

Spring History & Heritage -- #2 (April 1)

As is customary for this teacher-student blog, where parents & friends are invited to “listen in,” the content in summary or Q&A form is based on the sources indicated.

Girolamo Savonarola --- (*Christian Almanac; Grant/Wilbur; March 14*)

This Dominican monk (1452--1498), an inspiration to the early Protestants, became the virtual dictator of Florence, Italy, for a time in the 1490s? A medical student familiar with the new humanist learning, he impulsively joined the Dominicans, taught in Bologna & Florence, and gained an avid following with his fiery condemnations of corruption in church, state, and everyday life. His enemies, however, turned the people against him and prosecuted him on charges of heresy and sedition.

Pope Pius XI --- (*Christian Almanac; Grant/Wilbur; March 14*)

This Bishop of Rome issued an historic encyclical in 1937 aimed at the “idolatrous cult” of race, nation, and state manifesting itself in Nazi Germany at the time? “With burning concern and mounting consternation,” the pope began, “we have been observing for some time now the cross carried by the church in Germany and the increasingly difficult situation of those. . .who have kept the faith.” The papal letter was smuggled into Germany and read from all Catholic pulpits on Palm Sunday.

Congress Will Decide Congress’s Pay

(*Founding Fathers’ Guide to the Constitution; McClanahan; pp. 34-38*)

As provided in Article I, Section 6 of the U.S. Constitution, salaries for members of Congress (Senators & Representatives) were to be “paid out of the Treasury” as “ascertained by Law.” This ascertainment, perhaps surprisingly perhaps not, was to be made by Congress itself.

The dangers inherent in the arrangement, brought to the surface in both Philadelphia & many State ratifying conventions, have indeed come to pass. Congressional salaries today are more than three times higher (in inflation-adjusted dollars) than the rate set in 1789 (\$174,000 to \$233,000 per year as compared to \$46,625).

Brion McClanahan’s concluding remarks on this phenomenon are worth pondering: “Patrick Henry and other members of the founding generation worried about the probability of congressional excesses—what Madison called indecency—and were they alive to see how lavishly congressmen reward themselves today, they would surely be appalled. Across the board, the Founding Fathers viewed service in the government as a duty rather than a station. That, more than anything else, is what separates the founding generation from the political class today.”

“All Bills for Raising Revenue” --- (McClanahan; pp. 39-41)

Any bill of this kind, says Article I, Section 7 of the U.S. Constitution, must originate in the House, though the Senate may propose amendments as on any other bill? The Framers believed this “power of the purse” should be guarded by that body most closely tied electorally to the people, for it was their money that was to be taxed and spent. Moreover, as John Dickinson of DE declared in Philadelphia, the provisional power was based not upon the Framers’ abstract reason but the political customs of the States.

Dickinson Lauds not Reason, but Experience --- (McClanahan; p. 40)

When John Dickinson (DE) spoke in the Philadelphia Convention (1787) in favor of assigning the “power of the purse” to the House of Representatives, says McClanahan, he “made one of the more important speeches of the summer.”

Dickinson stressed that “experience must be our only guide. Reason may mislead us. It was not reason that discovered the singular and admirable mechanism of the English constitution. It was not reason that discovered or ever could have discovered, the odd. . .the absurd mode of trial by jury. Accidents probably produced these discoveries, and experience has given a sanction to them. This is, then, our guide.” Dickinson further observed that “eight states have inserted in their constitutions the exclusive right of originating money bills in favor of the popular branch of the legislature,” and “most of them. . .allowed the other branch to amend.” Thus, it “would be proper for us to do” likewise with respect to the general government of the Union.

Of Dickinson’s address, McClanahan says its “beauty. . .relates to his admission that the Constitution should not be the best document the delegates to the Convention could imagine, but should rely on time-tested maxims of government, society and law. Others had suggested that ‘experience’ should guide their actions, but Dickinson said it best. They were not reinventing the government of the United States—the rejection of Madison’s Virginia Plan drove that home—they were creating a general government the people of the States would accept, which argued in favor of relying on customary and familiar government powers. . .”

General Welfare Clause --- (McClanahan; pp. 41-45)

This constitutional clause, found in both the Preamble and Art. I, Sec. 8, has been greatly distorted to justify just about anything the U.S. does for the sake of the people? The clause itself comes from the *Articles of Confederation* where it referred to the Union’s duty to serve the several States, chiefly by defending their “liberties, sovereignty, religion, trade,” etc. Moreover its meaning, Madison conceded, did not change by virtue of its transfer from the republic’s first constitution to its second.