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The Defeat of Athens in 404 BC in The Federalist

Hans Kopp

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The Defeat of Athens in 404 BC in *The Federalist*

RÉSUMÉ-. Dans le débat public concernant la ratification de la constitution des États-Unis en 1787 et 1788, les références à l'Antiquité classique ont joué un rôle important. On se demande ici comment la défaite d'Athènes dans la Guerre du Péloponnèse (431-404 av. J.-C.) a été utilisée dans le texte politique le plus important et influent de cette époque, *The Federalist*, un recueil d'essais écrits par James Madison, Alexander Hamilton et John Jay pour défendre la constitution. La défaite d'Athènes y est interprétée comme exemple primordial des échecs et des risques qui découlent d'un gouvernement populaire illimité. Cette vision reflète autant les inquiétudes contemporaines relatives à la stabilité interne et à la sécurité du nouvel ordre politique que les préoccupations que l'on trouve dans les textes anciens et modernes qui étaient les sources des auteurs du *Federalist*.

ABSTRACT-. References to classical antiquity were of great importance in the public debate on the ratification of the United States Constitution in 1787 and 1788. This paper asks how the defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War of 431 to 404 BC was used in the most important and most influential document of political thought from this period, *The Federalist*, a collection of essays written by James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay in defence of the Constitution. The defeat of Athens is interpreted in these essays as a prime example of the failures and dangers that resulted from unrestricted popular government, a view that reflected contemporary concerns about the internal stability and safety of the new political order as well as the preoccupations prevalent in the ancient and early modern texts that were *The Federalist's* authors' sources.

One can hardly think of a time in history when examples from classical antiquity were more vigorously (and more polemically) applied to contemporary political debates than the years surrounding the drafting and ratification of the American Constitution in 1787 and 1788. These months of heated discussions have been aptly called “the greatest non-violent verbal battle ever waged in America.”¹ Scholars have disputed that classical *exempla* were effective in this battle,

Abbreviations

DHRC: *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, 29 vols. to date, ed. J. P. Kaminski *et al.*, Madison 1976-.

Farrand: *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, 4 vols., ed. M. Farrand, rev. edn., New Haven 1937.

PAH: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 27 vols., ed. H. C. Syrett, New York 1961-1987.

PJM: *The Papers of James Madison*, 16 vols., ed. W. T. Hutchinson *et al.*, Chicago 1962-1989.

Storing: *The Complete Anti-Federalist*, 7 vols., ed. H. J. Storing, Chicago 1981.

(1) BALL 2003, p. xv. See also MAIER 2010, ch. 3 on the “war of printed words” preceding the ratification period in 1788. On the debates surrounding the drafting and ratification of the Constitution, see generally the comprehensive study by HEIDKEKING 1988, published (slightly abridged) in English translation in 2012; references hereafter will be to the English edition.

and debated whether they actually shaped political thought and practice at the time.² What is *not* contestable, however, is the fact that the protagonists of political discourse, both the defenders as well as the opponents of the new Constitution, employed the legacy of Greek and Roman antiquity to shape and to strengthen their political arguments and to refute those of their opponents.³

The aim of this paper is to ask how and to what ends the defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War of 431 to 404 BC was used in the American political discourse of the later eighteenth century, and in particular in *The Federalist*, a collection of fifty-eight essays written jointly, under the pseudonym Publius,⁴ by James Madison (future president of the United States), Alexander Hamilton (future Secretary of the Treasury), and John Jay (future Governor of New York).⁵ The essays were published between October 1787 and May 1788 in New York newspapers,⁶ with the explicit purpose “to determine clearly and fully the merits of this Constitution, and the expediency of adopting it,” as Madison wrote in *Federalist* No. 37 of January 11, 1788.⁷ These essays are—apart, perhaps, from the Constitution itself and the Declaration of Independence—undoubtedly the most important and influential document of political thought originating from the early United States. But *The Federalist* is not only an example of political theory grounded in political practice. This collection of essays is also—and perhaps even primarily—an example of the fervent and sometimes quite polemical political debates of the time, and was meant directly to influence daily politics.⁸

References to antiquity are numerous in *The Federalist*: George Kennedy counted direct or indirect references to classical antiquity in no fewer than twenty-nine of the eighty-five essays authored by Publius.⁹ Greek history is the most common topic of these references, a fact that can be explained by the thematic focus of these essays.¹⁰ The essays of *The Federalist* thus provide an example of the intensity with which classical *exempla* were used in political debate during the years 1787 and 1788 when the ratification of the Constitution was contested in several states, among

(2) For a range of different interpretations, see ROSSITER 1953, p. 356–357; GUMMERE 1963, p. 190; BAILYN 1967, p. 26; REINHOLD 1984, p. 19–20; RICHARD 1994, esp. p. 232–243; SHALEV 2009; HEUN 2011.

(3) As JOHNSON 1988, 157 notes, “In retrospect, and judging simply by the frequency of citations made and parallels drawn, the influence of the Greek past reached an unprecedented peak in American political discourse around 1787.” See also RICHARD 1994, p. 233, who notes that “The most remarkable aspect of the debates surrounding the drafting and ratification of the U.S. Constitution was [...] the classicists’ rout of the anti-classicists. The classical tidal wave carried all before it.”

(4) On the use of classical pseudonyms during the revolutionary period, see RICHARD 1994, p. 39–43; SHALEV 2003 and 2009, ch. 5; HANSES 2011, p. 89–90; HEIDEKING 2012, p. 74–76.

(5) References to *The Federalist* will hereafter be to COOKE 1961, with the number of the essay and the page number in Cooke’s edition.

(6) Nos. 1 to 77 were first published in newspapers, whereas the last seven numbers were first printed in May 1788 in volume two of the book edition of the papers by John and Archibald McLean and only then reprinted in newspapers, beginning on June 14. On the publication history of the text, see COOKE 1961, p. xii–xiv.

(7) *Federalist* 37, p. 231. On the importance of newspapers for the debate on the Constitution, see HEIDEKING 2012, p. 76–83.

(8) See BALL’s (2003, p. xvii) characterization: “As a contribution to the ratification debate, *The Federalist* is an extended exercise in exposition, explanation, and persuasion. As a work of political theory, then, *The Federalist* flies fairly close to the ground, rarely soaring into the stratosphere of philosophical abstraction.” See also MAIER 2010, p. 84: “The ambitious scope of the series and the authors’ technique of answering opponents without acknowledging their existence [...] can easily mislead readers into thinking *The Federalist* is a dispassionate analysis of the Constitution, far removed from the political battleground, which was for ‘Publius’ first and foremost New York.”

(9) KENNEDY 1976, p. 120–122. On the overall importance of classical antiquity in *The Federalist*, see KENNEDY 1976 and HANSES 2011. As KENNEDY (1976, p. 119) notes, these essays were in a sense quite “ordinary” in their use of ancient precedents: “*The Federalist* is neither the most nor the least classical among the writings of the Founding Fathers and as such constitutes an appropriate document in which to study the normal view of classical antiquity and the limitations of its influence in a political context as seen by first-rate minds of the late eighteenth century.”

(10) See KENNEDY 1976, p. 121–122.

them New York. However, the actual influence of these classical analogies is much harder to assess. As the authors of a collection of essays on how antiquity served as a model in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America have quite rightly remarked,¹¹ we cannot do justice to the complexity of political discourse during the years of the American Revolution by simply searching out quantifiable traces of classical antiquity in political theory and praxis and then, based on this estimation, rendering judgment on the “importance” or the “influence” of antiquity.¹² What is needed, instead, is an evaluation of the complex ways in which classical analogies and specific modes of argumentation based on a common knowledge of the classics and ancient history were used in specific situations of dispute. These observations guide the reflections in this paper on the function of the defeat of Athens in *The Federalist*: in what historical and intellectual context did the authors write about the defeat of Athens? What made them dig out this more than 2000-year-old history and what exactly did they try to achieve by doing so? And finally: *which* defeat of Athens did they use? That is, which of the available traditions handed down from antiquity did they incorporate in their argument? And did they choose a particular interpretation on purpose, or perhaps out of a lack of alternatives, due to the biases of the sources available? In short: how was this classical *exemplum* transformed into an argument that could be used for specific political purposes?

To answer these questions, it does not suffice to look at *The Federalist* alone. One must also ask why eighteenth-century Americans ascribed to classical antiquity such persuasive power in the first place, and why men like Madison, Hamilton, and Jay could hope that the use of classical analogies would be persuasive, so that it seemed reasonable for them to invest quite a lot of their time in the study of history. It is also necessary to consider the intellectual milieu that had produced not only Publius but also (at least some) of his readers, and especially to explore how people in the eighteenth century thought about the usefulness of the study of history.

Before this can be done, however, it is mandatory to sketch, at least in very broad outlines, the immediate historical background of the year 1787, the situation that seems to have caused Alexander Hamilton to conceive of creating his mouthpiece Publius as a means of influencing public opinion in the state of New York.¹³

I. SETTING THE STAGE: NEW YORK BEFORE RATIFICATION

After the thirteen American colonies had declared their independence from Britain in 1776 they at first formed a rather loose-knit unity. The first constitution of the newly founded union, the Articles of Confederation of 1777, declared that a “firm league of friendship” should unite what were now thirteen states (Art. II) and that each state “retains its sovereignty, freedom and independence” (Art. III). The states were represented with equal votes in the Congress of the Confederation, irrespective of their size or population. The Congress itself, which in any case was only thought of as a means of coordinating the interests of the states without having any real powers of its own, was required to allow to the states whatever powers it had not been granted explicitly.¹⁴ “In short, the Congress established under the Articles of Confederation was purely a creature of the states, a forum for the representation of state interests.”¹⁵

(11) NIGGEMANN and RUFFING 2011, p. 9–10.

(12) Cf. HEUN 2011 on the possible influence of classical analogies on political discourse and practice in late eighteenth-century America, especially when compared with the—often considerably greater—importance of other, non-classical traditions.

(13) On Hamilton’s choice of pseudonyms, see ADAIR 1955; RICHARD 1994, p. 40–43.

(14) See HEIDEKING 2012, p. 9; BEDERMAN 2008, p. 104–108.

(15) BEDERMAN 2008, p. 106.

During the following years this distribution of powers, which clearly favored the interests of the states, became the target of intense political debates and controversies. Two men were at the forefront of the “nationalist” critique of the Articles of Confederation: Thomas Paine, a born Englishman who already in his influential pamphlet *Common Sense* of 1776 had sketched the vision of a powerful American nation, and Alexander Hamilton who—during his tenure as Washington’s Chief of Staff—repeatedly tried to expose the deficiencies of the present system in his six *Continentalist* essays, published between July 1781 and July 1782.¹⁶

In the 1780s, the still partially unfavorable situation in the on-going war with Britain and the enormous financial difficulties the Congress faced gave rise to even more pronounced critiques of the state of the American confederacy. The early 1780s saw several attempts to achieve a complete revision or at least a partial improvement of the Articles of Confederation.¹⁷ After extended debates it was finally decided in September 1786, at the Annapolis Convention, that a convention of the states should be held the next year with the purpose of producing a thorough revision of the Articles of Confederation.¹⁸ However, at the end of that convention, the Philadelphia or Constitutional Convention, on September 17, 1787, not much was left of the Articles of Confederation. The Convention’s delegates realized quite clearly that they had not simply revised the old order but developed a completely new one. Already on June 6, George Read, a delegate from Delaware and a champion of strong national government, declared the Articles of Confederation and the political order they sought to preserve dead: “The confederation was founded on temporary principles. It cannot last: it cannot be amended. If we do not establish a good Govt. on new principles, we must either go to ruin, or have the work to do over again.”¹⁹ Although in the end almost none of the delegates were completely happy with it, the new Constitution was an undisputable victory for the proponents of strong national government—represented above all by Madison and Hamilton—over the defenders of the supremacy of the states.

From their experience with the all but smooth ratification of the Articles of Confederation (in the end, almost four years lay between the completion of the Articles and their ratification by the last state, Maryland, in 1781) the Constitution’s authors had learnt that it was not enough simply to devise a new order and then to hope for its support and acceptance.²⁰ People had to be convinced that the new Constitution was a good thing, and the fact that the opponents of the new system were mobilizing all their powers to prevent its ratification made the task of promoting the Constitution all the harder.²¹ But there was no alternative: if this document was to become the foundation of a lasting and stable political order for the United States, it needed the explicit approval of the populace.²² Therefore, selected representatives of the people of all thirteen states were to decide on the acceptance of the Constitution in specifically summoned ratifying conventions.²³

These conventions would require supporters of the Constitution to bring forward strong arguments. In New York, the home state of Alexander Hamilton, where the draft of the Constitution

(16) *PAH* II, p. 649–652, 654–657, 660–665, 669–674; *PAH* III, p. 75–82, 99–106.

(17) On this period, see HEIDEKING 2012, p. 9–18. On the Federalists’ preference for strong central government, see *ibid.*, p. 135–140.

(18) See HEIDEKING 2012, p. 12, 21.

(19) Farrand I, p. 137; cf. also p. 29, 240, 312; HEIDEKING 2012, p. 22–25.

(20) See HEIDEKING 2012, p. 25.

(21) See HEIDEKING 2012, p. 25–30.

(22) See MAIER 2010, p. 30.

(23) On the elections to the New York ratifying convention, which resulted in an undisputable victory of the Antifederalists over the Constitution’s supporters (they took 46 of the state’s 65 convention seats), see HEIDEKING 2012, p. 245–246. On the ratification process in general, see MAIER 2010 (chs. 12 and 13 on the ratification in New York) and HEIDEKING 2012, ch. 5 (p. 320–327 on the New York convention).

had been published in the *New York Journal* on September 22, the situation did not look promising: no other state saw such a fierce clash between supporters and opponents of the Constitution.²⁴ Governor George Clinton spearheaded the camp of the opponents, whereas Alexander Hamilton was the most prominent figure on the side of the supporters. The part of the New York press that was critical of the Constitution fired one broadside after another, and openly called upon New Yorkers to regard the new Constitution as non-existent and to blockade the ratifying convention.²⁵ Alexander Hamilton, for his part, had started the public campaign against Clinton while the Philadelphia Convention was still sitting.²⁶

Two essayists in New York spoke even more vehemently than others against ratifying the Constitution: Cato, who was most likely either Governor Clinton himself or Abraham Yates and whose first letter had appeared on September 27 in the *New York Journal*,²⁷ and Brutus, perhaps Robert Yates,²⁸ whose sixteen letters were published between October 1787 and April 1788 in the *New York Journal*.²⁹ It was this situation that made Alexander Hamilton contrive Publius. If he and his two co-combatants, Madison and Jay, wanted to convince the people of New York to ratify the new Constitution, they first had to successfully refute their opponents' arguments.³⁰ The question remains, however, why the history of classical antiquity should have played any part in this endeavor.

II. *THE FEDERALIST* AND CHANGING IDEAS OF THE USEFULNESS OF HISTORY

Well into the second half of the eighteenth century the idea of the usefulness of history was firmly anchored. Human behavior was thought to be constant because under similar circumstances humans would always react in more or less the same way; history, so the conclusion, therefore tends to repeat itself and the future becomes to a high degree predictable if one only has enough (and the "right") knowledge of the experiences of former generations. This belief, which was central for ideas on history from the Renaissance to the eighteenth century,³¹ was widely acknowledged in colonial America and was determinative for the generation of Madison and Hamilton as well.³² As the French *homme des lettres* and historian Charles Pinot Duclos put it, the usefulness of history was seen as "une vérité trop généralement reconnue pour avoir besoin de preuves" and "la

(24) See MAIER 2010, p. 328; HEIDEKING 2012, p. 320–321. The arsenal of insults that "Inspector" used in the *New York Journal* of September 20, 1787, to denounce Hamilton personally (he calls him "Tom S**t") may serve as a good indicator for how forcefully both sides attacked each other: "I have also known an upstart attorney [...] being sifted and bolted to the brann, he was at length found to be a superficial, self-conceited coxcomb"; DHRC XIX, p. 31–33, quotation at p. 31. The article was a response to an article of Hamilton that had appeared in the *Daily Advertiser* on September 15 (DHRC XIX, p. 26–29).

(25) As proposed by "A Countryman" in the *New York Journal* of November 21: "In the first Place then, most unfeignedly do I wish, and that for the Sake of Humanity, that the Convention never had existed [...]. Perhaps you may next inquire what can be done?—If you should, I will tell you, on Condition that you pardon the Anticipation, the Legislature may, and with the greatest Propriety, as its Delegate has exceeded his Powers, or rejected them, consider all that he has done as a Nullity.—Would not this be a useful Lesson for Usurpers?" (Storing VI, p. 50–51).

(26) *New York Daily Advertiser*, July 21, 1787; PAH IV, p. 229–232. Cf. MAIER 2010, p. 320.

(27) Storing II, 2.6. On the question of authorship, see Storing II, p. 102–103.

(28) Storing II, 2.9. On Brutus, see generally A. S. DIAMOND 1976. On the question of authorship, see *ibid.* p. 252–241; Storing II, p. 358; BALL 2003, p. 436.

(29) Brutus' first letter had appeared on October 18 in the *New York Journal*; three days later, in a letter to Edmund Randolph, Madison voiced his concern that "a new Combatant [...] with considerable address & plausibility" who could easily threaten the very "foundation" of the new Constitution had appeared on the stage (PJM X, p. 199).

(30) On both sides' arguments and ideological background, see HEIDEKING 2012, ch. 3.

(31) See KOSELLECK 2004, p. 27–28.

(32) Cf. BECKER 1952, p. 88–95; MULLETT 1959, p. 552; ADAIR 1968, p. 401; COMMAGER 1971, p. 3–5; SPAHN 2011, ch. 4.

connaissance de l'Histoire" therefore as "expérience anticipée."³³ History as anticipated experience and as guidance for the future—these were assumptions to which many of the generation of the American Founders wholeheartedly subscribed. "Indeed, there was scarcely a theory more widely prevalent in eighteenth-century America than the doctrine that history is a *corpus* of instruction for the statesman, and for anyone else who wishes to discern the face of the new future."³⁴ *The Federalist* offers instances of this theory as well: in *Federalist* No. 4, John Jay voiced his belief that history is useful because "it is not improbable that what has so often happened would, under similar circumstances, happen again."³⁵ In *Federalist* No. 6, Alexander Hamilton answered a question he had asked himself before, namely whether national self-interest, passions, and commercial motives had played a major role in the violent conflicts of former times, with yet another avowal of this theory: "Let experience the least fallible guide of human opinions be appealed to for an answer to these inquiries."³⁶

The authors of *The Federalist* were far from being the only American writers and political thinkers of the second half of the eighteenth century who voiced belief in history's usefulness. In the *Newport Herald* of November 6, 1788, an anonymous "Correspondent" remarked: "History is to society like conscience to man, a faithful monitor to warn us against a renewal of past errors, and a registry of enlightened maxims to enable us to form the best judgement of new pursuits."³⁷ But it was John Dickinson who, while attending the Philadelphia Convention of 1787 as a delegate from Delaware, gave this idea its perhaps most concise phrasing. In a dictum that was to become famous he admonished his fellow delegates not to neglect the lessons history had to offer: "Experience must be our only guide. Reason may mislead us."³⁸ Whenever the delegates at the Convention appealed to the primacy of "experience" over mere reasoning, "experience" almost always meant *historical* experience: the phrases "experience shows" and "history proves" had become almost synonymous.³⁹

But *which* history? Without a large reservoir of historical experience of their own, Americans of the eighteenth century were left with only one past—apart from the history of English constitutionalism—that seemed to have lessons to teach aplenty: "the History of *Greece* and *Rome* which may be justly call'd the History of *Heroism*, *Virtue* and *Patriotism*," as William Smith put it in *A General Idea of the College of Mirania*, an essay on educational method and principles published in 1753.⁴⁰ The "dark ages" of medieval times seemed not worth referring to, apart perhaps from the idea, borrowed from English Whig historiography, that there had existed something of an Anglo-Saxon ancient democracy in Britain before the Norman Conquest.⁴¹ What was left, then, that could serve as a model and as "experience"? Apart from the by then still rather short period of post-medieval history it was above all the history of antiquity that could fulfil such a purpose, a history that was well known in its general outline and with which at least the elites in the American colonies were well acquainted due to the education they had enjoyed in schools and universities.⁴²

(33) Charles PINOT DUCLOS, "Préface" of the *Histoire de Louis XI*, vol. 1, Paris 1745, p. i, ii.

(34) BURNS 1954, p. 144. Cf. COMMAGER 1971, p. 5.

(35) *Federalist* 4, p. 22.

(36) *Federalist* 6, p. 32. Cf. HANSES 2011, p. 90–91.

(37) *Newport Herald*, November 6, 1788.

(38) Farrand II, p. 278.

(39) Cf. ADAIR 1968, p. 398–400; McDONALD 1985, p. 5; WHITE 1987, p. 49–50; TAYLOR 1998, p. 31.

(40) William SMITH, *A General Idea of the College of Mirania*, New York 1753, p. 29.

(41) See COLBOURN 1965, p. 25–35. On the widespread rejection of medieval history as reservoir of possible precepts, see MORGAN 1960; COMMAGER 1971, p. 6.

(42) See COMMAGER 1971, p. 5: "If history is philosophy and a storehouse of precedent, what history do you draw on? That was easy enough in the 18th century. You draw on the history that everyone knew, you draw on the writers that everyone agreed were the greatest that mankind had yet produced. You draw on the ancient world."

By the end of the century, however, the belief in history's usefulness and above all in the supposed continuity of human experience had lost some of its force.⁴³ While Publius could sometimes praise historical knowledge in general as useful, many of his references to particular historical *exempla* strike a more reserved and sceptical tone.⁴⁴ Whenever Madison, Hamilton, and Jay sought the assistance of history in their essays, it was almost exclusively to show how different and often worse history—and even the history of antiquity—had been from the possibilities that lay now open for the young American nation. If history had anything to teach at all, then not to repeat the obvious errors and shortcomings of former times. Positive lessons were much harder to find. The defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War was only one of many examples of a reception of antiquity that did not aim at reverent emulation of past times but at admonition and deterrence.⁴⁵

Publius' apparent pessimism as regards the applicability of ancient history to the present is first and foremost a by-product of the specific quarrels and arguments of contemporary political debate. Madison, Hamilton, and Jay were arguing for the supremacy of strong national government. Therefore, the Greek system of mini-states that had "failed" in its attempts to establish larger federal unities of substantial duration and political strength inevitably had to be presented as a "record of failure,"⁴⁶ at least in public debate. As Madison pointed out in *Federalist* No. 14, in a country without plenty of historical experience of its own, reason and sound thinking ought to replace the knee-jerk appeal to other peoples' history, a remark that in a way turns Dickinson's motto of trusting in experience over reason on its head:

Is it not the glory of the people of America, that whilst they have paid a decent regard to the opinions of former times and other nations, they have not suffered a blind veneration for antiquity, for custom, or for names, to overrule the suggestions of their own good sense, the knowledge of their own situation, and the lessons of their own experience?⁴⁷

The belief that history had lost a great deal of its force as a storehouse of lessons is nowhere more explicitly and forcefully argued in *The Federalist* than in essay No. 37. Defending the considerations that had shaped the draft of the Constitution during the Philadelphia Convention, Madison stresses that the novelty of the American experience had forbidden its framers any simplistic references to history:

The novelty of the undertaking immediately strikes us. It has been shewn in the course of these papers, that the existing Confederation is founded on principles which are fallacious; that we must consequently change this first foundation, and with it the superstructure resting upon it. It has been shewn, that the other confederacies which could be consulted as precedents, have been vitiated by the same erroneous principles, and can therefore furnish no other light than that of beacons, which give warning of the course to be shunned, without pointing out that which ought to be pursued. The most that the Convention could do in such a situation, was to avoid the errors suggested by the past experience of other countries, as well as of our own; and to provide a convenient mode of rectifying their own errors, as future experience may unfold them.⁴⁸

(43) On this development, see generally KOSELLECK 2004.

(44) See JOHNSON 1988, p. 157–158; HANSES 2011, p. 90–91.

(45) See HANSES 2011, p. 91. On the history of antiquity as a source of "antimodels," see RICHARD 1994, ch. 4, who notes that "The founders' classical 'antimodels,' those ancient individuals, societies, and government forms whose vices they wished to avoid, were as significant as their models" (p. 85).

(46) BURNS 1954, p. 146. As KENNEDY 1976, p. 126 remarks: "Modern students of the classics see in the Greek republics an attempt to create government and societies on rational principles and an inclination to experiment toward achieving the forms which will best accomplish agreed upon goals. It might be thought that the Founding Fathers would feel a kindred spirit with the Greeks in this respect and be heartened by Greek efforts at freedom. To the authors of *The Federalist*, however, and to Hamilton in particular, what was evident from the experiments of the Greeks was their eventual failure, an awful example whose tragic fate was to be avoided." Cf. also BURNS 1954, p. 145–146.

(47) *Federalist* 14, p. 88.

(48) *Federalist* 37, p. 233. Cf. KENNEDY 1976, p. 122–124. Already in *Continentalist* No. 1 of July 12, 1787, Hamilton had stated that "In comparison of our governments with those of the ancient republics, we must, without hesitation, give the preference to our own" (*PAH* II, p. 651).

History was still thought of as useful in a certain sense, yet in view of a situation that seemed so completely new it had obviously lost most of its appeal as *magistra vitae*. American thinkers increasingly saw in the age of Plato and Aristotle not the apex of political thought but rather the “infancy of political Science” and a time with only the slightest resemblance to their own days.⁴⁹ Accordingly, history—and, in a way, *especially* ancient history—had become a teacher that could only teach you what *not* to do. In this respect, *The Federalist’s* view of history is characteristic of a time when the idea of the usefulness of history was still deeply rooted in many people’s minds but at the same time more and more exposed to a new scepticism. Already in 1782, in *Continentalist* No. 6, Hamilton had openly stated that *every* search for analogies between the present and antiquity must fail: “There is a total dissimulation in the circumstances, as well as the manners, of society among us; and it is as ridiculous to seek for models in the simple ages of Greece and Rome, as it would be to go in quest of them among the Hottentots and Laplanders.”⁵⁰ Although Madison thought differently in this respect,⁵¹ a general scepticism regarding the applicability of historical knowledge to present problems is a characteristic of Publius’ attitude to history.

III. THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR AND THE DEFEAT OF ATHENS IN *THE FEDERALIST*

Given these shifts in attitude, the significance ascribed to the defeat of Athens in *The Federalist* comes as no surprise. To Publius, the city–state that had lost the war against Sparta in 404 BC was, in accordance with the mostly negative early modern reception of classical Athens,⁵² first and foremost the city that had invented unrestricted democracy and eventually fallen prey to the people’s dangerous passions. It had been Athens, after all, that had invented what *The Federalist’s* authors and many like–minded thinkers feared perhaps even more than weak national government: direct, unrestricted popular government.⁵³ As it was, the Constitution devised in 1787 was meant to remedy the two most fundamental potential dangers that seemed to threaten the new republic, the weakness of the central executive and the direct influence of the people on politics. Accordingly, these issues were of central importance in the public quarrels between Publius and his adversaries in New York as well. Whenever Madison, Hamilton, and Jay opened their history books, they were therefore looking for “proofs” that (1) loose confederacies without a strong central administration

(49) James Wilson at the Philadelphia Convention, on June 20, 1787 (Farrand I, p. 343, James Madison’s notes).

(50) *PAH* III, p. 103.

(51) As can be seen in *Federalist* No. 63 (co–authored by Hamilton): “I am not unaware of the circumstances which distinguish the American from other popular governments, as well ancient as modern; and which render extreme circumspection necessary in reasoning from the one case to the other. But after allowing due weight to this consideration, it may still be maintained that there are many points of similitude which render these examples not unworthy of our attention” (p. 426).

(52) On the antidemocratic tradition in Western thought, see ROBERTS 1994, esp. ch. 9 on the “age of revolutions.” On the beginnings of a more benevolent view of ancient Athens in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth century, see now ZABEL 2016.

(53) On views of democracy during the time of the American Revolution, see generally WOOD 1995, who emphasizes that the concept “democracy” saw a crucial redefinition in these years, particularly in the context of the constitutional debate, and finally re–emerged as the idea of “representative democracy,” a phrase first used, as it seems, by Alexander Hamilton, in a letter to Gouverneur Morris of May 19, 1777: “When the deliberative or judicial powers are vested wholly or partly in the collective body of the people, you must expect error, confusion and instability. But a representative democracy, where the right of election is well secured and regulated & the exercise of the legislative, executive and judiciary authorities, is vested in select persons, chosen *really* and not *nominally* by the people, will in my opinion be most likely to be happy, regular and durable” (*PAH* I, p. 255). A short survey of what was understood as “democracy” at different times (and why) can be found in HANSEN 1992.

were vulnerable to foreign enemies and prey to the rivalries of their member states,⁵⁴ and (2) that every form of direct democracy will inevitably degenerate into self-destructive rule by society's "lowest" elements.⁵⁵ The history of ancient Greece, and of Athens in particular, offered the proofs they were looking for. "In all very numerous assemblies," wrote Madison or Hamilton (authorship is disputed) in *Federalist* No. 55, "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."⁵⁶ This nicely illustrates Publius' view of ancient Athens, a view he held with many others in the eighteenth century.

However, it is Alexander Hamilton who offers the most extensive and also the most devastating verdict on Athens and the Peloponnesian War in *The Federalist*. Essay No. 6, first published on November 14, 1787, in *The Independent Journal*, mainly comprises accounts of several cases testified by history where enmities between individual states had led to grave consequences on a larger scale.⁵⁷ To Hamilton, the idea that more or less independent states could coexist peacefully in close proximity (an idea that was advanced by the Antifederalist opponents of strong national government) was nothing more than utopian gambling,⁵⁸ as the "experience" of former times was supposed to show:

A man must be far gone in Utopian speculations who can seriously doubt, that if these States should either be wholly disunited, or only united in partial confederacies, the subdivisions into which they might be thrown would have frequent and violent contests with each other. To presume a want of motives for such contests, as an argument against their existence, would be to forget that men are ambitious, vindictive and rapacious. To look for a continuation of harmony between a number of independent unconnected sovereignties, situated in the same neighbourhood, would be to disregard the uniform course of human events, and to set at defiance the accumulated experience of ages.⁵⁹

According to Hamilton, the reasons for the "frequent and violent contests" among states of the past were "love of power," "the desire of preeminence and dominion," "the jealousy of power," "the desire of equality and safety," "the rivalships and competitions of commerce between commercial nations," and, finally, those mainly rooted in human nature and the passions of the individual: "the attachments, enmities, interests, hopes and fears of leading individuals in the communities of which they are members."⁶⁰ "Men of this class," Hamilton goes on, "whether the favourites of a king or of a people, have in too many instances abused the confidence they possessed; and assuming the pretext of some public motive, have not scrupled to sacrifice the national tranquility to personal advantages, or personal gratification."⁶¹

(54) See HEIDEKING 2012, p. 140–145, who states, regarding Madison's reading of the history of the Greek city-states: "The historical studies he had been immersed in since 1786 had taught him that the greatest threat to the federal system of government did not come from the central administration but from the jealous attempts of its member states to preserve their independence and authority" (p. 141). On the confederacies of antiquity as "antimodels" for the Federalists, see RICHARD 1994, p. 104–113.

(55) On the Federalists' attitude to democracy, see M. DIAMOND 1959; RICHARD 1994, p. 116; HEIDEKING 2012, p. 148–150.

(56) *Federalist* 55, p. 374. Cf. BURNS 1954, p. 159.

(57) *Federalist* 6, p. 28: "The three last numbers of this Paper have been dedicated to an enumeration of the dangers to which we should be exposed, in a state of disunion, from the arms and arts of foreign nations. I shall now proceed to delineate dangers of a different, and, perhaps, still more alarming kind, those which will in all probability flow from dissensions between the States themselves, and from domestic factions and convulsions. These have been already in some instances slightly anticipated, but they deserve a more particular and more full investigation."

(58) On the Antifederalists' preference for a looser confederacy, see Storing I, p. 15–23; HEIDEKING 2012, p. 113–119.

(59) *Federalist* 6, p. 28.

(60) *Federalist* 6, p. 28–29.

(61) *Federalist* 6, p. 29.

At this point the defeat of Athens comes into play. In Hamilton's interpretation of the events, the city's defeat in 404 BC was first and foremost an example of how a state that was led into a self-destructive conflict by a "leading individual" lost its power and freedom. What is more, the interpretation of the causes of the Peloponnesian War Hamilton came upon in his sources made it possible to combine this verdict with an only slightly veiled attack on direct democracy of the Athenian kind. It is Pericles who, as *the* democratic "leading individual" *par excellence*,⁶² plays a major, although not very flattering, role in this argument:

The celebrated Pericles, in compliance with the resentments of a prostitute, at the expence of much of the blood and treasure of his countrymen, attacked, vanquished and destroyed, the city of the *Samnians*. The same man, stimulated by private pique against the *Megarensians*, another nation of Greece, or to avoid a prosecution with which he was threatened as an accomplice in a supposed theft of the statuary *Phidias*, or to get rid of the accusations prepared to be brought against him for dissipating the funds of the State in the purchase of popularity, or from a combination of all these causes, was the primitive author of that famous and fatal war, distinguished in the Grecian annals by the name of the *Peloponnesian* [sic] war; which, after various vicissitudes, intermissions and renewals, terminated in the ruin of the Athenian commonwealth.⁶³

This view of the Athenian statesman is typical of the later eighteenth century, as Jennifer Roberts has remarked: at the time, Pericles "served as an emblem of the danger of too much power in the hands of one man."⁶⁴ Hamilton's remarks in *Federalist* No. 6 are one of the prime examples of this view.

In Hamilton's case, one need not look far for the source of this devastating verdict: it is Plutarch's *Life of Pericles*. Although Plutarch is not cited directly, the stories and rumors about Pericles are obviously taken from him (31–32). This comes as no surprise: the eighteenth century was, in Meyer Reinhold's words, "a veritable *aetas Plutarchana*,"⁶⁵ and the *Lives* of the Greek and Roman statesmen written by Plutarch had always been on the essential reading list of the educated elite in the American colonies.⁶⁶ The authors of *The Federalist* were no exception to this rule. Alexander Hamilton, whose classical education was not first-rate and who was far less devoted to the "serious" study of history than Madison,⁶⁷ was especially interested in Plutarch.⁶⁸ Already in 1777 and 1778, during the War of Independence, when he was captain of a New York artillery company, Hamilton had made excerpts of some of the *Lives* in his idle hours. These notes, which are preserved

(62) On Pericles in the American political discourse, see ROBERTS 2011 (p. 269–272 and p. 277–279 on the eighteenth century). On the mostly negative early modern reception of Pericles previous to the nineteenth century, see generally AZOULAY 2014, ch. 11.

(63) *Federalist* 6, p. 29.

(64) ROBERTS 2011, p. 279.

(65) REINHOLD 1984, p. 252.

(66) On Plutarch's popularity in eighteenth-century America, see REINHOLD 1984, p. 252–257. On the influence of Plutarch on the image of Pericles in colonial America, see ROBERTS 2011, p. 267.

(67) Madison wrote treatises on specific themes, e.g., ancient and modern federalism, including meticulous work on the sources, which would then become the basis of his argument in *The Federalist*. See the notes on "Ancient & Modern Confederacies" of 1786, *PJM* IX, p. 4–22. Two years before, on March 16, 1784, Madison had explained his new interest in the history of confederacies in a letter to Thomas Jefferson: "You know tolerably well the objects of my curiosity. I will only particularise my wish of whatever may throw light on the general Constitution & droit public of the several confederacies which have existed. I observe in Boineaud's Catalogue several pieces on the Du[t]ch, the German & the Helvetic" (*PJM* VIII, p. 11). On April 27, 1785, he asked Jefferson for "treatises on the ancient or modern foederal republics" (*PJM* VIII, p. 266).

(68) As ADAIR 1944, 250n34 remarks, regarding both authors' different interests and scholarly methods: "It is instructive to compare Madison's careful and scholarly use of history in his essays with Hamilton's, as it reveals clearly the different personal qualities of the two men. The New Yorker was not scholarly in his approach to politics; his use of history was that of a propagandist citing examples from the past in order to make a debater's point rather than to establish historical truth. Madison's treatment of Greek confederations was based on widely gathered material from all the available authorities, carefully cross-checked and qualified before being synthesized into a rich and suggestive study. Hamilton's research consisted in superficially extracting bits of a speech of Demosthenes and a hasty reading of Plutarch."

on the blank pages of his pay book (a book that lists payments to his soldiers and some other expenses),⁶⁹ bear witness to his interests in Plutarch's reports on ancient founders of government (Theseus, Lycurgus, Romulus, and Numa) and, among other things, on how they tried to secure stable political order free from the dangers of tyranny or the rule of unrestricted popular will.

Hamilton's interest in the *Lives* is a reflection of the considerations that were prevalent in the mind of a man who thought seriously about the needs and dangers that accompanied the institution of a new republic. His interpretation of the defeat of Athens in *The Federalist*, written ten years later, bears the mark of the very same concerns. Hamilton's idea that "the attachments, enmities, interests, hopes and fears of leading individuals in the communities of which they are members" can lead to violent contests between states was almost certainly influenced by his reading of Plutarch. To a man who was concerned with the challenge of devising a structurally balanced constitution that avoided the dangers inherent in more "radical" forms of government, this "proof" by history must have been more than welcome.

The general outline of Publius' verdict on Athens and the Peloponnesian War is therefore clear. Equally clear was the lesson this piece of history had to offer: in order not to fall victim to the individual passions and attachments of leading political figures, a constitution needed checks and balances as a safeguard.⁷⁰ Although Hamilton doesn't voice this concern explicitly in *Federalist* No. 6, the outline of his argument leaves no doubt that he held the political system of Athens, i. e., "unrestricted" democracy *without* internal checks, responsible for the triumph of an individual's passions.⁷¹ The connection between popular government, the interests of the people's leaders, and the necessity to safeguard a constitution against these factors is explicitly articulated in essay No. 63 (written mainly by Madison):

As the cool and deliberate sense of the community ought in all governments, and actually will in all free governments ultimately prevail over the views of its rulers; so there are particular moments in public affairs, when the people stimulated by some irregular passion, or some illicit advantage, or misled by the artful misrepresentations of interested men, may call for measures which they themselves will afterwards be the most ready to lament and condemn. In these critical moments, how salutary will be the interference of some temperate and respectable body of citizens, in order to check the misguided career, and to suspend the blow meditated by the people against themselves, until reason, justice and truth, can regain their authority over the public mind? What bitter anguish would not the people of Athens have often escaped, if their government had contained so provident a safeguard against the tyranny of their own passions? Popular liberty might then have escaped the indelible reproach of decreeing to the same citizens, the hemlock on one day, and statues on the next.⁷²

After all, it was, according to Madison, one of the defining hallmarks of the new Constitution that it prevented all too direct participation of the people in politics, in stark contrast to most known ancient forms of government: "The true distinction between these and the American Government lies in the total exclusion of the people in their collective capacity from any share in the latter," a distinction that "must be admitted to leave a most advantageous superiority in favor of the

(69) *PAH I*, p. 391–407. The edition used was Dryden's, published 1758 in London (see n65 in *PAH I*, p. 391; STADTER 2011, p. 202). On these notes on Plutarch, see generally STADTER 2011. On Hamilton's interest in Plutarch, see also REINHOLD 1984, p. 255.

(70) On the Federalists' preference for "complex government," i. e., a mixed constitution with internal checks and balances, see HEIDKING 2012, p. 150–153.

(71) Cf. HANSES 2011, p. 100. On Hamilton's—even when compared to his co-authors—decidedly "anti-democratic" attitude, see KENNEDY 1976, p. 131; HEUN 2011, p. 71. On late eighteenth-century views on Athenian democracy in America, see generally ROBERTS 1994, p. 179–193. On the, at least partially, more benevolent view of Athenian democracy among the Antifederalists, see RICHARD 1994, p. 116–117; HANSES 2011, p. 103.

(72) *Federalist* 63, p. 425.

United States.”⁷³ As Hamilton asked in *Federalist* No. 15: “Why has government been instituted at all? Because the passions of men will not conform to the dictates of reason and justice, without constraint.”⁷⁴ To Publius, the Peloponnesian War and the reasons for its outbreak seemed an unquestionable proof of this belief. The political system that could breed a man like Pericles was to be held at least as guilty of the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War as Pericles himself. It was guilty because it knew no mechanism that could hinder “leading individuals” from acting out their personal ambitions with the support of the people.

So far for the outbreak and the underlying causes of the Peloponnesian War. But what about its consequences? In *The Federalist's* authors' interpretation, the main result of the war had been a loss of freedom, a point offered repetitively throughout the essays.⁷⁵ Again, Publius had opened his history books to prove the point and to highlight the consequences of Athens' defeat. This time, it was not Plutarch but a French man of the church and historian, Charles François Xavier Millot, whose *Éléments d'histoire générale* was widely received and also available in an English edition (London 1778/9), who served as Publius' reference. According to Millot, says Publius, the Peloponnesian War was only one in a series of events that had led to disunity in the Greek world and finally brought forth the end of Athenian liberty:

Had the Greeks, says the Abbe Milot, been as wise as they were courageous, they would have been admonished by experience of the necessity of a closer Union, and would have availed themselves of the peace which followed their success against the Persian arms, to establish such a reformation. Instead of this obvious policy, Athens and Sparta, inflated with the victories and the glory they had acquired, became first rivals and then enemies; and did each other infinitely more mischief, than they had suffered from Xerxes. Their mutual jealousies, fears, hatreds and injuries ended in the celebrated Peloponnesian war, which itself ended in the ruin and slavery of the Athenians, who had begun it.⁷⁶

But not only the Athenians suffered in such away. In Hamilton's words, the defeat of Athens brought forth “the ruin of the Athenian commonwealth” as well.⁷⁷ His choice of words is indicative: the city's defeat in 404 BC did not only cause the fall of a single city, the city that in Hamilton's eyes had hazardously started the war, but it also harmed a greater unity of separate yet somehow united states, the Athenian “commonwealth,” as he called it, or the Delian League, as modern historians usually call it. When Athens lost the war it not only lost the sources of its power—fleet, walls, revenues—but also its league, the vast Aegean confederacy of formerly independent city-states formed after the Greek victory in the Persian Wars. Yet, as Hamilton and Madison stated, this had not been the end of the story, since much more than Athens' league and the city's freedom had been at stake. Not only was Athens severely weakened by its final defeat in 404 BC but also, in the long

(73) *Federalist* 63, p. 428. Cf. WOOD 1995, p. 97.

(74) *Federalist* 15, p. 96. See also Madison in *Federalist* No. 51: “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 controuls 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 controul the governed; and in the next place, oblige it to controul itself. A dependence on the people is no doubt the primary controul on the government; but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions” (p. 349).

(75) Already in *Continentalist* No. 1 of July 12, 1781, Hamilton had written that “No friend to order or to rational liberty, can read without pain and disgust the history of the commonwealth of Greece. [...] In these governments, that of Sparta excepted, the jealousy of power hindered the people from trusting out of their own hands a competent authority, to maintain the repose and stability of the commonwealth; whence originated the frequent revolutions and civil broils with which they were distracted. This, and the want of a solid foederal union to restrain the ambition and rivalship of the different cities, after a rapid succession of bloody wars, ended in their total loss of liberty and subjugation to foreign powers” (*PAH* II, p. 651).

(76) *Federalist* 18, p. 112.

(77) *Federalist* 6, p. 29.

run, the whole of Greece. To Hamilton and his co-authors, the future history of Greece—first its fate under the reign of the Macedonians, then under Rome—was a proof of the fact that disunity and the violent upheavals resulting from it could, and most likely would again, lead to weakness against the aggression of foreign powers and ultimately to the subjugation of the greater whole.

In *Federalist* No. 18, Madison (the essay was jointly written by Hamilton and him) stated this clearly: “Had Greece, says a judicious observer on her fate, been united by a stricter confederation, and preserved in her Union, she would never have worn the chains of Macedon; and might have proved a barrier to the vast projects of Rome.”⁷⁸ The Peloponnesian War, or, to be more precise, the consequences of its outcome, fitted neatly into Publius’ main arguments because it could be presented as *the* prime example of a (democratic) state that by pursuing its own aggressive policy had destroyed any hope of achieving a closer and therefore more enduring confederacy. It was an example of the “dangers of a different and, perhaps, still more alarming kind” Hamilton had announced in *Federalist* No. 6, i.e., “those which will in all probability flow from dissensions between the States themselves, and from domestic factions and convulsions.”⁷⁹ The new American republic should be spared what had befallen ancient Greece. There should be no war, like the Peloponnesian, that was the result of disunity, enmities, and passions and that would finally lead to the subjugation of the whole under the hands of foreign powers. One must not forget that at the time Madison, Hamilton, and Jay voiced these concerns, the United States were still at war with Britain and the threat of foreign invasion therefore no mere fantasy.

Although these ideas were mainly a product of the arguments and debates of the 1780s, they had been voiced some time before as well.⁸⁰ Already in 1766, George Mason—a wealthy Virginia planter, the principal author of the Virginia Declaration of Rights (1776), and later one of the states’ delegates at the Philadelphia Convention—had put forward the same interpretation of the history of Greece in the late fifth and fourth century BC.⁸¹ After the English parliament had repealed the highly controversial Stamp Act in 1765, Mason, in a letter to the Committee of Merchants in London, compared Pericles with the former English Prime Minister George Grenville, who had been the main author of the Act. In Mason’s eyes, what Grenville had proposed was in a way comparable to Pericles’ behavior prior to the Peloponnesian War. “No Thanks” should therefore go “to Mr. Grenville and his Party, who, without his Genius or Abilitys, has dared to act the part that Pericles did, when He engaged his Country in the Peloponnesian War, which, after a long and dreadful Scene of Blood, ended in the Ruin of all Greece, and fitted it for the Macedonian Yoke.”⁸² Men like Hamilton and Mason, faced with the challenge of transforming thirteen formerly independent political entities into a single, strong, and lasting body, had no particular interest in the fortunes of a city like Athens for its own sake. What mattered to them was the fate of Greece as a whole; in its failed attempts to overcome the particularism of its individual states and to defend its liberty they

(78) *Federalist* 18, p. 113. Already in 1781, in *Continentalist* No. 2 of July 19, Hamilton had noted: “When the cities were not engaged in foreign wars, they were at perpetual variance among themselves. Sparta and Athens contended twenty-seven years for the precedence, or rather dominion of Greece, till the former made herself mistress of the whole; and till in subsequent struggles, having had recourse to the pernicious expedient of calling in the aid of foreign enemies, the Macedonians first, and afterwards the Romans became their masters” (*PAH* II, p. 656).

(79) *Federalist* 6, p. 28.

(80) In the *Boston Evening Post* of July 4, 1774, an anonymous writer tried to persuade the American people of the necessity of achieving a closer union by referring to the history of ancient Greece. “Why were the states of Greece,” he asked, “broken down into the tamest submission by Philip of Macedon, and afterwards by the Romans? Because they contended for freedom separately.”

(81) Cf. RICHARD 1994, p. 95.

(82) “To the Committee of Merchants in London,” letter of June 6, 1766, in *The Papers of George Mason*, vol. 1: 1749–1778, ed. R. A. Rutland, Chapel Hill 1970, p. 65–72, quotation on p. 69.

saw a political struggle not unlike the challenge they faced themselves. The Peloponnesian War and the defeat of Athens were an especially suitable object for their enquiries, as this particular piece of history displayed not only the destructive effects of strong individual interests but also further nourished their suspicions about the inevitable dangers resulting from direct democracy (a form of government, however, that the world had not witnessed since the days of classical Athens, apart perhaps from the Swiss Cantons mentioned three times in *The Federalist*, in Nos. 19, 42, and 43).⁸³

CONCLUSION

To use a famous simile coined by John Adams, the history of the Peloponnesian War and of the defeat of Athens was, at least to *The Federalist's* authors, a “mirror” in a “boudoir” in which the generation of the founders could see the distorted face of a time when a group of states, instead of achieving a close union, wore themselves out in consecutive struggles.⁸⁴ Although he based his verdict mainly on Plutarch and some modern authors, Publius’ view of ancient Athenian and Greek history is nevertheless quite similar to Thucydides’, our foremost witness to these years, who painted a similar picture of the Greek states’ incapacity to maintain cooperation and union in the opening chapters of his *History of the Peloponnesian War*. To Thucydides, the whole history of the fifth century was simply a series of violent conflicts between Athens, Sparta, and their allies (1.18) and the Peloponnesian War an event of such enormous consequences that it affected and literally “moved” or “shook” the whole of mankind (1.1.2). Although Thucydides doesn’t share Publius’ overly simple verdict on Pericles, he nevertheless might have congratulated *The Federalist's* authors on their interpretation of Greek history.

An occurrence years later may shed further light on the fact that whenever Hamilton, who was mainly responsible for *The Federalist's* interpretation of Athenian history, turned his eye to (ancient) history he was looking for arguments and ideas that might move public opinion on the occasion. It cannot be doubted that he, just like his co-authors and many other educated Americans at the time, was convinced that the Greek states of antiquity were a model not to follow. It also cannot be doubted that he saw in Pericles a man who had opted for a dangerous policy that in the end caused the ruin of ancient Athens. Yet the very same man who, based on his reading of Plutarch, denounced Pericles as the devotee of a prostitute and the sole author of “that famous and fatal war” took up quite another stance on other occasions, at least if such a judgment can be made based on his use of pseudonyms. In 1803, the United States were about to buy Louisiana, after France had regained the territory from Spain in 1801. Political opinion on the proposed purchase was divided, and in this situation Hamilton, who in the years before had written essays not only under the pseudonym Publius but also as Phocion (1784), Tully (1794), Camillus (1795) (all borrowed from Plutarch’s *Lives*), and Titus Manlius (1798, probably from Livy),⁸⁵ now used *Pericles* as his pseudonym for an essay in the *New-York Evening Post* of February 8, 1803.⁸⁶ Hamilton, who—like

(83) On the influence of the Swiss constitution(s) on American political thought during the revolutionary era, see WIDMER 1988, esp. p. 377–381 on *The Federalist*.

(84) JOHN ADAMS, “A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America,” vol. 1 (1787), in *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States*, ed. C. F. Adams, vol. 4, Boston 1851, p. 271–588, quotation on p. 469. Cf. ADAIR 2000, p. 46: “But neither Adams, nor Madison, nor the other classically conditioned citizens of the United States who were so quick to draw parallels out of the past ever stopped to consider carefully just how far it was safe to apply them as guides to contemporary problems. In many instances, as a consequence, the reflecting *boudoir* glass of Greek history threw back an image that was distorted in certain specific particulars.”

(85) Cf. ADAIR 1955, p. 284.

(86) PAH XXVI, p. 82–85.

other leading politicians—had realized the strategic importance of Louisiana early on, argued therein that it was expedient not to wait for future purchase but to go at war with France at once.

But why did he choose the Athenian statesman who supposedly had been under a prostitute's spell as his mouthpiece? Just as Pericles had argued prior to the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War that war was inevitable (and therefore had to be started immediately), so now Hamilton tried to persuade his readers that war with France, whose American territory after 1801 again bordered on that of the United States, was inevitable. In a way, then, the choice of Pericles as his pseudonym makes perfect sense. However, it is also interesting to note that the same man could condemn Pericles on one day as the man who out of personal ambition had led Greece into ruin and slavery and on the other use his name as a perfectly credible authority for the need to go to war. Times had obviously changed since 1787 and *Federalist* No. 6, and what was needed in 1803 was no longer a warning of disunity and rivalry between the states but a spokesman for imperial acquisition.⁸⁷ The figure of Pericles could be used for both purposes, yet another indicator for the flexible use of the classical tradition in public discourse.⁸⁸

The same holds true for the use of the defeat of Athens in *The Federalist*: this historical *exemplum* shaped the way Madison, Jay, and, above all, Hamilton presented their argument. However, it did not, I would suggest, shape their argument itself. As was the case in other instances where the history or the writings of former times were used for argumentative purposes, these references were “illustrative, not determinative, of thought” and mostly “contributed a vivid vocabulary but not the logic or grammar of thought,” as Bernard Bailyn has convincingly argued.⁸⁹ *The Federalist's* authors did not need Pericles and the fate of Athens in 404 BC to realize just how threatening disunity between states could potentially be. What they obviously were glad to have, however, was a well-known historical *exemplum* that could lend their argument the air of classical credibility and authority.

Whether the classical *exempla* used time and again in *The Federalist* actually helped to persuade the citizens of New York of the Constitution's merits cannot be known, especially since the contemporary influence and reception of the essays is itself a matter of dispute.⁹⁰ As a member of the ratification convention in New York, however, Hamilton, a gifted and passionate speaker,⁹¹ continued to paint a vivid picture of antiquity's failure to devise reasonable and imitable forms of government.⁹² Finally, on July 26, 1788, the delegates at the New York convention ratified the Constitution, albeit by a very close vote (30 to 27).⁹³ Whatever the reasons, Publius had won.⁹⁴

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(87) See ADAIR 1955, p. 285–286; RICHARD 1994, p. 42; ROBERTS 2011, p. 279–280.

(88) As ROBERTS 2011, 293 notes, regarding the views of Pericles in America: “The fluidity of Pericles' image strongly discourages placing too much emphasis on classical influence in American political rhetoric.”

(89) BAILYN 1967, p. 26.

(90) See MAIER 2010, p. 84.

(91) See MAIER 2010, p. 347.

(92) On June 20, 1788, in an extraordinarily long speech, he told his fellow delegates that their use of classical analogies was a pointless exercise: “The gentlemen who have spoken to day have taken up the subject of the ancient Confederacies [...]. The fact is, the same false and impracticable principle ran through most of the ancient governments. [...] The same feeble mode of legislation in the head, and the same power of resistance in the members, prevailed. [...] I might go more particularly into the discussion of examples, and shew, that wherever this fatal principle has prevailed, even as far back as the Lycian and Achaean leagues, as well as the Amphyctionic confederacy, it has proved the destruction of the government. But I think observations of this kind might have been spared. Had they not been entered into by others, I should not have taken up so much of the time of the committee” (*DHRC* XXII, p. 1725–1726). On this speech of Hamilton, see MAIER 2010, p. 352–353.

(93) On the decision of the New York convention, see MAIER 2010, p. 395–397.

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