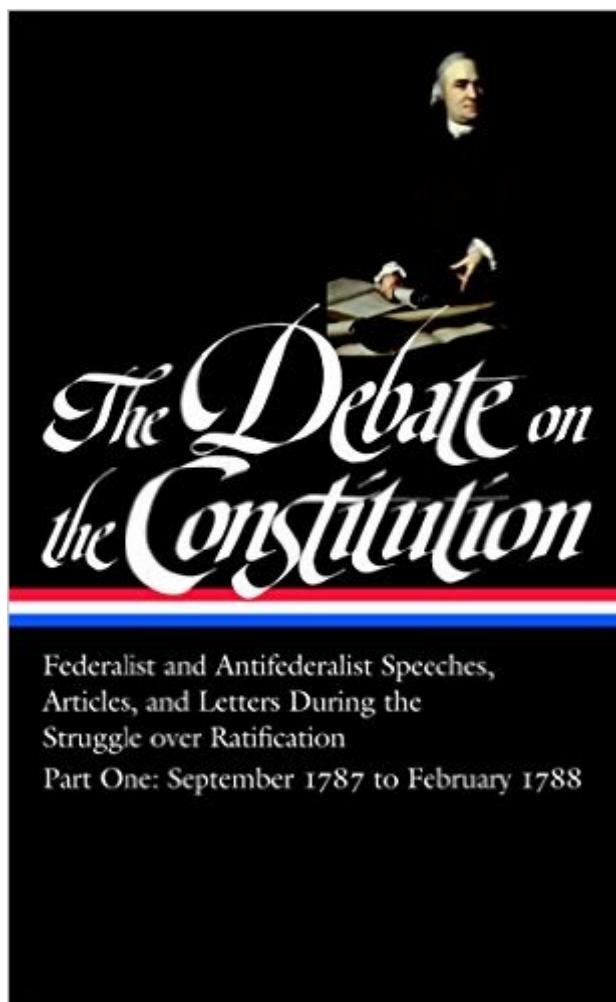


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The Debate On The Constitution Part 1: Federalist And Antifederalist Speeches: (Library Of America #62)



Synopsis

Here, on a scale unmatched by any previous collection, is the extraordinary energy and eloquence of our first national political campaign: During the secret proceedings of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, the framers created a fundamentally new national plan to replace the Articles of Confederation and then submitted it to conventions in each state for ratification. Immediately, a fierce storm of argument broke. Federalist supporters, Antifederalist opponents, and seekers of a middle ground strove to balance public order and personal liberty as they praised, condemned, challenged, and analyzed the new Constitution. Gathering hundreds of original texts by Franklin, Madison, Jefferson, Washington, and Patrick Henry—“as well as many others less well known today”—this unrivaled collection allows readers to experience firsthand the intense year-long struggle that created what remains the world’s oldest working national charter. Assembled here in chronological order are hundreds of newspaper articles, pamphlets, speeches, and private letters written or delivered in the aftermath of the Constitutional Convention. Along with familiar figures like Franklin, Madison, Patrick Henry, Jefferson, and Washington, scores of less famous citizens are represented, all speaking clearly and passionately about government. The most famous writings of the ratification struggle—the Federalist essays of Hamilton and Madison—are placed in their original context, alongside the arguments of able antagonists, such as “Brutus” and the “Federal Farmer.” Part One includes press polemics and private commentaries from September 1787 to January 1788. That autumn, powerful arguments were made against the new charter by Virginian George Mason and the still-unidentified “Federal Farmer,” while in New York newspapers, the Federalist essays initiated a brilliant defense. Dozens of speeches from the state ratifying conventions show how the “draft of a plan, nothing but a dead letter,” in Madison’s words, had “life and validity...breathed into it by the voice of the people.” Included are the conventions in Pennsylvania, where James Wilson confronted the democratic skepticism of those representing the western frontier, and in Massachusetts, where John Hancock and Samuel Adams forged a crucial compromise that saved the country from years of political convulsion. Informative notes, biographical profiles of all writers, speakers, and recipients, and a detailed chronology of relevant events from 1774 to 1804 provide fascinating background. A general index allows readers to follow specific topics, and an appendix includes the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, and the Constitution (with all amendments).

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Customer Reviews

Editor Bernard Bailyn has assembled a first-rate collection of letters, circulars, pamphlets, speeches, and what would be the colonial equivalent of modern op-ed pieces that allows today's readers to witness the founding of a government through the eyes of (and with the voices of) those who were really there. But don't be fooled into thinking this is going to be the stilted, polite prose that often belongs to 18th century philosophers or debaters. Many of the pieces Bailyn has selected are remarkably spry and teeming with understated wit. Those who think that mud-slinging, negative campaigning, and assaults on the integrity of the opponent are modern day creations may be surprised to see that those in the 18th century could be just as nitpicky, petty, and asperbic as their present day descendants -- and yet still remain surprisingly gentlemanly about the whole thing. Some letter writers absolutely seethe with irritation at their opposition, and by presenting his debaters in roughly chronological order, Bailyn ensures that for every "Oh yeah?" uttered by a Federalist, there will soon be a responsive "Yeah!" from the anti-Federalist side. It all makes for lively and informative reading, and one wonders if such a critical debate could be carried out with such manners in today's media. It should come as no surprise that most of the Hamilton-Madison-Jay Federalist Papers are in here, as are the level-headed, persuasive anti-Federalist arguments of James Wilson and George Mason.

"The Debate on the Constitution" is a wealth of primary source material for true students of U.S. History. Caveat emptor though. If you fancy yourself an armchair historian because you've read a few of David McCullough's readable histories, then you may find yourself overwhelmed when you try to tackle this collection of circulars, speeches, and articles. To truly appreciate the intellect imbued in many of these passages, one should probably have a background in Hume, Montesquieu, Locke, Blackstone and a host of others. If you read this volume and cannot grasp the beauty of Madison's "The Federalist X" or the sheer logical brilliance of Hamilton's "The Federalist XXXII - XXXIII," then you may need to give yourself a primer on the theoretical underpinnings of colonial history before you digest the rest of this work. What Bailyn does collect here is not to be ignored. There are very few omissions that one should go out and hunt down in order to see the entire effort of contorting the nascent Constitution. If you find yourself siding with George Mason and James Monroe more often than James Wilson and Alexander Hamilton, then it would behoove you to pick up the entire collected works of the anti federalists, but it is not necessary to get a thorough panoramic of the debate. On the negative side (small negative side, mind you), Bailyn uses a format that I have never enjoyed for works of this length: endnotes rather than footnotes. I have studied formative U.S. history for over a decade, and I still needed to read several of the notes. Most readers should read all of the notes. Therein lies the problem.

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