

## **Student Handout 2A: Federalists**

Those in support of the proposed Constitution called themselves “Federalists.” The name they adopted suggested they were committed to a loose, decentralized system of government; however, the term “federalism” is the opposite of the actual plan they proposed and supported. Perhaps, a more appropriate name for these supporters of a stronger central government would have been “Nationalists.”

The “nationalist” label, however, would have been political suicide in the 1780s, as people living in the Revolutionary Era worried that a strong centralized authority would likely lead to an abuse of power. However, The Federalists felt strongly that the problems of the country in the 1780s stemmed from the weaknesses of the central government created by the Articles of Confederation.

For Federalists, events like Shays’ Rebellion proved that the Constitution was required in order to protect the liberty and independence that colonists had fought for and attained during the American Revolution. They saw their most important role as defender of the social gains of the Revolution and desired to protect the new republic from the worrisome “mob rule.” According to Federalist leader James Madison, who is considered the “Father of the Constitution,” the Constitution was to be a “republican remedy for the diseases most incident to republican government.”

The Federalists not only had an innovative political plan to pursue their agenda; they had talented leaders of the Revolutionary Era. Most of the men experienced in national-level work were Federalists and political “celebrities” like Benjamin Franklin and George Washington who supported the Constitution. In addition to having the backing of these impressive superstars, the Federalists were organized, well-funded, and – following in the successful footsteps of the pro-Revolutionary colonists – made excellent use of the printed word. Most newspapers published articles and pamphlets in support of the Federalists’ political plan and explained why the people should approve the proposed Constitution.

Despite their advantages, the Federalists fought an uphill battle as the solution they proposed represented a major change to the political ideas many held during this time. Most significantly, the Federalists believed that the greatest threat to the future of the United States did not lie in the abuse of central power, but instead could be found in what they saw as the threat of “mob rule” that Shays’ Rebellion represented. They also viewed the independence and power that states cherished as economic and trade liabilities for the republic.

How could Federalists convince the American people that the republic could not survive without a stronger central government?