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Publius & Journal of Federalism

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Who Was Publius—The Real Guy?

"Publius" was the pseudonym used by Alexander Hamilton (who became the first U.S. Secretary of the Treasury), James Madison (who became the fourth U.S. President), and John Jay (who became the first Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court) to write the 85 papers that make up *The Federalist*. The papers were penned between October 1787 and May 1788. "The immediate object" of these papers, wrote Madison in a letter to James K. Paulding dated July 24, 1818, "was to vindicate and recommend the new Constitution to the State of New York, whose ratification of the instrument was doubtful, as well as important. . . .The papers were originally addressed to the people of N. York, under the signature of a 'Citizen of New York.' This was changed for that of 'Publius,' the first name of Valerius Publicola. The reason for the change was, that one of the writers was not a citizen of that State; another that the publication had diffused itself among most of the other States." (Madison's memory here is inaccurate because the papers were signed "Publius" from the outset, but he did clarify the identity of Publius.)

"Publius" was a fairly common praenomen (the first or personal name of an ancient Roman.). Some readers of *The Federalist*, therefore, might have understood "Publius" to be the Publius praised in the Acts of the Apostles (28:7), "the chief man of the island" of Melita (probably Malta) who received and lodged Paul and his shipwrecked companions for three days. Most readers, however, probably recognized "Publius" as Publius Valerius Publicola, a Roman patriot, general, and statesman who lived in the sixth century B.C.E. and who, according to *Plutarch's Lives*, saved the early Roman republic several times from tyranny and military subjugation. Publius was one of the founders of the republic. His republican reputation was regarded by some of the American founders as superior to the republican *bona fides* of Brutus and Cato, though a problem for the Federalists was that prominent Anti-Federalists had already appropriated the pseudonyms Brutus (Robert Yates) and Cato (George Clinton).

Plutarch compared Publius to Solon, the great statesman and lawgiver who framed the democratic laws of ancient Athens. "Such was Solon," wrote Plutarch. "To him we compare Publicola, who received this title from the Roman people for his merit, as a noble accession to his former name, Publius Valerius. He descended from Valerius, a man among the early citizens, reputed to be the principal reconciler of the differences between the Romans and the Sabines, and one who was most instrumental in persuading their kings to assent to peace and union." Publius aligned with Brutus in the revolution against the monarchy in about 509 B.C.E. Afterward, he was disappointed at not being elected as the second consul, but he allayed fears that he might join the defeated monarchists to conspire against Rome by publically leading the Senate in a pledge to defend the republic.

Plutarch contended that Publius "obtained as great a name from his eloquence as from his riches, charitably employing the one in liberal aid to the poor, the other with integrity and freedom in the service of justice." Plutarch portrayed Publius as a man accessible to the poor, "who never shut his gates against the petitions or indigence's of humble people." He defended the plebeians. He also saved and freed a slave who had discovered a plot against the republic, and made the former slave a voting citizen of Rome.

Publius was elected second consul after the incumbent second consul, Collatinus, turned against the republic and was banished by Brutus. Publius thereafter received accolades for being the first consul to drive a four-horse chariot victoriously into Rome after having defeated the Etruscans who, with Tarquin, sought to tyrannize Rome.

However, upon the death of Brutus, who was killed in the Etruscan battle and whom the Romans esteemed as "the father of their liberty," the people feared that Publius might become a tyrant because he remained in power as consul without calling for the election of a second consul. Publius had constructed a palatial home on a fortified hill overlooking the forum. Seeing him descend from the hill appeared to the people to be "a stately and royal spectacle." Hearing of the people's displeasure and fear, Publius "showed how well it were for men in power and great offices to have ears that give admittance to truth before flattery." During one night, Publius destroyed his house, leveling it to the ground. In the morning, the people "expressed their wonder and their respect for his magnanimity." They also expressed "sorrow" because their "unfounded jealousy" had driven Publius to demolish his home, leaving their noble consul "to beg a lodging with his friends" until he constructed a new home at the foot of the hill.

Publius "resolved to render the government, as well as himself . . . familiar and pleasant to the people" rather than terrible "and . . . to show, in the strongest way, the republican foundation of the government." He reconstructed the Senate and promulgated popular laws. Among other acts, Publius exempted widows and orphans from paying tribute-money (i.e., taxes), established an independent treasury in the temple of Saturn, "and granted the people the liberty of choosing two young men as treasurers." He also decreed that any Roman could become a consul and that patricians would suffer harsher punishments than plebeians for disobeying a consul. The people, "submitting with satisfaction," expressed their admiration by calling him "Publicola" (also "Poplicola), meaning people-lover, people-pleaser, people-minder, or friend of the people.

Although he was said to be generally mild and moderate in governing, Publius did institute, wrote Plutarch, "one excessive punishment; he made it lawful without trial to take away any man's life that aspired to a tyranny"; that is, a man who usurped a public office without popular election could be executed or slain by a citizen.

However, monarchists still opposed Publius and make trouble for Rome. Publius had many rivals during his life, and his authority waxed and waned as a result. Near the end of his life, though, he was chosen to be consul for "the fourth time, when a confederacy of the Sabines and Latins threatened a war." Publius made peace with a portion of the Sabines—"people of the quietest and steadiest temper of all the Sabines"—and welcomed 5,000 Sabine families into Rome, immediately giving them the right to vote and allotting each family two acres of

land by the river Anio. The remaining Sabines and Latins besieged Rome, but Publius defeated them. He delivered the enemies of Rome "lame and blind. . .to be dispatched by their swords. From the spoil and prisoners, great wealth accrued to the people" of Rome, and the people apparently rewarded Publius with a home atop the Palatine Hill.

According to Plultarch, Publius, "having completed his triumph, and bequeathed the city to the care of the succeeding consuls, died [in about 503 B.C.E]; thus closing a life which, so far as human life may be, had been full of all that is good and honorable." According to Livy, in his *History of Rome*, Publius "was universally admitted to be first in the conduct of war and the arts of peace, but though he enjoyed such an immense reputation, his private fortune was so scanty that it could not defray the expenses of his funeral."

The people, wrote Plutarch, "as though they had not duly rewarded his deserts when alive, but still were in his debt, decreed him a public internment, every one contributing his quadrans toward the charge; the women, besides, by private consent, mourned a whole year, a signal mark of honor to his memory. He was buried, by the people's desire," in the section of Rome called Velian Hill.

It was in the light of the lessons of this Roman history that Hamilton, Madison, and Jay used "Publius" as their *nom de plume* for *The Federalist*, though Hamilton apparently made the initial choice, having already used "Publius" in 1778.

One sees in the life of Publius Valerius Publicola many themes and ideas important in the founding and later history of the United States of America, including:

- the desire to establish and preserve liberty;
- the desire to establish peace and union, in part to protect freedom;
- the will to create a republican form of government accountable to the people, even if not democratic in the simple traditional sense;

the requirement that lawgivers appeal eloquently to the judgment of the people in founding or reconstituting a republic;

the need to defend a republic against enemies of liberty;

the need for military heroes in a republic to refrain from turning their power and prowess against their republic;

the need for republican leaders to be among rather than above the people;

the need for political leaders in a republic to enter and exit public office peacefully and through the consent of the people;

sensitivity to the poor, including public policies such a exemptions from taxation;

the manumission of slaves and the contradiction between slavery and republican government;

extensions of the right to vote;

the welcoming of immigrants, indeed, former enemies, into the republic, and, thus, openness to pluralism;

the naturalization of immigrants to full, equal citizenship;

land grants to immigrant families;

a public treasury controlled by the citizenry;

the civic obligation to place the wealth and honor of one's republic ahead of one's personal wealth and honor; and

the need for republican leaders to act today in ways that seek to ensure the future well-being of their republic.

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