RISE TO THE MOMENT OF TRUTH
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Opinion

Allen Mendenhall: From frost to federalism

Allen Mendenhall | 01.30.25

(Mobile Museum of Art, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Last Friday, in the silvery aftermath of winter's capricious embrace, I embarked on a picaresque journey from Auburn's still-snowy landscape through the frost-etched backroads of Alabama. I collected my graduate assistant at Troy University en route to the Mobile Museum of Art, where those of us assembled began rekindling the fervent constitutional debates that once divided Federalists and Antifederalists.

Susan Warner of the Warner Foundation had enlisted me to lead intensive discussions of a few of Madison's most prominent essays – namely, Federalist 10, 14, 45, 46, and 51 – alongside the Constitution, Virginia Recommendatory Amendments, and works by Brutus, Federal Farmer, An Old Whig, and Maryland Farmer.

The participants included a diverse group of Alabama high school teachers eager to study the founders' ideas while earning continuing education credits.

The Warner Foundation's mission is "to promote an understanding of American History and its relevance to controversial issues through art exhibitions and programs." Accordingly, the seminar's distinguishing feature was its innovative integration of visual literacy, using paintings to enrich the learning experience.

Jon Carfagno of the Mobile Museum of Art led a session using 19th-century landscape paintings to illuminate the Federalists' and Antifederalists' perspectives on the American Republic's potential scale and character.

Historical narratives diverge on America's founding moment. Americans typically cite 1776 and the Declaration of Independence, while the British point to the 1783 Treaty of Paris, which concluded the Revolutionary War. Regardless, the country existed for several years before the Constitutional Convention of 1787 convened.

The pomp and grandeur of the recent presidential inauguration – a great day! – can obscure that our fledgling republic initially operated without a chief executive. George Washington, revered as the first president, did not take office until 1789.

So, who was president under the Articles of Confederation? No one! However, there was a president of the Congress of Confederation (which replaced the Continental Congress).

My students often view the Constitutional Convention through a contemporary lens, focusing on the Civil Rights Movement and the Civil War era. This perspective can make it challenging to understand the actual political dynamics of 1787.

The Federalist-Antifederalist divide wasn't strictly geographical, except in New York, where Antifederalist sentiment dominated. In most states, supporters of both movements coexisted and quarreled alongside one another.

Virginia is a prime example of this complexity. While James Madison and George Washington championed the Federalist cause, their fellow Virginians George Mason and Richard Henry Lee stood firmly in the Antifederalist camp.

Edmund Randolph's journey is particularly telling. Despite initially proposing the Virginia Plan, which advocated for a robust federal government, he ultimately declined to sign the Constitution, concerned that it lacked sufficient checks and balances.

The conventional association of "states' rights" with the South overlooks the complicated dynamics of the Convention. In fact, the New Jersey Plan, representing smaller states' interests, emerged as the primary defender of state sovereignty in opposition to the Virginia Plan. This Virginia Plan, crafted by Southerners, faced criticism for potentially undermining state autonomy. The dynamics of state size played out dramatically with Rhode Island, the smallest state, which boycotted the Convention entirely and was the last to accept the Constitution.

Perhaps most surprisingly to today's students, the Three-Fifths Compromise represented a sectional alignment: Northern states, not Southern ones, pushed to count enslaved people as three-fifths of a person for representation purposes. Their motivation wasn't moral but practical: they feared that counting the entire enslaved population would give Southern states disproportionate power in the new government.

Our seminar proved fruitful as we explored ways to make our subject come alive for students. The dialogue meandered through Hobbes' and Locke's expositions of social contract and the state of nature. We shared unexpected insights and teaching strategies. What began as a conversation about political theory evolved into a pedagogical exchange about engaging students and encouraging them to dive into the primary texts.

As we embraced and bid farewell after the final session, I felt that peculiar mix of melancholy and renewed purpose that often accompanies the close of stimulating gatherings.

Whereas Friday's journey south had revealed a landscape shellacked in winter's final defense – thin sheets of ice clinging to pine needles, dustings of white in shadowed hollows – Sunday's return offered an altogether different meditation.

The sun had bullied its way through, leaving only damp patches where snow had stubbornly held court days before. It seemed a fitting parallel to our own crucible of debate: Like the convention delegates who argued their way toward a new Constitution, we learned that sometimes revelations come not through quiet acquiescence and solitary reflection but sustained intellectual contest, each snowbank's surrender marking victory for the coming spring.

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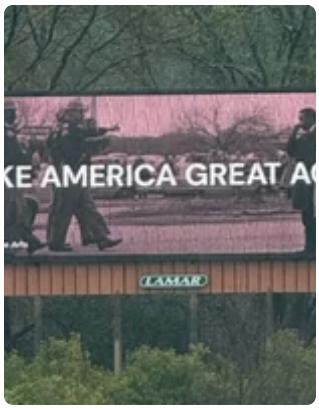

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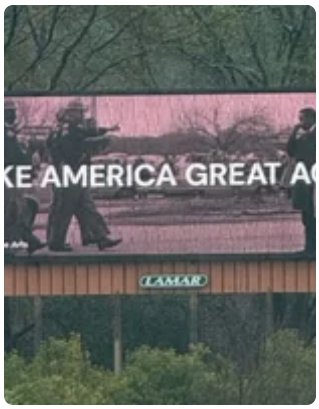

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