were overwhelmed by the force of the framers' desire to be remembered well by history. Thus, the desire for fame is, in Adair's view, the prime motivator.
The Scottish Enlightenment, the Study of History, and the Founding. In Adair's view, what further solidified his assertion that economic forces were only secondary was the link which he discovered between the Scottish Enlightenment and some of the framers, particularly between Federalist author James Madison and David Hume, the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher. Adair calls Madison "the most creative and philosophical disciple of the Scottish school of science and politics," citing Madison's ability to "set his limited personal experience in the context of men in other ages and times, thus giving extra reaches of insight to his political formulations."

According to Adair, the Scottish system of philosophy rested on one basic assumption, had developed its own special method, and kept to a consistent aim. The assumption was "that there is a great uniformity among the actions of all men, in all nations and ages, and that human nature still remains the same, in its principles and operations. The same motives always produce the same actions; the same events follow from the same causes . . . . Would you know the sentiments, inclinations, and course of life of the Greeks and Romans? Study well the temper and actions of the French and English . . . ."--thus David Hume, present[ed] the basis of a science of human behavior.

Adair believes these elements of Scottish philosophy appear directly in Madison's work. Adair felt his theories were clearly validated by Madison's belief in a science of politics and by Madison's careful study of history, which the Scottish "science of human behavior" prescribed.
Adair's Theories and the Federalist. Adair asserts that the authors of the Federalist Papers were not overwhelmingly influenced by material self-interest. They were, however, overwhelmingly influenced by a desire for eternal fame. This desire led them to strive beyond what might be considered their normal capacities in producing, what they thought would be, a "monument" worthy of lasting fame. His second assertion, that the thought of the framers was directly influenced by Scottish philosophy, gives the Federalist an intellectual base. If one accepts Beard's arguments, the Federalist must be little more than clever propaganda defending the economic interests of the elite; but with Adair's argument the Federalist becomes a profound expression of Madison and Hamilton's interpretation of Scottish philosophy with a careful study of the history of governments thrown in.

The Followers of the Theories

As has been stated, two diverging philosophies about the founding have emerged as a result of the work of Charles Beard and Douglass Adair. If Beard's influence created a scholarly tidal wave, drowning out old notions and pushing new ideas ahead, Adair's work served as a first major dike, slowing the force of this particular rushing wave. Those who have followed have largely sought to add either additional water to the wave or earth to the dike. While all the scholars of the founding may not be the direct intellectual descendants of these two men, their original theories relate to much of the recent scholarship on the subject, as may be seen in the following catalogue of some of the more recent and important work on the founding.
Robert A. Dahl views the founding, as did Beard, as largely the product of material self-interest. Dahl states:

to some extent, they (the Framers) elevated their own privileges into universal matters of abstract right and universal right; groups who might interfere with their privileges were, in their eyes, dangerous factions. In this respect, they carried partisan attitudes into the Convention, yet were usually unaware that they did so. They were not necessarily cynical, merely human.

Whereas Beard sees the Founding Fathers as an elite that came to the Convention as part of economically interested conspiracy, Dahl sees the Convention delegates as "merely human," unable to see beyond the horizon created by their individual interests.

Dahl's argument centers on his belief that the forces which moved the framers were bigger than the framers themselves. Thus, he does not hold them completely responsible for the government they created:

Without seriously qualifying, much less abandoning their universal norms (morals), they nonetheless created a government that would demand obedience to its laws from a majority of adults--women, non-whites, and some white males--who were excluded from active participation in making those laws, whether directly or through their elected representatives.

Thus, Dahl believes that the creation of a self-interested and undemocratic government was
not an act of gross immorality on the part of the framers, but was to be expected under circumstances where the majority in society were unable to express their interests in the Constitution-making process.

Gordon S. Wood feels class interest was a prime motivating factor in the founding. A major element of Wood's thesis is evident in the following statement:

Eighteenth-century leaders took it for granted that society was a hierarchy of finely graded ranks and degrees divided vertically into interests and lines of personal interest, rather than as today into horizontal cleavages of class and occupation.

Despite the fact that Wood divides the eighteenth-century class system vertically, he still contends that a sense of elitist protectionism influenced the framers. He states, "Members of the elite debated endlessly over what constituted the proper character for a gentleman . . . but they never really questioned the leadership of the society by an aristocracy of some sort." Wood believes that those already in social leadership positions did not question, in any democratic way, their right to rule. Thus, the framers created a government which placed impediments to democracy in order to protect what the elite saw as their inherent right.

Richard Hofstadter seems to have synthesized a number of widely divergent notions about the founding. He believes, as Beard does, that the framers created the government for commercial reasons; as Wood does, that the framers were anti-democratic and elitists; and that the framers were, first and foremost,
influenced by Thomas Hobbes. Hofstadter concludes:

(The framers) accepted the mercantile image of life as an eternal battleground, and assumed the Hobbesian war of each against all; they did not propose to put an end to this war, but merely to stabilize it and make it less murderous. They had no hope and they offered none for any ultimate organic change in the way men conduct themselves. The result was that while they thought self-interest the most dangerous and unbrookable quality in man, they necessarily underwrote it in trying to control it.

Hofstadter felt that the Hobbesian view of man was so powerfully entrenched in the minds of the framers that it was the prime motivating force in their creation of a government. This view of man, Hofstadter theorizes, created in the framers a fear of the other classes of society, which, in turn, led to the anti-democratic, self-interested and protectionist form of government which he feels was created at Philadelphia.

Martin Diamond also takes a rather synthetic view of past scholarship. He, however, unlike Dahl, Wood, or Hofstadter takes as a main source of inspiration not Beard, but Adair. Yet Diamond agrees, in a limited sense, with Beard that economic factors play a role in shaping political structures. However, he believes the key to understanding the founding lies in intellectual development of several of the key framers.

Diamond asserts that the framers, Madison in particular, rejected many of the political traditions based on Classical and Christian political philosophy and turned instead to "such political
philosophers as Machiavelli, Bacon, Hobbes, and Locke," who had developed "a new science of politics" based on a realistic view of man. These political philosophers brought man down from the pedestal of "perfection" as the Classical and Christian philosophers thought he "ought" to be, and viewed him "as he actually is." Diamond argues that the framers, again Madison in particular, wholeheartedly accepted these notions, and they felt that with this new "view of man" the problems of republican and democratic government, which had in the past appeared to have no solution, could now be resolved.

Diamond further argues that it was this "new science of politics" with its view of man "as he actually is" which gave an anti-democratic tilt to the Constitution, a tilt which those of the Beardian school attribute to material self-interest. In direct contrast to Dahl and others, he states that "the American political order was deliberately tilted to resist, so to speak, the upward gravitational pull of politics toward the grand, dramatic, character-enobling but society-wracking opinions about justice and virtue." The new Enlightenment sense of realism required the framers to reject older republican notions about man in relation to "justice and virtue."

However, Diamond contends that simply because the framers rejected older notions "regarding virtue, they did not thereby abandon the pursuit of virtue or excellency in all other possible ways." He asserts this because Enlightenment philosophy, as perceived by Madison and others among the framers, does not reject the possibility for virtue in man; the system, in a sense, plans for the worst and expects to produce the best, not perfection but the best.

Diamond concludes:
The Founding becomes more than an arrangement of the passions and interests; when "venerated" by the people, it can serve as an ethical admonition to the people, teaching them to subdue dangerous impulses of passion and interest. This goes far in the direction of genuine republican virtue, but it still rests on the mild and merely declaratory tutelage of the Founding, not the steeper stuff of ancient political science.

Diamond sees an intellectual base for the founding primarily as a result of the assimilation of Scottish philosophy by several of the key framers which produced in these men definite beliefs about what government could be and what it ought to be.

Garry Wills takes the theory of Scottish philosophical influence several steps beyond either Adair or Diamond. He contends, as did Adair, that Hume directly influenced Madison on a number of issues. However, in his book Explaining America, Wills finds a greater number of direct correlations between Hume and Madison than Adair probably ever thought possible and more than many scholars today believe are possible. In order to validate his thesis, Wills points to a number of specific political doctrines espoused by Madison and then points to what he believes are the antecedents to these doctrines in the writings of the Scottish philosopher David Hume.

James Conniff places a slightly different emphasis on the theory of the influence of Scottish philosophy. He disagrees with Adair's thesis that the main link between Scottish philosophy was from Hume to Madison. Instead he asserts that link was from Francis Hutcheson to Madison, and that Madison's own governmental
experience in combination with his Hutcheson-inspired education had much more to do with the shaping of Madison's thought than did Hume.

Conniff describes Madison's education, asserting that in that educational process Hutcheson was much more likely to be influential than Hume. He also describes Madison's years of public service before the convention and shows how this may have influenced his thinking.

Recent Scholarship and the Federalist. Most of the more recent scholarship relating to the intellectual origins of the Federalist falls in the same two categories created by the earlier work done by Beard and Adair. Those who believe the Federalist is an expression of self- or class-interest must relegate the papers to the class of propaganda. And those who accept the Federalist as having some intellectual base, whatever that base might be, believe that the papers are the interpretation of the philosophical base in an attempt to fit it to the American situation.

Conclusion

Martin Diamond, in his essay Ethics and Politics: The American Way, after discussing Aristotle's views on politics and ethics, asks how might Aristotle rank America? Would he characterize it as a genuine political community, one with its own special moral foundation, or only as "an association of place and of not acting unjustly to one another for the sake of trade"? Would he find it a place where law was only "a compact, ... a guarantor for one another of the just things, but not able to make the citizens good and just,"—that is, good
and just in the way their characters were formed and not merely in conformity to a compact? Or might he conclude that there is an American political ethos, a unique character-forming mix of ethics and politics? In short, is there an "American way" by which this republic nurtures in its citizens certain ethical excellences upon the basis of some particular view of what is advantageous and just?44

This is a key issue arising between the two schools of thought discussed in this report. Was America founded upon a unique "political ethos" created by the framers, or was it founded upon "an association of place and not acting unjustly to one another for the sake of trade."

If the framers were motivated by the desire to enrich themselves, and thus founded the American republic with this objective in mind, then America is without moral foundation as a nation. If the framers were motivated by the desire to create a nation which would remember them as being worthy of fame, then they may or may not have succeeded in creating a nation founded upon a genuine "political ethos."

A second key issue arises from the fact that the two arguments themselves are fundamentally different. Beard's form of economic determinism has material self-interest controlling America's founding, and Adair's fame argument sees the framers as reacting to a variety of forces but ultimately in control of the founding. Thus, Beard sees the interests ultimately controlling the individuals, and Adair sees the individuals ultimately controlling the interests. Beard also sees the creation of the Constitution, in its particular form, as inevitable given the particular economic conditions of the times. Adair sees the
creation of the Constitution as largely the product of the framers' desire for fame and as the result of the Scottish-influenced intellectual development of the key framers.

A Final Analysis

Each of these theories is based on the view of man held by the individual scholar who authored the theory. Thus, the two primary arguments discussed in this report proceed from completely different fundamental premises: Beard's premise is that the forces within society are more powerful than the individual. Adair's premise is that individuals choose to respond to the forces within society; therefore, individuals are more powerful than the forces. Adair sees material self-interest, which Beard views as the most powerful force upon man, as being less important to the framers than their desire for fame and the intellectual power of Scottish philosophy and the lessons of history. Adair argues that understanding the intellects of the men who made the decisions concerning the founding of America and the writing of the Federalist, is the key to understanding the founding of the United States. In opposition to Adair's assertion, Beard argues that understanding the economic status of society at the time of the Constitutional Convention is the key to understanding America's founding and the Federalist authors' arguments.
ENDNOTES


6 Beard, An Economic Interpretation, p. 4.

7 Hofstadter, p. 84.

8 Adair, pp. 82-83.


10 Ibid., p. 382.

11 Beard, An Economic Interpretation, p. 153.
12 Ibid., pp. 41-42.
13 Ibid., p. 52.
14 Ibid., pp. 64-65.
15 Ibid., p. 73.
16 Ibid., p. 149.
17 Ibid., p. 152.
18 Adair, pp. 23, 84.
19 Ibid., p. 77.
20 Ibid., pp. 7-8.
21 Ibid., p. 21.
22 Ibid., p. 4.
23 Ibid., p. 11.
24 Ibid., p. 12.
25 Ibid., p. 97.
26 Ibid., p. 95.


29 Gordon S. Wood, "The Democratization of the Mind in the American Revolution," in

30 Ibid., p. 106.

31 Hofstadter, pp. 73-74.

32 Ibid., pp. 84-85.


35 Ibid.


37 Ibid., p. 56.

38 Ibid., p. 63.

39 Ibid., p. 71.


42 Conniff, p. 383.

43 Ibid., pp. 387-88.
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