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2026: THE BOOKS THAT SHAPE US

JULY HIGHLIGHT

THE FEDERALIST PAPERS BY ALEXANDER HAMILTON, JAMES MADISON, AND JOHN JAY

A coordinated marketing campaign for the newly-written Constitution, this collection of 85 essays explains and expounds on key choices of the framers in an effort to convince states to ratify the document. Despite having no official or legal status, it is considered the most authoritative source on the reasoning and intent of the authors of the Constitution.

(A counterpoint collection, the Anti-Federalist Papers, is a far less organized set of influential essays arguing against the choices of the framers. They are featured on Dial-A-Story.)

CONTEXT & IMPACT

The Federalist Papers might be the driest of the selections for our theme this year, but it is also likely to be the most impactful for our identities as Americans. The United States Constitution isn't turning 250 this year - that comes in 2038. During the initial years of the United States of America, the country operated under the Articles of Federation and Perpetual Union (which were written in 1776-1777 and fully in effect from 1781-1788, though Congress operated under them from 1777-1781 while waiting for full ratification). In fact, the Constitution wasn't even supposed to be written. In 1787, a convention, now known as the Constitutional Convention, was convened for the express purpose of revising the Articles to solve some issues of interstate commerce. Against their express charter, the delegates quickly decided that revising the Articles was not prudent and decided to write a whole new form of government.

From May 25-September 17, 1787, the Constitution was drafted and debated before it was signed and the ratification process began. The Federalist Papers were an organized marketing campaign for the newly drafted Constitution that were published in New York to convince the states to ratify the document. The politically risky papers were originally published anonymously; they were signed by the name "Publius". That name was a nod to Publius Valerius, a 6th-century BC Roman general and statesman who had been given the title of "Friend of the People". They are primarily addressed to "New York" because New York was a critical swing state.

The progression of essays was planned out and coordinated between the three authors: Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay. (Jay was originally slated to write a larger number of essays but was sidelined by illness.) The essays start by defending the need for one large nation (as opposed to independent states or smaller confederacies) before moving into describing the insufficiency of the Articles and the identified needs of a government. After all of that framing, the authors then defend the specific choices made in the Constitution. In No. 40, they defend the Convention's authority to draft the Constitution instead of revising the Articles, ensuring that weakness is protected.

The Constitution planned to change the United States from a Federation into a Nation, founding the democratic republic we operate under today. At the time, the idea of a democratic republic was novel; few if any other countries operated under this model. As this represented a major shift, the debates between the balance of federal vs state power

continued

was fierce. A pure democracy was rejected by the Framers. The decision was best articulated by James Madison, who defended the choice of a republican government in Federalist No. 10. Madison held a complex view of human nature, understanding that humans are capable of both good and evil. He, and the other founders, examined other democratic governments (in particular, Athens), and realized that pure democracy would eventually hurt the public good, becoming subject to the negative effects of factions. The framers also wanted to ensure the government's power and authority was derived from the people as a whole, rejecting other "mixed government" models of contemporary countries which divided up government representation by classes of people (monarchy, aristocracy, and the commoners). Instead, the framers chose to separate the powers of government through a balance of state (Senate) and population (House of Representatives) representation.

Many of the papers were devoted to defending the terms of office for each branch of government. The framers spent significant time working through the best balance of the need for expertise, such as in negotiating treaties or determining legal authority, with the need for the population to regularly evaluate and approve their representation. They also debated the matter of pay, arguing that it would be necessary to pay representatives in order to prevent, where possible, corruption by bribes.

In the model of dual sovereignty described in the Constitution there is a tension between state and federal powers. The framers realized that federal power would have to be enumerated, to ensure that too much power wasn't taken from the states. They felt that the states should care for the "day-to-day" concerns, so that the people are able to stay more involved in governments closer to them. In addition, they created a judicial system that expressly evaluates if novel laws violate those powers.

Most importantly to us today, the framers elected to ensure that the Constitution they wrote wasn't set in stone. They deliberately chose a dynamic system that could be amended. In fact, the first set of amendments was made official a scant three years later in 1791, with The Bill of Rights. The Bill of Rights covered some of the issues covered in what we now call The Anti-Federalist Papers. Interestingly, the Bill of Rights was authored by James Madison, a vocal opponent in The Federalist Papers. The voice of the people changed his mind.

The change from the Articles of Federation to the Constitution was the first step in Americans identifying as citizens of the United States of America instead of as citizens of specific states. It would take many more decades (and, frankly, a Civil War) for the identities to fully switch, but today we think of ourselves as American citizens first, and secondly as residents of the state in which we live. Even as the pendulum swings between stronger state and federal powers, we the people consider ourselves as Americans, and this collection of essays helped lay that foundation.

SOURCES & MORE

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Books

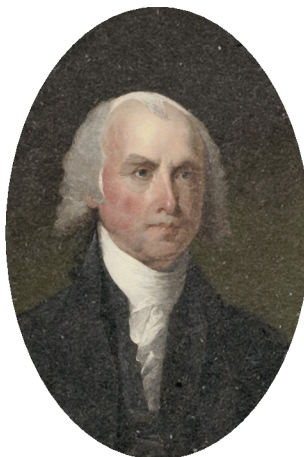
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Video

- *Books that Matter: The Federalist Papers*. The Great Courses, 2020. (available on Kanopy)
- *The US Constitution through History*. The Great Courses, 2022. (available on Kanopy)
- *From the Vaults: Federalist Papers*. Library of Congress, 2022.
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Alexander Hamilton



James Madison



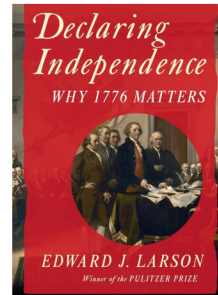
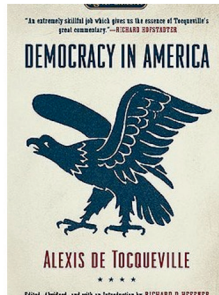
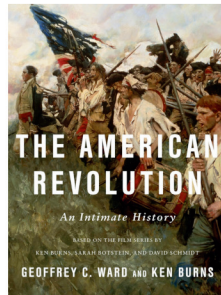
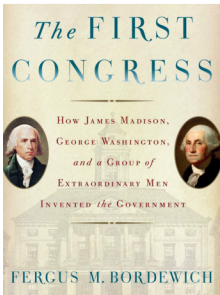
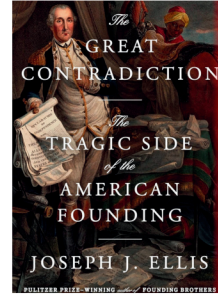
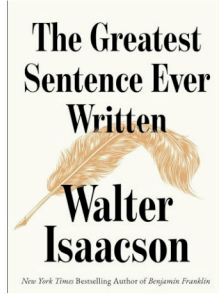
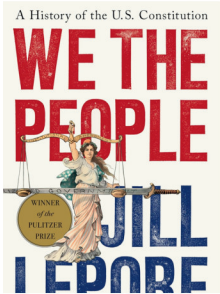
John Jay



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Did reading *The Federalist Papers* help you articulate anything about how you view our government today? Should the papers be more broadly read?
- The papers show multiple places of compromise, most notably on the issue of slavery. Did those compromises help America get to the right place (eg ending slavery) or did they slow down the country's development? What may have happened had those compromises not been made?
- How do you feel about the power historical documents such as *The Federalist Papers* have in influencing the US Supreme Court's interpretation of the modern-day meaning of the Constitution? Should external documents be used to interpret governing laws like the Constitution? Defend your position.
- Do you agree with Madison and the other framers about the ills of a pure democracy? If so, do you feel that the solution the framers developed was the best way over 200 years later? If not, what defense would you give to prevent the problems Madison describes from other pure democracies?
- Do you believe that the framers' design of the federal legislature has ultimately been successful in preventing the rise of an American oligarchy or aristocracy? Why/why not?
- Do you agree with Alexander Hamilton that it is crucial for the president to be "energetic" and "vigorous"? Why or why not?
- The framers did not anticipate the rise of mass and social media. What decisions may have changed if they could have foreseen today's media landscape? Do you think they would have changed any elements of their governmental structure?
- Do you agree with this quote from paper No. 57, describing America? "the vigilant and manly spirit which actuates the people of America - a spirit which nourishes freedom, and in return is nourished by it." Defend your position.
- What do you think the current balance of state and federal powers is? If you could change one thing to alter the balance of powers, what would it be?
- Do you think that the power to alter government actually lies with the people? Why or why not? Is this something that we could change within the structure of our current government, for example, by passing reform laws?
- What do you think the current state of the checks and balances of the three branches of government is today. Do you feel one is stronger than the others? If you feel they are out of balance, do you feel that it could be corrected?
- How do you feel each branch of government today reflects the intentions of the founding fathers of America?

READ-ALIKES - THE FEDERALIST PAPERS

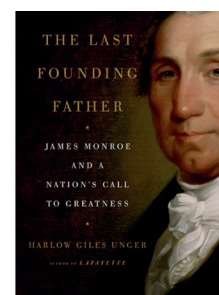
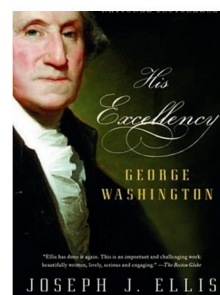
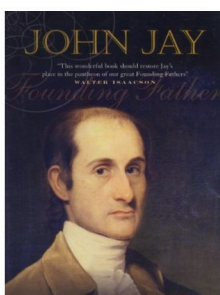
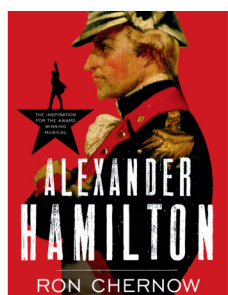
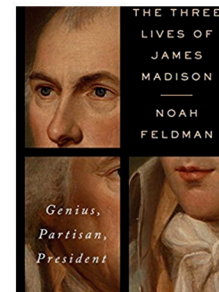
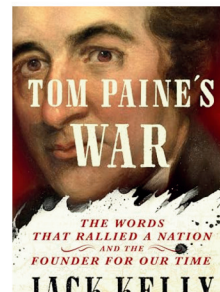
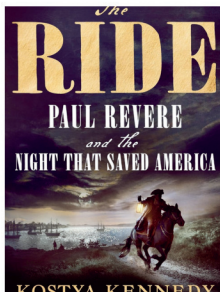
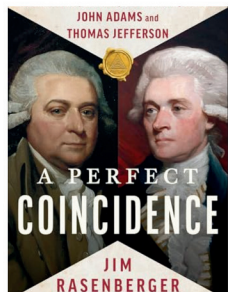
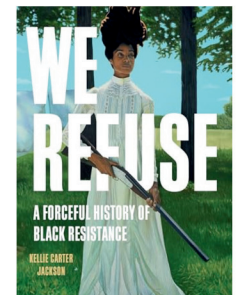
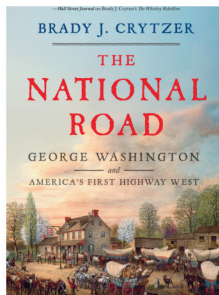
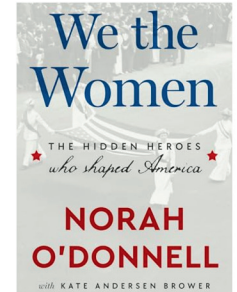
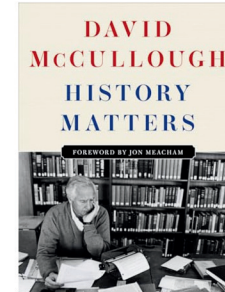
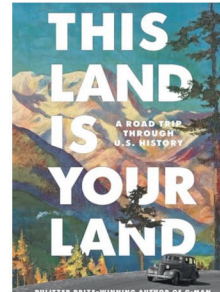
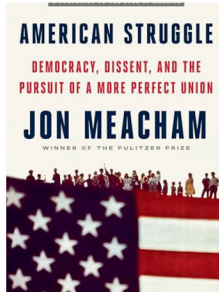


More on America's Founding:

- *The American Revolution and the Fate of the World* by Richard Bell
- *The First Congress* by Fergus M. Bordewich
- *The Great Contradiction* by Joseph J. Ellis
- *The Greatest Sentence Ever Written* by Walter Isaacson
- *Declaring Independence* by Edward J. Larson
- *We the People* by Jill Lepore
- *Democracy in America* by Alexis de Tocqueville
- *The American Revolution* by Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns

American Histories:

- *The National Road* by Brady J. Crytzer
- *A Fever in the Heartland* by Timothy Egan
- *This Land is Your Land* by Beverly Gage
- *We Refuse* by Kellie Carter Jackson
- *History Matters* by David McCullough
- *The Small and the Mighty* by Sharon McMahon
- *American Struggle* by Jon Meacham
- *We the Women* by Nora O'Donnell



People Who Shaped America:

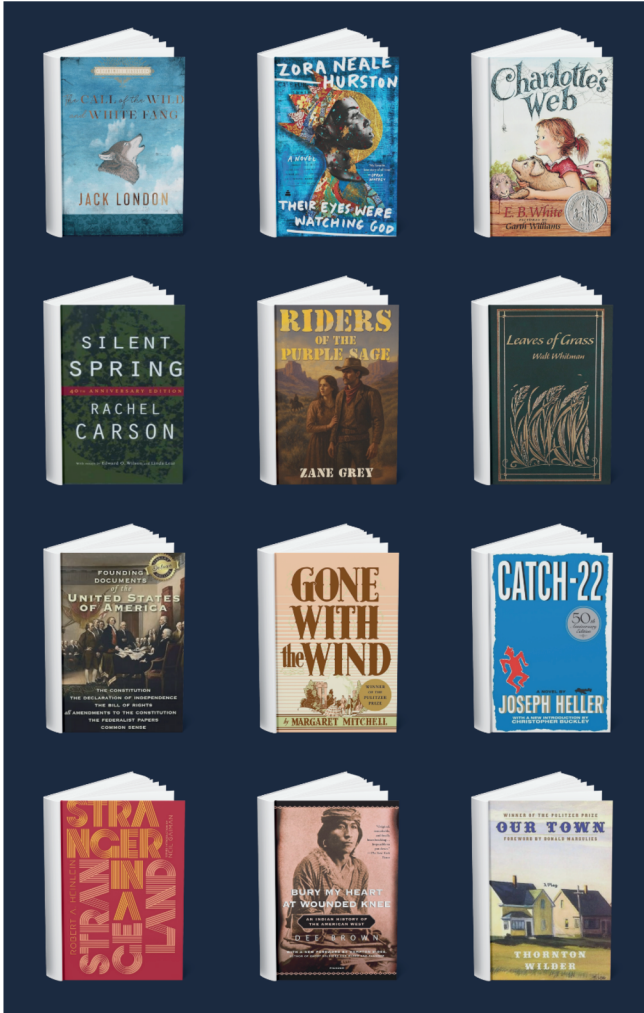
- *Alexander Hamilton* by Ron Chernow
- *His Excellency George Washington* by Joseph J. Ellis
- *The Three Lives of James Madison* by Noah Feldman
- *Tom Paine's War* by Jack Kelly
- *The Ride: Paul Revere and the Night that Saved America* by Kostya Kennedy
- *A Perfect Coincidence* by Jim Rasenberger
- *John Jay* by Walter Stahr
- *The Last Founding Father* by Harlow Giles Unger

UPCOMING SELECTIONS

THE BOOKS THAT SHAPE US



- **January:** *The Call of the Wild* by Jack London
- **February:** *Their Eyes were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston
- **March:** *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White
- **April:** *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson
- **May:** *Riders of the Purple Sage* by Zane Grey
- **June:** *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman
- **July:** *The Federalist Papers* by Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, & James Madison
- **August:** *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell
- **September:** *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller
- **October:** *Stranger in a Strange Land* by Robert Heinlein
- **November:** *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* by Dee Brown
- **December:** *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder



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2026's Read with Your Librarian theme "The Books that Shape Us" honors America's 250th birthday by highlighting books influential in shaping America. Titles were chosen from the list featured in the Library of Congress' 2012 "Books that Shaped America" exhibit.

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