Our Constitution is in actual operation; everything appears to promise that it will last; but in this world nothing is certain but death and taxes.

—Benjamin Franklin. Letter to M. Leroy. 1789

Although his voice was weak, it could be clearly heard throughout Convention Hall in Philadelphia. The delegates had temporarily ceased their bickering as Benjamin Franklin, at eighty-one years the oldest member of the group, read one of his proposals. With the exception of George Washington, Franklin was probably the most esteemed member of the remarkable group of statesmen who filled Convention Hall that hot summer of 1787. Franklin had repeatedly called for harmony in the proceedings. This newest proposal, like his previous ones, sought to forge a compromise among the delegates.

A Civic Leader
Franklin was a successful American entrepreneur. As such, he looked for ways to improve the lives of his fellow citizens through his many inventions, and the formation of beneficial voluntary organizations. He also served in colonial government, represented Pennsylvania in the Continental Congress, and as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention. His cardinal teaching was that “the most acceptable Service of God is doing Good to Man.” Franklin sought to promote public virtues through his many writings, such as Poor Richard’s Almanack. He formed a secret society, the Junto, to promote beneficial ideas. In 1743, he helped to create the American Philosophical Society to advance the cause of science in the New World. He also played a major role in building the first fire department, the first public library, and the first hospital in Philadelphia.

Franklin also worked to improve his community through scientific invention. An example of his selflessness was his refusal to accept patent protection for his famous stove. “That as we enjoy great advantages from the inventions of others,” Franklin asserted, “we should be glad of an opportunity to serve others by any invention of ours, and this we should do freely and generously.”

His fellow citizens repeatedly called upon Franklin to serve in public. He served as deputy postmaster of Philadelphia and deputy postmaster general of the colonies. He was a clerk for and later a member of the Pennsylvania Assembly. After American independence, he established the U.S. Post Office. “I shall never ask, never refuse, nor ever resign an office,” Franklin once declared.

The Albany Plan
In 1754, the prospect of war with the French led several of the royal governors to call for a congress of all the colonies. One purpose of the meeting was to plan war operations against the French. Another purpose was to prepare some plan of confederation among the colonies. Only seven colonies sent commissioners to this congress, which met in Albany, New York. Reception among the American colonists and the colonial newspapers was generally unfavorable. But Franklin’s own Pennsylvania Gazette ran a political cartoon with the motto “Join, or Die!”

Benjamin Franklin
At Albany, Franklin drafted and introduced the first formal proposal for a permanent union of the thirteen colonies. This became known as the Albany Plan. It was similar to the decentralized system of government that would later emerge under the Articles of Confederation. There would be a union of the colonies under a single central government, though each colony would preserve its local independence.

Public opinion, however, was not yet ready for a centralized colonial government. Though the Albany Congress did adopt Franklin’s plan, the colonial assemblies rejected it because it encroached on their powers. The British government also disapproved of the plan, fearing it would give the colonies too much independence.

Defender of American Rights
Between 1757 and 1775, Franklin resided in England as an agent for several colonies. During the Stamp Act crisis of 1765 he became famous in London as a defender of American rights. The British later branded Franklin a traitor. He escaped probable imprisonment by returning to Philadelphia in May 1775. There he was received as a hero of the American cause and was immediately nominated to be a member of the Second Continental Congress. Thirteen months later, he served on the committee that drafted the Declaration of Independence. He then served as president of Pennsylvania’s constitutional convention.

Not long afterward, the aged statesman set sail once again for Europe as a diplomat for the newly established United States of America. Franklin succeeded in gaining French support for the American Revolution. As commissioner to France from 1779–1785, Franklin, along with John Jay and John Adams, negotiated the Treaty of Paris (1783) that ended the War for Independence.

Sage of the Constitutional Convention
Franklin arrived back in the United States in 1785. Believing the Articles of Confederation to be too weak, he joined in the call for a Constitutional Convention. He was chosen to represent the state of Pennsylvania at the Constitutional Convention that met in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787. At 81, Franklin was the oldest member of the convention. He attended almost every session, though his age and illness sometimes made it necessary for others to speak for him.

Franklin’s prestige reassured his countrymen about the meeting in Philadelphia, and his presence promoted harmony in the proceedings. Franklin made several successful proposals at the Convention. His ideas often reflected his sympathy with the common people. For example, he favored giving the lower house of Congress the sole power to propose money and tax bills. Franklin believed that the lower house would reflect the “public spirit of our common people.” He also successfully opposed property requirements for voting and financial tests for holders of federal office.

Though he favored a stronger central government, Franklin also worried about the possibility of tyranny. He therefore desired a clear listing of the powers of the federal government. He also supported an executive council instead of a single president. When this idea failed, Franklin seconded Virginian George Mason’s call for an advisory council to the president. He believed that the president should be limited to only one term in office, so that no one man should gain too much power. He also opposed giving the executive absolute veto power over the Congress. Franklin’s proposals met with some success. A cabinet was established, and Congress was given the power to override presidential vetoes by a two-thirds vote.
On September 17, the convention met for the last time. Fellow Pennsylvanian James Wilson delivered a speech on behalf of Franklin in support of the Constitution. Passage of the plan, Franklin asserted in the speech, “will astonish our enemies, who are waiting with confidence to hear . . . that our States are on the point of separation, only to meet hereafter for the purpose of cutting one another’s throats.” The new Constitution was ratified into law by the states on June 21, 1788.

Franklin was concerned, however, that the issue of slavery could someday result in the states “cutting one another’s throats.” Franklin had been an opponent of slavery as early as the 1730s. At the convention, he made the case that all free black men be counted as citizens. Such a course, Franklin believed, would have the “excellent effect of inducing the colonies to discourage slavery and to encourage the increase of their free inhabitants.” In 1787, Franklin was elected first president of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery. His final public act was signing a petition to Congress recommending dissolution of the slave system.

Franklin was optimistic about America’s future. As the convention delegates signed the Constitution, he pointed to the sun carved into the president’s chair, and reflected: “I have often . . . in the course of this session . . . looked at that . . . without being able to tell whether it was rising or setting; but now at length I have the happiness to know that it is a rising and not a setting sun.” As he exited Convention Hall upon the completion of the Constitution, a woman came up to him and asked what the delegates had created. Franklin responded, “A republic, if you can keep it.” Franklin died two and one-half years later, still optimistic that the republic he helped to shape would endure.

Reading Comprehension Questions
1. List three ways in which Franklin improved the lives of those in his community.
2. What was the Albany Congress?
3. List five proposals that Franklin made at the Constitutional Convention.

Critical Thinking Questions
4. How do you think the other delegates at the Constitutional Convention viewed Franklin?
5. What did Franklin mean when he told the woman outside Convention Hall that the delegates had created “a republic, if you can keep it”?

Benjamin Franklin
Vocabulary and Context Questions

Excerpts from the Albany Plan of Union (1754) and the United States Constitution (1788)

1. **Vocabulary:** Use context clues to determine the meaning or significance of each of these words and write their definitions:

   a. tranquility
   b. posterity
   c. ordain
   d. delegated
   e. respective
   f. vested
   g. assent
   h. requisite
   i. originated
   j. approbation
   k. concur
   l. consent
   m. consuls
   n. levy
   o. duties
   p. imposts
   q. excises

2. **Context:** Answer the following questions.

   a. When was this document written?
   b. Where was this document written?
   c. Who wrote this document?
   d. What type of document is this?
   e. What was the purpose of this document?
   f. Who was the audience for this document?
Excerpts from the Albany Plan of Union (1754) and the
United States Constitution (1788)

Directions: Compare the selected portions of the Albany Plan to the corresponding excerpts from the Constitution. List the ways in which the sections are similar and then the ways in which they are different.

1: Preamble and Federal System

Albany Plan
(Preamble): It is proposed that humble application be made for an act of Parliament of Great Britain, by virtue of which one general government may be formed in America, including all the said colonies, within and under which government each colony may retain its present constitution, except in the particulars wherein a change may be directed by the said act, as hereafter follows.

Constitution
(Preamble): We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

(Tenth Amendment): The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.

2: Branches of Government

Albany Plan
(1): [It is proposed] that the said general government be administered by a President-General, to be appointed and supported by the crown; and a Grand Council, to be chosen by the representatives of the people of the several Colonies met in their respective assemblies.

(4): There shall be a new election of the members of the Grand Council every three years.

Constitution
(Article II, Section 1, Clause 1): The Executive power shall be vested in a President of the United States of America.

(Article I, Section 1): All legislative powers herein granted shall be vested in a Congress of the United States, which shall consist of a Senate and House of Representatives.

(Article I, Section 2, Clause 1): The House of Representatives shall be composed of members chosen every second year by the people of the several States.

(Article I, Section 3, Clause 1): The Senate of the United States shall be composed of two Senators from each State, chosen by the legislature thereof, for six years.

Benjamin Franklin
3: Legislative Process

Albany Plan
(6): The Grand Council shall meet once in every year, and oftener if occasion require.

(9): [It is proposed] that the assent of the President-General be requisite to all acts of the Grand Council, and that it be his office and duty to cause them to be carried into execution.

Constitution
(Article I, Section 4, Clause 2): The Congress shall assemble at least once in every year.

(Article I, Section 7, Clause 2): Every bill which shall have passed the House of Representatives and the Senate, shall, before it become a law, be presented to the president of the United States; if he approve, he shall sign it, but if not, he shall return it, with his objections, to that house in which it shall have originated, who shall enter the objections at large on their journal, and proceed to reconsider it. If after such reconsideration, two thirds of that house shall agree to pass the bill, it shall be sent, together with the objections, to the other house, by which it shall likewise be reconsidered, and if approved by two-thirds of that house, it shall become a law.

(Article II, Section 3): [The President] shall take care that the Laws be faithfully executed.

4: Military Powers

Albany Plan
(10): [It is proposed] that the President-General, with the advice of the Grand Council, hold or direct all Indian treaties, in which the general interest of the Colonies may be concerned; and make peace or declare war with Indian nations.

(23): [It is proposed] that all military commission officers, whether for land or sea service, to act under this general constitution, shall be nominated by the President-General; but the approbation of the Grand Council is to be obtained, before they receive their commissions.

Constitution
(Article I, Section 8, Clause 11): [The Congress shall have the power] to declare war.

(Article II, Section 2, Clause 1): The President shall be Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States, and of the militia of the several States, when called into the actual service of the United States.

(Article II, Section 2, Clause 2): He shall have power, by and with the advice and consent of the Senate, to make treaties, provided two-thirds of the Senators present concur; and he shall nominate, and by and with the advice and consent of the Senate, shall appoint ambassadors, other public ministers and consuls, judges of the Supreme Court, and all other officers of the United States.
5: Power of Taxation

Albany Plan
(16): That for these purposes [the President-General and the Grand Council] have power to make laws, and lay and levy such general duties, imposts, or taxes, as to them shall appear most equal and just (considering the ability and other circumstances of the inhabitants in the several Colonies), and such as may be collected with the least inconvenience to the people; rather discouraging luxury, than loading industry with unnecessary burdens.

Constitution
(Article I, Section 8, Clause 1): The Congress shall have the power to lay and collect taxes, duties, imposts and excises, to pay the debts and provide for the common defence and general welfare of the United States; but all duties, imposts and excises shall be uniform throughout the United States.

For nearly 250 years, the existence of slavery deprived African Americans of independent lives and individual liberty. It also compromised the republican dreams of white Americans, who otherwise achieved unprecedented success in the creation of political institutions and social relationships based on citizens' equal rights and ever-expanding opportunity. Thomas Jefferson, who in 1787 described slavery as an "abomination" and predicted that it "must have an end," had faith that "there is a superior bench reserved in heaven for those who hasten it." He later avowed that "there is not a man on earth who would sacrifice more than I would to relieve us from this heavy reproach in any practicable way." Although Jefferson made several proposals to curb slavery's growth or reduce its political or economic influence, a workable plan to eradicate slavery eluded him. Others also failed to end slavery until finally, after the loss of more than 600,000 American lives in the Civil War, the United States abolished it through the 1865 ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution.

American slavery and American freedom took root at the same place and at the same time. In 1619—the same year that colonial Virginia’s House of Burgesses convened in Jamestown and became the New World’s first representative assembly—about 20 enslaved Africans arrived at Jamestown and were sold by Dutch slave traders. The number of slaves in Virginia remained small for several decades, however, until the first dominant labor system—indentured servitude—fell out of favor after 1670. Until then indentured servants, typically young and landless white Englishmen and Englishwomen in search of opportunity, arrived by the thousands. In exchange for passage to Virginia, they agreed to labor in planters’ tobacco fields for terms usually ranging from four to seven years. Planters normally agreed to give them, after their indentures expired, land on which they could establish their own tobacco farms. In the first few decades of settlement, as demand for the crop boomed, such arrangements usually worked in the planters’ favor. Life expectancy in Virginia was short and few servants outlasted their terms of indenture. By the mid-1600s, however, as the survival rate of indentured servants increased, more earned their freedom and began to compete with their former masters. The supply of tobacco rose more quickly than demand and, as prices decreased, tensions between planters and former servants grew.

These tensions exploded in 1676, when Nathaniel Bacon led a group composed primarily of former indentured servants in a rebellion against Virginia's government. The rebels, upset by the reluctance of Governor William Berkeley and the gentry-dominated House of Burgesses to aid their efforts to expand onto American Indians' lands, lashed out at both the Indians and the government. After several months the rebellion dissipated, but so, at about the same time, did the practice of voluntary servitude.

In its place developed a system of race-based slavery. With both black and white Virginians living longer, it made better economic sense to own slaves, who would never gain their freedom and compete with masters, than to rent the labor of indentured servants, who would. A few early slaves had gained their freedom, established plantations, acquired servants, and enjoyed liberties shared by white freemen, but beginning in the 1660s Virginia’s legislature passed laws banning interracial marriage; it also stripped African Americans of the rights to own property and carry guns, and it curtailed their freedom of movement. In 1650 only about 300 blacks worked Virginia’s tobacco fields, yet by 1680 there were 3,000 and, by the start of the eighteenth century, nearly 10,000.

Slavery surged not only in Virginia but also in Pennsylvania, where people abducted from Africa and their descendants harvested wheat and oats, and in South Carolina, where by the 1730s rice planters had imported slaves in such quantity that they accounted for two-thirds of the population.
The sugar-based economies of Britain’s Caribbean colonies required so much labor that, on some islands, enslaved individuals outnumbered freemen by more than ten to one. Even in the New England colonies, where staple-crop agriculture never took root, the presence of slaves was common and considered unremarkable by most.

Historian Edmund S. Morgan has suggested that the prevalence of slavery in these colonies may have, paradoxically, heightened the sensitivity of white Americans to attacks against their own freedom. Thus, during the crisis preceding the War for Independence Americans frequently cast unpopular British legislation—which taxed them without the consent of their assemblies, curtailed the expansion of their settlements, deprived them of the right to jury trials, and placed them under the watchful eyes of red-coated soldiers—as evidence of an imperial conspiracy to “enslave” them. American patriots who spoke in such terms did not imagine that they would be forced to toil in tobacco fields; instead, they feared that British officials would deny to them some of the same individual and civil rights that they had denied to enslaved African Americans. George Mason, collaborating with George Washington, warned in the Fairfax Resolves of 1774 that the British Parliament pursued a “regular, systematic plan” to “fix the shackles of slavery upon us.”

As American revolutionaries reflected on the injustice of British usurpations of their freedom and began to universalize the individual rights that they had previously tied to their status as Englishmen, they grew increasingly conscious of the inherent injustice of African-American slavery. Many remained skeptical that blacks possessed the same intellectual capabilities as whites, but few refused to count Africans as members of the human family or possessors of individual rights. When Jefferson affirmed in the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal,” he did not mean all white men. In fact, he attempted to turn the Declaration into a platform from which Americans would denounce the trans-Atlantic slave trade. This he blamed on Britain and its king who, Jefferson wrote, “has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating it’s [sic] most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere.”

The king was wrong, he asserted, “to keep open a market where MEN should be bought & sold.” Delegates to the Continental Congress from South Carolina and Georgia, however, vehemently opposed the inclusion of these lines in the Declaration of Independence. Representatives of other states agreed to delete them. Thus began, at the moment of America’s birth, the practice of prioritizing American unity over black Americans’ liberty.

Pragmatism confronted principle not only on the floor of Congress but also on the plantations of many prominent revolutionaries. When Jefferson penned his stirring defense of individual liberty, he owned 200 enslaved individuals. Washington, the commander-in-chief of the Continental Army and future first president, was one of the largest slaveholders in Virginia. James Madison—who, like Jefferson and Washington, considered himself an opponent of slavery—was also a slaveholder. So was Mason, whose Virginia Declaration of Rights stands as one of the revolutionary era’s most resounding statements on behalf of human freedom. Had these revolutionaries attempted to free their slaves, they would have courted financial ruin. Alongside their landholdings, slaves constituted the principal asset against which they borrowed. The existence of slavery, moreover, precluded a free market of agricultural labor; they could never afford to pay free people—who could always move west to obtain their own farms, anyway—to till their fields.

Perhaps the most powerful objection to emancipation, however, emerged from the same set of principles that compelled the American revolutionaries to question the justice of slavery. Although Jefferson, Washington, Madison, and Mason considered human bondage a clear violation of individual rights, they trembled when they considered the ways in which emancipation might thwart their republican experiments. Not unlike many nonslaveholders, they considered especially fragile the society that they had helped to create. In the absence of aristocratic selfishness and force, revolutionary American governments relied on virtue and voluntarism. Virtue they understood as a manly trait; the word, in fact, derives from the Latin noun vir, which means “man.” They considered men to be independent and self-sufficient, made free and responsible by
habits borne of necessity. Virtuous citizens made good citizens, the Founders thought. The use of political power for the purpose of exploitation promised the virtuous little and possessed the potential to cost them much. Voluntarism was virtue unleashed: the civic-minded, selfless desire to ask little of one's community but, because of one's sense of permanence within it, to give much to it. The Founders, conscious of the degree to which involuntary servitude had rendered slaves dependent and given them cause to resent white society, questioned their qualifications for citizenship. It was dangerous to continue to enslave them, but perilous to emancipate them. Jefferson compared it to holding a wolf by the ears.

These conundrums seemed to preclude an easy fix. Too aware of the injustice of slavery to expect much forgiveness from slaves, in the first decades of the nineteenth century a number of Founders embarked on impractical schemes to purchase the freedom of slaves and “repatriate” them from America to Africa. In the interim, debate about the continued importation of slaves from Africa stirred delegates to the Constitutional Convention. South Carolina’s Charles Pinckney vehemently opposed prohibitions on the slave trade, arguing that the matter was best decided by individual states. The delegates compromised, agreeing that the Constitution would prohibit for twenty years any restrictions on the arrival of newly enslaved Africans. As president, Jefferson availed himself of the opportunity afforded by the Constitution when he prohibited the continued importation of Africans into America in 1808. Yet he had already failed in a 1784 attempt to halt the spread of slavery into the U.S. government’s western territory, which stretched from the Great Lakes south toward the Gulf of Mexico (the compromise Northwest Ordinance of 1787 drew the line at the Ohio River), and in his efforts to institute in Virginia a plan for gradual emancipation (similar to those that passed in Northern states, except that it provided for the education and subsequent deportation of freed African Americans). Of all the Founders, Benjamin Franklin probably took the most unequivocal public stand against involuntary servitude when, in 1790, he signed a strongly worded antislavery petition submitted to Congress by the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. This, too, accomplished little.

The revolutionary spirit of the postwar decade, combined with the desire of many Upper South plantation owners to shift from labor-intensive tobacco to wheat, created opportunities to reduce the prevalence of slavery in America—especially in the North. Those opportunities not seized upon—especially in the South—would not soon return.

Eli Whitney’s invention of the cotton gin in 1793 widened the regional divide. By rendering more efficient the processing of cotton fiber—which in the first half of the nineteenth century possessed a greater value than all other U.S. exports combined—Whitney’s machine triggered a resurgence of Southern slavery. Meanwhile, the wealth that cotton exports brought to America fueled a booming Northern industrial economy that relied on free labor and created a well-educated middle class of urban professionals and social activists. These individuals kept alive the Founders’ desire to rid America of slavery, but they also provoked the development of Southern proslavery thought. At best, Southerners of the revolutionary generation had viewed slavery as a necessary evil; by the 1830s, however, slaveholders began to describe it as a positive good. African Americans were civilized Christians, they argued, but their African ancestors were not. In addition, the argument continued, slaves benefited from the paternalistic care of masters who, unlike the Northern employers of “wage slaves,” cared for their subordinates from the cradle to the grave. This new view combined with an older critique of calls for emancipation: since slaves were the property of their masters, any attempt to force their release would be a violation of masters’ property rights.

Regional positions grew more intractable as the North and South vied for control of the West. Proposals to admit into statehood Missouri, Texas, California, Kansas, and Nebraska resulted in controversy as Northerners and Southerners sparred to maintain parity in the Senate. The 1860 election to the presidency of Abraham Lincoln, a Republican who opposed the inclusion of additional slave states, sparked secession and the Civil War.

“I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just,” Jefferson had prophetically remarked, for “his justice cannot sleep for ever.” Americans paid dearly for the sin of slavery.
members of the founding generation failed to identify moderate means to abolish the practice, and hundreds of thousands died because millions had been deprived of the ability to truly live.

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Suggestions for Further Reading
As Benjamin Franklin left Philadelphia’s Convention Hall in September 1787, upon the completion of the work of the Framers of the Constitution, a woman approached him and asked the old sage of the Revolution what the delegates had created. Franklin responded, “A republic, Madame, if you can keep it.” The woman’s reaction to Franklin’s reply is left unrecorded by history, but she might well have asked Franklin for a more detailed answer. Though the word “republic” was common currency in America at the time, the meaning of the term was imprecise, encompassing various and diverse forms of government.

Broadly, a republic meant a country not governed by a king. The root of the word is the Latin, res publica, meaning “the public things.” “The word republic,” Thomas Paine wrote, “means the public good, or the good of the whole, in contradistinction to the despotic form, which makes the good of the sovereign, or of one man, the only object of the government.” In a republic, the people are sovereign, delegating certain powers to the government whose duty is to look to the general welfare of society. That citizens of a republic ought to place the common good before individual self-interest was a key assumption among Americans of the eighteenth century. “Every man in a republic,” proclaimed Benjamin Rush, “is public property. His time and talents—his youth—his manhood—his old age, nay more, life, all belong to his country.”

Republicanism was not an American invention. In shaping their governments, Americans looked to history, first to the ancient world, and specifically to the Israel of the Old Testament, the Roman republic, and the Greek city-states. New Englanders in particular often cited the ancient state of Israel as the world’s first experiment in republican government and sometimes drew a parallel between the Twelve Tribes of Israel and the thirteen American states. In 1788, while ratification of the Constitution was being debated, one Yankee preacher gave a sermon entitled, “The Republic of the Israelites an Example to the American States.” Indeed, the Bible was cited by American authors in the eighteenth century more often than any other single source.

Americans not only knew their Bible, but also the history of the Greeks and Romans. The elite class mastered ancient languages and literature, a requirement of colleges at the time. To these men of the eighteenth century, ancient languages were not dead, nor were ancient events distant; rather, the worlds of Pericles and Polybius, Sallust and Cicero were vibrant and near. The relatively minor advancements in technology across 2,000 years—people still traveled by horse and sailing ship—served to reinforce the bond eighteenth-century Americans felt with the ancients.

Like the Greeks and Romans of antiquity, Americans believed that government must concern itself with the character of its citizenry. Indeed, virtue was “the Soul of a republican Government,” as Samuel Adams put it. Virtue had two connotations, one secular and the other sacred. The root of the word was the Latin, vir, meaning “man,” and indeed republican virtue often referred to the display of such “manly” traits as courage and self-sacrifice for the common good. These qualities were deemed essential for a republic’s survival. “A popular government,” Patrick Henry proclaimed, “cannot flourish without virtue in the people.” But virtue could also mean the traditional Judeo-Christian virtues, and many Americans feared that God would punish the entire nation for the sins of its people. “Without morals,” Charles Carroll proclaimed, “a republic cannot subsist any length of time.” New Englanders in particular sought to have society’s institutions—government and schools as well as churches—inculcate such qualities as industry, frugality, temperance, and chastity in the citizenry. The Massachusetts Constitution of 1780, for example, provided for “public instructions in piety, religion, and morality.”

The second ingredient of a good republic was a well-constructed government with good institutions.
American colonial legislatures therefore passed from avarice, the greed for material wealth. Several every other Nation.”

produce liberty but “a Slavery, far exceeding that of England, American independence would not Extinction of Morals.”

Adams asserted, “will not long survive the total immorality among the people. “Liberty, “ Samuel Corruption referred, first, to the prevalence of virtue, had both a religious and a worldly meaning. Theorists from the ancient Greek thinker Polybius to the seventeenth-century English radical Algernon Sidney warned that republics suffer from particular dangers that monarchies and despotisms taught that republics were inherently unstable and vulnerable to decay. The Framers of the Constitution did just this by fashioning a single executive and a Senate once removed from the people. The problem, as John Adams pointed out in his Thoughts on Government, was that “the possible combinations of the powers of society are capable of innumerable variations.”

Americans had every reason to be pessimistic about their experiment in republicanism. History taught that republics were inherently unstable and vulnerable to decay. The Roman republic and the city-state of Athens, for instance, had succumbed to the temptations of empire and lost their liberty. The histories of the Florentine and Venetian republics of Renaissance Italy too had been glorious but short-lived. Theorists from the ancient Greek thinker Polybius to the seventeenth-century English radical Algernon Sidney warned that republics suffer from particular dangers that monarchies and despotisms do not. Republics were assumed to burn brightly but briefly because of their inherent instability. One element of society always usurped power and established a tyranny.

The great danger to republics, it was generally believed, stemmed from corruption, which, like virtue, had both a religious and a worldly meaning. Corruption referred, first, to the prevalence of immorality among the people. “Liberty,” Samuel Adams asserted, “will not long survive the total Extinction of Morals.”

“If the Morals of the people” were neglected, Elbridge Gerry cautioned during the crisis with England, American independence would not produce liberty but “a Slavery, far exceeding that of every other Nation.”

This kind of corruption most often resulted from avarice, the greed for material wealth. Several American colonial legislatures therefore passed sumptuary laws, which prohibited ostentatious displays of wealth. “Luxury . . . leads to corruption,” a South Carolinian declared during the Revolutionary era, “and whoever encourages great luxury in a free state must be a bad citizen.” Another writer warned of the “ill effect of superfluous riches” on republican society. Avarice was seen as a “feminine” weakness; the lust for wealth rotted away “masculine” virtues. John Adams bemoaned “vanities, levities, and fopperies, which are real antidotes to all great, manly, and warlike virtues.”

The second meaning of corruption referred to placing private interest above the common good. This temptation plagued public officials most of all, who had ample opportunity to misappropriate public funds and to expand their power.

“Government was instituted for the general good,” Charles Carroll wrote, “but officers intrusted with its powers have most commonly perverted them to the selfish views of avarice and ambition.” Increasingly in the eighteenth century, Americans came to see government itself as the primary source of corruption.

Fear of government’s tendency to expand its power at the expense of the people’s liberty was part of Americans’ English political heritage. They imbibed the writings of late-seventeenth-century English radicals and eighteenth-century “country” politicians who were suspicious of the power of British officials (the “court”). Government corruption was manifested in patronage (the awarding of political office to friends), faction (the formation of parties whose interests were opposed to the common good), standing (permanent) armies, established churches, and the promotion of an elite class. Power, these country writers argued, was possessed by the government; it was aggressive and expansionist. Liberty was the property of the governed; it was sacred and delicate. The history of liberty in the world was a history of defeat by the forces of tyranny.

Though the history of republicanism was a dismal one, the lessons of history as well as their own colonial experience convinced the American Founders that they possessed sufficient information on which to base a new science of politics. “Experience must be our only guide,” John Dickinson proclaimed at the Philadelphia Convention; “reason may mislead us.” The Framers of the United States Constitution all had experience as public servants,
and it must be remembered that the document they produced did not spring forth as something entirely new in the American experience. Rather, the Founders had learned much from the operation of their colonial charters, state constitutions, and the Articles of Confederation. At Philadelphia, the Founders focused on the proper construction of the machinery of government as the key to the building of a stable republic. The Constitution makes no mention of the need for virtue among the people, nor does it make broad appeals for self-sacrifice on behalf of the common good. It is a hard-headed document forged by practical men who had too often witnessed avarice and ambition among their peers in the state house, the courtroom, and the counting house. A good constitution, the Founders held, was the key to good government. Corruption and decay could be overcome primarily through the creation of a written constitution—something England lacked—that carefully detailed a system in which powers were separated and set in opposition to each other so that none could dominate the others.

James Madison, often called “The Father of the Constitution” because of the great influence of his ideas at Philadelphia, proposed to arrange the machinery of government in such a fashion as not to make virtue or “better motives” critical to the advancement of the common good. Acknowledging in The Federalist Papers that “enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm,” Madison believed that the separate powers of government—legislative, executive, and judicial—must be set in opposition to one another so that “ambition must be made to counteract ambition.”

“In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men,” Madison asserted, “the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.”

James Wilson, representing Pennsylvania at the Philadelphia Convention, declared that the Constitution’s separation of powers and checks and balances made “it advantageous even for bad men to act for the public good.” This is not to say that the delegates believed that the republic could survive if corruption vanquished virtue in society. Madison himself emphasized the importance of republican virtue when defending the new government in The Federalist Papers. But the Framers agreed with Madison that men were not angels, and most were satisfied that the Constitution, as George Washington put it, “is provided with more checks and barriers against the introduction of Tyranny . . . than any Government hitherto instituted among mortals.”

The question remained, however, whether one part of society would come to dominate. No matter how perfect the design, the danger remained that a faction would amass enough political power to take away the liberty of others. To combat this problem, classical republican theory called for creating a uniformity of opinion among the republican citizenry so that factions could not develop. The ancient Greek city-states, for example, feared anything that caused differentiation among citizens, including commerce, which tended to create inequalities of wealth and opposing interests. In contrast, Madison and the Founders recognized that factionalism would be inherent in a commercial republic that protected freedom of religion, speech, press, and assembly. They sought only to mediate the deleterious effects of faction.

Replicas also were traditionally thought to be durable only when a small amount of territory was involved. The Greek city-states, the Roman republic, the Italian republics, and the American states all encompassed relatively small areas. When the Roman republic expanded in its quest for empire, tyranny was the result. Madison turned this traditional thinking on its head in The Federalist Papers, arguing that a large republic was more conducive to liberty because it encompassed so many interests that no single one, or combination of several, could gain control of the government.

Not all Americans accepted the Madisonian solution. Agrarians, such as Thomas Jefferson, were uncomfortable with the idea of a commercial republic centered on industry and sought to perpetuate a nation of independent farmers through the expansion of the frontier. Though uneasy about the “energetic government” created by the Constitution, Jefferson endorsed the Framers’ work after a bill of rights was added to the document. “Old republicans” like Samuel Adams and George Mason opposed the Constitution, even after the addition of a bill of rights, fearing that the power granted to the central government was too great and wistfully looking back to the Revolutionary era when virtue, not ambition, was the animating principle of government. But in 1789, as the new government went into operation,
most Americans shared the optimism of Benjamin Franklin, who had decided at the conclusion of the Philadelphia Convention that the sun carved into the back of the chair used by George Washington was a rising—not a setting—sun, and thereby indicative of the bright prospects of the nation.

“We have it in our power to begin the world over again,” Thomas Paine had written in 1776, during the heady days of American independence. And indeed the American Founders in 1787 were keenly aware that they possessed a rare opportunity.

Like the legendary Lycurgus of Ancient Greece, they were to be the supreme lawgivers of a new republic, a novus ordo seclorum or new order of the ages. The American Founders were aware that the eyes of the world and future generations were upon them, and they were determined to build an eternal republic founded in liberty, a shining city upon a hill, as an example to all nations for all time.

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Suggestions for Further Reading