Commandant’s Professional Reading List

- The Federalist Papers Discussion Guide -

This guide is intended to help Marines think about and synthesize ideas from The Federalist Papers. All answers or responses during discussion should be embraced as relevant, and open for further discussion. To the guide leader: There is no single right answer.

Encourage the Marine to read, from this book and other books. Encourage them to think and challenge and debate, and arrive at a common understanding. Encourage them to consider the ideas of others (authors and peers) and to push themselves intellectually.

Avoid leading the discussion group to a particular interpretation. Support continuous conversation. This guide does NOT support a lecture with mile-deep detail on every possible issue and scenario in The Federalist Papers.

The point of this guide is to help the readers synthesize the purpose, perspective, wisdom – “goodness” – of the book with their own perspectives on warfighting, and come out of this session or sessions of small group PME with a better sense of history, identity, and purpose.

**Prep Work:**
Be prepared to discuss the following selected reading from the book:
- *The Federalist Papers*, No. 1 (introduction and rationale);
- *The Federalist Papers*, No. 6 (human nature);
- *The Federalist Papers*, No. 10 (factions);
- *The Federalist Papers*, No. 15 (the Confederation’s insufficiency)
- *The Federalist Papers*, No. 23 (a national force);
- *The Federalist Papers*, No. 51 (checks and balances);
- *The Federalist Papers*, No. 70 (the need for a strong executive);
- *The Federalist Papers*, No. 78 (judicial branch is the least dangerous);
- *The Federalist Papers*, No. 84 (the bill of rights); and,
- *The Federalist Papers*, No. 85 (just adopt and amend).

**Discussion Questions:** All answers/ responses during discussion should be embraced as relevant, and open for further discussion.

1. Why did Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison write these 85 “op-ed” pieces, now known as *The Federalist Papers*?

Key-Take Away: In some ways, *The Federalist Papers* was a very sophisticated strategic communication campaign. Weeks after the Philadelphia Convention where the Constitution was written, Anti-Federalist (those against the Constitution’s ratification) essays started appearing in newspapers. Hamilton decided that the Federalists needed to respond. No. 1 explains that “Publius” (a pseudonym used by the Federalists, after Publicola, “people lover” and a 6th century Greek statesman) will discuss many “interesting particulars,” including why a new republic is necessary.

2. What is *The Federalist’s* view of human nature, and how does it impact the type of government supported by the founders?
Key Take-Away: As noted by Hamilton in No. 6, he believes that human nature is ambitious, vindictive, and rapacious. Given this is an individual’s nature, and a state is no more than a collection of individuals, a confederation of states will not work together for peace. A republic, with a strong central government to be the arbitrator, must be created. But even that central government must be held in check by the other branches and states.

3. What are factions, can the negative causes of factions be removed, and what is the alternative?

Key Take-Away: Madison argues in No. 10 that a faction is “a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or 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.” His main concern is majority factions that can trample the rights of minority factions. Factions can be removed by: (1) destroying liberty, or (2) giving every citizen the same passions, opinions, or interests. The first is worse than factions, and the second would never work. Instead, the government has to control the negative effects of factions, which a republic can, by setting faction against faction on any given issue.

4. Is the United States a democracy or a republic?

Key Take-Away: The founders created a republic. Wrote Madison in No. 10, the fact that we delegate governing to elected officials and the size of our country means we are a republic.

5. What is Madison’s argument for checks and balances?

Key Take-Away: Madison answers this question in both Nos. 10 and 51. If your Marines have difficulty understanding No. 10, have them read No. 51 as it is clearer. Madison writes that “ambition must be made to counteract ambition.” In other words, the antidote to selfish citizens is other selfish citizens, and this translates into the governmental branches that will check one another. In one of the most famous quotations from The Federalist Papers, Madison writes in No. 51, “If men were angles, no government would be necessary. If angles were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary.” Those who make the laws will be bound by them (what’s known as the “reflexive principle”), and no one branch will become too powerful because the other branches would rise up against it.

6. Why do The Federalist Papers argue for a strong executive?

Key Take-Away: In No. 70, Hamilton argues that a feeble executive means a feeble execution of government. With responsibility must come power, and that power should be vested in one man (in part, for accountability), checked by the other branches.

7. Why did the founders think that the judiciary was the least dangerous branch of government? Were they right?

Key Take-Away: No. 78, written by Hamilton, states that the judiciary has “neither FORCE nor WILL, but merely judgment; and must ultimately depend upon the aid of the executive arm even for the efficacy of its judgments.”

8. What are the arguments for and against a Bill of Rights?

Key Take-Away: No. 84 argues that it would be dangerous to spell out rights that are not being challenged in the first place since a despot could then say citizens did NOT have a right that was not spelled out. The final The Federalist Paper, No. 85, acknowledges that the Constitution was written by men, and therefore not perfect, so citizens should just adopt the Constitution and amend it.
9. According to The Federalist Papers No. 23, what are the arguments for having a national armed force to protect the nation?

Key Take-Away: One of the Anti-Federalist’s (those who disagreed with the Constitution’s ratification) biggest disagreements with the Constitution regarded a federal armed forces’ creation. The Anti-Federalists wanted states to retain control over the militias, and generally had a fear of a standing army. This ambivalence comes across in No. 23 when Hamilton writes, “Whether there ought to be a federal government entrusted with the care of the common defense, is a question, in the first instance, open to discussion.” The Federalists believed they reached a compromise in Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution, which gives Congress the power “to raise and support Armies, but no Appropriation of Money to that Use shall be for a longer Term than two Years” and “to provide and maintain a Navy.” (Note that this often leads to frustration in the field with short budget horizons.) Hamilton reasons in No. 23 that with responsibility for the common defense must come the power to do so and, therefore, a national force.

10. What would have been the consequences of the Constitution not being ratified?

Key Take-Away: No. 15 paints a gloomy picture of the state of affairs in 1787, and foreshadows how the confederation will fail. Perhaps the Federalist’s best argument is that the Anti-Federalists have no good alternative other than the status quo, the Confederation, which is on the verge of collapse. As No. 6 suggests, the stakes are high: If the Constitution is not ratified, war may ensue between the neighboring states.

The Federalist Papers Discussion Key Take-Aways:

1. In many ways, The Federalist Papers were a sophisticated strategic communication campaign which, even if they did not necessarily help in the Constitution’s ratification, provides unique access into the insider debates surrounding our founding. At the time of their writing, citizens still generally referred to themselves as “Virginians” or the like versus “American” or from the “United States.” Arguably, The Federalist Papers helped shift identities through appealing to the citizens.

2. Unlike some other forms of government, ours presupposes a human nature that is ambitious and vindictive. Rather than create a tyranny or change human nature, our government has checks and balances at every turn. While this may often make for a slower system of government, the alternative (tyranny) for the founders was far worse, or impossible (changing human nature).

3. The founding fathers often fought vigorously, which the writing of The Anti-Federalist Papers and The Federalist Papers demonstrates. Indeed, even using the term “the founding fathers” suggests unanimity that did not exist. By the 1790s, Washington, Hamilton, and John Adams (the Federalists) were allied against Madison and Jefferson (the Republicans). The debate over what kind of government we should have continues to this day.

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