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The Writings of Presidents and Patriots from Paine, Washington, Hamilton, and Madison to Patrick Henry and Frederick Douglass: Defining – and Protecting – Unity

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When America's founders first urged the colonies to separate from England, the colonists were diverse and far-flung. Other nations defined themselves by shared ethnicity or religion; Americans spanned every economic class, practiced diverse religions, and hailed from dozens of native lands. What common goals could unite them? And what dangers most threatened their unity? The writings of early patriots reveal a careful struggle to nurture both unity and diversity, and show a new national character in the making.

Thomas Paine (1737–1809)

One of the first patriots to argue that the American colonies must define themselves separately from the mother country was himself born and raised in England.

Thomas Paine published "Common Sense" in 1776 in Philadelphia; the anonymous pamphlet sold so briskly that two printers stepped in to fill the demand for a second edition the following month. Paine urged colonists to demand independence from Great Britain, even though he admitted that independence might not be "yet fashionable." Paine was well aware of the colonists' diverse backgrounds, but he emphasized their common experiences. "We are young, and we have been distressed," he wrote, suggesting that their shared suffering under British rule was already the beginning of a national bond. In Paine's argument, the colonists

also shared a unique opportunity to create a government based on reason.

But Paine saw threats to American unity. He feared the colonies' growing size, which he predicted would one day work against collective identity. He warned against the loss in "spirit" that could result from "an increase in trade," since "men become too much absorbed thereby to attend to anything else." Note that Paine did not discourage commerce; indeed, later in the pamphlet he wrote, "Our plan is commerce, and that, well attended to, will secure us the peace and friendship of all Europe." [p. 24] But he did fear an increase in commerce to the point of wealth and complacency. Most significantly, Paine feared that the combined growth of population and trade would lead to the development of a "vast variety of interests" and a day when "colony would be against colony." Paine foresaw a day when separate interests would outweigh allegiance to the nation as a whole.

By way of solution, Paine urged immediate action. Notice how he inspired unity by creating virtues of characteristics that might have seemed faults. He presented "the infant state of the Colonies" as a point of commonality and strength rather than weakness or inexperience. He dismissed the august government of England as one based on "law at the point

of the sword" and promised more rational rule based on "the articles or charter of government." Finally, Paine presented diversity itself as the colonies' great virtue, even "the will of the Almighty." The issue of religious diversity and freedom was particularly pressing to early colonists, many of whom had fled religious persecution in Europe. Paine's language may seem rooted in a single religion to modern readers, mentioning as he does "Christian names" and offering "a larger field for our Christian kindness." But Paine used the word "our" to emphasize a common cause that would take precedence over separate religions and heritages. He urged the diverse colonists to consider themselves "children of the same family"—a family facing a threat to its survival.

George Washington (1732–1799)

Paine's arguments helped spur a revolution, and the war for independence was fought and won (1776–1783). Shortly after the victory, the leader of the Continental army, George Washington, wrote a letter to the governors of the newly independent states. By this time Americans had proven their ability to unite against a common enemy. But could they remain united in peace? America's survival was hardly guaranteed, and Washington renewed the call for unity with visions of both the success and the fragility of the

young nation.

Americans, wrote Washington, found themselves at the right place and time for success. He extolled the virtues of their land, "a vast Tract of continent, comprising all the various soils and climates of the World." Even the soil contributed to America's blessed diversity. Washington noted the power in the nation's recent victory, too, their "moment of absolute Freedom and independency." And he invoked time on a broader scale, rejoicing that America had been founded at "an Epoque when the rights of mankind were better understood and more clearly defined" than ever before. To Washington, Americans enjoyed a unique opportunity to put into practice the abstract ideals of the Enlightenment—liberty, freedom, and tolerance. Their success could set an example for the world.

But Washington was keenly aware that the new nation might fail and "ruin their national character forever." He used the language of a test, presenting the aftermath of revolution as a "time of political probation." If Americans lost their freedom and happiness, "the fault will be intirely our own." Washington's idea that Americans had to *earn* their promised land would have seemed familiar to America's Puritan settlers, who believed that some souls were already elected to heaven, but all had to work hard on earth to prove

they deserved it. In Washington's view, the judges were not divine but political: "the eyes of the whole world are turned upon them." Other nations watched America, ready to take advantage of any divisions to "play one State against another to prevent their growing importance." Like Paine, Washington feared infighting among the states. Well-traveled from his years commanding the Continental army, he knew the extent of "local prejudices and policies" among the new citizens and worried that Americans' diversity could tear them apart.

Washington argued that the surest way to safeguard against both infighting and foreign interference was to form "an indissoluble Union of the States under one Federal Head." His letter raised an issue that would come to dominate public debate over the next decade. Would a central government take charge of the developing fate of America, or could such government be left to individual states? As delicately as possible—given that he was writing to state authorities—Washington insisted upon the "federalist" view, or the idea that a strong central government was the best way to preserve the union and even individual states and citizens. States might even be asked to "sacrifice their individual advantages to the interest of the Community." Notice that Washington championed "Liberty" as "the basis" of "our Independency and National

Character," but he did not promise unlimited freedom. He threatened "the severest punishment" to any who "would dare to sap the foundation, or overturn the Structure" of the new nation. To Washington, American unity took precedence over individual interests or state claims to power.

Alexander Hamilton (1755–1804)

Soon the great minds of America would be engaged in the debate between federal and state powers. Who would have the power to tax and represent whom in the new nation? How much power could each state have without undermining the union? The debate took shape as part of the effort to frame a new constitution to replace the Articles of Confederation, which were ratified in 1781 in the midst of the Revolution. Passionate arguments on both sides of the federalist issue—and on whether or not a new constitution was needed—spilled out of convention halls and into newspapers, pamphlets, and public speeches. Among the advocates of a stronger central government, or federalism, were Alexander Hamilton and James Madison. Together with John Jay, they wrote a series of letters under the combined pen name "Publius" that appeared several times a week in New York newspapers from October 1787 to April 1788, a polemic barrage intended to secure New York's crucial vote as one of

nine states needed to ratify the proposed constitution. Although written in great haste, the Federalist Papers remain one of the best defenses of the American constitution and way of government.

In Federalist 9, Alexander Hamilton presented the federalist view—the argument for a stronger central government—as the best way to “suppress faction and guard the internal tranquillity of the States.” Warning against the dangers of competing individual interests, Hamilton appealed to common pride in the young nation’s virtues. He extolled America’s hard-won “peace and liberty” and its potential to serve as “the broad and solid foundation of other edifices not less magnificent.” He looked to the past as well as the future, drawing lessons from “the petty Republics of Greece and Italy.” Reason would allow Americans to avoid the fatal errors of other republican nations, namely allowing “domestic faction and insurrection,” the “rapid succession of revolutions,” and the “tempestuous waves of sedition and party-rage.” Enlightened Americans would guard against the destabilizing power of individuals and even political parties in a government “of a more perfect structure.” Such a government would be built upon a systematic central system of “distinct departments,” three branches of government sharing power by means of “ballances and checks.” In other words,

the very structure of government would see to it that no individual, party, or state would have enough power to allow “splitting ourselves into an infinity of little jealous, clashing, tumultuous commonwealths.” Hamilton did not deny the diversity of interests among Americans. Rather, he wanted to contain such differences in a rational, central government. By emphasizing that this kind of government would be based on “great improvement” in “the science of politics,” Hamilton reinforced the American belief in reason and progress: another point of shared pride and character.

James Madison (1751–1836)

James Madison shared Hamilton’s faith in a stronger central government. In Federalist 14, he also revealed his pride in America’s willingness to try something new. America’s constitution framers “have not suffered a blind veneration for antiquity, for custom, or for names,” he wrote, persuading a newly independent nation to see England’s intimidating history, tradition, and monarchy in a negative light. Rather, Americans were pioneers, having “accomplished a revolution which has no parallel in the annals of human society” and pursuing “a new and more noble course.” Madison celebrated pioneering as part of the American identity, as Hamilton touted

reason and progress. Notice that Madison echoed Paine's image of Americans as "members of the same family," the revolution having spilled "the kindred blood which flows in the veins of American citizens." The family image allowed patriots to envision a nation of diverse interests, yet linked by a common American heritage. Americans would not be defined by religion or ethnicity, like so many of the world's nations, but rather by shared experience and values.

Despite his advocacy of a strong federal government as the basis for American unity, Madison championed the freedom of Americans to pursue differences of opinion and particularly religion. He did not merely advocate religious toleration, implying as it did some disapproval. Rather he fought for true religious freedom, "a freedom to embrace, to profess and to observe the Religion which we believe to be of divine origin," as he argued in the essay "Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments" [p. 31]. Madison argued passionately for the separation of church and state. The federal government he helped to create would be strong in matters of state, but removed from citizens' spiritual lives. It was a way to give power to the government while preserving individual liberty.

Patrick Henry (1736–1799)

The argument against a strong central government, or the anti-federalist viewpoint, was well represented by Patrick Henry, who spoke at a Virginia convention considering ratification of the new constitution. Eight states had ratified by this time (June 1788) and nine were needed; Virginia's vote was pivotal. Henry based his argument against the constitution on the idea that it was a "change in government" and thus a betrayal of the goals of the Revolution. It is striking that he espoused the same virtues as his opponents, namely "rights, liberty, and happiness." But Henry suggested that these rights were best represented by the states: "States are the characteristics, and the soul of a confederation." He argued that "the people" were less well-represented under the new constitution (and the system for ratifying it) and challenged the framers for speaking as "we the people." In Henry's words, "The people gave them no power to use their name." Anti-federalists, too, saw the central issue of the constitution as the allocation of power—who could tax, draft, and represent whom. To Henry, the states were better positioned to represent the people than a distant central government.

While Henry valued the preservation of the Union ("a wrong step will plunge us

into misery, and our Republic will be lost”), he feared a “consolidated government” in which individuals and states would be under-represented. Like his federalist opponents, he too feared the dissolution of the Union. But Henry saw danger in the factions created by the constitutional process, by which the approval of nine states would be enough to adopt the constitution “to the eventual exclusion of 4 states.” Hamilton and Madison by contrast believed that a majority was sufficient in the present to secure the proposed constitution and block future factions. Henry’s position lost narrowly to the federalists, and Virginia’s vote finally endorsed the constitution late in 1788. But the issue of state power would remain divisive and, a century later, help provoke civil war.

Frederick Douglass (1818–1895)

By the mid-nineteenth century, concern over state power centered on the issue of slavery, which some states had outlawed but upon which many still based their economies. Throughout the nation, debates continued on the defining features of America—both its government and its character. Among those to join the debate were slaves themselves, still held legally in many states until 1865. The former slave Frederick Douglass spoke in his adopted hometown of Rochester, New York, in 1852, fourteen years after

escaping slavery in Maryland. Douglass had studied American documents carefully as part of his activism for the abolitionist cause. In “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?”, Douglass drew upon American history, pride, and even the language of the Declaration of Independence to argue for the emancipation of slaves. Note his celebration of the same virtues praised by early patriots, including America’s “rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity, and independence.” Like the nation’s founders, Douglass emphasized the shared experience and values that took precedence over ethnicity to define America as a nation. He also evoked “the names of the constitution and the bible.” But whereas a century earlier Thomas Paine had envisioned an “Almighty” pleased by America’s religious diversity, Douglass portrayed an angry deity. He compared American slaves to the enslaved people of Israel (quoting *Psalms 137: 1–6*) and warned that they were earning God’s wrath, not praise. So, too, did he remind listeners that the eyes of the world were upon them (as did Washington and Hamilton), but as a caution that his silence about their crimes “would make me a reproach before God and the world.” And like Madison, Douglass addressed “fellow citizens,” but he did so provocatively rather than reassuringly. By drawing attention to their unity as Americans, Douglass highlighted the

difference in experience between “your national independence” and “us,” the enslaved.

own highest standards of reason, freedom, and harmonious diversity.

Douglass’s boldness in challenging a white American audience on their own principles—and this on the Fourth of July—was enhanced by his powerful language. In the face of arguments that slaves might not be human, he turned the tables, writing “to drag a man ... were inhuman” and speaking “in the name of humanity which were outraged.” In the face of prejudice about color, he wrote, “the character and conduct of this nation never looked blacker to me.” And in the face of America’s founding tenets of independence and liberty—which Douglass did not challenge—he suggested the present generation’s betrayal of their founders and their future: “America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future.” In short, Douglass cast himself and the people for whom he spoke in the position of eighteenth-century Americans, seeking independence from “a long and violent abuse of power” (in the words of Thomas Paine). His arguments cast the words of the founding patriots in a new light and tested the resilience of the documents they left behind. His goal was similar, though: to define the nation’s unity in terms of shared values and experiences, rather than similarities of skin or blood, and to hold America to its

**Suggested Excerpts:
The Writings of Presidents and Patriots**

1. *Thomas Paine: Collected Writings*
"Common Sense, Addressed to the Inhabitants of America"
pp. 42.3–43.28
[from "The infant state of the Colonies ..." through "... called, their Christian names."]
2. *George Washington: Writings*
"Circular to State Governments"
pp. 516–519.14
[from beginning through "... which can be inflicted by his injured Country."]
3. *The Debate on the Constitution, Part One: September 1787 to February 1788*
"Publius," The Federalist IX (by Alexander Hamilton)
pp. 339–341.33
[from beginning through "... the greatness or happiness of the people of America."]
4. *James Madison: Writings*
The Federalist No. 14
pp. 172–173
[from "I submit to you my fellow citizens ..." through end.]
5. *The Debate on the Constitution, Part Two: January to August 1788*
Patrick Henry's Opening Speech: A Wrong Step Now and the Republic Will Be Lost Forever
pp. 595–597
[speech in entirety]
6. *Frederick Douglass: Autobiographies*
Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?"
pp. 431–432.35
[from beginning through "... a slaveholder, shall not confess to be right and just."]

**Suggested Discussion Questions:
The Writings of Presidents and Patriots**

1. How would you characterize the different patriots' views of human nature? You may find it helpful to distinguish the federalists from the anti-federalists.
2. Alexander Hamilton and James Madison argued that political parties and factions were threats to national stability. Nevertheless, contemporary American politics is dominated by parties and special-interest groups. In what ways do you think Hamilton and Madison were right to worry? Consider their arguments in Federalists 9 and 10. Do you believe that alliances fairly represent citizens' views or undermine the public good?
3. What other fears do you think the early patriots were right to worry about? Do any of their fears or hopes seem exaggerated today? You may also want to think about ways in which the phrasing of the Constitution may have forestalled potential problems—or exacerbated them.
4. In what ways do you think the federalist/anti-federalist debate has continued to this day? Consider issues that divide states today, such as capital punishment, abortion, gun control, farm subsidies, or energy supply. Where do you think the federal government should hold sway on these issues, and where states? Do you find the early patriots' arguments on either side relevant?
5. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), the Nobel Prize-winning novelist Toni Morrison writes:

"What was distinctive in the New [World] was, first of all, its claim to freedom and, second, the presence of the unfree within the heart of the democratic experiment—the critical absence of democracy, its echo, shadow, and silent force in the political and intellectual activity of some not-Americans." [58]

"The presence of black people is... a major referent in the framing of the Constitution." [65]

[Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992]

Do you agree? Consider any evidence you can find that the framers of the Constitution were aware of slavery and its role in the new nation. (A few specific passages are suggested in "ideas for further reading.") How do you account for the emphasis on freedom within the debates on the Revolution and the Constitution, promoted side-by-side with the accommodation of slavery?

Ideas for Further Reading: The Writings of Presidents and Patriots

Thomas Jefferson

Read two letters in which Thomas Jefferson criticizes the proposed constitution. What do you make of his objections? How do you think a constitution that accommodated his criticisms would have changed—and in some cases did change—the country?

- Thomas Jefferson Replies to James Madison, *The Debate on the Constitution, Part One*, 209–213.
- Thomas Jefferson to William Stephen Smith, *The Debate on the Constitution, Part One*, 309–310.
- See also John Adams' letter to Thomas Jefferson, *The Debate on the Constitution, Part One*, 473

Slavery

Many early patriots and framers of the Constitution owned slaves. At the same time, many discussed their opposition to, or at least reservations about, slavery. Consider for yourself their diverse thoughts on the matter. Do any of the passages below help you to understand the seeming contradiction that America promised liberty but preserved slavery? (Below are representative passages; many more may be found by consulting the indexes of each volume.)

- *George Washington:*
 - Reward for Runaway Slaves, 102–103
 - Letter to Lund Washington, 334–336 (on the presumed “advantages resulting from the sale of my negroes”)
 - Letter to Robert Morris, 593–594 (“there is not a man living who wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a plan adopted for the abolition of it [slavery]... but there is only one proper and effectual mode by which it can be accomplished.”)
 - Reflection on Slavery, 701–702 (“The unfortunate condition of the persons, whose labour in part I employed, has been the only unavoidable subject of regret.”)
 - Letter to Robert Lewis, 1047–1048 (“I have more working Negroes ... than can be employed.... What then is to be done?”)
- *James Madison:*
 - The Federalist LIV; “Are Slaves Property or Persons?” *The Debate on the Constitution, Part Two*, 196–201
 - “Memorandum on Colonizing Freed Slaves” *James Madison: Writings*, 472–473
 - Letter to Robert J. Evans (favoring gradual emancipation, but “...the freed blacks ought to be permanently removed beyond the region occupied by or allotted to a White population.”) *James Madison: Writings*, 728–733
 - Debate with George Mason on the Slave-Trade Clause, *The Debate on the Constitution, Part Two*, 706–708
- *The Constitution:*
 - Article I, Section 2 (*The Debate on the Constitution, Part Two*, 968) “...three-fifths of all other Persons.”
 - Article IV, Section 2 (*The Debate on the Constitution, Part Two*, 979) “no

- Person held to Service or Labour in one State, escaping into Another ..."
- Article XIII 2 (*The Debate on the Constitution, Part Two*, 985) "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude ... shall exist within the United States..."

New Visions

Americans have celebrated many features of their nation, not exclusively its form of government. Consider John Muir's nature writings. In "The American Forests," Muir speculates that the "forests of America... must have been a great delight to God; for they were the best he ever planted" [701]. Muir also criticizes nineteenth-century management—or mismanagement—of the forests, then subject to widespread logging, development, and erosion. This essay helped persuade the federal government to establish protected national forests.

In what ways would you consider Muir's essay patriotic? What do you think it says about a citizen's place to critique the government, or to lobby for change? You may want to browse through the Muir volume for more examples of his elegant praise, and pointed cautions, about America's natural inheritance.

John Muir: Nature Writings. "The American Forests," 701–720.