



WHO, THEN, IS PUBLIUS?

Terry Roberts

Between October 1787 and August 1788, there appeared in several New York newspapers a series of 77 articles over the pseudonym *Publius* or “friend of the people.” Late in 1788, these 77 articles along with eight others were compiled and published under the title *The Federalist*. Taken together, they are a highly evolved explanation of and public argument for the U. S. Constitution; they were intended originally for the people of New York, a key state in the campaign for ratification. Over time, these essays became known as the “Federalist Papers,” and as Theodore Roosevelt was later to say, they are “on the whole the greatest book” dealing with the practical art of government. Indeed, taken with Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence and the Constitution itself, they are the first great product of the American mind, the first “classic” on our shelf. Even after their collection in book form, however, there was some mystery about authorship. *Who, then, was Publius?*

As with many important questions, there are several easy answers. First, the project was conceived by Alexander Hamilton, a New Yorker, as a direct reply to the anti-federalist attacks on the proposed Constitution, and Hamilton recruited several strong writers

to his scheme, most notably James Madison, the brilliant, if dour Virginian. (It is interesting to note that New Yorker Gouverneur Morris, though “warmly pressed” by Hamilton, declined to participate due to pressing business concerns. We shall have more to do with Morris shortly.) Eventually Hamilton himself would write 51 of the 85 Federalist essays, Madison 29, and John Jay only five before dropping out of the project due to illness. *Publius*, then, was the common pseudonym for what became a whirl-wind, tag team production between Hamilton and Madison. Simple enough, but why *Publius*?

Publius Valerius Publicola (died 503 BC) was a Roman consul, who with Lucius Junius Brutus governed Rome in 509 BC, traditionally considered the first year of the Roman Republic. According to Livy and Plutarch, the death of Brutus left Publius the sole consul of the new Republic, and the people feared that he was preparing to seize monarchical power. To calm the populace, Publius ceased construction on his new, ostentatious home and introduced two laws to protect their liberties: one providing citizens with the right of appeal when condemned in a court of law, and the second enacting that whosoever should attempt to make himself a king might be slain by any man at any time (this the law that would eventually be used to justify the assignation of Julius Caesar). The original Publius, then, was the archetype of a leader who in establishing a republic relinquishes power to the people. Like Washington, who would resist the temptation of absolute power in our own country, Publius was a founding leader who refused the role of Caesar and, in so doing, proved that the government could function without one.

In part, then, Hamilton chose *Publius* as the Federalist pen name, intending to disarm those who would accuse him and his conspirators of the personal consolidation of power. But he also chose it because the Roman’s last name, “Publicola,” famously meant “of the people,” something that a surprising number of the original readers of the Federalist Papers would have known. Thus, we might legitimately say that in 1788 Hamilton and Madison intended the shadowy *Publius* to mean the man—or *mind*—of the people. In 2008, 220 years later, I would propose that we might use the same term to examine not who *was* Publius, but who he—or she—has become. Who is the mythical citizen that makes popular government possible: in any age, on any continent?

Based on the historical record, we know that she or he is active, determined, jealous of personal rights, demanding of citizen-officials, and convinced that there are, indeed, “certain unalienable

rights,” including “life, liberty, and property.” But what prevents this pugnacious, opinionated, acquisitive individual from regressing into loud partisanship and passionate selfishness. I believe it is the ability—most often forged under pressure—to think one’s way into a larger, seemingly contradictory state-of-mind. Those first American men of letters, Emerson and Whitman, hinted at this expanded sensibility early on: Emerson in “Self-Reliance” wrote that “a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds”; and Whitman (as he was wont to do) went even further in “Song of Myself.” “Do I contradict myself?” he wrote. “Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes.” Publius, then, is beginning to stretch—beyond the reach of a single party or a single platform, beyond the narrow pale of a single issue or denomination—into something larger, into the synthesis that lies beyond point and counter-point. Publius, the quintessential citizen, is a creature who actually seeks cognitive dissonance, who deliberately invites divergent thinking, who courts disequilibrium, and then grows larger by synthesizing competing ideas.

History, I believe, proves my point.

The first instance in this country of a group of individuals who overcame a dire problem by intellectual synthesis occurred in 1787. For sixteen weeks in that hot, fly-speckled summer, representatives from 12 of the original 13 states met behind locked doors and shuttered windows in Philadelphia, trying desperately to create a new and stronger federal government by replacing the original Articles of Confederation with a more effective and more powerful charter. The working government that originally bound the young states together was coming apart at the seams over squabbles between the semi-independent states.

A crisis was brewing when the Framers of the Constitution met in Philadelphia, and the entire convention was marked by anxiety and conflict. The Constitution itself was the product of all but endless debate and political wrangling between many of the best legal and political minds of the day. Of those we call the Founding Fathers, only Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Sam Adams were absent (Jefferson and John Adams in Europe on ambassadorial duty; Sam Adams in a tavern somewhere fomenting a riot). Washington was the chair of the Convention, Madison the head of the Virginia delegation, Hamilton the delegation of New York and, though often too weak to speak himself, the 81-year-old Benjamin Franklin called for the document’s unanimous support on the last day.

These highly opinionated, passionate men—who represented a vast array of seemingly irreconcilable conflicts—essentially locked themselves in a room and refused to be let out until they had resolved their differences. The result was what we now think of as a single, monumental document, a blueprint for many of the world’s constitutions to follow. It is only when we read and discuss it (which, by the way, Mortimer Adler was adamant about) that we realize that the Constitution is not distant, not philosophical, and not what the framers thought of as finished. But what the Constitution *is*, is an amazing synthesis of warring points of view, and what it does on point after point is merge competing interests. School children memorize the three branches of government and the balance of power between them, but how many of us understand that the framers of the Constitution dealt directly with paradox after paradox and resolved them by marrying competing forces.

In the design of the U. S. Congress, for example, they satisfied the desires of the large states with representation by population and simultaneously mollified the small states with equal seats in the Senate. What we take for granted as the U. S. Congress it took the Framers more than a month to hammer out. But hammer they did—through patient, reflective dialogue—and so collectively, sat for our first portrait of *Publius*.

As successful as they were, the Framers did table the one divisive issue they could not come fully to grips with—knowingly postponed it for a later, less partisan generation of leaders, whom they hoped could find a solution. That issue, of course, was slavery.

And it was slavery that created the intense internal pressure that would lead to our second example of inspired synthesis. When Abraham Lincoln was elected President of the United States in 1860, his Northern rivals in his own political party ridiculed him as an ignorant backwoods bumpkin, while in the South he was universally despised. The country was on the verge of war before he was even inaugurated, and the fragmentation that the framers of the Constitution had tried to prevent had obviously, painfully come to pass. What Lincoln did in response to the crises was to recruit, as Doris Kearns Goodwin has famously called them, “a team of rivals.” Calmly, deliberately, Lincoln convinced men who had been openly critical, even derisive of him, to accept cabinet post after cabinet post—explaining quietly to anyone who asked that the country needed its best men regardless of what they thought of him personally. William H. Seward (Secretary of State), Salmon P. Chase (Secretary of Treasury), and Edward Bates (Attorney General) had all been his fierce rivals for the Republican nomination

for President, and in addition to their ambivalence toward Lincoln himself, they and the other cabinet members were more than wary of each other.

Over time, however, Lincoln used the often extreme variety in their points of view to fashion a synthesis of his own. And just as the Constitution was the result of the framers' willingness to blend powerful, contradictory forces into one whole, many of Lincoln's wartime policies were the result of a similar merger.

Perhaps the most famous example of this synthetic thinking is the Emancipation Proclamation. The result of Lincoln's arduous political and spiritual journey in relation to slavery, the Emancipation is a highly charged military and economic strategy as well as a ringing spiritual manifesto. On July 22, 1862 Lincoln called his cabinet together to read to them a draft Proclamation, tentatively set for January 1, 1863. The replies from his "team of rivals" were both profoundly mixed and unexpected, with several of the more radical abolitionists counseling caution and several of the more conservative politicians urging Lincoln forward. The President, as he habitually did, listened: both to the discussion within the group and to the several arguments put to him in private. The result was that he made a number of minor edits at the suggestion of various cabinet members and settled down to wait for a military victory to give the Proclamation teeth. He got his victory at Antietam on September 21 and issued the preliminary order for Emancipation two days later, despite the grave misgivings of several cabinet members. He had seized the moral high ground and done so strategically, so that the Proclamation itself would be worth more than the paper it was written on.

When Lincoln first appointed his cabinet, his critics laughed openly at his choices, believing that the naïve, slow-talking Lincoln would be overwhelmed by the strong personalities and brilliant minds that he had recruited. Furthermore, his critics argued, he would never be able to get them to pull together in common cause, with so many voracious and divergent egos yoked together in one government. Obviously, the critics of 1860 were proven wrong. Lincoln got the strength of mind and will that he wanted, but more importantly, he got the radical divergence of opinion out of which he forged his own policy. Although his cabinet members at times appeared to operate independent of Lincoln and of each other, the mind and spirit at the top of the government slowly, effectively created a synthesis that pulled violently opposed parties back together and eventually healed the greatest wound—self-inflicted—the country has ever experienced. And with the Eman-

cipation Proclamation, the face of Publius began slowly to darken, taking on the beautiful features and exquisite voices of formerly enslaved Americans.

When Abraham Lincoln was murdered at Ford's Theater on April 14, 1865, only five days after the surrender at Appomattox, he had become a man of many minds—indeed, he contained multitudes—he had become Publius.

War remains a theme in my next example, but in this case, there is economic as well as military conflict. When Franklin Roosevelt was first elected President in 1933, the United States was embroiled in the world-wide economic crises that in the United States became known as the “Great Depression.” Thus, FDR, the only President to serve more than two terms in office, fought an economic war at home as well as a World War abroad. Interestingly, his response was uncannily like that of Lincoln—he appointed a cabinet that covered the entire political spectrum—including Republicans Henry Stimson and Frank Knox, and created an executive staff that was known for loud disagreements behind closed doors.

The story is told of a meeting in the president's office [early in the administration] during which the president outlined a pet proposal. Everyone nodded in approval except [junior General George] Marshall. “Don't you think so, George?” the president asked. Marshall replied: “I am sorry, Mr. President, but I don't agree with that at all.” The president looked stunned, the conference was stopped, and Marshall's friends predicted that his tour of duty would soon come to an end. A few months later, reaching thirty-four names down the list of senior generals, the president asked the straight-speaking Marshall to be chief of staff of the U. S Army. (Goodwin 22)

As with George Marshall, Roosevelt consistently recruited those strong minds that disagreed with him as well as with each other, and then, like Lincoln, studied their heated dialogues. Even more significant, perhaps, than the role of senior staff in Roosevelt's decision making was the revolutionary role played in the administration by his wife.

When Roosevelt was elected in 1933, American women had been voting for only 14 years, and the role of First Lady was essentially that of First Hostess. Furthermore, Eleanor and Franklin's Roosevelt's personal relationship was a complex and troubled one, and yet as Goodwin explains:

At a time when her husband was preoccupied with winning the war, Eleanor Roosevelt insisted that the struggle would not be worth winning if the old order of things prevailed. Unless democracy were renewed at home, she repeatedly said, there was little merit in fighting for democracy abroad. To be sure, she did not act single-handedly,...but without her consistent voice at the upper levels of decision-making, the tendency to put first things first, to focus on winning the war before exerting effort on anything else, might well have prevailed. She shattered the ceremonial mold in which the role of the first lady had traditionally been fashioned, and reshaped it around her own skills and commitments to social reform.... And in so doing she became, in the words of columnist Raymond Clapper, “the most influential woman of her time.” (Goodwin 11)

Eleanor Roosevelt’s voice was heard in the White House on countless issues that had to do with the inclusiveness of the democratic process: she spoke out not just for women but also for racial minorities (including the 120,000 Japanese Americans imprisoned during the war) and for the poor—who suffered most from the ravages of the Depression.

It was not until the 20th Century, then, that the face and form of Publius took on a profoundly feminine aspect, assimilating the attributes of the millions of American women who sometimes thought and felt in very different ways than did their masculine counterparts about the paradoxes that bedevil democracy.

It is possible to trace just how the popular dialogue of American democracy evolved in the Constitutional Amendments that brought new and radically different voices to the table. In the aftermath of the Civil War, the 14th Amendment (1868) clarified that “all persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States.” The 15th, which followed only two years later, clarified that the right to votes “shall not be abridged by the US or any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” It was not until 1920, however—132 years (!?) after the ratification of the Constitution and 50 years after the 15th Amendment—that the 19th Amendment gave women the right to vote. *The story is not over*, however; in 1964, the 24th Amendment guaranteed “the right of citizens to vote” even if they had failed “to pay any poll tax or other tax,” thereby closing a loophole that had been used (especially in the South) to turn African-American voters away from the polls. *Still, the story is not over*: it was only in 1971, that “citizens of the

United States, who are eighteen years of age or older” were given the vote by the 26th Amendment, long after they had been not just accepted but—in war after war—drafted into military service. Perhaps you see a trend? Perhaps you would call it progress: *shamefully* slow but progress nonetheless. And if there is a lesson here, it is that the story is never over. It is plain that Publius must continue to grow or she/he will die.

So what sort of person, what sort of individual, fuels growth? I’d like to return to our three historical vignettes to answer that question: the Constitutional Convention, the Lincoln Cabinet, and the Roosevelt White House. The first example I’d like to share is one of the Founding Fathers and one of the Framers of the Constitution that you probably have never heard of because in some ways he is such an inconvenient hero. Gouverneur Morris was a New Yorker born into a family of means, who lost a limb in childhood accident and walked almost his entire life on a wooden leg. During the revolution, he was one of two financial advisors who helped the astonishingly inefficient Continental Congress fund the war effort; and along the way became quite probably George Washington’s closest friend. He was, by all accounts, a cheerful, profane, wickedly funny man who was, despite—or perhaps because of—his wooden leg, widely celebrated and condemned as a libertine. It was during the Constitutional Congress that Morris shone, however. During those months in Philadelphia, Morris spoke in general session more than any other delegate, often cheerfully warning the others against giving too much power to the ignorant and uneducated. He was, in a sense, the grease that kept the Congress running: he described his role as “to further our business, remove impediments, obviate objections, and conciliate jarring opinions” (letter to Timothy Pickering, 1814)...and, I might add, to remind the delegates to laugh at themselves. We should celebrate Morris because, in the same sense that Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, he wrote the U. S. Constitution. Even James Madison famously admitted in an 1831 letter that: “The finish given to the style and arrangement of the Constitution fairly belongs to the pen of Mr. Morris; the task having probably, been handed over to him by the chairman of the Committee, ...and with the ready concurrence of others. A better choice could not have been made, as the performance of the task proved.” More important to our research, however, more significant to the character of *Publius*, is the nature of Morris’ role in the debates that formed the document. As Madison admitted, “in addition to the “brilliancy of his genius,” Morris could forthrightly surrender his opinions if he was satisfied with the opposition’s argument” (Adams 162). In other words, when he lost a point in open discussion—even a point about which

he felt strongly—he shrugged his shoulders, smiled, and then deftly helped to articulate the group’s will. Gouverneur Morris, the shadowy figure who was so willing to “contain multitudes,” is the man who actually wrote the words, “We the people.”

Like Gouverneur Morris, Abraham Lincoln was the pattern of a man who grew to assimilate and synthesize opposing points of view. When Lincoln met Frederick Douglass for the first time, “the fiery orator had [just] lambasted ‘the tardy, hesitating and vacillating policy of the President’” in a widely publicized speech (Kearns 552). After they had finished their business, Lincoln mentioned the speech to Douglass and admitted that he could move with frustrating slowness on important issues because of the care he took to consider all points of view, including that of Douglass himself, who had been so critical of Lincoln. When they met again some months later at Lincoln’s request, Lincoln read to Douglass an important but equivocating letter he had written that had to do with emancipation. Douglass objected strongly on moral and strategic grounds, and as a result, Lincoln discarded the letter. “While they were talking, a messenger informed Lincoln that the governor of Connecticut wished for an audience. “Tell Governor Buckingham to wait, I want to have a long talk with my friend Douglass,” Lincoln instructed.” Later, Douglass was to report that “he treated me as a man; he did not let me feel for a moment that there was any difference in the color of our skins!” (Kearns 650). If you read Douglass’ famous Eulogy in response to Lincoln’s death, you realize that these two giants had each infected the other with mind and spirit, but it is probably fair to say that their symbiotic relationship grew out of Lincoln’s original willingness to listen—closely and carefully—to a strong-minded, strong-willed critic, and to merge the apparently contradictory point of view with his own.

Like Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt came to the Presidency when the nation was wracked in crisis. And like Lincoln, his response was to build a government characterized by diversity in party, faction, and point of view. Like Lincoln, he encouraged free and open discussion, even violent debate, as a way of eliciting different points of view, so that he could synthesize out of many minds, one strong policy. With the benefit of nearly 80 years of history, however, Roosevelt had one advantage that Lincoln did not. He had the benefit of his wife’s strong-willed, humane, policy-oriented mind and spirit. Inspired in part by her close personal friend Lorena Hickok, herself a groundbreaking journalist, as well as other strong-willed women, Eleanor Roosevelt traveled extensively and worked exhaustively through the war years, influencing domestic policy on a wide range of issues despite her ambivalent

personal relationship with her husband. And despite that ambivalence, Roosevelt himself listened to his wife, treating her more as a member of his government than as a personal partner. Thus, under the extreme pressure of war, the Publean character grew to include both sexes as well as many races.

Thus the mind of a single individual could come to encompass the multiple personalities and points of view that genius requires. What then, do individuals like Gouverneur Morris, Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt have in common? In a broader sense, who is *Publius*? As I suggested earlier, these were individuals who actually sought *cognitive dissonance*, who deliberately invited *divergent thinking*, who courted personal *disequilibrium*, and then grew larger by consuming and digesting competing ideas. Each in turn proved to be the embodiment of what the English poet John Keats called “negative capability.”

In a famous letter to George and Thomas Keats dated Sunday, 21 December 1817, Keats wrote:

I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke, on various subjects; several things dovetailed in my mind, & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason. Keats “Negative Capability is a kind of deliberate, even strategic open-mindedness that is manifest in Publius, the ideal of democratic citizenship. To truly hear all arguments with what Adler called a “passive mind” requires a suspension of judgment and a willingness to dwell at least for a time in complexity (Keats’ “uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts”). Furthermore, it requires the sort of encompassing mind that accepts neither thesis nor antithesis at face value but seeks instead to generate the synthesis that lies beyond either. It is interesting to note that both Lincoln and Roosevelt were described by their contemporaries as frustratingly slow to decide large questions, always resistant to the easy or expedient answer, always seeking the long view. Finally, the Publian character requires the judgment of inclusion rather than exclusion, and the energy and dedication to find the synthetic rather than the partisan response to the paradoxes with which we are faced.

Who, then, is Publius? Who is the quintessential citizen in a democracy? My sincere hope is that you are. My hope is that I may someday be. In *We Hold These Truths: Understanding the Ideas*

and Ideals of the Constitution (1987), Mortimer Adler wrote that “Most Americans, I fear, do not know or appreciate the fact that *citizenship is the primary political office under a constitutional government. In a republic, the citizens are the ruling class. They are the permanent and principal rulers*” (18). In order for you and I to rule, however, we must give up our parties, our factions, our labels; live periodically in complexity; and deliberately seek out a larger awareness of the common good. In the speech that closed the Constitutional Convention (which had to be read for him), Benjamin Franklin argued for support of the Constitution despite its flaws. In his characteristically humorous, self-deprecating way, Franklin included a stern warning. “I believe,” he said, “that this [form of government] is likely to be well administered for a course of years, [but] can only end in despotism, as other forms have done before it, when the people shall become so corrupted as to need despotic government, being incapable of any other.” Franklin is speaking to us—here, today—he is saying that we may indeed meet the enemy and, if so, we will discover it to be ourselves.

In other words, our government is a direct reflection of our selves, the mirror of our hearts and minds, and if we wish it more just and more wise, then collectively and individually, we must ourselves seek justice ... and ... wisdom. 📖

Works Cited

Adams, William Howard. *Gouverneur Morris: An Independent Life*. New Haven: Yale UP: 2003.

Adler, Mortimer. *We Hold These Truths: Understanding the Ideas and Ideals of the Constitution*. New York: Scribners, 1987.

Berkin, Carol. *A Brilliant Solution: Inventing the American Constitution*. New York: Harcourt, 2002.

Goodwin, Doris Kearns. *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994.

Goodwin, Doris Kearns. *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007. 20



Dr. Terry Roberts is the Director of The National Paideia Center in Chapel Hill, NC—founded in 1988 by Mortimer Adler at the University of North Carolina.

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

Patricia Harden

Lára Ingflorsdóttir

Zivko Loskoski

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Marie E. Cotter, Editorial Assistant

Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.