

Handout A: Excerpts from *The Republic of Plato* (~380 B.C.) and selected Federalist Papers by James Madison (1787-1788)

Background: *The Republic* was a conversation among Socrates, Glaucon, Cephalus, Polemarchus, Thrasymachus, and Adeimantus, written by Plato. The Federalist Papers were written by James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay, all using the pen name, Publius, in order to build support for the U.S. Constitution during the ratification debate in New York.

Directions: Read the excerpts below and answer the questions that follow. (Note: Clarifying information on each excerpt can be found in the margins.)

Excerpts from *The Republic of Plato*

Book IV: 415 a-c

“It was indeed appropriate,” I [Socrates] said. “All the same, hear out the rest of the tale. ‘All of you in the city are certainly brothers,’ we shall say to them in telling the tale, ‘but the god, in fashioning those of you who are competent to rule, mixed gold in at their birth; this is why they are most honored; in auxiliaries, silver; and iron and bronze in the farmers and the other craftsmen. So, because you’re all related, although for the most part you’ll produce offspring like yourselves, it sometimes happens that a silver child will be born from a golden parent, a golden child from a silver parent, and similarly all the others from each other. Hence the god commands the rulers first and foremost to be of nothing such good guardians and to keep over nothing so careful a watch as the children, seeing which of these metals is mixed in their souls. And, if a child of theirs should be born with an admixture of bronze or iron, by no manner of means are they to take pity on it, but shall assign the proper value to its nature and thrust it out among the craftsmen or the farmers; and, again, if from these men one should naturally grow who has an admixture of gold or silver, they will honor such ones and lead them up, some to the guardian group, others to the auxiliary, believing that there is an oracle that the city will be destroyed when an iron or bronze man is its guardian.’ So, have you some device for persuading them of this tale?”

According to Plato, there are three types of people in society. Philosophers and kings are “gold,” soldiers and other auxiliaries are “silver,” while the rest of the people who produce resources are “bronze.”

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Book V: 442 a-b

“And these two, thus trained and having truly learned their own business and been educated, will be set over the desiring—which is surely most of the soul in each and by nature most insatiable for money—and they’ll watch it for fear of its being filled with the so-called pleasures of the body and thus becoming big and strong, and then not minding its own business, but attempting to enslave and rule what is not appropriately ruled by its class and subverting everyone’s entire life.”

“Most certainly,” he said.

“So,” I [Socrates] said, “wouldn’t these two do the finest job of guarding against enemies from without on behalf of all of the soul and the body, the one deliberating, the other making war, following the ruler, and with its courage fulfilling what has been decided?”

Book V: 458 c - 459 d

“...I’ll consider, if you permit me, how the rulers will arrange these things when they come into being and whether their accomplishment would be most advantageous of all for both the city and the guardians. I’ll attempt to consider this with you first, and the other later, if you permit.”

“I do permit,” he said, “so make your consideration.”

“Well, then,” I said, “I suppose that if the rulers are to be worthy of the name, and their auxiliaries likewise, the latter will be willing to do what they are commanded and the former to command. In some of their commands the rulers will in their turn be obeying the laws; in others—all those we leave to their discretion—they will imitate the laws...”

“First, although they are all noble, aren’t there some among them who are and prove to be best?”

“There are.”

“Do you breed from all alike, or are you eager to breed from the best as much as possible?”

“...My, my, dear comrade,” I said, “how very much we need eminent rulers after all, if it is also the same with the human species.”

“Of course it is,” he said, “but why does that affect the rulers?”

Money led people to attempt to enslave and rule through subversion.

One part of the government should deliberate while the other should make war and follow the ruler.

The rulers will command their auxiliaries and the rest of the people will follow.

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“...To this,” I said. “It’s likely that our rulers will have to use a throng of lies and deceptions for the benefit of the ruled. And, of course, we said that everything of this sort is useful as a form of remedy.”

“And we were right,” he said.

“Now, it seems it is not the least in marriages and procreations, that this ‘right’ comes into being.”

“...And all this must come to pass without being noticed by anyone except the rulers themselves if the guardians’ herd is to be as free as possible from factions.”

Book VI: 488 a-e and 489 a

“...Conceive something of this kind happening either on many ships or one. Though the shipowner surpasses everyone on board in height and strength, he is rather deaf and likewise somewhat shortsighted, and his knowledge of seamanship is pretty much on the same level. The sailors are quarreling with one another about the piloting, each supposing he ought to pilot, although he has never learned the art and can’t produce his teacher or prove there was a time when was learning it. Besides this, they claim it isn’t even teachable and are ready to cut to pieces the man who says it is teachable. And they are always crowded around the shipowner himself, begging and doing everything so that he’ll turn the rudder over to them. And sometimes, if they fail at persuasion and other men succeed at it, they either kill the others or throw them out of the ship. Enchaining the noble shipowner with mandrake, drink, or something else, they rule the ship using what’s in it; and drinking and feasting, they sail as such men would be thought likely to sail. Besides this, they praise and call ‘skilled sailor,’ ‘pilot,’ and ‘knower of the ship’s business’ the man who is clever at figuring out how they will get the rule, either by persuading or forcing the shipowner, while the man who is not of this sort they blame as useless. They don’t know that for the true pilot it is necessary to pay careful attention to the year, seasons, heaven, stars, winds, and everything that’s proper to the art, even if he’s going to be skilled at ruling a ship. And they don’t suppose it’s possible to acquire the art and practice of how one can get hold of the helm whether the others wish it or not, and at the same time to acquire the pilot’s skill. So with such things happening on the ships, don’t you believe that the true pilot will really be called a stargazer, a prater and

To be free of factions, new generations of the ruling class must continue.

It will be the person who is clever at figuring out how to obtain power that will be the rulers, not necessarily the person who is the best for the job. Plato believed that this is the same problem with philosophers and kings – the kings or rulers are clever enough to figure out how to obtain the power to rule, but it is the philosophers who have the skills to rule.

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useless to them by those who sail on ships run like this?”

“Indeed, he will,” said Adeimantus.

“Now,” I [Socrates] said, “I don’t suppose you need to scrutinize the image to see that it resembles the cities in their disposition toward the true philosophers, by you understand what I mean...”

Excerpts from *The Federalist Papers*

Federalist No. 10 (1787) by James Madison

By a faction, I understand a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or a minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.

There are two methods of curing the mischiefs of faction: the one, by removing its causes; the other, by controlling its effects...

It is in vain to say that enlightened statesmen will be able to adjust these clashing interests, and render them all subservient to the public good. Enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm. Nor, in many cases, can such an adjustment be made at all without taking into view indirect and remote considerations, which will rarely prevail over the immediate interest which one party may find in disregarding the rights of another or the good of the whole.

The inference to which we are brought is, that the CAUSES of faction cannot be removed, and that relief is only to be sought in the means of controlling its EFFECTS...

A republic, by which I mean a government in which the scheme of representation takes place, opens a different prospect, and promises the cure for which we are seeking. Let us examine the points in which it varies from pure democracy, and we shall comprehend both the nature of the cure and the efficacy which it must derive from the Union.

The two great points of difference between a democracy and a republic are: first, the delegation of the government, in the latter, to a small number of citizens elected by the rest; secondly, the greater number of citizens, and greater sphere of country, over which the latter may be extended.

Madison defines faction as a number of citizens with a common interest acting against the rights of other citizens or against the interests of the community.

There are two cures for faction: removing its causes or controlling its effects.

The causes of faction cannot be removed; only the effects of factions can be controlled.

Republican government is a way to control the effects of factions through elections and a greater number of citizens over a larger space.

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Federalist No. 49 (1788) by James Madison

As the people are the only legitimate fountain of power, and it is from them that the constitutional charter, under which the several branches of government hold their power, is derived, it seems strictly consonant to the republican theory, to recur to the same original authority, not only whenever it may be necessary to enlarge, diminish, or new-model the powers of the government, but also whenever any one of the departments may commit encroachments on the chartered authorities of the others. The several departments being perfectly co-ordinate by the terms of their common commission, none of them, it is evident, can pretend to an exclusive or superior right of settling the boundaries between their respective powers; and how are the encroachments of the stronger to be prevented, or the wrongs of the weaker to be redressed, without an appeal to the people themselves, who, as the grantors of the commissions, can alone declare its true meaning, and enforce its observance?

... In the next place, it may be considered as an objection inherent in the principle, that as every appeal to the people would carry an implication of some defect in the government, frequent appeals would, in a great measure, deprive the government of that veneration which time bestows on every thing, and without which perhaps the wisest and freest governments would not possess the requisite stability. If it be true that all governments rest on opinion, it is no less true that the strength of opinion in each individual, and its practical influence on his conduct, depend much on the number which he supposes to have entertained the same opinion. The reason of man, like man himself, is timid and cautious when left alone, and acquires firmness and confidence in proportion to the number with which it is associated. When the examples which fortify opinion are ancient as well as numerous, they are known to have a double effect. In a nation of philosophers, this consideration ought to be disregarded. A reverence for the laws would be sufficiently inculcated by the voice of an enlightened reason. But a nation of philosophers is as little to be expected as the philosophical race of kings wished for by Plato. And in every other nation, the most rational government will not find it a superfluous advantage to have the prejudices of the community on its side.

The separate branches of government, states, and other departments will coordinate but exclusive power will not be held by one branch or department.

Government rests on opinion. Republican government allows for the people to voice their opinions while nations of philosophers (as in Plato's time) will rely on the opinions of philosophers.

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Federalist No. 51 (1788) by James Madison

It is equally evident, that the members of each department should be as little dependent as possible on those of the others, for the emoluments annexed to their offices. Were the executive magistrate, or the judges, not independent of the legislature in this particular, their independence in every other would be merely nominal. But the great security against a gradual concentration of the several powers in the same department, consists in giving to those who administer each department the necessary constitutional means and personal motives to resist encroachments of the others. The provision for defense must in this, as in all other cases, be made commensurate to the danger of attack. Ambition must be made to counteract ambition. The interest of the man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place. It may be a reflection on human nature, that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government. But what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.

A dependence on the people is, no doubt, the primary control on the government; but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions. This policy of supplying, by opposite and rival interests, the defect of better motives, might be traced through the whole system of human affairs, private as well as public. We see it particularly displayed in all the subordinate distributions of power, where the constant aim is to divide and arrange the several offices in such a manner as that each may be a check on the other that the private interest of every individual may be a sentinel over the public rights. These inventions of prudence cannot be less requisite in the distribution of the supreme powers of the State. But it is not possible to give to each department an equal power of self-defense. In republican government, the legislative authority necessarily predominates. The remedy for this inconveniency is to divide the legislature into different branches; and to render them, by different modes of election and different principles of action, as little connected with each other as the

Madison asserted that because humans are not angels, government is necessary to keep them in check. But neither is the government itself angelic, and it also needs to have checks on it. People will be ambitious and will try to gain more power. The Constitution protects people from the government and protects government from itself.

Experience has taught people that government must have boundaries. People (both the citizens and those elected to office) can be expected to sometimes choose unwisely or corruptly, so the structure of the government system must provide boundaries.

In a republican government, the legislature holds the majority of the power. In order to check that power, the United States legislature

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nature of their common functions and their common dependence on the society will admit. It may even be necessary to guard against dangerous encroachments by still further precautions. As the weight of the legislative authority requires that it should be thus divided, the weakness of the executive may require, on the other hand, that it should be fortified.

Federalist No. 55 (1788) by James Madison

The number of which the House of Representatives is to consist, forms another and a very interesting point of view, under which this branch of the federal legislature may be contemplated. Scarce any article, indeed, in the whole Constitution seems to be rendered more worthy of attention, by the weight of character and the apparent force of argument with which it has been assailed. The charges exhibited against it are, first, that so small a number of representatives will be an unsafe depository of the public interests; secondly, that they will not possess a proper knowledge of the local circumstances of their numerous constituents; thirdly, that they will be taken from that class of citizens which will sympathize least with the feelings of the mass of the people, and be most likely to aim at a permanent elevation of the few on the depression of the many; fourthly, that defective as the number will be in the first instance, it will be more and more disproportionate, by the increase of the people, and the obstacles which will prevent a correspondent increase of the representatives...

Sixty or seventy men may be more properly trusted with a given degree of power than six or seven. But it does not follow that six or seven hundred would be proportionably a better depository. And if we carry on the supposition to six or seven thousand, the whole reasoning ought to be reversed. The truth is, that in all cases a certain number at least seems to be necessary to secure the benefits of free consultation and discussion, and to guard against too easy a combination for improper purposes; as, on the other hand, the number ought at most to be kept within a certain limit, in order to avoid the confusion and intemperance of a multitude. In all very numerous assemblies, of whatever character composed, passion never fails to wrest the sceptre from reason. Had every Athenian citizen been a Socrates, every Athenian assembly would still have been a mob...

What change of circumstances, time, and a fuller population of our country may produce, requires a prophetic spirit to declare,

is divided into two houses: the House of Representatives and the Senate. At the time of the writing and ratification of the Constitution, the House and Senate were elected in different manners. Each house has different responsibilities. For instance, the Senate approves treaties and officers the president recommends, while all bills related to appropriations (money spent) start in the House.

The four main arguments against the proposed number of representatives in the House; critics have charged that there were too few representatives.

There should be enough representatives in government in order to consult with each other and discuss important issues but not too many to cause confusion.

Madison stated that if every person in Athens had been as virtuous and knowledgeable as Socrates, there still would have been disagreement.

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which makes no part of my pretensions. But judging from the circumstances now before us, and from the probable state of them within a moderate period of time, I must pronounce that the liberties of America cannot be unsafe in the number of hands proposed by the federal Constitution...

As there is a degree of depravity in mankind which requires a certain degree of circumspection and distrust, so there are other qualities in human nature which justify a certain portion of esteem and confidence. Republican government presupposes the existence of these qualities in a higher degree than any other form. Were the pictures which have been drawn by the political jealousy of some among us faithful likenesses of the human character, the inference would be, that there is not sufficient virtue among men for self-government; and that nothing less than the chains of despotism can restrain them from destroying and devouring one another.

To a greater degree than any other form of government, republican government will protect against evil and corruption, while encouraging virtue among the people.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. How do Plato and Madison differ in their understanding of human nature?
2. What are the remedies for faction according to Plato and Madison?
3. Plato believed that government power should be in the hands of philosophers. Explain his reasoning. How does Madison differ from Plato regarding government power?
4. According to Madison, how would the government under the U.S. Constitution remedy many of the problems faced by the ancient republics?