

PRIMARY SOURCE

“Cato I,” Anti-Federalist Essay**Building Context**

When the Constitutional Convention announced the new form of government they had created during the summer of 1787, they had to convince the voters in popular ratifying conventions in the states to agree that this was the system that they wanted going forward. This led to a series of debates in newspapers across the country in which political leaders and everyday citizens expressed their thoughts on the Constitution.

James Madison, along with Alexander Hamilton and John Jay, wrote a series of essays called *The Federalist* which encouraged every state convention to ratify (or pass) the new Constitution.

Opponents of the Constitution’s ratification were called the Anti-Federalists. They published their own essays that encouraged people and states to be more skeptical of what this new form of government might be empowered to do. These essays made the case against ratifying the Constitution. They reasoned that it established an unwieldy federal authority, rather than a limited government, and that it would not respect the inalienable rights of the people it governed.

You might notice that supporters and opponents of the Constitution used many of the same reasons to justify their positions. Both groups wanted to uphold Founding principles that they agreed upon, but they preferred different ways of bringing them to life as a system of government.

The source included here is an anonymous essay published in the same month that the Constitution was presented to the public for consideration. This article outlines some of the reasons why the Anti-Federalists opposed the Constitution’s more powerful national government.

Directions: Review the essential vocabulary. Then, read the excerpts and answer the questions that follow.

Essential Vocabulary

| | |
|-----------------------|---|
| Conjure | To implore someone to do something |
| federal system | The existing government under the Articles of Confederation |
| Standing army | A permanent military force, maintained during peacetime as well as during war |
| welfare | The general well-being, prosperity, and happiness of a community |
| aggrandizement | Increasing something in wealth, status, or power |
| posterity | All future generations of people |
| dupes | One that is easily deceived, a fool |
| prejudices | Unfavorable opinions formed without sufficient knowledge |
| candor | Fairness, the absence of malice |

Excerpts from “Cato I,” *Independent Journal* (New York, NY) September 26, 1787

<https://archive.csac.history.wisc.edu/cato1.pdf>

| Text | Notes |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| The Convention , who sat at Philadelphia, have at last delivered to Congress that system of general government, which they have declared best calculated to promote your safety and happiness as citizens of the United States... | The Constitutional Convention of 1787 |
| Without directly engaging as an advocate for this new form of national government, or as an opponent – let me conjure you to consider this a very important crisis of your safety and character – You have already, in common with the rest of your countrymen, the citizens of the other states, given to the world astonishing evidences of your greatness | |
| – you have fought under peculiar circumstances, and [were] successful against a powerful nation on a speculative question – you have established an original compact between you and your governors of the world – your experience has informed you that there are defects in the federal system , and, to the astonishment of mankind, your legislatures have concerted measures for an alteration, with as much ease as an individual would make a disposition of his ordinary domestic affairs... | |
| Deliberate, therefore, on this new national government with coolness; analyze it with criticism; and reflect on it with candor: if you find that the influence of a powerful few, or the exercise | |

Excerpts from “Cato I,” Independent Journal (New York, NY) September 26, 1787 (cont.)

<https://archive.csac.history.wisc.edu/cato1.pdf>

| Text | Notes |
|---|--------------------------------|
| <p>of a standing army, will always be directed and exerted for your welfare alone, and not to the aggrandizement of themselves, and that it will secure to you and your posterity happiness at home, and national dignity and respect from abroad, adopt it – if it will not, reject it with indignation – better to be where you are, for the present, than insecure forever afterwards...</p> | |
| <p>Beware of those who wish to influence your passions, and to make you dupes to their resentments and little interests – personal invectives can never persuade, but they always fix prejudices which candor might have removed—those who deal in them have not your happiness at heart. Attach yourselves to measures, not to men.</p> | |
| <p>This form of government is handed to you by the recommendations of a man who merits the confidence of the public; but you ought to recollect, that the wisest and best of men may err, and their errors, if adopted, may be fatal to the community; therefore, in principles of politics, as well as in religious faith, every man ought to think for himself.</p> | <p>Refers to James Madison</p> |

Comprehension & Analysis Questions

1. The author describes the steps that people should take when they develop an opinion about the Constitution. What are some of those steps?
2. What Founding principles does the author draw upon in their argument? These principles might be stated explicitly, or they might be implied in the reasons that they describe. Look for specific words or phrases that seem to be central to the argument.
3. How would practicing the civic virtues of moderation and prudence help to settle the debate between the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists?