Commandant’s Professional Reading List

- Why Read *The Federalist Papers* –

“It has been frequently remarked, that it seems to have been reserved to the people of this country to decide, by their conduct and example, the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not, of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend, for their political constitutions, on accident and force.”

– John Jay, *Federalist Papers*, No. 1

Thomas Jefferson, who was abroad in France serving as a U.S. minister during the debate surrounding the U.S. Constitution, commented on *The Federalist Papers* that it is “the best commentary on the principles of government which was ever written.” Totaling 85 papers, at the time of their writing in 1787 and 1788, these essays appeared in New York, Virginia, and New England newspapers in order to convince citizens to adopt the newly written Constitution to replace the Articles of Confederation (and to reply to the “anti-Federalists” who were also writing during this time and against the Constitution). Although experts debate the *Federalist’s* effect on the Constitution’s acceptance – by June 1788, the Constitution became adopted with New Hampshire becoming the 9th state to ratify it – *The Federalist Papers* provides a deep understanding of the debates surrounding the U.S. Constitution, and why we have the government that we do. Marines swear their very lives to support and defend the Constitution, and the *Federalist* breathes life into that document.

U.S. Marine Colonels and Generals operate at the strategic level, and in a world with hybrid threats, thriving in such an environment requires a deep comprehension of one’s own government. *The Federalist Papers* offers an unparalleled glimpse into the making of a republic – our republic. The back of a dollar bill heralds in Latin, “Novus Ordo Seclorum,” or a “New Order of the Ages.” The founding fathers were aware of the momentous task they were undertaking, and their practical and philosophical deliberations have been preserved for all to read. As members of the Executive Branch, Marines will better understand why our country chose the form of government that it did – an invaluable insight especially when the two other branches, the Judicial and Legislative, become involved in national security issues.

*The Federalist Papers* dives into topics from human nature to societal factions in justifying the balance of powers approach evidenced in the Constitution. On the former, as George Washington said, “We have, probably, had too good an opinion of human nature in forming our confederation.” Some were less diplomatic, such as Alexander Hamilton, who wrote in Federalist No. 6 that “men are ambitious, vindictive, and rapacious.” Rather than try to deny human nature, the founders would use it to form a government. Wrote James Madison in Federalist No. 51, “Ambition must be made to counteract ambition.” There would be internal balances on the federal government’s power (the three branches) as well as external checks (the states). Importantly, the founders did not envision permanent factions, such as parties, forming; rather, men would pursue their self-interest on a case-by-case basis. By the 1790s, however, Hamilton and Washington made up the Federalist party’s leadership with Jefferson and Madison forming the Republicans. The founders did agree, however, that conflicting, competing interests were natural, and the governmental “cure” was a republic.