
Book Reviews

Can our Republic survive?

by Nancy Spannaus

The Debate on the Constitution

ed. by Bernard Bailyn

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In these days, when history lessons are being given by videogames, and primary sources being replaced by free copies of the *New York Times*, it is a pleasure to find that compilations such as *The Debate on the Constitution* are still being published. For Bernard Bailyn has brought together in one place a strong representation of the discussion which permitted the ratification of the longest-lasting constitution of any government in human history, that of the United States of America.

When one thinks of the debate on the Constitution, one thinks primarily of the *Federalist Papers*, which were serialized in newspapers throughout the states during the ratification conventions. But, as Bailyn's work demonstrates, those essays were only a small part of the public debate. Bailyn's collection includes many of the prominent opponents of the Constitution, such as George Mason, Patrick Henry, and many anonymous authors. It is clear throughout that all participants are operating from a common educational background that included a study of Greek and Roman forms of government, as well as political theorists like Montesquieu.

Clearly, these volumes will rarely be read from cover to cover, but rather used for reference. This reviewer has not read them in full. But they are a very important resource, and I would recommend them for every academic or public library, in addition to the personal libraries of those committed to political organizing in depth.

The challenge we face today

In the course of the polemics recorded here, one is reminded once again of the shallowness of political debate in

America today. Indeed, our public education system barely educates a small percentage of our youth to be able to read the documents of this most essential debate—which are undoubtedly written at what would be rated a far higher grade level than high school senior. Because of this failure of education, it is possible for political ideologues today to misrepresent our system of government as a “pure democracy,” for example, rather than the republic which it was conceived to be.

The weekly Sunday newspaper feature prepared by Universal Press Syndicate and published around the United States on Sept. 19, of this year, is a case in point. Entitled “Greek Democracy and Us,” the insert argued that our Constitution, Declaration of Independence, and Bill of Rights were based on Greek democracy. Yet, a reading of these debates, as well as a broader knowledge of history, shows this presentation to be a fraud.

Not that many of the opponents of the Constitution didn't want our form of government to be a democracy. Many of our populists today would recognize themselves in the language of those polemicizing against the Constitution. They would have to confront the fact that their historical heroes—Washington, Hamilton, and Madison—were on the other side, arguing against a system of government which could *not* rise and fall with the whims of popular referenda, or other popularity contests.

In fact, our nation became the most free and technologically advanced on earth because it rejected the models of aristocracy and democracy, and sought to use the centralized powers of the government for the republican goals of ensuring prosperity, domestic tranquility, the common welfare, the common defense, and the blessings of liberty to our posterity. The clearest exposition of these questions, it appears, remains that contained in James Madison's Federalist X, but it is interesting to note the inadequacy of the debate even then. How much worse off we are today, when so few think of a standard for government distinct from their immediate pleasure or pain!

Government reflects the population

The most profound point, not surprisingly, appears to have been made by Benjamin Franklin himself, in the opening statement of Volume I. Franklin's remarks recommending the Constitution are quoted with the following statement included: “. . . I believe farther that this [form of government] . . . can only end in Despotism as other Forms have done before it, when the People shall become so corrupted as to need Despotic Government, being incapable of any other. . . .”

In other words, a republic does reflect the character of its citizens. As we improve our character, we shall improve our government. We shall find the problem does not lie in form, but in our willingness and ability to fight for the principles so well enunciated in our Constitution.