FIFTY years is a long time, and I can only vaguely recall the difficulties I had, in those pre-internet years, to gather the sources for the book that were scattered through dozens of archives here and abroad; the sense of discovery that dominated the project from the start; and the great intensity with which the book was written. But some things are unforgettable. One of the few clear memories I have is of my sudden discovery of the usefulness of prayer in keeping me from being hit by a truck before I could get the book into print.

My aim in what follows is not to describe the making of the book or to evaluate any part of it, or to trace its role in the historiography of the subject, but only to note my reaction to re-reading it now, focusing only on a few features that seem to me to stand out most clearly, and to confess to some of the background of what appears in print.

The first of these requires a word of explanation. For several years before the appearance of *The Ideological Origins*, I had been trying to identify the core areas of my interest in history, the time period, or the place, or the process, or the topics that most interested me. Sometime in the 1950s, I wrote out my main conclusions and buried one of them in a small book on the history of education published in 1960. Among the things that


most intrigued me, I wrote, and that seemed most important are

those critical passages of history where elements of our familiar present, still part of an unfamiliar past, begin to disentangle themselves, begin to emerge amid confusion and uncertainty. For these soft, ambiguous moments where the words we use and the institutions we know are notably present but are still enmeshed in older meanings and different purposes—these are the moments of true origination. They reveal in clearest form essential features which subsequent events complicate and modify but never completely transform.¹

The words are mine, but the thought derives largely from Mark Bloch, whose main writings—which so often turn on conceptual and etymological transitions—I had studied with great concentration in preparation for my oral exam on the history of medieval France. For Bloch, slow interior shifts in the meaning of words explained or reflected large social transformations. For me, in a more general sense, it led to a focus on the early modern period of Western history, with emphasis on the long revolutionary era here and abroad—a period and place from which, I believed, basic elements of modernity emerged.

Emergence: re-reading The Ideological Origins, I realized how much of the book is about precisely that. The emergence not of wholly new ideas, political or social, or new concepts of governance but of shifts in the meanings of long-familiar terms and venerable practices—slight shifts, subtle turns—that proved to be transformative. The old words remain, but their meanings are altered. In the American Revolutionary Era, the emergence of such inner transformations appeared contentiously, erratically, unsurely from within the pounding debate on possible grounds for resistance to Britain’s sovereignty. The leaders of resistance were not philosophers or political theorists but merchants, lawyers, planters, and preachers. They did not write systematic discourses, nor did they feel bound to adhere to traditional maxims or to reasoning, however logical, that led to conclusions they feared. Edmund Burke, in his speech

of 1774 on American taxation, caught their spirit exactly. If, he warned the government, you keep arguing subtle deductions on the nature of supreme sovereignty odious to those you govern, you will teach them to call your sovereignty into question.

When you drive him hard, the boar will surely turn upon the hunters. If that sovereignty and their freedom cannot be reconciled, which will they take? They will cast your sovereignty in your face. No body will be argued into slavery.²

So, defiantly and experimentally, the colonial leaders twisted and turned to find new meanings within familiar concepts. “Constitution”: in Britain, though Burke fiercely denied it, was in fact a loose bundle of statutes, common law, and sanctioned practices, without explicit boundaries.³ It emerges in the colonies as an articulated foundational structure of explicit powers and rights, “a thing antecedent to government” superior to and confining any subsequent enactments. “The balance of powers”—traditionally a balance of social orders or estates—emerged as a balance of functioning branches of government—though in some places and in some minds social orders had long been assumed to embody, in some fashion, functions of government, and in others the old concept for a time persisted.

So it was with rights: once identified with the privileges and liberties granted by rulers and municipalities, embedded in customs and inscribed in age-old statutes and royal decrees, emerged free of sanctified privileges, as natural endowments of humanity based on the principles of reason and justice. None of the Revolutionary writers sought deliberately to repudiate the heritage of established law. Their aim was to establish the source of all rights in the transcendent laws of nature and the fundamental endowments of humanity, beyond the reach of human powers. It was left for the future to identify all such rights and enact them into positive law, a struggle that we know


³Burke, “An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs” (1791), in Writings and Speeches, 4:432-33.
would have no end. But the Revolutionary generation created the basic shift in the meaning of rights on what would prove to be the cusp of an emerging modernity.

And so it was in other spheres of political thought: in the meaning of representation, in the nature of sovereignty, and in the amplitudes and boundaries of personal freedom. What strikes me now is how pervasive in the book is the sense of an emergent world slowly becoming part of our familiar present, and how that helps explain how things came to be the way they are.

I became aware as well, as I read through the book, of something quite different, something unplanned, that had developed as the book was written. I realized that large sections of what I had written proved to be a selection of statements by contributors to the debate—contributions to a conversation, it would seem, among many speakers—that provided the context for any one contribution. Some of the writers quoted or paraphrased were in fact addressing each other directly, and I recorded these exchanges. Some statements were not direct challenges; they were simply written by participants to establish their views, but when brought together they formed a cluster of related exchanges important to the overall discourse. A comment from one source was paired with its opposite to show the outer boundaries of opinion, the limits of imagination. More significantly, the complexity of opinion and the difficulty of establishing a consensus was shown by juxtaposing similar-seeming but subtly different views which changed as the conflict deepened. A phrase or two was extracted from one source and added to another for emphasis or clarity.

There are dangers in creating this kind of constructed conversation or debate, and I had been aware of them. One could gather together similar sounding expressions to form an apparently consistent grouping, or tradition, or party line that in fact never existed. That is, one could construct a narrative, an intellectual story, that was in fact an authorial construct, an account of one’s own devising. Contemporaries whose words one used to form the narrative could not themselves have known that such a story was unfolding—that they were participants in
a movement or group unknown to them. So on what basis had
I selected the examples and organized them to tell the story?
Had I implicitly assumed that some kind of collective mind was
at work and illustrated it by manipulating the documentation I
had?

There was no collective mind. But there were vital issues
around which divergent opinions gathered and that were, so
to speak, organically related to each other. They could reason-
ably and without contextual distortion be grouped together to
form discussions that expressed the heart of the struggle.

And this brings me to Quentin Skinner. I recalled, as I re-
read The Ideological Origins, my reaction to reading Skinner's
elegant, quasi-philosophical essays of the late sixties and seven-
ties on understanding modern political thought not by focusing
on the "classic texts" as such, which could lead to what he called
"historical nonsense," but "on the more general social and intel-
lectual matrix out of which [these] works arose." It is essential,
he wrote in 1978,

to consider the intellectual context in which the major texts were
conceived—the context of earlier writings and inherited assumptions
about political society, and of more ephemeral contemporary contribu-
tions to social and political thought. For it is evident that the nature
and limits of the normative vocabulary available at any given time will
also help to determine the ways in which particular questions come
to be singled out and discussed. I have thus tried to write a history
centred less on the classic texts and more on the history of ideologies.

Though Skinner's tightly wrought, formal papers on the foun-
dations of modern political thought were remote from any pur-
pose of mine, I felt his stress on "texts written or used in
the same period, addressed to the same or similar issues, and
sharing a number of conventions" was familiar ground for me,
though I had come to it through very different documents from
his.4

4Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," in Meaning and
University Press, 1988), 50; Skinner, The Foundations of Modern Political Thought
(Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1978), l.x, xi.
In any case, looking back at the result now, I find that this unplanned feature of the book in the passage of time has acquired the additional value of conveying a sense of the intellectual excitement of the pre-Revolutionary years, the unexpected complexities of the problems the participants faced, and their constant experimentation in hitherto unreasonable territories of political and constitutional thought.

But of all my impressions on re-reading the book, the most vivid by far is the Americans’ obsession with Power. It was not one among many concerns, it was their central, overwhelming concern, and I responded to it now even more strongly than when I first described it. I was again struck by the degree to which power and its ravages had engrossed their minds. They wrote about it again and again, elaborately and imaginatively—in pamphlets, letters, newspapers, sermons—in any medium available. Seeing it now with a broader knowledge of early modern political thought than I had had before, as well as with our present political concerns very much in mind, I could better appreciate the extraordinary ways in which the writers had expressed their concerns about the uses and misuses of power.

They wrote about the specific agencies of power they knew and feared—royal armies, crown prerogatives, Parliamentary mandates, arbitrary magistrates—and about all those “usurpations” of power that would be listed in the Declaration of Independence. But they wrote even more eloquently of power itself; power in its essence, power as an autonomous entity, an ever-present, dark, independent, primordial force, pervasive and malign. They described it in metaphors, similes, and analogies. Power, they wrote, “is like the ocean, not easily admitting limits to be fixed in it.” It is like “jaws . . . always open to devour.” It is “like cancer, it eats faster and faster every hour.” And it is everywhere in public life, and everywhere it is dominating, grasping, and absorbing. Liberty, its opposite, they wrote, could not stand strongly before it. For liberty, as John Adams put it, always “skulking about in corners from the creation, and has been hunted and persecuted in all countries by cruel power” was in its nature delicate and sensitive, weak in the presence of power. Freedom, they quoted from the 1767 edition of
Marchamont Nedham’s *Excellencie of a Free State* (1656), is “a virgin . . . that everyone seeks to deflower: if it is not properly protected (so great is the lust of mankind for dominion) there follows a rape upon the first opportunity.” It was to overcome the dark, engrossing force of power that all efforts to liberate mankind were directed.5

I saw now more clearly than before how this personification of power and the metaphoric descriptions of its character had come to suffuse their thinking. In a situation of conflict with established authority, they drew on the legacy of the so-called “Real Whigs,” the “Commonwealthmen” who had sought in the generation after the Revolution of 1688 to carry forward against the Hanoverian court, dominated by Robert Walpole, the reform principles of the seventeenth century. These radical pamphleteers of the 1720s had expressed in challenging, defiant prose the major themes on the nature and uses of power that the later American Patriots would fervently embrace.

I was impressed again with how their publications overflowed with examples of the havoc wrought by the use of unfettered power, of power released, power allowed to tear at the vitals of free institutions and the liberties of ordinary folk. In a free state power, they wrote, is a trust acquired by consent and used only for the people’s good. When it is acquired by force or deceit or demagoguery by those who use it to enhance their own glory and influence, power is arbitrary, and the people suffer deeply. Unconstrained monopolists of power would become monsters and tyrants. They would transform “blessings and plenty into curses and misery, great cities into gloomy solitudes, and their rich citizens into beggars and vagabonds.” The “Daemons” of power become worse the longer they wield their illegal power, until their victims, refusing to “be slaves to their own servants,” find it necessary for their survival to oppose them. And then the great upheavals ensue, as cities and nations are torn apart in the struggle for the uses of power.

ON RE-READING THE IDEOLOGICAL ORIGINS

I saw again, now fifty years later, how deep in the American polemics of the 1760s and 1770s was the fear of the progress of power. As the threat developed, active resistance, the American Revolutionaries knew, was required against those who had gained, by force or guile or demagoguery, some measure of power's essence.

I was struck especially by the importance of the historical analogues they had absorbed into their view of the world. Some people, they believed—the Russians, the Ottoman Turks—seemed never to have known freedom, having been ruled, time out of mind, by powerful despots backed by personal troops. But what interested them more than such age-old legendary despotisms were examples of once-free states whose descent into autocracy happened within living memory and had been recorded in detail by participants or contemporary witnesses.

Poland had been a case in point. It was a nation, they knew from their reading, sunk in human misery, its peasant people reduced to barbarism, its social condition a scene of carnage. They could trace equally the loss of liberty in France under Louis XIV, the advent of autocracy in Sweden, and the revolts that shook Spain and severed its relation to Portugal. But for them the most recent example of the loss of freedom was that of Denmark, a story they knew well as it had been recorded in day-by-day, at times hour-by-hour detail by Viscount Molesworth, England's envoy to Copenhagen under William III. In four short days, they learned from Molesworth's An Account of Denmark (1694), that country had "changed from an estate little different from aristocracy to as absolute a monarchy as any is at present." They could see, through Molesworth's eyes, exactly what had happened. At a critical moment, seeking safety from the impositions of the nobles, the two lower orders had given the king, their supposed protector, the absolute powers of the state, only to discover that "the little finger of an absolute prince can be heavier than the loins of many nobles."6

Molesworth’s book, I discovered, proved to be enormously popular in America as in Europe. The first edition sold initially at the rate of 1,000 copies per week. Within three months 6,000 copies had sold in London. For the Americans it was a template, a model, for what must be prevented from coming about at home.\textsuperscript{7}

But the greatest example they knew of the descent from freedom to autocracy was the most distant from them in time but so familiar to them as to be contemporaneous in their thinking. This was the fortunes of ancient Rome. And thereby hangs a tale.

At the start of the book, I had written at length of the Americans’ deep immersion in the writings of antiquity. “Knowledge of classical authors,” I wrote, “was universal among colonists with any degree of education,” and I referred in detail to the vast array of classical authors they knew and referred to—not merely the obvious Latin writers like Cicero, Tacitus, Sallust, Livy, Ovid, and Virgil, and not merely, among the Greeks, Homer, Sophocles, Herodotus, Plato, and Plutarch, but also lesser known writers like Strabo, Nepos, Petronius, Lucan, and Marcus Aurelius. There was much misunderstanding in their readings; but still, I had written, they found in the classics their ideal selves and to some extent their inner voices. And then I wrote these fatal words:

The classics of the ancient world are everywhere in the literature of the Revolution, but they are everywhere illustrative, not determinative, of thought. They contributed a vivid vocabulary but not the logic or grammar of thought, a universally respected personification but not the source of political and social beliefs.

The outrage these words have evoked among the many writers on the classics in America has not subsided in the fifty years since their appearance. It seems that everyone who writes about the subject seems obliged to register, upon reading these words, a sense of violation, of desecration, of lèse-majesté. But

for those who knew Molesworth’s *Account of Denmark* and the dismal fortunes of Poland, Spain, and Sweden, the destruction of the ancient Roman republic followed by the advent of Caesarian power and the dictatorial principate was one among many illustrations.

For them the fullest and most famous history of the destruction of Roman freedom and the rise of imperial power that left Rome in ruins was the detailed two-volume account by the Abbé René-Aubert Vertot, “one of the most popular writers of the first half of the eighteenth century” (Caroline Robbins). English translations of his *Revolutions That Happened in the Government of the Roman Republic* (1720) were in almost every library, private or institutional, in British North America. Madison included it in the list of books for the use of Congress; Jefferson had a copy in his personal library and recommended it for his nephew’s education; Washington specifically requested a copy; and John Adams recommended it to his son John Quincy. What was unique about the Roman example was the vividness and drama of the personalities involved and the fame and familiarity of some of the major texts of the story.8

John Adams, age twenty-three, recorded his joy in shouting out in Latin, alone at night in his room, Cicero’s Catalinarian orations. His younger contemporary, Josiah Quincy Jr., a neophyte lawyer fiercely ambitious to play an important role as a learned public intellectual, far exceeded Adams as a classicist. Though he died at age thirty-one, he left behind an extraordinary collection of legal papers, commonplace books, newspaper pieces, travel journals, occasional thoughts and correspondence all of which has been recently published in full in six elegantly edited volumes. Scarcely a page goes by in this entire collection without one or more references to ancient writings. Quincy seems to have absorbed the entire corpus of ancient letters; he

seems intellectually to have lived in the classical world. He, and others as well educated as he, knew not only the military and political deeds of the younger Cato but his stoicism as well, not only Brutus's role in the assassination of Caesar but his reputation for virtue, learning, and public service, and not only Tacitus' famous histories but the terse, sardonic style of his writing. And what they knew of these famous figures of the ancient past had stirred their imaginations as nothing else could.\(^9\)

Drawing on all the sources they had available—Vertot's volumes especially and those of other historians of Rome as well as the mass of facts and comments on Rome that had appeared in the radical press a generation earlier—the Americans rejoiced in the freedom of Rome's republic and celebrated its checks on the unlimited power of magistrates. They enjoyed reading about the magnificence of Rome at its height and lamented its decline and fall when freedom was destroyed by the power of imperial despots, who lived in corrupt magnificence, squandering the public treasure and dividing it among private men, leaving behind a broken and supine people wandering about in the wreckage around them. They had learned from their favorite sources that in the struggle of warring factions at the end of the Republic,

Rome and all Italy was but one slaughter-house . . . hundreds of thousands fell sacrifices to the ambition of a few. . . . Proscriptions and massacres were esteemed sport and pastime, till at length two thirds of the people were destroyed and the rest made slaves to the most wicked and contemptible wretches of mankind.

Thus ended, they learned from the Radical Whigs, “the greatest, the noblest state that ever adorned the worldly theatre.” “I wish I could say,” one of the most popular of the earlier writers added, “that the Abbot Vertot's description of the Roman state in its last declension suited no other state in our own time. I hope that we ourselves have none of these corruptions and abuses to complain of.” But it was only a hope, of which the

American leaders increasingly despaired. Many active in the struggle with Britain had come to agree with the well-informed, well-educated member of the Continental Congress who wrote in 1774: “From the fate of Rome, Britain may trace the course of its present degeneracy and its impending destruction. Similar causes will ever produce similar effects.”

Nothing struck me more strongly, as I reread these passages, than the Americans’ belief that in Britain as in ancient Rome factions—parties—were tearing the nation apart. The story of encroaching power and the growing corruption of the newly rich that had been so clearly illustrated in the case of Rome was being reenacted, they believed, in Britain, with its new wealth flowing in from the east, threatening Britain and its empire as it had the Roman world.

There seems to have been no end to the torrent of writings they had at hand that dwelt on the beauties and the “glorious advantages” of the ancient Roman republic and its ultimate destruction by the advent of arbitrary power. So vast, so complex, and so rich in meaning were the ancient world-historical events that no definitive account of them, they believed, could ever be given. Properly to describe the “noble” subject of liberty and power in ancient Rome is a task, the Radical Whigs had written in 1722,

to which no human mind is equal, for neither the sublimest wits of antiquity, nor the brightest geniuses of late or modern time, assisted with all the powers of rhetoric and all the stimulations of poetick fire . . . ever did, or ever could, or ever can, describe . . . sufficiently the beauty of the one [liberty] or the deformity of the other [power]. Language [they wrote] fails in [this] . . . words are too weak.

But if these prolific writers felt that language fails and words are not sufficient, how could one best recover the Americans’ vision of the ancient world? I wondered about this, as I read, and thought that where words fail, images might succeed.

11 Cato’s Letters, no. 73 (April 21, 1722), emphasis added.
What did eighteenth-century Rome look like? How did its appearance relate to the Americans’ concerns? Few Americans of the pre-revolutionary years had visited continental Europe, fewer still knew the art world of contemporary Rome. But some did, and others were well informed. Thomas Hollis, Harvard’s English benefactor, in constant touch with the colonists, was intimately involved with artists and their works in France and Italy, and especially in Rome. It was in the Roman art world that one finds the visual expression of the Americans’ concerns. They lie in the artistic achievements of their contemporary, the celebrated Roman engraver, architect, designer, and print maker, Giovanni Battista Piranesi, whom Hollis knew well.\(^\text{12}\)

Piranesi’s themes in his famous images of antiquity were theirs. Both he and the Americans dwelled on the glory of Rome as a free state and on the squalor of its decline and fall. In his famous series of etchings of contemporary Rome, especially his four-volume Antichità Romane—copies of which Hollis sent to Harvard, where they were placed in special cupboards for oversized books\(^\text{13}\)—Piranesi depicted everything the colonists could have imagined about the greatness of the ancient city and its surroundings: the monumental structures of all kinds, the temples, the celebratory columns, the arches, the tombs, the fountains, the baths, the circuses, the colosseums, all enhanced in monumentality by Piranesi’s mannerist exaggerations and the manipulation of perspective. But his Vedute—his scenes of Rome—were not only images of magnificent architecture. Many of the structures were in ruins, and Piranesi portrayed them as he saw them: testimonies of the power-driven barbarism that had destroyed the classical world. Some of the crumbling buildings he depicted had been shabbily rebuilt to serve as churches, others had been patched together to form ragged habitations with clothing and farm equipment scattered about. A few people wander around like “human insects,” in Marguerite Yourcenar’s words, rummaging through the rubble


\(^{13}\)Bond, “Hollis’s Gifts to Harvard,” 152, 28.
Fig. 2. The Temple of Portunus Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York https://images.metmuseum.org/CRDImages/dp/original/DP828263.jpg (accessed November 14, 2017)
FIG. 3. **Foundations of the Mausoleum of Hadrian**

The greatest of Piranesi’s etchings of human insignificance in the face of overwhelming power. A few tiny human figures can be seen standing aimlessly near ground level and one or two others scarcely visible aloft on the highest pinnacle. They are all, the art historian Peter Murray wrote, “as ephemeral as gadflies.”

Courtesy of the Harvard Art Museums
Fig. 4. Piranesi, Temple of Concordia
Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
https://metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/400194
(accessed December 18, 2017)
or the brush,” aimlessly leaning on staves, occasionally gesturing to sights unseen as if guiding strangers through the ruins. In the shadows of once-great structures, washing is being hung out to dry, donkeys are balking, dogs are barking, goats are wandering among fallen segments of once magnificent columns. Here and there people in small groups seem to be conversing, but mostly they are solitary, and everywhere they are “reduced to infinitesimal proportions by the enormity of the edifices.”

These scenes of vast power and “minuscule humanity,” appear in most concentrated form in Piranesi’s earliest and most famous etchings, the sixteen nightmarish, hallucinatory scenes of wildly imagined prisons, the Carceri—deep, gargantuan, cavernous and darkly threatening spaces with sweeping ranges of staircases and platforms that lead nowhere, soaring ropes of heavy chains, spiked wheels, and racks. Everywhere in these inhuman halls is a sense of the brutality of power. The people scattered here and there on the platforms and stairs are simply watching, dwarfed by the monumental stone labyrinths that surround them.

There were, of course, no such prisons, in Rome or anywhere else. They were products of Piranesi’s imagination, his dark dreams, his capricci, his fantasies. But these vivid imaginations were well within the range of the Americans’ fears of uncontrolled power which dominated their imaginings of the greater political world. Within a decade these fears of the pre-revolutionary years would prove to be the source of the new nation’s most bitter and most consequential struggle, the outcome of which would determine the character of American democracy.

For the fear of power did not end with Independence. It carried through the complicated process by which the states formed or reformed their provincial constitutions and dominated the ratification of the national constitution of 1787. “Fulfillment,” added to the book in 1992, was no casual addendum to what came before. I had been well aware of the relation of

the Americans’ pre-revolutionary struggle with Britain to the adoption of their own Constitution but had had no opportunity to pursue that elusive and difficult subject until I undertook to edit the two-volume, 2,300-page *Debate on the Constitution* published by the Library of America in 1993. For this I had had to review the entire literature of that epochal debate of 1787-88 and to explore within it the ultimate resolution of the Americans’ struggle over the uses and misuses of power that had begun a quarter of a century earlier.

That famous debate has no parallel in the history of political thought. It lasted for eleven months, involved twelve state conventions in which at least 1,500 official delegates participated directly. It reached into every town, county, village, and plantation in the thirteen states, and produced a flood of writings—speeches, pamphlets, correspondence, newspaper columns, and records of a torrent of oratory. The Sisyphean project to publish the whole of it, public and private, printed and manuscript, has now reached twenty-nine volumes plus microfiche addenda, and will add at least three more volumes in years to come.

In that great national struggle, every clause of the Constitution and every conceivable ramification was scoured for possible consequences. Opinion pro and con was often penetrating and subtle. So attenuated were the arguments that they could not be confined to single essays or speeches. Some continued on, in series—twenty five in all, of which *The Federalist* was but one and the incisive antifederalist “Brutus” series of fifteen essays another. The country’s best minds bent to the effort, to approve or disapprove, of the Constitution as it had been submitted by the Convention of 1787. And in this they faced a bewildering dilemma that derived from the still dominant fear of power. Many of the state and national leaders—not all, but some of the most influential—knew the absolute necessity to create a forceful power center in the new national government that would replace the loose and ineffective “league of friendship” defined by the Articles of Confederation. In the six years under the Articles, the basic stability of the nation, largely in the hands of state governments, had come under pressure from
populist forces and local interests that threatened not only the welfare of local property owners and defenders of the rule of law but also from those of broader vision who hoped that the nation would play an effective role in world affairs. For all of this, an efficient national power over the states and their people would have to be created. But to construct a new national power center when a war had just been fought to defy such a force flew directly into the face of the ideology that had stirred American resistance a decade earlier. The old pleas, tropes, images, and authorities were invoked again, but now with a renewed passion to deal with the urgent situation at hand.

The Federalists, though many of them younger than those who had defied Britain’s authority, were well aware of the elemental fear of power that lay deep in popular awareness, and they knew they would succeed only to the extent that they could somehow demonstrate that power could be reconciled with individual freedom. The new institutions, they knew, would have to be a return to the past as well as a departure to the future, a re-conception of the earlier views, not a repudiation. But the opposition was formidable and the dangers were obvious. Article after article defined a source of power. The eighteen great powers of Congress (Art. I, § 8) alone could create an authoritarian state. The President could easily become a quasi-monarch, especially when equipped with the pardoning power. Though elected, he could become “great and mighty” and live, Patrick Henry feared, “in extravagant magnificence,” granting whatever favors he pleased to his acolytes, whose crimes, George Mason explained at length, he could pardon “and thereby prevent a discovery of his own guilt.”

Nothing stirred the Antifederalists more than the prospect of a national army—a “standing army” in traditional terms—now deeply embedded in the Constitution. And once again they invoked the dangers of dual sovereignty—states and nation both with ultimate powers, the inevitable outcome of which they had witnessed at the imperial level in 1775-76. Even Madison

conceded that dual sovereignties could result in “violence in place of law, or the destructive coercion of the sword in place of the mild and salutary coercion of the magistracy.” And they argued again that a geographically vast nation could not remain republican and free but would splinter into small, contentious authoritarian provinces ripe for conquest by foreign powers.

But it was left to “Brutus” to anticipate the ultimate conclusion of the powers implicit in the proposed Constitution. With its unlimited taxing power, with a President immune from ordinary legal sanctions and unimpeachable by virtue of his pardoning power, supported by a Congress with great powers and with an army at his disposal, the nation state would become what a later generation would call totalitarian. “It would introduce itself,” Brutus wrote, “into every corner of the city and country. It will wait upon the ladies at their toilet, and will not leave them in any of their domestic concerns . . . it will enter the house of every gentleman, watch over his cellar, wait upon his cook in the kitchen, follow the servants into the parlour, preside over the table, and note down all he eats or drinks; it will attend him to his bed-chamber, and watch him while he sleeps; it will take cognizance of the professional man in his office or his study; it will watch the merchant in the counting-house or in his store; it will follow the mechanic to his shop and in his work, and will haunt him in his family and in his bed; it will be a constant companion of the industrious farmer in all his labour, it will be with him in the house and in the field, observe the toil of his hands and the sweat of his brow . . . and finally, it will light upon the head of every person in the United States. To all these different classes of people and in all these circumstances in which it will attend them, the language in which it will address them will be, GIVE! GIVE!

At the very least the nation’s power would “necessarily, from its very nature, swallow up all the power of the state governments.”

With such apocalyptic visions the Federalists had somehow to deal. They sought to temper the fears. Forget “morbid fantasies of impending doom,” Madison wrote; and worry about

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things with “certain degrees of probability.” Events vaguely possible, Hamilton wrote, have been blown up into a “serious and infallible prediction,” inflated into “gorgons, hydri, and chimeras dire.” Our fears will never end if we do not “trust our sons, our brothers, our neighbors.” What danger can there be “from men who are daily entangling with the rest of their countrymen and who participate with them in the same feelings, sentiments, habits and interests?” Stop thinking in extremes and don’t abandon a wise government for the possibility of a “fantastical utopia.” There was no danger, the Federalists wrote, of a tyrannical army. “Standing armies” in Europe are created to maintain the power of monarchs and hence to keep the people in slavery. In America an army is created to protect the people. An army that would support an errant President and his following could only be created by “progressive augmentations” of Congressional funding, which would take years to build up and would require an unlikely conspiracy between the executive and the representatives of the people whose membership would be transformed biennially. And in any case, civilian control of the military was an ancient and fundamental doctrine which could be traced back through generations of Anglo-American history.17

The vast, enumerated powers of Congress? The Federalists pointed to the eight limiting clauses of Art. I, § 9 and stressed the intricacy of the separation and cross-checking of the branches of government. The clash of powers—the dual sovereignties of states and nation? The ancient belief that states within a state was illogical and dangerous, Hamilton explained, was in fact an “artificial distinction.” The two levels of authority would not clash. They would simply merge since state officials would be charged with enforcing federal law, and the powers of the nation were limited to those enumerated. The two governments would intersect where they exercised “concurrent” powers, and concurrence was not the “repugnancy” that the ancient “solecism” had portended. The most

ingenious—and most famous—of the Federalists’ responses to the opposition’s concerns was their response to the issue of geographical size and republican states. Many concurred in the response, which Madison best formulated in the Federalist papers. The issue, he argued in the tenth essay in that series, had been misconceived. It was not the internal unity of small polities that would guarantee stability, but the opposite. “Extend the sphere,” he wrote, “and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens.”

Point by point, the Federalists sought to resolve the ancient, well-established fear of power in order to justify and explain the complex document they had written. But the Federalists’ most cogent and eloquent arguments could not prevail over the ingrown belief that liberty was fragile in its nature and easily destroyed and that consolidated, centralized authority—final power of any kind, however defined, refined, or technically contrived—was malign.

The opposition—majorities in some states, vocal minorities in others—could never be satisfied with a document that created power but did not explicitly defend freedom. For “the very idea of power,” Edward Rutledge declared, “included a possibility of doing harm.” They demanded if not a formal Bill of Rights then its equivalent in enumerated liberties. But there was no mechanism to revise the draft Constitution short of summoning a new Convention to re-write the document, and that, all knew, would create chaos. The impasse was overcome on the afternoon of February 6, 1788, when, in a dramatic scene that followed complex factional maneuvering and the satisfaction of John Hancock’s political ambitions, the Massachusetts convention, its galleries jammed with an apprehensive audience, in “profound silence” ratified the Constitution unconditionally (187-168) but with the understanding that recommended amendments would follow immediately in the first session of Congress. Together with similar recommendations from other states the amendments would in effect constitute a Bill of Rights that would balance the Bill of Powers in the Federalists’ Constitution.
ON RE-READING THE IDEOLOGICAL ORIGINS

It was a crucial moment in the history of American constitutionalism. It did not solve the ancient and persistent problems of power—nothing could—but it created a system for their resolution that would last as long as officials ruled within the boundaries of the Constitution and that an informed, alert, and uncorrupted electorate was committed to preserving the freedoms of a republican state.

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