and have been an important element in our politics ever since. Other historians working on the Antifederalists have greatly refined our understanding of the makeup and beliefs of this complex and shifting group.38

The new political historians whose goal is to integrate politics with social and cultural history have reenergized the debate over Beard. Woody Holton (excerpted below) has reconstructed the chain of economic hardships in the 1780s and the debate over them, showing that the causal links that Beard looked for were there but were more indirect than he thought. In Holton’s dialectical view, the 1780s represented a crisis for farmers and other taxpayers who were assessed with record levies and required to pay them in scarce specie in order to pay interest to bondholders, many of whom were speculators and had bought discounted bonds. The crisis was analogous to that of many developing countries during and after the structural adjustment programs of the 1980s in which the World Bank favored creditors and forced countries to cut back on social services for the general population in an effort to make the countries inviting for investment. According to Holton’s study, the founders wanted to create an environment that would encourage further investment. That meant transferring wealth from the working farmers to those who would use the money to invest and start up new ventures. Historians have explained and largely validated the Federalist argument that state legislatures were behaving irresponsibly by printing money and offering debt relief, but have given little or no voice to the farmers and debtors who were affected by these measures and who argued in favor of increasing the state debt relief measures that were inadequate to help many of them keep their farms. Holton sees this as a complex kind of class conflict in which not everyone necessarily pushed for his own class interest, but which posed Americans the stark problem: “which segment of society should bear the burden of reviving the economy . . . which classes should sacrifice for the good of the whole.”39

In conclusion, the globalizing view of history has reached constitutional studies. Mary Bilder’s _The Transatlantic Constitution_ showed how Rhode Island’s state law developed in conversation with English litigants, lawyers, legislators, and other practitioners of common law, and how these shared assumptions helped the new Republican accept federalism and judicial review as altered but recognizable aspects of a system they were long used to and found legitimate. Bernard Bailyn, in a recent collection of essays, discussed the varied responses to the Constitution in Europe and in South America, ranging from German praise to the bafflement of many South Americans

38Cornell, _The Other Founders_, 14, 19, 305; David J. Siemers, _Ratifying the Republic: Antifederalists and Federalists in Constitutional Time_ (Stanford, Calif., 2002); Richard Hofstadter, _The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It_ (New York, 1948).


like Simon Bolivar.40 And George Billias, one of the originators of _Interpretations of American History_, will soon publish _Heard Round the World: American Constitutionalism Abroad, 1776–1989, A Global Perspective_.

Were the proponents of the republican synthesis correct in believing that Americans shared a basic ideological consensus? Or was this a generalization that failed to describe the diverse people of the new nation? History students continue to come to grips with the problem of evaluating the Constitution and the developments that led to its writing and ratification. Was the Constitution a fulfillment or a repudiation of the ideals of the Revolution expressed in the Declaration of Independence? What was the nature of the Constitution, and in what ways did its framing reflect the developments in political thought during the 1780s? Were the differences that divided those who favored and those who opposed the Constitution based more on ideology or on interests? Was the Constitution, as Beard and some neo-Progressive historians argued, an undemocratic document—the work of a political and propertied minority who drafted it as an instrument to suit their own purposes? Were the Antifederalists tradition-minded classical republicans or enterprising protoliberals who glimpsed the future of America as Wood suggested? Asking these questions can help us decide how much the Constitution reflected political and economic conflict or consensus.


GORDON S. WOOD from _The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787_ [1969]


The division over the Constitution in 1787–1788 is not easily analyzed. It is difficult, as historians have recently demonstrated, to equate the supporters or opponents of the Constitution with particular economic groupings. The Antifederalist politicians in the ratifying conventions often possessed

wealth, including public securities, equal to that of the Federalists. While the relative youth of the Federalist leaders, compared to the ages of the prominent Antifederalists, was important, especially in accounting for the Federalists’ ability to think freshly and creatively about politics, it can hardly be used to explain the division throughout the country. Moreover, the concern of the 1780s with America’s moral character was not confined to the proponents of the Constitution. That rabid republican and Antifederalist, Benjamin Austin, was as convinced as any Federalist that “the luxurious living of all ranks and degrees” was “the principal cause of all the evils we now experience.” Some leading Antifederalist intellectuals expressed as much fear of “the injustice, folly, and wickedness of the State Legislatures” and of “the usurpation and tyranny of the majority” against the minority as did Madison. In the Philadelphia Convention both Mason and Elbridge Gerry, later prominent Antifederalists, admitted “the danger of the levelling spirit”: flowing from “the excess of democracy” in the American republic.

There were many diverse reasons in each state why men supported or opposed the Constitution that cut through any sort of class division. The Constitution was a single issue in a complicated situation, and its acceptance or rejection in many states was often dictated by peculiar circumstances — the prevalence of Indians, the desire for western lands, the special interests of commerce — that defy generalization. Nevertheless, despite all of this confusion and complexity, the struggle over the Constitution, as the debate if nothing else makes clear, can best be understood as a social one. Whatever the particular constituency of the antagonists may have been, men in 1787–1788 talked as if they were representing distinct and opposing social elements. Both the proponents and opponents of the Constitution focused throughout the debates on an essential point of political sociology that ultimately must be used to distinguish a Federalist from an Antifederalist. The quarrel was fundamentally one between aristocracy and democracy. . . .

The disorganization and inertia of the Antifederalists, especially in contrast with the energy and effectiveness of the Federalists, has been repeatedly emphasized. The opponents of the Constitution lacked both coordination and unified leadership; “their principles” wrote Oliver Ellsworth, “are totally opposite to each other, and their objections discordant and irreconcilable.” The Federalist victory, it appears, was actually more of an Antifederalist default . . .

But the Antifederalists were not simply poorer politicians than the Federalists; they were actually different kinds of politicians. Too many of them were state-centered men with local interests and loyalties only, politicians without influence and connections, and ultimately politicians without social and intellectual confidence. In South Carolina the upcountry opponents of the Constitution shied from debate and when they did occasionally rise to speak apologized effusively for their inability to say what they felt had to be said, thus leaving most of the opposition to the Constitution to be voiced by Rawlins Lowndes, a low-country planter who scarcely represented their interests and soon withdrew from the struggle. Elsewhere, in New Hampshire, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina, the situation was similar; the Federalists had the bulk of talent and influence on their side “together with all the Speakers in the State great and small.” In convention after convention the Antifederalists, as in Connecticut, tried to speak but “they were browbeaten by many of those Cicero’s as they think themselves and others of superior rank.” The presses are in a great measure secured to their side,” the Antifederalists complained with justice: out of a hundred or more newspapers printed in the late eighties only a dozen supported the Antifederalists, as editors, “afraid to offend the great men, or Merchants, who could work their ruin,” closed their columns to the opposition. The Antifederalists were not so much beaten as overviewed . . .

[Fear of a plot by men who “talk so finely and gloss over matters so smoothly” ran through the Antifederalist mind. Because the many “new men” of the 1780s, men like Melancthon Smith and Abraham Yates of New York or John Smilie and William Findley of Pennsylvania, had bypassed the social hierarchy in their rise to political leadership, they lacked those attributes of social distinction and dignity that went beyond mere wealth. Since these kinds of men were never assimilated to the gentlemanly cast of the Liptonias or the Morrises, they, like Americans earlier in confrontation with the British court, tended to view with suspicion and hostility the high-flying world of style and connections that they were barred by their language and tastes, if by nothing else, from sharing in. In the minds of these socially inferior politicians the movement for the strengthening of the central government could only be a “conspiracy” “planned and set to work” by a few aristocrats, who at first, said Abraham Yates, no longer in number in any one state than the cabal which sought to undermine English liberty at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Since men like Yates could not quite comprehend what they were sure were the inner maneuverings of the elite, they were convinced that in the aristocrats’ program, “what was their view in the beginning” or how “far it was Intended to be carried Must be Collected from facts that Afterwards have happened.” Like American Whigs in the sixties and seventies forced to delve into the dark and complicated workings of English court politics, they could judge motives and plans “but by the Event.” And they could only conclude that the events of the eighties, “the treasury, the Cincinnati, and other public creditors, with all their comitants,” were “somehow or other, . . . inseparably connected,” were all parts of a grand design “concerted by a few Tyrants” to undo the Revolution and to establish an aristocracy in order “to lord it over the rest of their fellow citizens, to trample the poorer part of the people under their feet, that they may be rendered their servants and slaves.” In this climate all the major issues of the Confederation period — the impost, commutation, and the return of the Loyalists — possessed a political and social significance that transcended economic concerns. All seemed to be devices by which a ruling few, like the ministers of the English Crown, would attach a corps of pensioners and dependents to the government.
and spread their influence and connections throughout the states in
order "to dissolve our present Happy and Benevolent Constitution and to
erect on the Ruins, a proper Aristocracy."

Nothing was more characteristic of Antifederalist thinking than this
obsession with aristocracy. Although to a European, American society may
have appeared remarkably egalitarian, to many Americans, especially to
t hose who aspired to places of consequence but were made to feel their
inferiority in innumerable, often subtle, ways, American society was distin­
guished by its inequality. . . . In all communities "even in those of the
most democratic kind," wrote George Clinton (whose "family and connec­
tions" in the minds of those like Philip Schuyler did not "entitle him to so
distinguished a predominance" as the governorship of New York), there
were pressures — "superior talents, fortunes and public employments" —
demarcating an aristocracy whose influence was difficult to resist.

Such influence was difficult to resist because, to the continual annoy­
ance of the Antifederalists, the great body of the people willingly sub­
mitted to it. The "authority of names" and "the influence of the great"
among ordinary people were too evident to be denied. "Will any one say
that there does not exist in this country the pride of family, of wealth, of
talents, and that they do not command influence and respect among the
common people?" "The people are too apt to yield an implicit assent to
the opinions of those characters whose abilities are held in the highest
estee m, and to those in whose integrity and patriotism they can confide;
not considering that the love of domination is generally in proportion to
talents, abilities and superior requirements." Because of this habit of def­
erence in the people, it was "in the power of the enlightened and aspiring
few, if they should combine, at any time to destroy the best establish­
ments, and even make the people the instruments of their own subjugation.
Hence, the Antifederalist-minded declared, the people must be awakened
to the consequences of their self-ensnarement; they must be warned over
and over by the popular tribunes, by "those who are competent to the
task of developing the principles of government," of the dangers involved
in paying obeisance to those who they thought were their superiors. The
people must "not be permitted to consider themselves as a grol ling, dis­
tinct species, uninterested in the general welfare."

Such constant admonitions to the people of the perils flowing from
their too easy deference to the "natural aristocracy" were necessary because
the Antifederalists were convinced that these "men that had been dedi­
cately bred, and who were in affluent circumstances," these "men of the
most exalted rank in life," were by their very conspicuousness irreparably
cut off from the great body of the people and hence could never share in
its concerns nor look after its interests. It was not that these "certain men
exalted above the rest" were necessarily "destitute of morality or virtue" or
that they were inherently different from other men. "The same passions
and prejudices govern all men." It was only that circumstances in their
particular environment had made them different. There was "a charm in
politics"; men in high office become habituated with power, "grow fond

of it, and are loath to resign it"; "they feel themselves flattered and elevated,"
enthralled by the attractions of high living, and thus they easily forget the
interests of the common people, from which many of them once sprang.
By dwelling so vividly on the allurements of prestige and power, by
emphasizing again and again how the "human soul is affected by wealth,
in all its faculties, . . . by its present interest, by its expectations, and by its
fears," these ambitious Antifederalist politicians may have revealed as
much about themselves as they did about the "aristocratic" elite they
sought to displace. Yet at the same time by such language they contributed
to a new appreciation of the nature of society.

In these repeated attacks on deference and the capacity of a conspicu­
osfew to speak for the whole society — which was to become in time the
distinguishing feature of American democratic politics — the Antifederalists
struck at the roots of the traditional conception of political society. If the
natural elite, whether its distinctions were ascribed or acquired, was not
in any organic way connected to the "feelings, circumstances, and inter­
est s" of the people and was incapable of feeling "sympathetically the
wants of the people," then it followed that only ordinary men, men not
distinguished by the characteristics of aristocratic wealth and taste, men
"in middling circumstances" untempted by the attractions of a cosmopoli­
tan world and thus "more temperate, of better morals, and less ambitious,
than the great," could be trusted to speak for the great body of the people,
for those who were coming more and more to be referred to as "the mid­
dling and lower classes of people." The differentiating influence of the envi­
enment was such that men in various ranks and classes now seemed to
be broken apart from one another, separated by their peculiar circum­
stances into distinct, unconnected, and often incompatible interests. With
their indictment of aristocracy the Antifederalists were saying, whether
they realized it or not, that the people of America even in their several
states were not homogeneous entities each with a basic similarity of inter­
est for which an empathic elite could speak. Society was not an organic
hierarchy composed of ranks and degrees indissolubly linked one to
another; rather it was a heterogeneous mixture of "many different classes
or orders of people, Merchants, Farmers, Planter Mechanics and Gentry
or wealthy Men." In such a society men from one class or group, however
educated and respectable they may have been, could never be acquainted
with the "Situation and Wants" of those of another class or group. Lawyers
and planters could never be "adequate judges of tradesmen concerns." If
men were truly to represent the people in government, it was not enough
for them to be for the people; they had to be actually of the people.
"Farmers, traders and mechanics . . . all ought to have a competent num­
ber of their best informed members in the legislature."

Thus the Antifederalists were not only directly challenging the conven­
tional belief that only a gentlemanly few, even though now in America
naturally and not artificially qualified, were best equipped through learn­
ing and experience to represent and to govern the society, but they were
as well indirectly denying the assumption of organic social homogeneity
on which republicanism rested. Without fully comprehending the consequences of their arguments the Antifederalists were destroying the great chain of being, thus undermining the social basis of republicanism and shattering that unity and harmony of social and political authority which the eighteenth century generally and indeed most revolutionary leaders had considered essential to the maintenance of order.

Confronted with such a fundamental challenge the Federalists initially backed away. They had no desire to argue the merits of the Constitution in terms of social implications and were understandably reluctant to open up the character of American society as the central issue of the debate. But in the end they could not resist defending those beliefs in elitism that lay at the heart of their conception of politics and of their constitutional program. All of the Federalists' desires to establish a strong and respectable nation in the world, all of their plans to create a flourishing commercial economy, in short, all of what the Federalists wanted out of the new central government seemed in the final analysis dependent upon the prerequisite maintenance of aristocratic politics. . . .

The course of the debates over the Constitution seemed to confirm what the Federalists had believed all along. Antifederalism represented the climax of a "war" that was, in the words of Theodore Sedgwick, being "levied on the virtue, property, and distinctions in the community." The opponents of the Constitution, despite some, "particularly in Virginia," who were operating "from the most honorable and patriotic motives," were essentially identical with those who were responsible for the evils the states were suffering from in the eighties — "narrow-minded politicians . . . under the influence of local views." "Whilst many ostensible reasons are assigned" for the Antifederalists' opposition, charged Washington, "the real ones are concealed behind the Curtains, because they are not of a nature to appear in open day." "The real object of all their zeal in opposing the system," agreed Madison, was to maintain "the supremacy of the State Legislatures," with all that meant in the printing of money and the violation of contracts. The Antifederalists or those for whom the Antifederalists spoke, whether their spokesmen realized it or not, were "none but the horse-jockey, the mushroom merchant, the running and dishonest speculator," those "who owe the most and have the least to pay," those "whose dependence and expectations are upon changes in government, and distracted times," men of "desperate Circumstances," those men that "have Debts to pay, Interests to support or Fortunes to make," those, in short, who "wish for scrambling Times." Apart from a few of their intellectual leaders the Antifederalists were thought to be an ill-bred lot: "Their education has been rather indifferent — they have been accustomed to think on the small scale." They were often blustering demagogues trying to push their way into office — "men of much self-importance and supposed skill in politics, who are not of sufficient consequence to obtain public employment." Hence they were considered to be jealous and mistrustful of "everyone in the higher offices of society," unable to bear to see others possessing "that fancied blessing, to which, alas! they must themselves aspire in vain." In the

Federalist mind therefore the struggle over the Constitution was not one between kinds of wealth or property, or one between commercial or non-commercial elements of the population, but rather represented a broad social division between those who believed in the right of a natural aristocracy to speak for the people and those who did not.

Against this threat from the licentious the Federalists pictured themselves as the defenders of the worthy, of those whom they called "the better sort of people," those, said John Jay, "who are orderly and industrious, who are content with their situations and not uneasy in their circumstances." Because the Federalists were fearful that republican equality was becoming "that perfect equality which deadens the motives of industry and places Demerit on a Footing with Virtue," they were obsessed with the need to insure that the proper amount of inequality and natural distinctions be recognized. . . . Robert Morris, for example, was convinced there were social differences — even in Pennsylvania. "What!" he exclaimed in scornful amazement at John Smilie's argument that a republic admitted all sorts of persons possessed of knowledge, judgment, information, integrity, and having extensive connections, are not to be classed with persons void of reputation or character.

In refuting the Antifederalists' contention "that all classes of citizens should have some of their own number in the representative body, in order that their feelings and interests may be the better understood and attended to," Hamilton in The Federalist, Number 35, put into words the Federalists' desires to establish a strong and respectable Federalist mind therefore the struggle over the Constitution was not one between kinds of wealth or property, or one between commercial or non-commercial elements of the population, but rather represented a broad social division between those who believed in the right of a natural aristocracy to speak for the people and those who did not.

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the circle of his neighbors and acquaintances" was the defining element of the Federalist philosophy.

It was not simply the number of public securities, or credit outstanding, or the number of ships, or the amount of money possessed that made a man think of himself as one of the natural elite. It was much more subtle than the mere possession of wealth: it was a deeper social feeling, a sense of being socially established, of possessing attributes — family, education, and refinement — that others lacked, above all, of being accepted by and being able to move easily among those who considered themselves to be the respectable and cultivated. It is perhaps anachronistic to describe this social sense as a class interest, for it often transcended immediate political or economic concerns, and, as Hamilton's argument indicates, was designed to cut through narrow occupational categories. The Republicans of Philadelphia for example, repeatedly denied that they represented an aristocracy with a united class interest. "We are of different occupations; of different sects of religion; and have different views of life. No factions or private system can comprehend us all." Yet with all their assertions of diversified interests the Republicans were not without a social consciousness in their quarrel with the supporters of the Pennsylvania Constitution. If there were any of us ambitious for power, their apology continued, then there would be no need to change the Constitution, for we surely could attain power under the present Constitution. "We have already seen how easy the task is for any character to rise into power and consequence under it. And there are some of us, who think not so meane of ourselves, as to dread any rivalryship from those who are now in office."

In 1787 this kind of elitist social consciousness was brought into play as perhaps never before in eighteenth-century America, as gentlemen up and down the continent submerged their sectional and economic differences in the face of what seemed to be a threat to the very foundations of society. Despite his earlier opposition to the Order of the Cincinnati, Theodore Sedgwick, like other frightened New Englanders, now welcomed the organization as a source of strength in the battle for the Constitution. The fear of social disruption that had run through much of the writing of the Eighties was brought to a head to eclipse all other fears. Although state politics in the Eighties remains to be analyzed, the evidence from Federalist correspondence indicates clearly a belief that never had there occurred "so great a change in the opinion of the best people" as was occurring in the last few years of the decade. The Federalists were astonished at the outpouring in 1787 of influential and respectable people who had earlier remained quiescent. Too many of "the better sort of people," it was repeatedly said, had withdrawn at the end of the war "from the theatre of public action, to scenes of retirement and ease," and thus "demagogues of desperate fortunes, mere adventurers in fraud, were left to act unopposed." After all, it was explained, "when the wicked rise, men hide themselves." Even the problems of Massachusetts in 1786, noted General Benjamin Lincoln, the repressor of the Shaysites, were not caused by the rebels, but by the laxity of "the good people of the state." But the lesson of this laxity was rapidly being learned. Everywhere, it seemed, men of virtue, good sense, and property, "almost the whole body of our enlight'ned and leading characters in every state," were awakened in support of stronger government. "The scum which was thrown upon the surface by the fermentation of the war is daily sinking," Benjamin Rush told Richard Price in 1786, "while a pure spirit is occupying its place." "Men are brought into action who had consigned themselves to an eve of rest," Edward Carrington wrote to Jefferson in June 1787, "and the Convention, as a Beacon, is rousing the attention of the Empire." The Antifederalists could only stand amazed at this "weight of talents" being gathered in support of the Constitution. "What must the individual be who could thus oppose them united?"

Still, in the face of this preponderance of wealth and respectability in support of the Constitution, what remains extraordinary about 1787-1788 is not the weakness and disunity but the political strength of Antifederalism. That large numbers of Americans could actually reject a plan of government created by a body "composed of the first characters in the Continent" and backed by Washington and nearly the whole of the natural aristocracy of the country said more about the changing character of American politics and society in the Eighties than did the Constitution's eventual acceptance. It was indeed a portent of what was to come...
The Constitution: Conflict or Consensus?

The delicate social structure, the Federalists' program itself demanded that the discussion of the Constitution would be in essentially social terms. The Federalists were not as much opposed to the governmental power of the states as to the character of the people who were wielding it. The constitutions of most of the states were not really at fault. Massachusetts after all possessed a nearly perfect constitution. What actually bothered the Federalists was the sort of people who had been able to gain positions of authority in the state governments, particularly in the state legislatures. Much of the quarrel with the viciousness, instability, and injustice of the various state governments was at bottom social. "For," as John Dickinson emphasized, "the government will partake of the qualities of those whose authority is prevalent." The political and social structures were intimately related. "People once respected their governors, their senators, their judges and their clergy; they reposed confidence in them; their laws were obeyed, and the states were happy in tranquility." But in the eighties the authority of government had drastically declined because "men of sense and property have lost much of their influence by the popular spirit of the war." "That exact order, and due subordination, that is essentially necessary in all well appointed governments, and which constitutes the real happiness and well-being of society" had been deranged by "men of no genius or abilities" who had tried to run "the machine of government." Since "it cannot be expected that things will go well, when persons of vicious principles, and loose morals are in authority," it was the large number of obscure, ignorant, and unruly men occupying the state legislatures, and not the structure of the governments, that was the real cause of the evils so much complained of.

The Federalist image of the Constitution as a sort of "philosopher's stone" was indeed appropriate: it was a device intended to transmute base materials into gold and thereby prolong the life of the republic. Patrick Henry acutely perceived what the Federalists were driving at. "The Constitution," he said in the Virginia Convention, "reflects in the most degrading and mortifying manner on the virtue, integrity, and wisdom of the state legislatures: it presupposes that the chosen few who go to Congress will have more upright hearts, and more enlightened minds, than those who are members of the individual legislatures." The new Constitution was structurally no different from the constitutions of some of the states. Yet the powers of the new central government were not as threatening as the powers of the state governments precisely because the Federalists believed different kinds of persons would hold them. They anticipated that somehow the new government would be staffed largely by "the worthy," the natural social aristocracy of the country. "After all," said Pelatiah Webster; putting his finger on the crux of the Federalists' argument, "the grand secret of forming a good government, is, to put good men into the administration: for wild, vicious, or idle men, will ever make a bad government, let its principles be ever so good."

In short, through the artificial contrivance of the Constitution overlying an expanded society, the Federalists meant to restore and to prolong the traditional kind of elitist influence in politics that social developments, especially since the Revolution, were undermining. As the defenders if not always the perpetrators of these developments — the "disorder" of the 1780s — the Antifederalists could scarcely have missed the social implications of the Federalist program. The Constitution was intrinsically an aristocratic document designed to check the democratic tendencies of the period, and as such it dictated the character of the Antifederalist response. It was therefore inevitable that the Antifederalists should have charged that the new government was "dangerously adapted to the purposes of an immediate aristocratic tyranny." In state after state the Antifederalists reduced the issue to those social terms predetermined by the Federalists themselves; the Constitution was a plan intended to "raise the fortunes and respectability of the well-born few, and oppress the plebians"; it was "a continental exertion of the well-born of America to obtain that darling domination, which they have not been able to accomplish in their respective states"; it "will lead to an aristocratical government, and establish tyranny over us." Whatever their own particular social standing, the Antifederalist spokesmen spread the warning that the new government either would be "in practice a permanent ARISTOCRACY" or would soon "degenerate to a complete Aristocracy." ...
classes,” be elected to the House of Representatives. “The Station is too high and exalted to be filled but [by] the first Men in the State in point of Fortune and Influence. In fact no order or class of the people will be represented in the House of Representatives called the Democratic Branch but the rich and wealthy.” The Antifederalists thus came to oppose the new national government for the same reason the Federalists favored it: because its very structure and detachment from the people would work to exclude any kind of actual and local interest representation and prevent those who were not rich, well born, or prominent from exercising political power. Both sides fully appreciated the central issue the Constitution posed and grappled with it throughout the debates: Whether a professedly popular government should actually be in the hands of, rather than simply derived from, common ordinary people.

Out of the division in 1787-1788 over this issue, an issue which was as conspicuously social as any in American history, the Antifederalists emerged as the spokesmen for the growing American antagonism to aristocracy and as the defenders of the most intimate participation in politics of the widest variety of people possible. It was not from lack of vision that the Antifederalists feared the new government. Although their viewpoint was intensely localist, it was grounded in as perceptive an understanding of the social basis of American politics as that of the Federalists. Most of the Antifederalists were majoritarians with respect to the state legislatures but not with respect to the national legislature, because they presumed as well as the Federalists did that different sorts of people from those who sat in the state assemblies would occupy the Congress. Whatever else may be said about the Antifederalists, their populism cannot be impugned. They were true champions of the most extreme kind of democratic and egalitarian politics expressed in the revolutionary era. Convinced that “it has been the principal care of free governments to guard against the encroachments of the great,” the Antifederalists believed that popular government itself, as defined by the principles of 1776, was endangered by the new national government. If the Revolution had been a transfer of power from the few to the many, then the federal Constitution clearly represented an abnegation of the Revolution. For, as Richard Henry Lee wrote in his Letters from the Federal Farmer, “every man of reflection must see, that the change now proposed, is a transfer of power from the many to the few.”

Although Lee’s analysis contained the essential truth, the Federalist program was not quite so simply summed up. It was true that through the new Constitution the Federalists hoped to resist and eventually to avert what they saw to be the rapid decline of the influence and authority of the natural aristocracy in America. At the very time that the organic conception of society that made elite rule comprehensible was finally and unavoidably dissolving, and the members of the elite were developing distinct professional, social, or economic interests, the Federalists found elite rule more imperative than ever before. To the Federalists the greatest dangers to republicanism were flowing not, as the old Whigs had thought, from the rulers or from any distinctive minority in the community, but from the widespread participation of the people in the government. It now seemed increasingly evident that if the public good not only of the United States as a whole but even of the separate states were to be truly perceived and promoted, the American people must abandon their revolutionary reliance on their representative state legislatures and place their confidence in the highmindedness of the natural leaders of the society, which ideally everyone had the opportunity of becoming. Since the Federalists presumed that only such a self-conscious elite could transcend the many narrow and contradictory interests inevitable in any society, however small, the measure of a good government became its capacity for insuring the predominance of these kinds of natural leaders who knew better than the people as a whole what was good for the society.

The result was an amazing display of confidence in constitutionalism, in the efficacy of institutional devices for solving social and political problems. Through the proper arrangement of new institutional structures the Federalists aimed to turn the political and social developments that were weakening the place of “the better sort of people” in government back upon themselves and to make these developments the very source of the perpetuation of the natural aristocracy’s dominance of politics. Thus the Federalists did not directly reject democratic politics as it had manifested itself in the 1780s; rather they attempted to adjust to this politics in order to control and mitigate its effects. In short they offered the country an elitist theory of democracy. They did not see themselves as repudiating either the Revolution or popular government, but saw themselves as saving both from their excesses. If the Constitution were not established, they told themselves and the country over and over, then republicanism was doomed, the grand experiment was over, and a division of the confederacy, monarchy, or worse would result.

Despite all the examples of popular vice in the eighties, the Federalist confidence in the people remained strong. The letters of “Caesar,” with their frank and violent denigration of the people, were anomalies in the Federalist literature. The Federalists had by no means lost faith in the people, at least in the people’s ability to discern their true leaders. In fact many of the social elite who comprised the Federalist leadership were confident of popular election if the constituency could be made broad enough, and crass electioneering be curbed, so that the people’s choice would be undisturbed by ambitious demagogues. “For if not blind to their own interest, they choose men of the first character for wisdom and integrity.” Despite prodding by so-called designing and unprincipled men, the bulk of the people remained deferential to the established social leadership — for some aspiring politicians frustratingly so. Even if they had wanted to, the Federalists could not turn their backs on republicanism. For it was evident to even the most pessimistic “that no other form would be reconcilable with the genius of the people of America; with the fundamental principles of the Revolution; or with that honorable determination which animates every votary of freedom, to rest all
our political experiments on the capacity of mankind for self-government." Whatever government the Federalists established had to be "strictly republican" and "deducible from the only source of just authority — the People."

Woody Holton

from Did Democracy Cause the Recession That Led to the Constitution? [2005]


The supporters of the United States Constitution touted it as, among many other things, the only solution to a terrible economic slump. Nearly all free Americans believed much of the responsibility for the recession of the 1780s lay with the thirteen state legislatures. Yet not everyone was of the same mind about what the assemblies, which controlled debtor-creditor relations, the money supply, and the collection of "Continental" as well as state taxes under the Articles of Confederation (1781–1789), had done wrong. The Federalists believed the lower houses of the legislatures — which in most states were annually elected and essentially omnipotent — had damaged the economy by caving in to taxpayers' and debtors' demands for release from their legal obligations. They claimed relief legislation was unjust both to government bondholders (the primary recipients of tax money) and to private creditors — and that it had provoked them to stop supplying the capital and credit that were the lifeblood of the American economy. For them, one of the most attractive features of the proposed Constitution was its abolition of relief. . . .

Scholars who embrace the Federalists' analysis of the financial crisis of the 1780s often forget that thousands of Americans wrote pamphlets, newspaper essays, petitions, private letters, and legislative speeches setting forth their own, very different diagnoses and remedies. Although the authors of these alternative analyses heartily concurred in the Framers' claim that the state legislatures had wrecked the economy, they did not agree that the assemblies had provided too much relief to debtors and taxpayers. They instead contended that the representatives had driven the nation into recession by conveying too much money, too quickly, from debtors and taxpayers to private creditors and investors in government bonds. That transfer of wealth had in their view depleted capital stocks and, more important, eroded farmers' ability to perform the hard work needed to pull the economy out of recession.

Americans who thus contested the Framers' diagnosis of the nation's economic ills also denied that the only remedy was to shift some of the states' most important duties to a new national government that would be less responsive to popular influence. If those critics were correct, if the state assemblies could have ended the recession simply by conveying less property from debtors and taxpayers to government bondholders and private creditors, then we will need to stop exhibiting the 1780s as evidence that popular rule inherently endangers the economy . . .

Although until recently historians describing the economic origins of the United States Constitution tended to focus on private debt, today more and more scholars contend that the Constitution was also rooted in a struggle between taxpayers and investors in government bonds. Between the Yorktown victory of 1781 and the federal assumption of state debts in 1790, Americans were hit with taxes that averaged three or four times those of the colonial era. The principal purpose of the levies was to pay interest on state and federal government securities, many of them bought up by speculators. In the mid-1780s, most states earmarked at least two-thirds of their tax revenue for foreign and domestic holders of the war bonds. The tax burden was magnified by a shortage of circulating coin. During the struggle against the British, creditors had generally been required to accept paper money from their debtors, but by the end of the war most assemblies were permitting creditors to demand gold and silver . . . The currency shortage also magnified the burden of private debt. In 1785, four years after the South Carolina assembly voted to require that debts be paid in gold or silver, a newspaper writer who took the name Americanus said he had seen debtors forced to "give up £50" worth of property "to pay £10." "Who will call this Justice?" he asked. Thus what was true of taxation was also true of the money supply; in perhaps the two most important areas of peacetime governmental action, most of the newly independent states adopted harsher policies than the colonial governments they had replaced . . .

Taxpayers, debtors, and their supporters proposed numerous remedies for the mid-1780s economic pinch, from tax abatements to legislation allowing farmers to pay their debts in several annual installments instead of all at once. Thousands of petitioners and newspaper essayists proposed that every war bond that had been bought by a speculator be redeemed at its market price — roughly the price at which it had changed hands — rather than at the price printed on its face . . .

Since many Americans believed the fundamental problem with the economy was the shortage of circulating currency, one of the most popular relief proposals was to issue paper money . . . Many wanted the state legislatures to revive the colonial practice of establishing public loan offices where farmers could mortgage their land and obtain loans at a low interest rate (and without becoming dependent upon wealthy neighbors). Most paper money advocates were also trying to ease their tax burden.
Recall that the states were levying heavy taxes for the benefit of the bond speculators. If the states paid the bondholders paper instead of hard money, they would not have to extract scarce gold and silver from taxpayers, who could thereby keep their farms. Some writers proposed a more radical step: Bondholders should be forced to exchange their bonds for paper money, which did not pay interest. Historians who depict paper money solely as a panacea for private debt have contributed to a process whereby Americans have forgotten that the movement for the Constitution, which barred the state governments from emitting paper money, grew partly out of a struggle over how much property the government should convey from taxpayers to bondholders.

Some of the most prominent men in America were appalled by the debt and tax-abatement measures of the 1780s, and much of the popularity of the Constitution can be traced to its clauses prohibiting state-level relief legislation and transferring responsibility for collecting continental taxes to the federal government. Why were the Framers so bent on rescuing both public and private creditors from perceived injustice? The answer was simple, Charles A. Beard declared in 1913. Many of the federal convention delegates had themselves lent large sums to private citizens, to Congress, or to one of the state governments (or they had bought up other people’s bonds), and they and the other holders of “personality” wanted their money. The Constitution had an obvious charm for creditors and bondholders. Yet thousands of Americans who did not belong to either of those groups joined them in celebrating the abolition of relief. Why? Today most students of the origins of the Constitution concur in Gordon S. Wood’s assessment that the Framers were elitists who saw relief legislation as alarming mostly because it showed that the plebian-dominated state assemblies had departed from virtue—a problem they solved by writing the Constitution, “instructively an aristocratic document.” Although Wood thus makes a persuasive case that the Framers hated tax and debt relief because they were elitists, it also seems clear that they were elitists (or, more precisely, that their habitual elitism was inflamed) at least in part because they hated relief. They believed the assemblymen’s solicitude for taxpayers and debtors had destroyed Americans’ collective credit rating.

The scholarly neglect of the desire to attract investment that motivated the Framers to oppose debt relief is surprising in light of the ample historical examination devoted to the Constitution’s other expected economic benefits. Empowering Congress to bar foreign ships and goods from United States harbors would enable American diplomats to pry foreign (especially British) ports open to American commerce. National taxes would permit the federal government to protect American vessels in the Mediterranean Sea from the Barbary corsairs and western settlers from the Indians. By knocking down tariff barriers among the states, the Constitution would create a vast free-trade zone.

Yet none of those anticipated economic benefits of the Constitution loomed as large in documents from the 1780s as the enticements it was expected to offer investors. Federalists claimed the Constitution would solve most of the problems farmers had spent the 1780s grumbling about, starting with their most vexing concern, the currency shortage. What was “necessary, in order to call forth the specie (gold and silver) that is accumulated and retained by men of influence,” the North Hampton, New Hampshire, minister Benjamin Thurston declared in a December 1786 speech, was for Americans to “renounce all ideas of introducing paper money” or other legislative relief. The moment the well-to-do stopped worrying about assemblymen allowing their debtors to repay them using “old horses,” it was widely believed, they would take their gold and silver out of their strongboxes and put it in circulation. Abolishing relief would even eliminate a great anomaly of the 1780s: Cautious American investors, reversing the natural flow of capital from the Old World to the New, had sent their money to Europe for safekeeping.

The monetary famine was not the only threat, for European merchants were growing more and more reluctant to ship cargoes to Americans on credit. This was not mere rhetoric. Louis Guillaume Otto, comte de Mosloy, the French chargé d’affaires in the United States, observed in May 1786 that American credit had “considerably suffered by the jolt given to it by several laws prejudicial to foreign creditors.” American wholesalers were in turn starting to demand that their own customers, generally retail merchants, pay cash on delivery. They too feared that public officials might someday come between them and their delinquent debtors’ property. The ban on debtor relief inscribed in the Constitution was widely celebrated during the ratification debate—for instance, by all three authors of the Federalist Papers. . . .

The authors of the Federalist Papers were not the only advocates for the Constitution who believed it would recruit capital and thereby revive the economy. In November 1787, A True Friend reminded his fellow Virginians that under British rule, “We could pass no act tending to hurt, or annihilate the rights and interests of British creditors; consequently they did not fear to advance considerable sums. . . . Those services and advances, though so dearly bought, were however indispensable.” But now Virginians were “deprived of the assistance, advances and credit, which the metropolis, used to sell us so dear, and which all nations would be so eager to offer us were they to . . . find in America, the punctuality and security, which alone gain credit and support confidence.” What stood in the way of restoring Americans’ collective credit rating? “As long as the law will subsist in Virginia that the creditor cannot seize, lay attachment and sell the land of his debtor, at the epoch the debt fall due, it is as if we had nothing” to mortgage, he said, and “as long as it will be by the tediousness of the course of justice almost impossible to force the debtor, we shall not find money lenders.” Other Virginia Federalists offered similar visions of the Constitution’s ability to attract investment from overseas. Meanwhile their counterparts in Massachusetts were making a slightly different case, asserting that their own state abounded in private reserves of gold and silver that would be lent out as soon as relief was abolished. “You may as
well expect to turn a stream up hill, as try to hire a Dollar of our rich men, so long as the Government remains in its present deplorable situation," one Massachusetts Federalist declared in October 1787. Ratification would give "the wealthy" confidence "in the honour and justice of the government," another Bay State writer declared a month later. It would be the signal for the well-to-do to begin "leaving the surplus of their riches upon reasonable terms." Predictions like these echoed through other states as well. . . .

Most historians of the Constitution endorse the Framers' analysis of the economic and political crises of the 1780s. Edmund S. Morgan of Yale University denounces the "legislative tyranny" of the period, Gordon S. Wood of Brown University writes that "paper money acts, stay laws, and other forms of debtor relief legislation hurt various creditor groups in the society and violated individual property rights." Bernard Bailyn of Harvard University asserts that by the time James Madison defended the Constitution in the Federalist Papers, "he had observed the evil effects of legislative majorities within some of the states over the previous five years. Again and again minority property rights had been overwhelmed by populist majorities." Scholars who do not explicitly endorse the Framers' analysis of the crisis of the 1780s accord it tacit support by not explicating any other. Yet during the founding era, numerous Americans differed with the Framers about both the causes of the economic ills of the 1780s and the remedies. Unlike Charles Beard and the "neo-Progressive" historians such as Merrill Jensen, nearly every freeman who lived through the 1780s agreed that the economy was in trouble during the postwar years and that the state assemblies deserved much of the blame. Yet many Americans dissented from the Framers' conviction that the legislators' error had been to grant debtors and taxpayers too much relief. They were happy to acknowledge that the nation needed a currency, investment capital, and the labor of American farmers, but they contended that prospects would brighten in all three sectors if the legislatures would only adopt more, not less, tax and debt relief.

The opponents of the record-high taxes of the 1780s rejected the claim that rigorous tax collection would expand the money supply. Indeed, they considered heavy taxation the chief culprit in draining the countryside of its gold and silver. They described a process whereby coins were collected from taxpayers and turned over to bondholders, who then shipped them to Britain in exchange for manufactured goods. In Virginia in fall 1787, a newspaper writer named Plain Reason blamed the "decay of specie in this country" on "the consumption of the greater part" of it "by the non-productive speculators, in European articles." . . .

Bond speculation also damaged the economy, some argued, by luring away capital that might otherwise have been invested productively. Plain Reason claimed that in Virginia "a great proportion of the specie" was "circulating in the traffick of military certificates," soaking up "funds, that would have gone to improve a farm, and increase the wealth of the state." Since "nobody will, if he can avoid it, otherwise employ his money," Plain Reason contended, bond speculation was a major reason for "the languid state of agriculture." In September 1786 a farmers' convention in Worcester County, Massachusetts, demanded fiscal reforms that would "induce the man of wealth to deposit that wealth in the lands and products of his country, rather than in speculations of publck securities. . . ." In 1790 Congress would adopt Hamilton's proposal for eliminating government bonds as an "object of . . . speculation." It would levy sufficient taxes to pay regular interest on the bonds, raising their market price to parity with their face value. During the 1780s, however, many Americans had favored scaling the bonds down or redeeming them with paper money, measures that would not only take the profit out of bond speculation but also have another, profounder, effect, they argued. Relieving the plight of both taxpayers and debtors would restore their ability to realize their productive potential. They believed the state legislatures had imposed fiscal and monetary regimes so harsh as to reduce American farmers' harvests, for instance, forcing debtors and taxpayers to give up their tools and livestock. . . . A New Jerseyan who took the name Willing to Learn declared at the end of 1785 that if the government were to intervene — say, by printing paper money — farmers would be able to "save their estates" and remain "useful members of the community."

As important as livestock and tools were to the labor process, the most crucial element was the farmer himself, and many contended that aggressive tax and debt collection often prevented rural Americans from working. So scarce was money in the New Jersey countryside, Willing to Learn claimed in 1786, that artisans spent nearly as much time dunning their customers as they did laboring at their benches. If paper money were printed, the artisan could easily settle old scores and get back to work. . . . A Rhode Island writer identified a different way the currency shortage soaked up waste of time attending law suits ... and the remedies. Unlike Charles Beard and the "neo-Progressive" historians such as Merrill Jensen, nearly every freeman who lived through the 1780s agreed that the economy was in trouble during the postwar years and that the state assemblies deserved much of the blame. Yet many Americans dissented from the Framers' conviction that the legislators' error had been to grant debtors and taxpayers too much relief. They were happy to acknowledge that the nation needed a currency, investment capital, and the labor of American farmers, but they contended that prospects would brighten in all three sectors if the legislatures would only adopt more, not less, tax and debt relief.

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Still more work hours were squandered when the debt- or tax-collection process ended in court. "The waste of time attending law suits . . . oppressed[s] industry," A Husbandman told readers of the Maryland Journal on June 6, 1786. . . .

The most dramatic way to stop a debtor or taxpayer from working was to imprison him. When debtors were "thrown into Gaols," the town of Cumberland, Rhode Island, pointed out in February 1786, it was not only "their families" that were "deprived of the advantages of their labors," but the whole "society." . . .

Thus fiscal and monetary austerity reduced farmers' output by robbing them of both their tools and their time. These problems, themselves grave, also wrought secondary damage that was even more harmful to the nation's productive capacity, many Americans believed. If farmers' distress
During the 1780s a remarkable number of petitioners and essayists described themselves in other Americans using variants of the word "discouraged." For instance, A Citizen of Connecticut said the currency shortage "discouraged[d]" farmers "from making any attempts towards extricating themselves; who otherwise would act with spirit and vigor."

Since aggressive debt and tax collection had "dispirited" farmers and "rendered [them] in some measure useless to Society," relieving their distress would revive their spirits, enabling them to make greater contributions both to their families and to the nation. In April 1787 a Marylander proposed that the state government replace its two hundred thousand pounds' worth of interest-bearing bonds with paper money, which did not pay interest. This proposal for "lessening the public debt" would allow the assembly to slash the state property tax (which had been levied "chiefly for the purpose of paying the interest on these certificates"), "thus animating the hopes of a desponding people."...

Americans who favored tax and debt relief affirmed that what made the loss of farmers' tools and time — and the consequent damage to both immigration and inspiration — so disastrous for the economy was that farmers' labor was the foundation of the nation's wealth. ...

Although the most damning indictment of the legislatures' harsh fiscal and monetary policies was that they had reduced farmers' output, relief advocates did not neglect the consumption side of the ledger. They rejected their opponents' claim that farmers and their families had provoked the economic crisis by spending beyond their means. "When we complain of our taxes," one Massachusetts writer said in summer 1787, protax essayists "tell us of our fine feathers and dinners, and other extravagance; but for my part, I see no more of these things now, than I did before the war." Not farmers but speculators were indulging in excess consumption, this writer declared: "Feathers, feasts, and coaches, are the exclusive pleasures and privileges of men who draw from 20 to 60 per cent, from their country."...

Today it is a commonplace among economists that excessive taxation or overly restrictive monetary policies — or a combination of the two — can throw an economy into recession. That was essentially what the champions of tax and debt relief were saying, but they rarely used such abstract language. For them the matter was more personal. In their eyes, high taxes and currency deflation had led the wealthy to stop making productive investments and in many cases to stop producing. Even more important, the assemblies had prevented farmers and artisans from working at their full potential. Those were the fetters dragging the economy down. ...

Debate over state-level fiscal and monetary policies... divided Americans on the eve of the Constitutional Convention. Is it appropriate to describe that debate as a class conflict? It cannot be confidently affirmed that the two principal sides represented conflicting classes: the authors of many fiscal and monetary treatises will forever remain unknown, and others sometimes took positions that ran counter to their own immediate self-interest. And yet the debate was a class conflict in a different sense. It hinged upon which segment of society should bear the burden of reviving the economy. Although the advocates for leniency and austerity both believed their plans would ultimately benefit every free American, the most candid champions of each approach acknowledged that it might force some segments of society to suffer for the good of the whole. ...

The debate over which classes should sacrifice for the good of the whole was largely a disagreement about what to do on the frequent occasions when the two imperatives for economic renewal — attracting capital and encouraging labor — clashed. Some Americans believed the single best way to end the recession was to remove all restraints on productive labor — even at the risk of scaring off potential investors. Although their opponents shared their desperate desire to end the recession, they also sought boisterous growth, and they would achieve it by attracting capital — even at the risk of discouraging labor. Historians have long debated early American farmers' attitude toward capitalism. Farm families may be defined as anticapitalist in the sense that when their most prominent countrymen called on them to sacrifice property and personal liberty on behalf of the crusade to attract capital, most of them declined. When modern historians uncritically adopt the Framers' assumptions that the farmers were simply short-sighted, they forget two truths: First, that few of the men who called on farmers to accept sacrifice were proposing to join them in it, and, second, that farmers and their supporters seem to have sincerely believed that it was not capital that held the key to economic revival. It was labor.

The competing economic strategies advanced in the 1780s were rooted in conflicting assessments of popular virtue. Madison and other prominent Federalists believed the 1780s offered farmers a grim lesson about the limits of their own capacity for self-rule. According to this viewpoint, the authors of the Revolution-era state constitutions had placed too much faith in ordinary Americans' ability and willingness to act wisely and justly. Yet many Americans... denied that the 1780s had taught any such lesson. Although they agreed that the state legislatures had mismanaged the economy, they traced this failure to elite, not popular, misrule. Consequently, they disputed the Federalists' assertion that the only way out of the economic bind was to embrace the restraints on popular influence embodied in the Constitution.

The contest between the elitist and populist political dispositions thus paralleled the dispute over whether the saviors of the economy were going to be moneyed men (who would invest in America as soon as they could do so safely) or ordinary farmers (who required only the removal of their fiscal and monetary shackles to become prodigiously productive). In politics as in economics, the question was whether redemption was going to come from above or below.