

Winter History & Heritage -- #6 (Feb. 11)

What follows is a brief analysis of opposing visions of the American Union. After that, some lessons from Brion McClanahan's *Founding Fathers' Guide to the Constitution*.

The “Old Republic” v. the “New Nation” --- (teacher commentary)

The following thesis is arguable and by no means originates with the teacher who articulates it. It is, however, a credible outlook on something vital that divided Americans in times past and, we might add, to this day.

There were several material causes (the “stuff” from which it came) of our terrible War Between the States (1861--1865): controversy over slavery, tariffs, secession, constitutional interpretation, and varying religious, cultural, and economic circumstances in the North & the South. Behind it all, however, was a deeper formal cause (the background against which all factors and events played themselves out). This formal cause was a conflict between two opposing visions of the Union—between what might be called the Jeffersonian “Old Republic” and the Lincolnian “New Nation.”

The old republicans, numerically dominate in the South but not without strong representation in the North, held the U.S. to be a confederated Union of sovereign States, whose peoples fulfilled their political vocations—their political liberties—largely through participation in their States (& localities). The Union & its general government, in this view, existed for the sake of the States, mostly to secure their republican (self-governing) liberties.

The new nationalists like Lincoln, with other prominent figures preceding and succeeding him, saw things differently. They held to a consolidated Union of an amalgamated American People, whose States fulfilled their purposes through participation in the People's Union. Thus the States existed for the sake of Union (the People's mass Union & government), mostly to do its bidding.

The triumph of the Northern Union in the War, with the devastation wrought and dominion established over a “reconstructed” South, set the stage for the slow but sure triumph of the “New Nation.” The rest, as they say, is history: the history of the last 150 years of political centralization and nation-state expansion accelerated by the so-called Progressive Era (roughly 1880--1920).

As for the U.S. Constitution, ratified in the spirit of the “Old Republic” to strengthen the protective canopy for the States while limiting centralized power, it was dead in the water in 1865. President Lincoln's very loose adherence, to say the least, to the document in the prosecution of the War was merely a preview of coming attractions in Washington, D.C.

Of course, Americans continued to venerate, publicly and privately, their Constitution, their Union, their governments, and their Fathers who founded them. But perhaps, to

paraphrase the Bible, it was more a case of honoring something with their lips when their hearts were far from it.

“Large States” v. “Small States” -- (Founding Fathers’ Guide; McClanahan; p. 3)

Of the various compromises that made up the U.S. Constitution, drafted in Philadelphia in 1787, **this one, the so-called great compromise**, loomed largest of all? The terms of the compromise, however, were really code words for the greater tussle between those favoring a national, centralized approach to government and those of a federal, decentralized persuasion. That divide, nationalism v. federalism, is the key to deciphering the document’s hybrid character.

Federalists & Anti-federalists: A Case of Mistaken Identity - (McClanahan; p. 5)

In the excerpt below, historian Brion McClanahan explains why the well-known terms “Federalists” & “Anti-federalists” did more to obscure than to clarify the issues at stake when the U.S. Constitution was adopted (1787--1789):

Opponents of the Constitution were never comfortable with the term “Anti-federalist.” They correctly pointed out during the ratification debates that what they wanted was to retain the federal system of the Articles of Confederation, and the proponents of the Constitution, instead of being federalists, were in fact nationalists bent on eliminating the State governments. Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts remarked in 1789 that “those who were called antifederalists at the time complained that they had injustice done them by the title, because they were in favor of a Federal Government, and the others were in favor of a national one; the federalists were for ratifying the constitution as it stood, and the others not until amendments were made. Their names then ought not to have been distinguished by federalists and antifederalists, but rats and antirats.” This colorful description may be tinged by the politics of his day, but Gerry was on to something. Our modern conception of how the Constitution was argued and ratified has also been distorted by the way the winning side framed the debate. . .

Preamble to the U.S. Constitution -- (Founding Fathers’ Guide; McClanahan; p. 7)

The much-revered introduction to the Constitution, fifty-two words long from the pen of Gouverneur Morris of New York, is reproduced below. Its first seven words, especially, were not without controversy back in the day.

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.