The First Great Newspaper Debate: The Constitutional Crisis of 1787–88

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OUR FAMILIARITY with the events of 1787 sometimes blinds us to the uniqueness of the process of constitutional change that took place in this country between the fall of 1786 and the summer of 1788. Nothing even remotely similar to the American experience had ever occurred before. And nothing like it could have happened in a country that lacked those 150 years of life within the British Empire; for what began at Plymouth and Jamestown was a great venture in English colonization, based on English law, English folkways, and English history. Of critical importance is the role that newspapers played in the aftermath of the breakup of that empire, when our nation was created and the Constitution drafted, revised, finished, signed, and then ratified. And all of this accomplished in less than fourteen months.

The roots of the breach with England were first planted in Boston. As Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., reminded us, this colonial capital was 'the Foundry of Propaganda' when the Stamp Act crisis forced British-Americans to react suddenly and violently to Parliamentary pressure.[1] Borrowing a page from their English cousins, American printers, and Boston printers particulary, were a scourge afflicting crown officials as they proved that all the rhetoric since

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1. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., *Prelude to Independence* (New York, 1958), pp. 85–109.

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the Revolution of 1688 in England about a free press was not falling on sterile ground. To them, freedom of the press was no abstraction; it was a part of their English heritage. As 'Cato' in the London press had assured them, freedom of the press was 'the palladium of our Liberties,' and they believed the slogan as though it were a gospel truth.[2] The stamp tax was repealed, but it was followed by a new threat in the Townshend Acts. Anonymous essayists, led by Samuel Adams and John Dickinson, relentlessly pressed home the argument that a three-penny tax on tea was only the entering wedge and the precursor of tyranny. 'Contempt & Infamy,' the *Boston Gazette* warned, awaited those who failed to resist Parliamentary oppression. From that beginning, when all but a handful of printers in the colonies made a common cause of their grievance against the detested stamp and tea taxes, something new was happening in this part of the world. Men were speaking and writing words that had been treasonous a century earlier, but now they were getting away with it. In the crucible of the Stamp Act and tea party turmoil, the American colonial press gave new meaning to freedom of a press. A free press was no longer a concept; it was a fact.

With the background of resistance and rebellion fomented, encouraged, and lauded by newspapers, by 1787 Americans were accustomed to the airing of complaints more often than to the reading of facts in their weekly gazettes. Surely newspapers hastened the day when independence was proclaimed, and, through Thomas Paine and other essayists, the young nation recoiled to the shocks at Valley Forge and Charleston with never a thought of surrender. All this reliance upon newspapers for the sustenance of morale, and the encouragement of the effort against England was not erased when peace came. And many a foreign visitor was taken aback to find that chambermaids, blacksmiths, farmers, and shopkeepers were also readers of newspapers. Tocqueville's shock when he found a copy of Shakespeare's plays in a crude frontier

2. Leonard Levy, *The Legacy of Suppression* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), pp. 115–21; see also his *Emergence of a Free Press* (New York, 1985), pp. 109–12.

cabin is typical of the European reaction to this phenomenon.[3] More than any other people on the globe, by the late eighteenth-century, vast numbers of Americans had learned to read; and they did not stop their reading with the Bible. Perhaps our shock today at finding young Americans so culturally deficient is that we have turned a corner in our country and no longer regard reading as a vital exercise. In 1787, this was not the case, and no thinking American knew this better than James Madison or Alexander Hamilton or, for that matter, George Washington.

The critical juncture in American affairs in 1786-87 is familiar to us, but, to recap quickly, let us remember that the Annapolis Convention failed, a general call for a national convention being the only real achievement, and the Continental Congress passed that plea on to the states. In May, the first of the fifty-five delegates trudged into Philadelphia, and they worked until September 17 without a single newspaper report of their proceedings. That in itself was a kind of miracle, perhaps the real 'Miracle at Philadelphia,' for no protest came from printers when the convention voted to hold its sessions in secret. The general feeling among the delegates was that secrecy was essential. On May 28, as the delegates were settling into their chairs, Pierce Butler moved 'that the house provide . . . agst. licentous publication of their proceedings.'[4] The consensus was so overwhelming that the matter was hardly debated. George Mason told his son, 'This I think myself a proper precaution to prevent mistakes and misrepresentation until the business shall have been completed, when the whole may have a very different complexion from that in which the several crude and indigested parts might in their first shape appear if submitted to the public eye.'[5]

The injunction was strictly enforced, but printers and the public knew that Washington was the presiding officer, and thus their

3. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 2 vols., ed. Phillips Bradley (New York, 1945), 2:55.

4. Max Farrand, ed., *Records of the Federal Convention*, 4 vols. (New Haven, 1911–37), 1:13.

5. Robert A. Rutland, ed., *Papers of George Mason*, 3 vols. (Chapel Hill, 1970), 3: 884.

trust was freely granted. Looking back to those momentous times, Madison in 1834 ventured the opinion that 'no Constitution would ever have been adopted by the convention if the debates had been [made] public.' No doubt Madison was right, for the thin ice on which the delegates trod would have broken had the public known of the tension over state representation and the threats to go home that were muttered until the July 16 compromise. That compromise would have been virtually impossible if a reporter had been at liberty to tell the country all the backbiting and vote switching that was taking place. But, thank Providence, the public was spared that inside view, and so the business of making a constitution proceeded on to September, with some hitches, but none that were catastrophic.

When the Constitution was signed in mid-September, not one delegate of the thirty-eight present to sign could have predicted with any certainty that their handiwork would be accepted by the public.[6] In short, the jury was still out, and would be until the next June. Surveying the likelihood of ratification by nine states, even optimistic Gouverneur Morris had to admit his concern. 'My Religion steps in where my understanding falters,' Morris wrote, 'and I feel faith as I lose Confidence.' [7] After the toasts and farewells of that last day in convention, everything dissolved in an atmosphere of cautious optimism, clouded by uncertainty.

The main area of doubt concerned the immediate public reaction, for the delegates had circumvented the thirteen state legislatures by providing for ratification by at least nine special conventions—a clever strategy that placed a premium on careful organization, political sagacity, and the art of persuasion. And all these elements would be needed, for there was no existing national political organization, no network of like-minded public men committed to a political philosophy or program. As Madison had noted in the federal convention, the strongest ties in the union

6. Thirty-eight delegates signed, and the ailing John Dickinson authorized George Read to sign for him in absentia.

7. Morris to Hamilton, June 13, 1788, Hamilton Papers, Library of Congress.

were geographic—the 'northern interest and the southern interest' he called them—and despite Madison's claim that 'slavery & its consequences formed the line of discrimination,' there was more behind the division than slavery.[8] So no formal group existed, which meant that one man could be a message center for the whole nation, and, in a sense, Madison became that central figure, as he used his franking privilege to spend whole days at his desk writing to friends of the Constitution living in key areas, seeking an assessment of the situation as the ratification struggle took shape.

Even as Madison assumed his self-appointed role, the newspapers seized the initiative, beginning on September 19, when the Philadelphia printers Dunlap and Claypoole printed the entire Constitution in their *Pennsylvania Packet.* (They already had the Constitution set in type, since, as the official printers to the convention, they had prepared the Committee of Style report.) This provided a shattering precedent, for soon virtually every newspaper in the country followed their example by printing the Constitution in its entirety. During the next six weeks, it is probable that every one of the ninety-nine or 100 newspapers that we know existed in the country provided their readers with the complete text.

When a Pennsylvania legislator in late September suggested that 3,500 copies of the proposed Constitution be printed at public expense, Hugh Brackenridge objected on the grounds that 'this paper [the Constitution] had been published in all the gazettes, as well as in handbills.'[9] Why, Brackenridge asked, pay for public printings when newspapers had already broadcast the text *gratis*?

The brevity of the Constitution was certainly working in its

8. William T. Hutchinson et al., eds., *Papers of James Madison*, 17 vols. (Chicago and Charlottesville, Va., 1960–), 10:102.

9. Some confusion as to numbers exists because several printers used a variety of names for a single newspaper—one for a weekly edition, another for a semiweekly, etc. My list, accumulated during research on the book *Ordeal of the Constitution: The Antifederalists and the Ratification Struggle of 1787–1788* (Boston, 1983), contained ninety-nine separate entries; Proceedings of the Pennsylvania Assembly, September 25, 1787, in Merrill Jensen et al., eds., *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, 16 vols. to date (Madison, Wis., 1976–), 2:63.

favor, for less than seven thousand words could fit comfortably into the four-columned newspapers of the day, usually in one issue. Nothing similar to this had ever occurred before and has never happened since—a whole nation invited, and even encouraged, to read the entire Constitution.

Before the month of September was over, there was an initial outpouring of enthusiasm for the Constitution, essentially nonpartisan and in keeping with the spirit engendered by Washington's cover letter when the document went forward to the Continental Congress (for relaying to the states). Gouverneur Morris wrote the letter, but Washington signed it, and it bore all the hallmarks of an endorsement. Privately, Washington said he was going back to Mount Vernon, and, as for the Constitution, 'what will be the general opinion on, or the reception of it, is not for me to decide, nor shall I say any thing for or against it.'[10] Washington retired, but Morris's letter had done all that was needed to give the general's stamp of approbation to the Constitution. And Washington was concerned. To a former aide he wrote, 'Much will depend . . . upon literary abilities, and the recommendation of it [the Constitution] by good pens should be *openly*, I mean, publickly afforded in the Gazettes.'[11] John Adams, at his diplomatic post in London, called the impending struggle 'the greatest single effort of national deliberation that the world has ever seen.'

The ratification bandwagon broke fast, for that was the strategy Federalists conceived for victory. The crisis could not be solved if years were consumed in the process of ratifying the Constitution; and we can only guess at how this strategy evolved in the minds of Hamilton, Madison, Rufus King, Gouverneur Morris, and the others who intended to bestir themselves. Soon essays by the score were appearing in newspapers, most of them pseudonymously signed, ranging from the famous 'Federal Farmer' to the obscure 'Nuts for the Aristocrats to Crack.' From his listening post in New

10. Washington to Lafayette, September 18, 1787. In *The Writings of George Washington*, 39 vols., ed. John C. Fitzpatrick, (Washington, D.C., 1931–44), 29:277.

11. Washington to David Humphreys, October 10, 1787, ibid., 29:287.

York, Madison wrote Jefferson that it was still too early to detect the public mood after the passage of a few weeks, but the quality of pro-Constitution supporters made it clear that the Federalists were an overmatch for their opponents.

As the opposition took shape, almost accidentally and certainly without any national coordinator, one of the three nonsigners at the Federal Convention unwittingly provided the fireworks. Most printers were reluctant to show their political coloration, since they were trained to believe that factionalism was akin to political suicide. In Boston, Benjamin Russell's *Massachusetts Centinel* bore the slogan 'Uninfluenced by Party, we aim only to be Just.' A genuine test of nonpartisanship was the circulation in late September of George Mason's objections to the Constitution, which he had scribbled on the verso of his Committee of Style report. The list began: 'There is no Declaration of Rights,' and Mason could have stopped there, for his opening clause became the tocsin for the ratification struggle ahead. We can see now that the attitude of printers toward Mason's objections was an early indicator of where their newspapers would stand in the partisan campaign ahead. In Philadelphia, then the hub of the nation's printing industry and the home of eleven weeklies or dailies, Mason's 'Objections' were handed to friends, who, without Mason's knowledge, hurried his short but specific list of constitutional miscues into print. But the mood of Philadelphia was not favorable to such sharp dissent, so Mason's 'Objections' were passed over by the newspapers and apparently first reached the public as a handbill.[12] Mason's critique also mentioned the Constitution's silence on 'the liberty of the press,' but it was in fact partly aimed at northern shippers and merchants; nonetheless, the bombshell was in that first sentence. Within a matter of weeks, newspapers in Richmond and elsewhere printed Mason's 'Objections,' and far more space

12. Rutland, *Papers of George Mason*, 3: 991–93, 1045. The only extant handbill of Mason's 'Objections' is held by the American Antiquarian Society. A copy is available in microform; it is listed in Clifford K. Shipton and James E. Mooney's *National Index of American Imprints through 1800*, 2 vols. (Worcester, 1969), as Evans 45095.

was given to rebuttals from James Wilson and Oliver Ellsworth. But the damage was done; and try as they might over the next nine months, the friends of the Constitution were unable to fend off Mason's no-bill-of-rights attack. Ultimately, they were forced to capitulate.

Before that happened, however, it became clear that the majority of America's printers were not unprejudiced nor seeking to avoid a partisan label. Madison, after reading several of the opposition newspapers, told Governor Randolph, 'Judging from the Newspapers one wd. suppose that the adversaries [of the Constitution] were the most numerous & the most earnest. But there is no other evidence that it is the fact.' Robert Morris agreed. In writing to Washington, he noted that the Antifederalists opposed to the Contitutions 'are not Numerous altho they fill the News Papers every day.' [13] Soon Madison and Morris must have known the truth: that, except for the *New-York Journal*, the Philadelphia *Independent Gazetteer*, and the Boston *American Herald*, newspaper opposition was sporadic, scattered along the Atlantic seaboard, and never exceeded a score of printing establishments.

The list of opposition newspapers might have been longer but for the economic facts of life. Economic pressure could be and was exerted by the merchant-banker-lawyer community that was anxious for quick ratification. The Philadelphia *Freeman's Journal* and *Pennsylvania Evening Herald* were among the earliest casualties to Federalist pressure as canceled advertisements and discontinued subscriptions took their toll. Printer Edward Powars in Boston felt the pinch and tried to balance matters by occasionally printing a Federalist essay as proof of good intentions. But his brother printer in Philadelphia, Oswald, was enraged by the lack of Federalist subtlety. He denounced his opponents as '*high-flying tools*, *pigmies* and *tiffanies* of power' who were so ungenerous as to cancel their subscriptions as a tactic aimed at suppressing dissent to the Constitution.[14] But in Boston, Russell, at the *Centinel*, lashed

13. Madison to Randolph, October 21, 1787, Hutchinson, *Papers of James Madison*, 10:199.

14. Rutland, *Ordeal of the Constitution*, p. 44.

'wrongheaded' Antifederalist printers who had the effrontery to print attacks on the Constitution but still expected Federalist patronage. When Powars was forced to retreat, first by changing the name of his newspaper and then by moving to Worcester in hopes of a better business climate, the beleaguered printer found little solace. Russell's farewell to his battered brother printer was 'good riddance.'

In Connecticut, Federalist pressure and personal inclination combined to make the Hartford *Connecticut Courant* and the New Haven *Connecticut Journal* rallying points for supporters of the proposed Constitution. Among the most widely circulated newspapers in the Republic, they were the first testing grounds for Oliver Ellsworth's powerful 'Landholder' essays, which came from the architect of the Connecticut compromise at the convention and a man probably second only to Madison in his political acumen and knowledge of the national situation. 'Landholder' thumped the Antifederalists for their inconsistency and obstructionism, but a Connecticut veteran believed the newspapers in his state were part of a Federalist conspiracy. 'Every thing huggermuggered & suppressed [by local newspapers] that was truly alarming against it [the Constitution],' the old soldier wailed as he saw a plot to make Federalists rich by purchasing depreciated government securities for three shillings on the pound.[15]

No proof of a conspiracy was forthcoming, despite these charges, but Connecticut's early and overwhelming ratification of the Constitution certainly fitted neatly into the overall strategy of near unanimity in the newspapers, a short convention called for an early meeting, and a decided pro-Constitution majority on the final ballot.

Neighboring Rhode Island presented a problem for friends of the Constitution, for the state legislature had refused to send a delegate to the Philadelphia convention. As further evidence of their contumacious conduct, the Rhode Island lawmakers ignored the convention plan recommended to states and instead called for

15. Ibid., p. 72.

an early referendum of all qualified voters, asking citizens to vote yes or no regarding ratification. The printer of the *United States Chronicle* in Providence, Bennett Wheeler, attempted to steer an impartial course by printing essays from both sides of the battle, and his newspaper was probably the fairest of any in the Union.[16] But, for his pains, Wheeler was condemned by the Federalists for being too weak, and by the Antifederalists for being a toady to the Providence business community. The dominant merchants in Providence were not interested in fair play, however; they wanted the Constitution ratified. So they denounced the popular referendum as a sham and boycotted the voting. The outcome: 2,708 votes against the Constitution, 237 for it. The results were not widely reprinted, except in the few Antifederalist newspapers; if they were printed, the results were followed by a comment that such results were to be expected from wicked 'Rogue-Island.' Even so, the Rhode Island legislature was impressed and thus rejected calls for a regular convention three times in 1788, convinced that their actions reflected the will of their constituents, primarily farmers owning relatively small acreages.

Federalist newspapers increasingly ignored Rhode Island, since the news from there was consistently unfavorable to the cause of the Constitution. Bandwagons, political bandwagons anyway, need well-oiled axletrees to keep rolling; and Federalists anxious for that vital ninth ratifying state preferred to point to favorable signs of victory. The most outstanding success story of the ratification battle was a success only in retrospect: the publication of the eighty-five essays signed by 'Publius' that appeared in a trio of New York newspapers between October 1787 and March 1788, and known now as *The Federalist Papers*. At the time when they were printed in the New York *Daily Advertiser* and several other Federalist journals on Manhattan, the works by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and, to a lesser extent, John Jay, were aimed at a local audience. A union without New York was unthinkable,

16. Robert A. Rutland, *The Newsmongers: Journalism in the Life of the Nation, 1690–1972* (New York, 1973), p. 63.

and yet there was considerable doubt that the pivotal state of New York would ratify the Constitution. All the signs, in fact, pointed to a victory for Gov. George Clinton's political machine, which was decidedly hostile to the centralizing features of the proposed Constitution. As Madison recalled, the essays 'were written most of them in great haste. . . . It frequently happened that whilst the printer was putting into type the parts of a number, the following parts were under the pen, & to be furnished in time for the press.'[17] No wonder we have not one Madison or Hamilton document from this episode in the great newspaper debate, for the printers apparently took the scribbled notes and, after their composing chores, tossed the smudged sheets into a scrapheap.

Antifederal writers denigrated 'Publius' without mercy. After twenty-six essays appeared, 'Bob Short' told readers of the Philadelphia *Freeman's Journal*, that a respite was in order, for the heavy-handed articles 'would jade the brain of any poor sinner.' 'In decency,' the Antifederalist pleaded, 'Publius' should 'now rest on his arms, and let the people draw their breath for a little.'[18] Oswald's readers were told of a farmer who read 'Publius' and rejected his arguments because the people were really more interested in the debate over the Constitution and 'had not time or inclination to read any essay on Foreign Affairs.'[19] The writings of Ellsworth, Roger Sherman, Tench Coxe, and other Federalists were more polemic, personal, and, in the judgment of history—more effective at the time despite their ephemeral quality. Surely *The Federalist Papers* have been read, and discussed in academic groves, more during the past generation than they were in 1787-88.[20] One is tempted to say that, for hard-hitting effectiveness in the ratification campaign, the Federalists' strongest essays were penned by Ellsworth rather than 'Publius.'

17. Elizabeth Fleet, ed., 'Madison's "Detached Memoranda,"' *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 3 (1946): 565.

18. Rutland, *Ordeal of the Constitution*, p. 137.

19. Ibid.

20. See Clinton Rossiter, ed., *The Federalist Papers* (New York, 1961), p. vii, and Robert A. Dahl, *Pluralist Democracy in the United States: Conflict and Consent* (Chicago, 1967).

Probably the most widely read counterpart of 'Landholder' or 'Publius' during the ratification struggle was 'Centinel,' the essayists whose twenty-four articles first appeared in the *Independent Gazetteer.* Samuel Bryan of Philadelphia used the pseudonym as he lashed at the Constitution as a conspiratorial document, hatched in secrecy and designed to implant an elective aristocracy in America.[21] Bryan was among the loudest complainers when it seemed that the nation's post office department was part of the conspiracy, deliberately choking off the free circulation of Antifederalist newspapers along the seaboard. Bryan was joined in his charges by the *New-Hampshire Spy,* which moaned in March 1788 that it had 'rarely received a single paper from New-York or Philadelphia' for the previous three months. In that same month, the *Freeman's Journal* in Philadelphia printed a spurious letter, purportedly written by Dr. Benjamin Rush to Alexander Hamilton, explaining the newspaper stoppage. 'Our scheme of stopping the newspapers containing the anti-federal pieces, has succeeded,' the letter explained. It continued, 'Let Mr. ----- know, that 200 dollars will be forthwith transmitted as a small gratuity for his service.' The accusation of bribery was groundless, but discerning readers knew the blank space was reserved for the name of Ebenezer Hazard, the well-intentioned postmaster general who was trying to economize by using more postriders and fewer stagecoaches. When Hazard learned that an Antifederalist tract printed in Philadelphia in December did not reach Boston until late February, the postmaster general confessed, 'This surprizes me because the Penna. dissenters' pamphlet had been published long before any hints were thrown about delays.'[22]

Hazard had his defender in Bostonian Benjamin Russell. Russell acknowledged the delay of newspapers, but claimed it hurt both sides of the political battle, and was owing not to incompetence in the post office but to avaricious postriders who carried the mails between New York and Hartford and who 'take from, and sell, the

21. Morton Borden, ed., *The Antifederalist Papers* (Lansing, Mich., 1965), p. 14.
22. Rutland, *Ordeal of the Constitution*, p. 131.

newspapers directed to Printers.'[23] Oswald rejected this argument, asking why Antifederal newspapers were systematically 'quashed or purloined in the Post Office in New York, while those papers which may with strictest truth be called the vehicles of despotism, pass from place to place unmolested.' Hazard groaned under such attacks and complained to a friend that 'Oswald and Baily . . . and Oswald's Echo [Greenleaf] have been pelting me at a most unmerciful rate.' Poor Hazard was learning that while the public professed to admire frugality in a bureaucrat, the people failed to appreciate economy if it diminished their services. Hazard's career as a public servant was nearing its end.

The first critical ratifying convention, after the accusations that followed the Pennsylvania meeting, was that scheduled for Massachusetts in January 1788. Boston was the site, where readers could choose from eight newspapers, with the arch-Federalist *Massachusetts Centinel* at one extreme and the cautious *American Herald* at the other. With that delicious New England word 'wicked' foremost in his vocabulary, Russell early on condemned the Antifederalists as 'malignant, ignorant, and short-sighted triflers,' known for 'the weakness of their heads, and the badness of their hearts.' Russell was eager for Massachusetts to erect the sixth pillar in his 'Federal Edifice' cartoon and probably was dismayed that Connecticut had already acted to become the first New England state under his artistic 'Federal Roof.' A blue-blood Federalist surveyed the list of 360 delegates chosen by the towns and drew a line between 'integrity, property, & ability' and the country bumpkins, and concluded, 'My god the contrast.'[24] Russell's *Centinel* hammered away at the farmers elected by suspicious town meetings, reminding them that Washington's name headed the list of those at the Philadelphia convention. But the *American Herald* warned readers not to be stunned by the brilliance of names and told delegates of thirteen disadvantages in the new plan of

23. Rutland, *The Newsmongers*, p. 65.

24. Henry Jackson to Henry Knox, January 20, 1788, Knox Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

government, which included the prediction that the '*Trade of Boston* [would be] transferred to *Philadelphia*' while '*Religion* [would be] *abolished*.'[25] The *Herald* advised delegates to postpone final action on the Constitution and await the call for a second convention, and this tactic became the emerging strategy of Antifederalists in the New York and Virginia strongholds. One of the ablest Antifederal writers, James Winthrop, used the *Herald* columns to plead with the delegates for a bill of rights as a condition to ratification, as the Federalists counted noses and believed they were coming up short. 'A nose of wax will be counted one [vote] as well as any other nose,' a wary Federalist commented.

Then Gov. John Hancock was persuaded to appear in the convention hall with a bill of rights proposal in his pocket, but only as a recommendation to be forwarded with an unqualified ratification, not a conditional one. The Antifederalist press screamed 'Foul,' but it was too late. A false report, claiming that North Carolina had recently ratified, circulated on the floor of the convention on the day of the crucial vote and only added to pressures already heavy on Antifederalist leaders. 'Unfortunately every Blockhead and Bankrupt in the State has as good a Vote as a better man,' a staunch Federalist moaned, fearing the worst. In the final vote, however, a dozen such blockheads deserted the Antifederal ranks to produce a slender majority for unconditional ratification. Joyfully, Russell's *Centinel* portrayed the sixth pillar moved into the proper spot and reported the final moments of the convention. 'All appeared willing to bury the hatchet of animosity, and to smoke the calumet of union and love,' he noted.[26] All? Perhaps Russell exaggerated, since printer Powars soon found the Boston precincts too hostile for him to make a living and was headed for Worcester and oblivion. But as the news from Boston worked southward, Federalists relaxed their vigil slightly. In New York, Madison was wary, but Hamilton felt relieved. Madison's morale improved as he analyzed the vote. 'Among the Antifederalists,' he

25. Rutland, *Ordeal of the Constitution*, p. 99.
26. Ibid., p. 111.

observed, 'there was not a single character capable of uniting their wills or directing their measures. . . . They had no plan whatever . . . [except] to put a negative on the Constitution and return home.'[27]

Bouyed by the Massachusetts results, Madison tapered off in his journalistic endeavors and finally left that chore in Hamilton's hands. More close votes would follow, but after February 6 there was little doubt that the Constitution would be ratified. The Antifederalist press turned on the defensive with more malice than good will. Federalists replied in kind, and after the news of New York's ratification reached Manhattan on July 22, 1788, a celebrating mob wound its way through the city streets to Thomas Greenleaf's printing shop, where the Antifederal *New-York Journal* had predicted a different outcome. During the ensuing melee, Greenleaf's shop was broken into, his typecases pied, his reams of paper destroyed, and his furniture smashed. Greenleaf was forced to suspend his newspaper for a month, and in reporting the damage, he also noted that sixty 'illiberal subscribers' had canceled his weekly newspaper.[28]

By August 1, 1788—less than eleven months since the ratification process had begun—that American must have been remote who had not learned the outcome of the struggle. Not all understood the implications, but they trusted the framers of the Constitution, and, above all, they trusted the man most of them assumed would be the first president. As James Monroe wrote to Jefferson in Paris regarding Washington's unseen presence in the state conventions, 'Be assured his influence carried this government.'[29] Perhaps Monroe overstated the truth only slightly.

The overwhelming support of the newspapers in this first test of a national referendum was a key element in the successful ratification campaign and set the journalistic tone for political contests

27. Madison to Jefferson, February 19, 1788, Hutchinson, *Papers of James Madison*, 10:519.

28. Rutland, *Ordeal of the Constitution*, pp. 265–66.

29. Monroe to Jefferson, July 12, 1788. In *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 22 vols., ed. Julian P. Boyd, et al. (Princeton, 1950), 13:352.

in America for generations to come. Imagine the difficulties the Federalists would have faced had the circumstances been reversed, and instead of having the support of some seventy-five newspapers they had faced their hostility. Even the name of Washington would have been difficult to invoke as the final argument in favor of the Constitution. Moreover, without this newspaper battle, the debate of a bill of rights would have been muted and probably would have led to nothing in the First Congress. Other lessons were learned as well; for the Federalist majority was so overbearing that it forgot older admonitions about liberality and moderation and proceeded to the excesses of the Sedition Act of 1799.

On all sides, America's leading men realized that something fundamental had happened to the political process in the new Republic. The nation's political habits would never be the same. 'Since the World began,' a correspondent wrote to Jefferson, 'I believe no Question has ever been more repeatedly and strictly scrutinized or more fairly and freely argued, than this proposed Constitution.' No wonder that Jefferson in 1787 said that, had he a choice between 'a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government,' he would unhesitatingly prefer the latter condition.[30]

The example of free men arguing and trying to persuade, of losing and of winning, that was provided in the first great newspaper debates in 1787-88 set the nation on an unalterable course of freedom. Now, two hundred years later, we still find that the wholesomeness of full public debate is the best way to preserve our liberty.

30. Francis Hopkinson to Jefferson, July 17, 1788, ibid., 13:370; Jefferson to Edward Carrington, January 16, 1787, ibid., 11:49.

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