

Book Review



Reviewed by Richard A. Forsten, Esquire

Explaining *The Federalist: Liberty's Blueprint*

by Michael I. Meyerson (Basic Books, 2008)

They were America's original odd couple. One was extremely shy, bookish, slight of stature and never weighed more than 100 pounds. The other was described as "striking" and "handsome," full of energy and charisma. One was born to a wealthy, Virginia family and received all the benefits associated with that status. The other grew up in relative poverty, born to an unwed mother in the Caribbean, and was a self-made man. James Madison and Alexander Hamilton made for two very unlikely allies, yet they shared a deep belief in the need for a stronger federal government in the wake of the impotent Articles of Confederation. Together with a small assist from John Jay, Madison and Hamilton produced *The Federalist*, considered by some as the greatest discourse on political theory and certainly the single most important work in interpreting the Constitution.

In *Liberty's Blueprint, How Madison And Hamilton Wrote the Federalist Papers, Defined the Constitution, and Made Democracy Safe for the World*, Professor Michael I. Meyerson tells the incredible story behind Hamilton's and Madison's unlikely collaboration, as well as their later falling out. Along the way, he also discusses some of the more important aspects of the Federalist Papers, and in general provides a riveting behind the scenes description of how the Federalist Papers came to be.

Hamilton and Madison first met in November, 1782, when Hamilton arrived in Congress (under the Articles of Confederation). Madison had already been serving for two years. Both were frustrated with the weakness of the national government and believed its powers needed strengthening.

Both sensed an ally in the other. Gradually their mutual respect grew into a friendship, so much so, that by the end of the session, many in Congress assumed that the two were working together on a regular basis.

Interestingly enough, neither Hamilton or Madison was particularly successful in advancing their ideas at the Constitutional Convention, and both had some misgivings about the final product. Madison, of course, was the original proponent of the so-called "Large States" Plan, in which both houses of Congress would be apportioned based on population. Madison also wanted the national government to be able to strike down state laws. Of seventy-one specific proposals he made, seconded or otherwise supported, forty were defeated. Hamilton was even less effective. At one point, he gave a lengthy speech extolling the virtues of Great Britain's political system and proposing that Senators and the chief executive both be elected for life. The response to Hamilton's speech was stunned silence, and it was thereafter ignored. Hamilton was so frustrated by the entire process that he left the convention on at least two occasions, although he was present when the Convention finally adopted the Constitution.

Yet, whatever disappointments or misgivings they had about the Constitution, both Hamilton and Madison realized just how important the document was to the fledgling country. Hamilton first conceived of the series of essays, although he originally thought there would be only twenty-five or so. He selected the title, *The Federalist*, and the pseudonym, Publius. Hamilton approached several others about assisting in the process, and history does not reveal precisely how or when Hamilton and

Madison first discussed Madison's involvement. However, Madison apparently did not become involved until after the first few essays were published.

The work involved in producing *The Federalist* was truly amazing. A total of eighty-five essays were published over a six month period. Hamilton and Madison wrote on average 1,000 words per day and four essays per week. All of this needed to be edited, proofed, and typeset in an age before typewriters or carbon paper, let alone word processing programs. On occasion, the printer would be standing in Hamilton's study, waiting for the next set of pages to take back to his shop, all in order to meet the demanding publication deadline. Yet despite the massive effort necessary, Hamilton and Madison (together with John Jay) produced the 85 essays in remarkably short order. Much of this was due to the amount of planning and research Hamilton and especially Madison had done prior to the Constitutional Convention itself. Madison had written papers (for himself) on the success and failure of past historical confederations and other forms of government—research he was then able to incorporate into the papers. Hamilton too took research and notes to the Convention that he later incorporated into several of the papers.

The Federalist was quite well received in its day. The essays were quickly compiled into books, even while the series was still being completed. Although originally written and published in New York City, Hamilton made arrangements to have the essays published in other states as well. Bound volumes of the essays were also sent to Virginia and other states. Historical

evidence shows that the papers circulated throughout the country and Publius was viewed as the most influential supporter of the Constitution. *The Federalist* was not only a critical success, but a popular success.

Almost as soon as the Constitution was ratified, however, the successful collaboration of Madison and Hamilton began to fall apart. Hamilton became the first Secretary of the Treasury. Madison became a member of the House of Representatives (Patrick Henry, the Governor of Virginia and a staunch anti-Federalist, had seen to it that Madison was not selected as a Senator). While Hamilton and Madison continued on good personal terms, their policy differences over the role and future of the new government led to a gradual erosion of their friendship. Hamilton called for the new government to assume the Revolutionary War debts of the states; Madison opposed such assumption. Hamilton and Madison (along with Thomas Jefferson) also famously clashed over whether the new government could charter a bank. Ironically, during the de-

bate over the bank in Congress, one of the bank's supporters quoted approvingly from *Federalist 44*, not realizing at the time that Madison had written that particular paper. Hamilton and Madison also disagreed over Britain and France, with Hamilton (and the Federalist party generally) viewing Britain more favorably, while Madison, Jefferson and what later would become the Democratic-Republican party, favored France. In general, Hamilton's and Madison's rift represented a difference of views over the direction the new country should take. Hamilton favored policies designed to create a stronger commercial and industrial base, while Madison, like his mentor Jefferson, favored a smaller, less active central government and an agricultural focus.

Beyond a history of Madison's and Hamilton's collaboration and their falling out, Professor Meyerson goes on to write why it still is important to study and understand *The Federalist* today, and provides further analysis of some of its underlying themes and arguments. Like his history of the creation of *The Federalist*, his analysis of its importance and his description of some

of its more important themes is equally well-written and compelling. The Supreme Court first cited *The Federalist* in 1798, and the number of decisions citing *The Federalist* has only risen steadily since that time. John Marshall once famously wrote that the Constitution was "intended to endure for ages to come." So, too, *The Federalist* endures, as both a work of political theory and a blueprint to explain and illuminate the enduring Constitution. Meyerson's book is a short, highly readable account of one of the most important texts in American law and history. ☺

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