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Every Election Is the Most Consequential In Our Lifetime

by

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If Joe Biden and Donald Trump agree on anything at all, it may be their mutual claim that the 2024 election is the most consequential in our lifetimes, or even, as they sometimes say, in our nation's history.

Of course, those who have lived long enough have heard this same claim made during nearly every presidential election, and plenty of midterms too. Whether or not you agree that this year's election will be *the most* consequential ever, there's enough at stake that it surely qualifies as an *important* one.

While I'll readily concede that whatever challenges America faces today are of a different order than those that caused Thomas Paine in 1776 to invoke "[the times that try men's souls](#)," the manifold challenges we confront, both foreign and domestic, are serious enough indeed. They range from real threats to America's national security to a flagrantly porous Southern border, hollowed-out inner cities riddled with senseless violence, and increasingly virulent antisemitism

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on college campuses – and more! This is not the time for what Abraham Lincoln [called](#) “mere catch arguments.”

Addressing America’s challenges demands much more than the daily onslaught of vacuous campaign rhetoric inflicted on Americans by Joe Biden and Donald Trump and many of their lesser acolytes. Peggy Noonan was not too far off in a [recent column](#) when she characterized our current moment “the fabulous freak show that is American politics.”

Certainly, it’s easy to be discouraged by the unseriousness and smallness of so much of what passes for contemporary political discourse. At the top, President Biden has elevated targeting narrow special interests and demographics to new levels of bodacious appeals – that is, vote buying – often attempted via promised executive actions acknowledged to be legally questionable. More student loan forgiveness, anyone? And former President Trump, despite having substantive accomplishments to tout from his term as president, continues to spend an inordinate amount of time pursuing personal vendettas or harkening back to 2020.

So, how to think about our current politics in a way that is not wholly dispiriting?

In my recent essay, [Restoring America by Recovering American Virtue](#), I turned to James Madison’s [Federalist No. 55](#) for a dose of optimism as a counter to the negativity. There, after acknowledging “a degree of depravity in mankind which requires a certain degree of circumspection and distrust,” Madison declared: “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.”

I suggested that in our time of deep societal divisions, restoring America in a way that promotes the public good and preserves our deliberative democracy might well depend upon recovering a sense of Madisonian republican virtue.

Once again, I turn to the Federalists Papers. However consequential we may imagine the choices before the American people in 2024, in no way do they compare in gravity to the singular choice confronting the colonists in 1787: whether the Constitution adopted in Philadelphia in September 1787 should be ratified by the people’s representatives.

Recall that the individual Federalist essays, published serially primarily in two New York newspapers, the *Independent Journal* and the *New York Packet*, had as their sole objective persuading the American people to support the proposed Constitution. Given the strength of anti-Federalist sentiment, ratification was by no means assured.

Alexander Hamilton authored [Federalist No. 1](#). At the outset he memorably framed the momentous question this way: “It has been frequently remarked that it seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide 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.”

Hamilton goes on to say:

“So numerous indeed and so powerful are the causes which serve to give a false bias to the judgment, that we, upon many occasions, see wise and good men on the wrong as well as on the right side of questions of the first magnitude to society. This circumstance, if duly attended to, would furnish a lesson of *moderation* to those who are ever so much persuaded of their being in the right in any controversy.”

And, finally, this exhortation: “Happy will it be if our choice should be directed by a judicious estimate of our true interests, unperplexed and unbiased by considerations not connected with the *public good*.”

To be sure, Hamilton did not underestimate what Madison called the “mutual animosities” which cause men to “vex and oppress each other.” Indeed, in Federalist No. 1 Hamilton acknowledged that in “cases of great national discussion,” it’s likely that a “torrent of angry and malignant passions will be let loose.”

No doubt such a torrent of hot passions is now loosed across the land. But the Federalist Papers record our Founders’ understanding that this is not unanticipated.

What to do?

Faced with momentous choices, the American people must demand more of those who seek to lead. This means consciously finding ways, in the context of our political discourse, to elevate the focus on those virtues Hamilton accentuated in the very first Federalist paper: *Reflection. Moderation. Elevating the Public Good Over Narrow Interests*.

These attributes of republican virtue are essential foundation stones for maintaining a healthy deliberative democracy.

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