

Glenn Beck. 2011. *The Original Argument: The Federalist' Case for the Constitution, Adopted for the 21st Century*. Threshold Editions, 464 pages.

Conservative talk-show hosts have a fetish for the Founding Fathers. And why shouldn't they? After all, the Founders gave America its birth of freedom, its political theology, and its Constitution. Rarely, however, do Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, or Glenn Beck – the nation's top three talkers – speak of the Founders in any but a collective sense, as if they were as monolithic as the faces on Mount Rushmore. More often the Founders are piously invoked as the repository of personal virtue, selfless patriotism, and political wisdom, or as a foil to refract the ills of modern liberalism: big government, creeping socialism, soft tyranny. Yet for all their reverence for the Founders, conservative talkers display little real knowledge – on the air or in their books – of the actual men who founded the country.

Among the biggest names in talk, Glenn Beck has done most to highlight the virtues of the Founders, even featuring a “Founders’ Friday” on his nightly Fox News program. In 2009, ostensibly channeling Thomas Paine, he published *Glenn Beck's Common Sense*, a manifesto to “take back America!” For good measure, Beck appended the original *Common Sense*, Paine's short tract which galvanized public opinion in favor of independence in early 1776.

Stirred by the book's success and convinced of the Founders' relevance for today's politics, Beck has taken his passion a step further: he's rewritten *The Federalist Papers*, the foremost commentary on the Constitution and America's sole political classic. Actually, Beck didn't rewrite the Papers himself; they were "translated" by a music student at the University of Kansas. What Beck has done is to arrange these translations (33 of the original 85 papers) into seven chapters and provide a brief introduction for each under the title *The Original Argument*. Basically, *The Federalist Papers for Dummies*.

As one who has used *The Federalist* in the classroom for twenty years, I commend Mr. Beck for attempting to make this classic more accessible to a larger audience. *The Federalist* is admittedly a difficult, long read in its original form. Much of it is no longer relevant or applicable to current conditions. The Papers were written for a specific purpose – to secure ratification of the Constitution in New York – more than two hundred years ago and before the Bill of Rights was adopted.

Given his track record as a best-selling author, more Americans are likely to read Glenn Beck's *Federalist* than all other editions combined. Is this a cause for concern? The "translations" are relatively harmless, though hardly a substitute for the genuine article. It is Beck's commentary that requires scrutiny. Does he know what he's talking about? Does he get it right? Not really. Based on Beck's politics – conservative, populist, states' rights – he should have brought out a book on the *Anti-Federalists*, the opponents of the Constitution who warned that a latent tyranny lurked in its provisions for a strong central government. This aside, Beck simply shows scant knowledge of the realities surrounding the composition of the *Federalist* or the creation of the Constitution it explained and defended.

In addition to factual errors – large and small – Beck's commentary is plagued by numerous oversights, half-truths, and downright distortions. First, he fails to distinguish between the Framers – the men who drafted the Constitution – and the Founders – the revolutionary-era leaders as a whole. Many Founders, including Patrick Henry and Samuel Adams initially opposed the Constitution. For Beck they are all simply "the Founders." He also seems unaware of the somewhat duplicitous position the principal authors of the *Federalist* – Alexander Hamilton and James Madison – found themselves in when writing as

“Publius,” an unequivocal exponent of the Constitution. Both were delegates to the Philadelphia Convention and both had advanced a plan that gave the central government far greater power than did the document they signed.

Madison, for example, insisted on the need for the federal government to have an absolute veto on legislation by the states and denounced equal representation in the Senate as grossly unfair and undemocratic. In a letter to Jefferson after the Convention, he expressed his disappointment in the outcome and confided that the powers retained by the states might well prove fatal to the union. Hamilton, an even more ardent nationalist, proposed to reduce the states to mere administrative districts and bestow upon senators and the president a life term of office. In writing in support of the Constitution both had to assume something of a mask, not infrequently taking a position they did not privately support. In particular, they were required to downplay the strongly nationalist features of the Constitution and underscore the reserved rights of the states. As Jefferson observed, “[i]n some parts [of the *Federalist*], it is discoverable that the author means only to say what may best be said in defense of opinions in which he did not concur.”

Beck shows no awareness of these facts or that the *Federalist* is largely a species of political rhetoric whose principal aim was to persuade. Nor does he note that Hamilton and Madison became political enemies and espoused opposing constitutional theories shortly after the new government was formed. Indeed, a year before his death in 1804 a disillusioned Hamilton referred to the Constitution as a “worthless fabric.” For his part, Madison predicted the emergence of a large landless class that would one day throw constitutional scruples to the wind. Hamilton and Madison were not the plastered political saints of Mr. Beck’s vision.

Often Beck is just plain wrong. He writes that the Founders’ core constitutional principles included the belief that “smaller government makes better government.” This is backwards: the prevailing sentiment among the Framers was for a *bigger, stronger* government that could tax, regulate commerce, and prevail in any conflict with the states. Equally egregious is Beck’s contention that Hamilton was faced with explaining “why a national government over the states was preferable to one over individuals ...” Again, just the opposite is true. Hamilton insisted that

the national government have direct authority over individuals, and denounced the lack thereof under the Articles of Confederation as a “radical vice.”

Elsewhere Beck asserts that the *Federalist* explains why the government “is not a protector of anything – it is simply an agent of our collective will.” Not even Rousseau – the democratic collectivist – went this far. Rousseau did, however, assert that man was born naturally free, a belief immortalized in the Declaration of Independence. Yet according to Beck, “[f]reedom is not the natural state of man,” while “[t]yranny [is] the natural state of government.” For Jefferson and the Founders, tyranny was a perversion of government, a violation of man’s natural rights.

Nor is Beck above outright solecisms. “Publius” he writes, “believed that the federal government has power over the states to *protect our liberties and our nation*, not to force the states to carry out policies that the federal government believes threaten these liberties.” Thank goodness the Constitution doesn’t grant the feds the power to force the states to threaten their own liberties! Beyond his illogic, Beck appears blithely oblivious to the fact that until the modern civil rights era it was the *states*, not the federal government, that posed the graver threat to individual rights, and conversely, the *federal* government that ended state-sponsored discrimination.

Beck is also dead wrong about the reception of the Papers and their impact on the ratification contest. They were not, as he asserts, “easy for most Americans to understand,” not even for eighteenth-century Americans. Even less did Publius “speak to the elites and the working class simultaneously without upsetting either side ...” As the residing French envoy observed, the Papers were “of no value whatever to well-informed people, and ... too learned and too long for the ignorant.” More to the point, the Papers were largely a failure in their immediate aim: the election of pro-Constitution delegates to the New York ratifying convention. Beck claims the Papers “won over the hearts and minds of not only New Yorkers but Americans across the confederacy and tipped the balance toward ratification.” In truth, the Papers did none of these things: the election in New York resulted in a large anti-Federalist majority, the Papers were largely unknown outside of the Empire State, and the Constitution had already been ratified by the

requisite nine states before New York became the eleventh to do so. It was behind the scenes wrangling by Hamilton and John Jay (a minor contributor to the *Federalist*) that secured ratification in Poughkeepsie, not the largely ineffectual *Federalist Papers*.

For a man who regularly exhorts his millions of listeners to “do your own homework,” Mr. Beck is guilty of errors that would be unpardonable in a sophomore term-paper. Sadly, his numerous blunders are compounded by distortions and hypocrisy. He notes, for instance, the existence of “some people [who] would prefer that you not read the *Federalist Papers*,” but “would rather contort Publius’s words to serve their own narrow ideological ends.” Beyond the seeming contradiction, this is simply absurd. Virtually every American government textbook reproduces *Federalist* Nos. 10 and 51 as an appendix, and there are more than a dozen editions of the *Papers* currently in print. Furthermore, Beck’s professedly “non-ideological” edition is by far the most ideological to date.

Beck would also have us believe that the *Federalist Papers* drip with religion and piety – as if Hamilton and Madison were powdered-hair progenitors of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson. What was striking to a number of contemporaries, however, was the secular thrust of the *Papers* (and the Constitution itself). There are a handful of references to “Providence” in the *Federalist*, a document of some 175,000 words, but only one to “God.” The Constitution itself is free of all references to the Deity, a regrettable omission for some of its early critics. When Benjamin Franklin moved that prayers be offered at the Philadelphia Convention his motion was flatly rejected. “The convention,” he recorded, “except three or four persons, thought prayers unnecessary.” *The Federalist* is not the work of some latter-day Puritans, but the American vanguard of the European Enlightenment. As historian Peter Gay notes, the authors of the *Papers* “sound all the great themes of the Enlightenment, if by implication only: the dialectical movement away from Christianity to modernity; the pessimistic though wholly secular appraisal of human nature ...” Publius speaks of “virtue” not “piety,” “vice” not “sin.”

All these blemishes aside, Beck simply overstates the case for the relevance of the *Federalist* for constitutional guidance and renewal. For all their brilliance, insight, and wisdom, the *Papers* alone cannot

provide answers to many of today's most pressing public controversies. *The Federalist* was written before the adoption of the Bill of Rights and the Fourteenth Amendment, which fundamentally reconfigured the relationship between the states and the federal government. This limits the relevance of Publius on questions of federalism. As for disputes over civil rights and liberties – the subject of most constitutional litigation – the *Federalist* can be of little help.

In fairness, Mr. Beck makes no claim to provide a scholarly edition of the *Federalist*. But his failure to provide an accurate, honest, or useful one places *The Original Argument* beneath scholarly comment.

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