Controversy is only dreaded by the advocates of error.
—Benjamin Rush

Benjamin Rush had never shied away from controversy before, and he wasn’t about to start now, when so much was at stake. The delegates of Pennsylvania were debating whether to ratify the new Constitution, and Rush believed strongly that doing so was the right thing. Well-traveled and educated, the professor of chemistry was used to speaking in front of large crowds. He would not mince words.

Indeed, the controversial physician had a reputation for speaking his mind even to the point of tactlessness. But as a doctor as well as a Patriot, his fearless attitude led to the advancement of science, social reform, and ultimately the birth of a new national government.

Background
One of seven children, Benjamin Rush was born near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on December 24, 1745. His father died when he was eight years old, and his care was entrusted to an aunt and uncle. He entered his uncle’s academy, and excelled in his studies. Five years later, he enrolled in the junior class at the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University). He graduated when he was barely fifteen.

After debating whether to study theology, law, or medicine, Rush decided to become a physician. For the next five years, he studied with Dr. John Redmond while attending lectures at the College of Philadelphia. In 1766, he traveled to Scotland to continue his studies at the world-renowned University of Edinburgh. He graduated two years later at age twenty-three. He then chose to continue his training in London and Paris. During that year, Rush became friends with Benjamin Franklin.

Rush returned to Philadelphia in 1769. Almost immediately he was named the first professor of chemistry in America at the College of Philadelphia. He quickly went to work launching his own medical practice. He gained a good reputation in the city, first treating the poor and then expanding his practice. Some of his techniques were controversial, such as bloodletting, while others were innovative and effective.

An Outspoken Leader
Throughout his career, Rush pursued interests outside of medicine as well. He supported the revolutionary cause, and called for the independence of the American colonies early on. He encouraged Thomas Paine to write on the subject of independence, and even suggested the title for the pamphlet, Common Sense. Rush’s own writings caught the attention of Patriots like Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. After their first meeting, Adams described him as “a sprightly fellow, but too much a talker to be a deep thinker.”

Rush attended the Continental Congress in 1776. There, he called for a strong spirit of unity among the representatives and states. When delegates bickered over the power of larger colonies, Rush reminded them of their common interests. He said in his first speech in Congress, “The more a man aims at serving America the more he serves his colony. . . . We are dependent upon each other—not totally independent states. . . . When I entered that door, I considered myself a citizen of America.”
Rush again made his presence and opinions known as Surgeon General of the Armies of the Middle Department during the Revolutionary War. Rush was appalled by the dreadful conditions in military hospitals, and questioned the competency of his superiors. He even challenged General George Washington. Rush took the matter to Congress. “Let our army be reformed,” he urged. “Let our general officers be chosen annually.” When Congress rejected his plea, Rush resigned.

Rush practiced medicine and lectured about social reforms until the Constitutional Convention of 1787 called him back to public life. He supported the new Constitution and worked to secure its ratification at the Pennsylvania state convention in 1787. Siding with the Federalists, he thought a bill of rights was unnecessary. “Would it not be absurd,” he asked, “to frame a formal declaration that our natural rights are acquired from ourselves?” Thanks to the efforts of Rush and James Wilson, Pennsylvania became the second state to ratify the Constitution.

Social Reform

Social issues also commanded Rush’s attention. In 1774 he helped to establish the first abolitionist society in America, the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery. In his view, slavery was inconsistent with the Declaration of Independence. He was concerned that the nation would seem hypocritical. To address this concern, he wrote pamphlets against the practice. He also supported gradual emancipation.

In addition to his efforts to oppose slavery, Rush worked to advance the status of all citizens. He strongly believed in the power of education and urged the creation of free public schools for all. He argued that future citizens of the United States, including women, needed to have a well-rounded education. He contended, “Let the ladies of a country be educated properly,” he contended, “and they will . . . form its manners and character.” Rush later helped establish Pennsylvania’s Carlisle College (now Dickinson College).

As a doctor, Rush recognized that a healthy citizenry would be crucial for the development of a young country. During the yellow fever epidemics of the 1790s, Rush stayed in Philadelphia and continued to treat patients despite the obvious risks. (His patients included John and Abigail Adams.) He considered alcohol and tobacco addiction to be diseases, and he advocated abstinence as the only cure. He supported the new technique of vaccination to prevent smallpox. He pioneered treatments for the mentally ill. His groundbreaking work Medical Inquiries and Observations upon Diseases of the Mind (1812) quickly became the first textbook of psychiatry. In fact, some credit him as the Father of American Psychiatry.

In return for Rush’s service to the country, President John Adams appointed Rush as Treasurer of the U.S. Mint in 1799. He held the post until his death in 1813.

An Influential Patriot and Friend

Rush’s influence in the lives of two prominent Founders is also noteworthy. When the divisive political issues of the 1790s took their toll on the long-standing friendship of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, Rush played an instrumental role in their reconciliation. For twenty years, Rush corresponded with both men. Due in large part to Rush’s efforts, Jefferson and Adams resumed their friendship in 1812 and began a correspondence that would last the next fourteen years. Rush told Adams, “I rejoice in the correspondence which has taken place between you and your old friend Mr. Jefferson. I consider you and him as the North and South Poles of the American Revolution.”
Rush’s lifetime of study, innovation, and advocacy was aimed at improving the quality of life for all people, regardless of race, gender, education, or economic status. In the end, Rush did more than sign the Declaration of Independence. Through his works, both in medicine and politics, he demonstrated a belief in the principles of liberty and equality at the Declaration’s core. Hearing of Rush’s death in 1813, John Adams reflected, “I know of no character living or dead who has done more real good for his country.”

Reading Comprehension Questions
1. What three major political roles did Benjamin Rush play in the Founding of the United States?
2. List five social reforms that Rush encouraged.
3. To which office did President Adams appoint Rush?

Critical Thinking Questions
4. In what ways do you think Benjamin Rush was ahead of his time?
5. Throughout his life, Benjamin Rush consistently challenged widely accepted ideas and practices. What are the advantages and disadvantages of doing so?
Excerpts from “Of the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic” (1798)

1. **Vocabulary:** Use context clues to determine the meaning or significance of each of these words and write their definitions:
   a. complexion
   b. nurseries
   c. homogeneous
   d. intelligible
   e. effectual
   f. inculcated
   g. approbation
   h. reciprocal

2. **Context:** Answer the following questions.
   a. When was this document written?
   b. Who wrote this document?
   c. What type of document is this?
   d. What was the purpose of this document?
IN HIS OWN WORDS:
BENJAMIN RUSH ON EDUCATION

Excerpts from “Of the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic” (1798)

**Directions:** Read each paragraph and decide on the main idea. Then write the main idea in your own words below each paragraph.

1. The business of education has acquired a new complexion by the independence of our country. The form of government we have assumed, has created a new class of duties to every American. It becomes us, therefore, to examine our former habits upon this subject, and in laying the foundations for nurseries of wise and good men, to adapt our modes of teaching to the peculiar form of our government.

   **Main Idea:**

2. I conceive the education of our youth in this country to be peculiarly necessary in Pennsylvania, while our citizens are composed of the natives of so many different kingdoms in Europe. Our schools of learning, by producing one general, and uniform system of education, will render the mass of the people more homogeneous, and thereby fit them more easily for uniform and peaceable government.

   **Main Idea:**

3. I proceed in the next place, to enquire, what mode of education we shall adopt so as to secure to the state all the advantages that are to be derived from the proper instruction of youth; and here I beg leave to remark, that the only foundation for a useful education in a republic is to be laid in Religion. Without this there can be no virtue, and without virtue there can be no liberty, and liberty is the object and life of all republican governments. . . .

   **Main Idea:**

4. From the observations that have been made, it is plain, that . . . it is possible to convert men into republican machines. This must be done, if we expect them to perform their parts properly, in the great machine of the government of the state. That republic is sophisticated with monarchy or aristocracy that does not revolve upon the wills of the people, and these must be fitted to each other by means of education before they can be made to produce regularity and unison in government.

   **Main Idea:**

*Benjamin Rush*
5. With the usual arts and sciences that are taught in our American colleges, I wish to see a regular course of lectures given upon History and Chronology... Above all, let our youth be instructed in the history of the ancient republics, and the progress of liberty and tyranny in the different states of Europe. I wish likewise to see the numerous facts that relate to the origin and present state of commerce, together with the nature and principles of money, reduced to such a system, as to be intelligible and agreeable to a young man... 

Main Idea: 

6. I beg pardon for having delayed so long to say anything of the separate and peculiar mode of education proper for women in a republic. I am sensible that they must concur in all our plans of education for young men, or no laws will ever render them effectual. To qualify our women for this purpose, they should not only be instructed in the usual branches of female education, but they should be taught the principles of liberty and government; and the obligations of patriotism should be inculcated upon them. The opinions and conduct of men are often regulated by the women in the most arduous enterprises of life; and their approbation is frequently the principal reward of the hero's dangers, and the patriot's toils. Besides, the first impressions upon the minds of children are generally derived from the women. Of how much consequence, therefore, is it in a republic, that they should think justly upon the great subject of liberty and government!

Main Idea: 

7. The complaints that have been made against religion, liberty and learning, have been, against each of them in a separate state. Perhaps like certain liquors, they should only be used in a state of mixture. They mutually assist in correcting the abuses, and in improving the good effects of each other. From the combined and reciprocal influence of religion, liberty and learning upon the morals, manners and knowledge of individuals, of these, upon government, and of government, upon individuals, it is impossible to measure the degrees of happiness and perfection to which mankind may be raised. For my part, I can form no ideas of the golden age, so much celebrated by the poets, more delightful, than the contemplation of that happiness which it is now in the power of the legislature of Pennsylvania to confer upon her citizens, by establishing proper modes and places of education in every part of the state.

Main Idea: 


Founders and the Constitution: In Their Own Words—Volume 2
**ANALYSIS: CONTRASTING IDEAS OF EDUCATION**

**Directions:** Fill in the left side of the chart with the purposes and goals of education during Benjamin Rush’s time. Fill in the right side of the chart with modern goals and purposes of education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GOALS OF EDUCATION DURING RUSH’S TIME</th>
<th>GOALS OF EDUCATION TODAY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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 republican 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.
“If the foundation is badly laid,” George Washington said of the American government, “the superstructure must be bad.” Americans adhered to a modified version of the idea of “mixed” government, advocated by the Greek thinker Polybius and later republican theorists. A mixed republic combined the three basic parts of society—monarchy (the one ruler), aristocracy (the rich few), and democracy (the people)—in a proper formula so that no one part could tyrannize the others. But Americans believed that the people of a republic were sovereign, so they sought to create institutions that approximated the monarchical and aristocratic elements of society. 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.

“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 instrusted 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 republicanms 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 each other 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.

Republics 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.

Stephen M. Klugewicz, Ph.D.
Consulting Scholar, Bill of Rights Institute

Suggestions for Further Reading