A Republic of Men

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Published by NYU Press

Kann, Mark E.
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The Better Sort and Leadership

The Family Man fit into the fraternity of men. The marriage contract was a fraternal contract that transformed a single man into a husband who claimed an exclusive sex right over his wife, agreed to other men’s monopoly over their wives, and thereby established a “cooperative agreement” among the “brotherhood of free appropriators” of women’s bodies. Men’s joint “jurisdiction over women” helped to knit together male society. Additionally, the Family Man was a protector who enlisted in the Revolution to defend and bequeath liberty. He achieved solidarity with the “manly citizenry” that stood in opposition to the “effeminate imperial power” of the “mother country.” Finally, the Family Man was a citizen who projected corruption onto womanhood and allied civic virtue to the male birthing of society and procreation of new republics, thereby actualizing Jefferson’s fantasy about men reproducing without women. In sum, early American fraternity presumed patriarchal domination and political exclusion of women.

However, that fraternity was threatened by intramale conflict. The Bachelor and other disorderly men threatened to destroy fraternal unity by acting on “unmanly ambition” to upset individual lives, destroy families, and ruin social harmony. Ann Fairfax Withington reports that scores of popular plays dramatized a world of “rakes, thieves, sharpers, libidinous old men, . . . dupes, and ‘chattering crop-eared coxcombs’” who generated constant chaos in the ranks of men. Judith Sargent Murray especially worried that the Family Man’s passion and parochialism, in tandem with his claims to freedom and equality, fueled a factionalism capable of sinking a sword of discord into “the vitals of that infant constitution” only to cut loose “hell-born anarchy.” The founders sought to subdue democratic disorder and reinforce fraternal unity by employing the grammar of manhood to encourage the Family Man to identify especially trustworthy men and submit voluntarily to their leadership. A mid-eighteenth-century visitor to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, identified the leadership pool when he remarked, “The better sort of people here live very well and genteel.”
Beyond Basic Membership

Benjamin Franklin had “great hopes” that his nephew Benny would mature into “a worthy man.” George Rogers Clark aspired to a higher status. He wanted to earn the respect of all virtuous and wise men and made it his “fixed principle” not to accept any honor but “to merit it first.” Similarly, jurist James Kent advised ambitious young lawyers to exhibit “a manly determination” to merit their membership in the legal fraternity. The founders put great stock in a father’s obligation to provide patrimony for his sons, but they especially honored the young man who demonstrated personal merit and achieved the distinction of being “observed, considered, esteemed, praised, beloved, and admired by his fellows.” Ultimately, an individual’s character, accomplishments, and social recognition were what elevated him into the ranks of the Better Sort.

The Family Man earned elevated standing first by honoring family responsibilities and then by shedding some selfishness and parochialism to identify with an extended family of men. Prior to the Revolution, the Better Sort of man demonstrated fidelity to fellow colonists and British brethren by engaging in “manly and spirited but yet respectful and loyal petitioning” to redress colonial grievances. He affirmed manly freedom for Americans and maintained “brotherly love” for the English. In 1776, the Better Sort exhibited fraternal solidarity with revolutionaries. John Witherspoon applauded patriots’ commitment to domestic “order and public peace” amid the chaos of the war, while Samuel McClintock congratulated patriots for being “a band of brethren” that averted internal “anarchy and confusion” to unify against the enemy. After the Revolution, writers honored American men’s sense of fellow feeling and respect for authority. David Ramsay praised patriots for forging “a social band” while submitting to a Congress whose “recommendations were more generally and more effectually carried into execution than the laws of the best regulated societies.” Mercy Otis Warren called the Revolution “a singular phenomenon in the story of human conduct” because laws and governments were annihilated but “recommendations of committees and conventions [were] equally influential and binding with the severest code of law.” American men demonstrated during the war that they could transcend individualism and localism to procreate an extended fraternal order and an independent nation.

One basis for that extended fraternal order was American men’s opposition to unmanly British vices. Philip Greven suggests that American protesters and rebels sought “to be manly rather than effeminate” by supporting republican
independence and frugality against English luxury and effeminacy. Withington recalls that the First Continental Congress drew up a code of moral conduct that banned English-identified vices such as cockfighting, horse racing, the theater, and lavish funerals. The code articulated a unifying vision “that made colonists aware of themselves as a people” who were “worthy of liberty.” It cut across class and sectional differences by proscribing regional extravagances, such as northern theatricals and southern horse races. It urged colonists to build a sense of manly pride and community in opposition to various vices associated with libertines, gamblers, transients, backwoodsmen, immigrants, blacks, and Indians as well as Englishmen. Patriots united in opposition to a deceitful mother country and to marginal men infected by licentiousness.5

Communities enforced the congressional code mostly by employing social pressure, humiliation, and ostracism. Local committees and leaders demanded that offenders recant and rejoin the community. They stigmatized men who tried to conceal their vices by accusing them of “unmanly equivocation,” subjecting them to ridicule, and urging them to confess and conform. They forced perpetrators who seemed beyond persuasion to endure rituals of public humiliation that included being tarred and feathered, drummed out of town, or “associated with blacks.” A profligate patriot or duplicitous Tory might be degraded and marginalized by being handcuffed to a black man for a period of time or by being publicly whipped by a black man before being banished from the vicinity. Rituals of public humiliation and social ostracism helped unify fraternal insiders as well as identify deviants and “render them impotent.”6

What motivated American men’s loyalty to extended fraternal families? Most founders believed that men naturally desired society. Assertions that “man is a gregarious animal” were accompanied by avowals that man’s “happiness” is rooted in society, his misery in “solitary existence.” Simultaneously, most founders felt that men’s natural sociability was weak. Thomas Paine contrasted men’s desire for society to their selfish “wickedness,” which demanded government restraints. Alexander Hamilton was absolutely awed by men’s wickedness. While others applauded wartime solidarity, Hamilton warned that men’s “passion . . . for opposition to tyranny and oppression very naturally leads them to a contempt and disregard for all authority.”7 Approaching victory, many founders were greatly concerned about whether American men could parlay wartime solidarity into peacetime sociability.

Contemporaries generally agreed that wartime experiences fostered fraternal feelings likely to outlast the war. David Ramsay noted that the Revolution
extended men’s bonds from their families and localities to all of the former colonies. An isolated farmer might not have seen the relationship between his family interests and British taxation or even national independence, but he certainly identified with American men across the continent who, in one way or another, suffered redcoat “depredation.” That prompted him to “extinguish selfish passions,” sacrifice parochialism “on the altar of patriotism,” and forge “a common bond of union cementing us together.” Furthermore, patriotic soldiers who died in the struggle left a legacy of enduring memories for their children, which would continue to provide “the firm cement of an extensive union” for generations to come. Military historian Don Higginbotham concludes that American men’s Revolutionary War experiences were “the bricks and mortar of nationality.”

The war certainly stretched American men’s sense of time, space, and politics. James Madison observed a new cosmopolitanism among easterners who became familiar with the frontier during the war and later acquired western lands “for their children.” They formed “a new class of advocates” for western brethren and children, for example, on issues related to the free navigation of the Mississippi River. Ramsay located another source of cosmopolitanism in the continental relationships that soldiers fashioned during their marches and encampments. Sometimes these relationships blossomed into “intermarriages between men and women of different states,” projecting family feeling across generations and geography to provide “an additional cement to the union.” Continuing friendships and extended family feelings eventually became a centerpiece in the federalist case for a strong national government. John Jay argued that Americans “fighting side by side throughout a long and bloody war” became “a band of brethren [who] united to each other by the strongest ties should never be split into a number of unsocial, jealous, and alien sovereignties.” Madison summoned “the mingled blood” of America’s warriors to “consecrate” the proposed new union.

The founders prolonged wartime solidarity by honoring and rewarding veterans. For example, Thomas Jefferson provided James Monroe a letter of introduction which emphasized that Monroe “served some time as an officer in the American army and as such distinguished himself in the affair of Prince-town as well as on other occasions. . . . Should any circumstances render your patronage and protection as necessary as they would be always agreeable to him, you may be assured they are bestowed on one fully worthy of them.” An honorable veteran was presumed to be deserving of men’s trust and good offices. Conversely, a nonveteran might encounter men’s presumptive distrust. Pelatiah Webster attacked Pennsylvania antifederalists by claiming that very
few of them had fought in the war. They should not have opposed the Constitution but, instead, they should have given thanks for the “lenity” of the deserving citizens who “permitted” them “to live among us with impunity.” Implicitly, only members of the Revolution’s martial fraternity could speak with authoritative public voices.

Despite their belief in men’s natural sociability and their efforts to perpetuate wartime unity, most founders feared that postwar solidarity would not be “so great as will be necessary for the general good.” Jefferson observed that few friendships borne of war stood the test of time. Men quickly “forget themselves but in the sole faculty of making money.” As early as 1778, Phillips Payson reported a trend among men toward self-aggrandizement and warned that the man who finds virtue solely in “what he hoards up in his barn or ties up in his purse” would be unable to practice good citizenship after the war. In 1783, George Mason announced that American ethics already had degenerated into a “depravity of manners and morals” that destroyed “all confidence between man and man.” He wondered whether victory “shall prove a blessing or a curse.”

Many of America’s foremost political and military figures were disenchanted by men’s postwar behavior. Selfishness and parochialism appeared to have replaced civic virtue and cosmopolitanism. George Washington wrote, “We have probably had too good an opinion of human nature in forming our confederation.” Some founders accepted the inevitability of possessive individualism and hoped to sublimate it into an emerging semblance of self-made manhood. But most founders continued to urge men to transform their wartime virtue into a peacetime civility consistent with the ideals of republican manhood. Washington instructed his demobilizing troops to cultivate “conciliating dispositions” and discipline themselves to engage in “wise and manly conduct.” Later, Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton issued an exemplary directive to revenue-cutter captains who had been detailed to curtail smuggling: “[They] will always keep in mind that their countrymen are freemen and as such are impatient of everything that bears the least mark of a domineering spirit. . . . They will endeavor to overcome difficulties . . . by a cool and temperate perseverance in their duty, by address and moderation rather than by vehemence or violence.” If martial courage and fortitude bound soldier to soldier in wartime, then perhaps self-restraint and sociability could bind citizen to citizen in peacetime. The founders called on Americans to cultivate civility.

It was one thing to promote civility among American men but quite another to expect most men to practice it. Many founders agreed with Noah
Webster’s assessment that the male majority suffered from “rough passions” that distracted them from “the civilities of refined life.” Even well-bred Americans often failed to discipline their passions to conciliate other men. Jefferson observed in 1797, “I have formerly seen warm debates and high political passions. But gentlemen of different politics would then speak to each other and separate the business of the Senate from that of society. It is not so now. Men who have been intimate all of their lives cross the street to avoid meeting and turn their heads another way lest they should be obliged to touch their hats. This may do for young men with whom passion is enjoyment but it is afflicting to peaceable minds.” The Better Sort of man was not an impassioned youth who fostered factional conflict. Rather, James Madison suggested, he was one of the trustworthy few who was able to maintain manly integrity and “make friends” of opponents.13

The Trustworthy Few

The trustworthy few reconciled aristocratic manhood and republicanism. They distinguished themselves by restraining their animal instincts and exemplifying the morals and manners of “civilized” beings. The United States Magazine reported in 1778, “A man without taste and the acquirements of genius [is an] orangutan with the human shape and soul of a beast.” By contrast, a man with taste emulated worthy gentlemen, understood social subtleties, and studied courtesy books to master the innumerable details of appropriate dress, speech, and conduct. His success depended as much on his effort and merit as on his birth and breeding. The Polite Philosopher explained, “It is want of attention, not capacity, which leaves us so many brutes.” Theoretically, all men could cultivate gentility and move up in society. As Richard Bushman puts it, middle- and low-status men could “strive for elevation rather than resent subordination.”14

Bushman asserts that men striving for elevation and those who achieved it were “the cement and soul” of society. Forrest McDonald argues that the founders considered social climbing a virtue when it involved soliciting “the esteem of wise and good men.” In turn, high-status men were obligated to be benefactors to low-status men. “The Preceptor” explained that gentility required “the true gentleman, rather than shunning or scoffing at inferiors, show affability and condescension to all who were below him.” Gentility also enjoined gentlemen to “defend and patronize their dependents and inferiors” in order to ensure that America’s “diversity of ranks and conditions” blended
into fraternal harmony. John Perkins thought fulfilling this obligation was challenging because “the rustic” often despised “the gentle manner and obliging behavior of the well-bred and polite” and considered gentility incompatible with “manly fortitude and resolution.” Perkins expected the Better Sort to resolve the tension between aristocratic manners and republican simplicity by reforming the rustic, encouraging him to redefine manhood as refinement, and teaching him proper behavior. Similarly, John Adams called on gentlemen to spread among commoners a gospel of “good humor, sociability, good manners, and good morals . . . some politeness but more civility.”

Refined morals and manners were especially important markers of male worth in a mobile society where a steady stream of strangers poured into established communities and carved out new ones. The founders wanted men to settle down and raise families but knew that many youth had to traverse time and space to demonstrate merit and earn an independent, respectable place for themselves and their families in the city or on the frontier. Who among them could be trusted? Strangers were judged by their dress, speech, and conduct. Those considered crude, lustful, and impulsive attracted other men’s distrust whereas those exhibiting manly refinement gained eligibility for admission into polite society. Bushman points out that, in an era of change, the ability to exhibit good morals and manners “enabled wanderers to claim a place, forge an identity, and establish a recognized hierarchy.” Refinement helped order the ranks of strangers.

A refined order was a hierarchical order with the Bachelor on the bottom, the Family Man in the middle, and the Better Sort at the top. Most founders believed that few men sufficiently mastered the challenges of refinement to deserve top ranking. Mastery was difficult. It went beyond exhibiting proper morals and manners; it also meant maintaining manly independence and integrity in difficult circumstances. A man was truly respectable only if he exhibited “a free and manly spirit.” He had “to think with boldness and energy, to form his principles upon fair enquiry, and to resign neither his conscience nor his person to the capricious will of men.” Few men demonstrated this independence and integrity, along with sincerity and honesty, when pressed to conform to conventional ideas and prevailing opinions. Moreover, mastery entailed balancing manly integrity with civility in order to reconcile independent thought with social order. George Washington advised that “manly candor” should be accompanied by a “manly tone of intercourse” and a disposition to deal “freely” with another man by treating him “like a friend.” Alexander Hamilton proposed a union of openness and modesty, recommending that President John Adams exhibit “manly but calm and sedate firmness . . .

without strut.” Edmund Randolph exemplified the ideal of aristocratic manhood in a republic: he harbored “no indifference to public opinion, but resolved not to court it by an unmanly sacrifice of my own judgment.” John Stevens praised Randolph for his “manliness”—for his “candor” and “delicacy” in paying homage to public opinion even when opposing it.17

The Better Sort possessed “the most attractive merit and the most diffusive and established characters.” They made independent decisions but acted “in conjunction with others” to promote a “moral culture of the heart” that fostered “all endearing ties of gratitude and love which unite man to man in the discharge of reciprocal duties.” They were an elite skilled at mediating individual liberty and fraternal order. This made them particularly qualified to be leaders and lawmakers. Unfortunately, many founders feared, the male majority often confused the trustworthy few with deceivers and manipulators who feigned manly integrity and civility to acquire base popularity, “an adulteress of the first order.” Speakers alerted Americans to pretenders. Samuel Wales differentiated worthy leaders who earned “true popularity” by gaining the “esteem of the virtuous and wise” from dangerous demagogues engaged in a “mad pursuit of low popularity” by “flattery.” Noah Webster distinguished the respectable man of “real worth” from the “popularity-seeker, or mere man of the people” who “banishes candor and substitutes prejudice.”18 The founders were quite concerned that the man of real worth, rather than the deceiver, establish an elevated reputation to secure hegemony by inspiring common men to invest their trust, consent, and quiescence in his leadership and authority.

A Man’s Reputation

Virtually all founders agreed with James Madison that “distinctions [among men] are various and unavoidable.” Many concurred with Judith Sargent Murray that liberty “dreadeth that tumultuous and up-rooting hurricane which, inmingling the various classes of mankind, destroyeth the beautiful gradation and series of harmony.” Some concluded with Peres Fobes that distinctions among men produced natural inequalities that invited domination and subordination: “We behold in the countenance of some persons a kind of dignity which at once beams reverence and designates for dominion; in others, we observe such a vacancy and prostration of dignity as equally marks them for subjection.” Perhaps the norm among the founders was Noah Webster’s notion that the Better Sort of man had “just claims” to elevated social
status and “influence and authority.” Republicanism did not destroy hierarchy. Rather, it called on the Better Sort to build manly reputations in order to attract sufficient public trust to be entrusted with political authority.

From the onset of colonization, Americans considered “a good name” of the utmost importance. Mary Beth Norton states that a man had to establish and maintain his “credit” and “reputation of being worthy of belief or trust” to participate in the oral agreements that shaped social interactions and to maintain his status in a society where legal supports for the male pecking order were mostly absent. The significance of reputation persisted into the founding era when, for example, Martin Howard proclaimed “the high value of a good name and how dear it is to men of sentiment and honor.” A good name fortified a man’s self-esteem, enhanced his opportunities, increased his admirers, and enabled him to circulate among the Better Sort, be favored by them, and become one of them. Thomas Jefferson was “never happier than when . . . performing good offices for good people, and the most friendly office one can perform is to make worthy characters acquainted with one another.” Worthy men needed good friends to disseminate their good names as well as to defend their good names against “the assassin who stabs reputation.”

Some founders ranked reputation above law. For example, George Mason wrote George Washington about a young relative who killed his opponent in an unlawful duel. The young man “may not be strictly justifiable in a legal sense [but] I am entirely of the opinion that he has done no more than any man of sensibility and honor would have thought himself obliged to do under the same circumstances of provocation . . . an attempt to blast the reputation of a young lady of family and character allied to him by the nearest ties of blood.” The youth had to protect his reputation and family honor by shedding blood. Alexander Hamilton (later to die in a duel with Aaron Burr) emphasized the importance of duelists’ proper conduct. A second to John Laurens in a duel with Charles Lee, Hamilton reported, “It is a piece of justice to the two gentlemen to declare that, after they met, their conduct was strongly marked with all the politeness, generosity, coolness, and firmness that ought to characterize a transaction of this nature.” Both duelists demonstrated their manhood and reinforced their good names.

Many founders were obsessed with what other notable men said and wrote about them. Early in the Revolution, Washington worried that his reputation would “fall” if he continued his military command with too few soldiers only to be charged with incompetence, or if he resigned his command only to be attacked for disloyalty. He fretted about the “impossibility of serving with reputation” and instructed his cousin Lund to issue a “declaration made in credit
to the justice of my character.” The founders generally considered men’s devotion to reputation less a matter of self-indulgence and more a positive stimulus to virtue. Theophilus Parsons explained that a major reason public officials could be trusted and empowered with authority was that their concern for their “own reputation would guard them against undue influence.” They were unlikely to engage in deceit, dishonesty, or corruption because they knew that “the censure of the people will hang on their necks with the weight of a millstone.”

Concern for reputation also was central to discussions about free expression. Benjamin Franklin wrote a satire favoring “liberty of the press” and “liberty of the cudgel”—the right of men to thrash anyone who unjustly attacked their reputations. Franklin defended a free press but added, “If [it] means the liberty of affronting, calumniating, and defaming another, I, for my part, own myself willing to part with my share of it . . . and shall cheerfully consent to exchange my liberty of abusing others for the privilege of not being abused myself.” Supporters of a free press expected journalists to qualify liberty with civility. They agreed with Washington that defamation was “incompatible with truth and manliness” as well as with Tunis Wortman that defamation constituted “unmanly . . . calumny.” However, supporters of the Sedition Act did not trust journalists’ truthfulness or manhood. They demanded legal restraints on the press, especially to protect political leaders’ reputations. Such restraints, they announced, were alarming only “to slanderers, to libelers, to robbers of reputation.”

Some founders considered a man’s reputation so important that it “ought to be guarded as of the next consequence to his life.” One reason was personal. Franklin wrote, “It is so natural to wish to be well spoken of, whether alive or dead.” This desire to be warmly remembered was a part of men’s quest for symbolic immortality. Franklin used this insight to try to lure Washington to France: “You would, on this side of the sea, enjoy the great reputation you have acquired, pure and free from those little shades that the jealousy and envy of a man’s countrymen and contemporaries are ever endeavoring to cast over living merit. Here you would know and enjoy what posterity will say of Washington.” Judith Sargent Murray’s “Gleaner” made reputation central to the very meaning of men’s lives and deaths when declaring his most cherished goals: “I would be distinguished and respected by my contemporaries; I would be continued on grateful remembrance when I make my exit; and I would descend with celebrity to posterity.”

A second reason was that many founders felt men’s concern for reputation helped moderate their conduct and keep it within the boundaries of propri-
ety. Colonial protesters who participated in mock funerals and executions experienced considerable social pressure to maintain decorum and order if they were to protect their good names. Many neutrals and Tories who remained in their communities during the Revolution learned to speak and act with restraint, so that they might maintain sufficient respectability to insulate themselves from public anger, humiliation, and worse. Patriots who aspired to upward mobility and leadership positions sought to establish good civic reputations to gain the respect and deference of friends, neighbors, and supporters who otherwise treasured their manly independence and maintained skepticism toward leadership and authority.25

Another reason the founders dwelled on reputation was that they saw it as a bond between citizens and leaders. Charles Pinckney argued that most men would trust leaders who “connect the tie of property with that of reputation.” Noah Webster thought that citizens would put their confidence in officials whose jealousy of their reputations was a “guarantee” that they would faithfully discharge public duties. Pelatiah Webster stated that lawmakers made themselves “fit to be trusted and worthy of public confidence” when concern for “personal reputations with all the eyes of the world on them” induced them to exhibit “noble, upright, and worthy behavior.” The founders were convinced that most men did not excel at manly sensibilities, candor, and civility; however, they believed that most men admired the few who did excel at manhood and most men would voluntarily submit to manly leaders who earned reputations for gentility, integrity, civility, and civic virtue. Annis Boudinot Stockton captured this belief when she announced that “the free born” would resign their “native rights” only to “Men.”26

The Better Sort and Leadership

The Natural Aristocracy

The men who filled the ranks of the Better Sort constituted what the founders often considered “the natural aristocracy.” Elizur Goodrich called the natural aristocracy an “institution of heaven,” designed by God to ensure that leaders with a “sincere regard to the public good” gained men’s “cordial affection, veneration, esteem, and gratitude.” Most founders doubted neither the existence of a natural aristocracy nor its significance for the stability of the Republic. But many founders questioned whether the language of natural aristocracy was appropriate in a republic. Did it provide a terminology that helped the majority of men to identify the trustworthy few and entrust authority to them? Or was it so closely associated with English corruption and tyranny
that, as Gordon Wood argues, the “destruction of aristocracy, including Jefferson’s ‘natural aristocracy,’ was the real American Revolution”?27

Alexander Hamilton stated, “There are strong minds in every walk of life that will rise superior to the disadvantages of situation and will command the tribute due to their merit, not only from the classes to which they particularly belong, but from the society in general.” At the New York ratifying convention, he labeled these men “aristocrats.” Their leadership inspired “the confidence of the people” from all classes. Two days later, Robert Livingston referred to “the natural aristocracy” as a repository of men’s virtue, wisdom, eminence, and learning. He asked, “Does a man possess the confidence of his fellow citizens for having done them important services? He is an aristocrat. Has he great integrity? Such a man will be greatly trusted. He is an aristocrat.” Livingston tied the natural aristocracy to democracy by expressing a hope that Americans were all “men of merit” and “all aristocrats.”28 For their part, antifederalists affirmed the conceptual substance of the natural aristocracy. Melancton Smith stated that “the author of nature has bestowed on some greater capacities than on others—birth, education, talents, and wealth, creating distinctions among men as visible and of as much influence as titles, stars, and garters.” He agreed that such men constituted a “natural aristocracy” that deserved recognition, which they would likely receive because “pride of family, of wealth, of talents . . . command influence and respect among the common people.” The “Federal Farmer” wrote that a “few men of wealth and talent” constituted a natural aristocracy, and “Brutus” asserted the likelihood that “the natural aristocracy of the country will be elected.”29

Two divisive issues centered on the language of aristocracy and the trustworthiness of natural aristocrats. First, federalists had mixed feelings about using the language of natural aristocracy to identify and legitimize manly leaders. Many federalists avoided the language of aristocracy for fear that it would alienate potential supporters. Like James Wilson, they preferred to characterize the new president as “the Man of the People” rather than a natural aristocrat. However, some federalists used, refined, and defended the language of aristocracy, for example, when confronted by opponents’ charges that supporters of ratification were “monarchy men, military men, aristocrats, and drones.” They drew distinctions between Europe’s “hereditary aristocrats,” the critics’ “phantom aristocrats,” and America’s “natural aristocrats” who contributed to the public good.30 Often, however, their distinctions were not particularly persuasive to American men steeped in the rhetoric of liberty and equality against aristocracy.

Second, federalists and antifederalists debated whether natural aristocrats
were worthy of most men’s trust. Federalists argued that natural aristocrats were trustworthy leaders and lawmakers. They were family men loath to engage in actions that might harm their posterity and gentlemen whose jealousy of their reputations allied them to the public good. Antifederalists contended that natural aristocrats, like all men, were flawed beings. Samuel Bryan claimed that they had a “love of domination” in proportion to their “talents, abilities, and superior acquirements.” Even those with “the greatest purity of intention” were apt to become “instruments of despotism in the hands of the artful and designing.” Unfortunately, the public was often blind to their failings and yielded “an implicit assent to the opinions of those characters whose abilities are held in the highest esteem.” Some antifederalists suggested that the “illustrious” were no “more free from error” than common men but were more insensitive to people of modest means. Other antifederalists repeated the warning that the public was sometimes so “dazzled by the splendor of names as to run blindfolded into what may be our destruction.”

Most federalists and antifederalists did agree that Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, and other framers of the Constitution were natural aristocrats. Federalists argued that these “distinguished worthies” favored ratification and the common man who respected them ought to favor ratification too, as well as “manfully oppose” those whose “wicked intent” was to destroy these great men’s labors. Noah Webster emphasized that “some of the greatest men in America with the venerable Franklin and the illustrious Washington at their head” had written the Constitution. They deserved public support. James Madison recognized that the framers’ reputations were crucial to ratification: “Had the Constitution been framed by an obscure individual instead of the body possessing public respect and confidence, there can be no doubt that . . . it would have commanded little attention from most of those who now admire its wisdom.”

Antifederalists did not attack Franklin and Washington for being aristocrats. At times, they even congratulated the American public on its propensity to honor these great men by associating their good names with worthy deeds. The main opposition tactic was to stress individual men’s responsibility to make independent judgments about the Constitution while pointing out the framers’ flaws. Thomas Wait explained that, initially, “I loved George Washington—I venerated Benjamin Franklin—and therefore concluded that I must love and venerate all the works of their hands.” Soon, Wait realized that blind veneration was a “violence of passion” more appropriate to “European slaves” than to “the freemen of America.” He consulted manly “candor,” engaged in “cool and impartial examination,” and chose to oppose the Constitution. But why did America’s great men support the Constitution? Bryan reminded read-
ers that “the illustrious and highly revered Washington” was “fallible on a subject that must be in great measure novel to him.” Moreover, his “unsuspicious zeal” for America along with the “honest mistaken zeal of a patriot” made him vulnerable to the “flagitious machinations of an ambitious junto.”

The conviction that the ranks of men were capped by a cadre of natural aristocrats who were more or less trustworthy as leaders of men was ubiquitous throughout the founding era. As late as 1794, Noah Webster openly applauded the existence of the natural aristocracy and added that even “the most noisy democrat” demonstrated a belief in “natural aristocracy” when he sought a “respectable family” to take his son as an apprentice, inquired into the “family connections and fortune” of a son’s or daughter’s proposed spouse, or rallied around the banner of “certain influential men in the democratic clubs.” In time, however, most founders discovered that the language of natural aristocracy was so laden with emotional baggage that it could not be used without controversy. John Adams learned by experience. Despite innumerable efforts to distinguish hereditary from natural aristocracy, he was constantly on the defensive. In 1790, he felt compelled to explain that his assertion of the inevitability of “noble families” referred to “the natural and actual aristocracy” of talent and virtue. In 1791, he tried to counteract accusations that he supported aristocracy by writing Jefferson, “If you suppose that I have ever had a design or desire of attempting to introduce a government of king, lords, and commons, or in other words an hereditary executive or an hereditary senate, either into the government of the United States or that of any individual state in this country, you are wholly mistaken.” Adams was still on the defensive in 1800, when critics continued to insist that his “principles would wrest the government from the hands of the people” and substitute “hereditary power and hereditary privileges.”

Attacks on men who spoke the language of natural aristocracy or who openly intimated its existence became quite vicious. William Manning’s 1799 *Key of Liberty* was a vitriolic tract against the conspiracies of “the Few.” Manning paid homage to great men whose wisdom, virtue, and service earned them public respect and trust. The problem with the natural aristocracy was the “solemn truth that the higher a person is raised in stations of honor, power, and trust, the greater are his temptations to do wrong.” Eminent men’s selfishness and pride “create a sense of superiority” and then a “hankering and striving after monarchy or aristocracy where the people have nothing to do in government but to support the Few in luxury and idleness.” This hankering was heightened when “leading men” felt they could “never receive compensation and honors enough from the people for their services” and urged the people “to reverence and respect” them rather than “to see for themselves.”
Manning asserted the temporality of all natural aristocracies and emphasized their antagonism to men’s liberty.

Unlike Manning, nearly all founders believed that the Better Sort—by whatever label—should be recognized, trusted, and empowered to compensate for common men’s passions, selfishness, and parochialism by leading them toward fraternal unity and exercising lawmaking authority over them. Legitimizing the leadership of the Better Sort was an ongoing challenge because any justifying language that hinted at the social or political superiority of a few men was sure to generate controversy. Thomas Jefferson believed in a natural aristocracy founded on a few men’s great virtue and talent, and he even considered it “the most precious gift of nature” for “the instruction, the trusts, and government of society.” Nonetheless, he understood that all talk about aristocracy, natural or not, was repugnant to men steeped in the rhetoric of “the equal rights of men.” Accordingly, he advised George Washington to refuse membership in the Society of the Cincinnati, which critics condemned as an aristocratic organization.36

Alexander Hamilton came to recognize that the distance between men and their leaders in a republic could not be too great or too narrow. Men had to feel close enough to their leaders to be familiar with them, develop trust in them, and eventually render habitual respect and obedience to them. And leaders had to reinforce public familiarity and trust by claiming to be like other men. Simultaneously, leaders had to appear sufficiently elevated and esteemed to merit men’s respect and obedience. Advising Washington on precedent-setting etiquette for the first presidency, Hamilton stated, “Men’s minds are prepared for a pretty high tone in the demeanor of the Executive, but I doubt whether for so high a tone as in the abstract might be desirable. The notions of equality are yet in my opinion too general and too strong to admit of such a distance.”37 The language of natural aristocracy proved to be too high-toned and put too much distance between the Better Sort and the common man. Alternatively, the founders experimented with a rhetoric of fame and infamy that emphasized the close proximity of citizens and leaders even as it justified men’s deference to hegemonic elites.

The Rhetoric of Fame and Infamy

The founders put “equality” at the heart of their revolutionary creed: “God made all mankind originally equal”; adult sons were “equal in rank to their parents”; men in society deserved “equal esteem or equal respect”; and “gov-
ernment was a political institution between men naturally equal.” They also suggested that American men were destined for equality. As individuals, they faced God’s “two great levelers, death and endless retribution”; as a nation, they adopted “a gospel of equality and fraternity” and encouraged “universal redemption of the human race.” At the same time, the founders were convinced that men were born unequal and died unequal. John Adams argued that men were born with varied abilities and a “passion for distinction” that motivated them to achieve superiority over others and to acquire a celebrity that continued beyond the grave, where it “Adorns our hearse, and flatters our tombs.”

How did the founders reconcile natural equality with the actual inequality represented by the Better Sort of man?

The founders relied on the grammar of manhood to discuss equality and inequality in the ranks of men. They conceptualized male equality as a function of patriarchal domination of women, joint opposition to unmanly vices associated with effeminacy and marginality, and support for fraternal sociability and wartime solidarity. They talked about inequality as a matter of men’s varying efforts and abilities to achieve high standards of manly refinement, candor, civility, and reputability. In late-eighteenth-century America, being a Family Man in a patriarchal society conferred dignity and justified citizenship; being a Family Man who exhibited great manly merit conferred social status and legitimized leadership. The passion for distinction and ambition was the driving force of manly merit and the quest for fame was its highest expression.

John Adams applauded the passion for distinction when it urged men to emulate noble ancestors and worthy contemporaries, but he feared it when it fostered jealousy, envy, and also “destructive factions, wasting seditions, and bloody civil war.” Mercy Otis Warren called men’s desire for distinction “a noble principle” with “benevolent effects”—except when it produced “mortifying instances of profligacy, tyranny, and the wanton exercise of arbitrary sway.” John Stevens considered men’s “ambition” a “noble passion” and “laudable desire” but worried that it sometimes stirred men’s “insatiate lust of domination and despotic sway.” If many writers appreciated ambition as a source of a “manly and martial spirit” and “heroism,” others were quick to warn that ambition for “pomp, power, and greatness” often corrupted men, even “our better sort.”

Judith Sargent Murray’s mixed belief that manly ambition was both “a noble principle” that was “productive of the most valuable consequences” and a “time server ready to answer the purpose of every base employer” reflected contested ideals of manhood. Ambitious young men were free to measure up
to republican manhood by establishing and governing families, perpetuating family dynasties, and positioning themselves to be fondly remembered by their children and neighbors. But they were also invited to measure up to aristocratic manhood by fitting into fraternal society, earning an esteemed reputation in it, and positioning themselves to be fondly remembered by men of virtue and wisdom, if not by all posterity. Unfortunately, the disorderly bachelor and the deceiving demagogue were likely to be equally ambitious in the cause of personal pleasure and power against fraternal unity and the public good. Both were self-made men but, by the founders’ standards, neither was a true “man.”

The highest object of ambition was “fame.” For most founders, Douglass Adair explains, a man ambitious for fame wanted “to make history” by acquiring “the largest possible human audience” and imprinting “his name and his actions” in the minds of worthy men everywhere so that he was “never to be forgotten.” He sought “immortality” by way of “public service.” David Ramsay considered fame the ultimate reward for men “who stepped forward in the cause of liberty.” George Washington admitted that he was driven by ambition, reputation, and especially fame. He explained that “the height of my ambition” was “to merit the approbation of good and virtuous men.” Fame would be “full compensation for all my toils and suffering.” According to Garry Wills, what most distinguished Washington from other leaders was his “willingness to be rewarded only in fame.” Washington’s quest for fame made him like other men, but his willingness to be rewarded only in fame made the “immortal Washington” into what William Emerson called “a man among men.” If ordinary citizens identified with Washington “the man,” they adored Washington “the man among men.” Wills concludes that his fame became “a social glue . . . for the republic.”

Occasionally, Washington’s colleagues sought to influence him by positioning themselves as defenders of his fame. For instance, James Madison opposed Washington’s 1793 Proclamation of Neutrality. Madison did not directly criticize Washington or the Proclamation but argued instead that it was “mortifying” to the President and his friends that the Proclamation undermined his “fame” because it appeared to be “an assumption of prerogative” that was not found in the Constitution but “copied from a monarchical model.” Americans often took it upon themselves to uphold Washington’s fame. In a sermon celebrating the Revolution, for example, George Duffield called on congregants to “let the illustrious Washington . . . live perpetual in the minds and the praises of all.” He enjoined his listeners to “aid feeble fame with her hundred wings and tongues to proclaim his worth; and . . . convey down through
every age the unsullied remembrance of the patriot, the hero, and citizen combined, and deliver his name and his praise to the unbounded ocean of immortal esteem.”

The rhetoric of fame was also applied to more ordinary officials. Daniel Shute proclaimed that men’s reward for the “faithful and intrepid execution of the duties of their offices” was the chance to “transmit their names with honor to posterity who, in futurity, will participate in the blessing.” Phillips Payson noted that men’s faith in public officials was justified by magistrates’ ambition “of transmitting their names to posterity with characters of immortal honor.” During the constitutional ratification debates, Madison resurrected the argument that citizens could safely entrust authority to elected officials who sought fame through public service. Other federalists relied on the desire for fame to build a case for a powerful presidency. Gouverneur Morris opposed a single-term presidency because it would “destroy the great incitement to merit public esteem by taking away the hope of being rewarded with reappointment,” perhaps “shut the civil road to glory,” and compel ambitious men to seek fame “by the sword” rather than by public service. Hamilton, agreeing that “love of fame” was “the ruling passion of the noblest minds,” argued that presidents should have unlimited terms of office to enable them to seek and achieve fame. Peres Fobes added that officials were most trustworthy when they were “fired with a noble emulation of transmitting their names to posterity in laurels of honor.”

The rhetoric of fame reserved its highest honors for leaders and lawmakers, but it also offered degrees of immortality to more ordinary men. Duffield’s celebratory sermon first praised Washington and then his fallen officers by instructing, “Number them not of the dead. They are enrolled in the list of glory and fame, and shall live immortal, beyond the death of the grave.” Next, Duffield widened the scope of remembrance by stating, “From the commander in chief down to the faithful centinel, let the officer and soldier who have bravely offered their lives and nobly dared death and danger in the bloody field . . . be remembered with kindness.” Sometimes, even men who fought for liberty but failed could expect their share of fame. An admirer told the Pennsylvania minority that lost its struggle against ratification, “We rejoice that your names will shine illustriously in the pages of history and will be read with honor and grateful remembrance in the annals of fame.”

Fame trickled down from the Better Sort of men to more ordinary men and thereby narrowed the distance between them.

The rhetoric of fame also helped close the gap between lofty political rhetoric and everyday personal experience because its glowing terms were fa-
miliar and friendly to common men. Few individuals achieved fame by being great leaders and public officials, but every family man sought “fame” by wishing to be remembered by his descendants. Orators played on this point. In a July 4 speech, Simeon Baldwin recalled “the sons of freedom” who with “manly firmness” withstood British tyranny and transmitted “their names, their virtues, and their noble deeds to posterity, by whom they will be revered as the most distinguished benefactors of mankind and eminent examples for future generations.” Baldwin then linked these great warriors to America’s family men, who did their noble share to provide for “the protection of their estates, families, persons, fame, and lives.” The rhetoric of fame justified inequality in the ranks of men, but it also reinforced Americans’ sense of shared manhood.

The familiarity of fame freed it from the baggage weighing down the language of natural aristocracy. Most men of distinguished birth or great wealth did not achieve fame, but some men of humble origins (such as Benjamin Franklin) were numbered among the famous. John Stevens expressed the equal opportunity idiom of fame as follows:

No government that has ever yet existed in the world affords so ample a field to individuals of all ranks for the display of political talents and abilities. Here are no patricians who engross the offices of state. No man who has real merit, let his situation be what it will, need despair. He first distinguishes himself amongst his neighbors and township and country meeting; he is next sent to the state legislature. In this theater his abilities, whatever they are, are exhibited in their true colors, and displayed to the views of every man in the state; from hence his ascent to a seat in Congress. . . . Such a regular uninterrupted gradation from the chief men in a village to the chair of the President of the United States, which this government affords to all her citizens without distinction, is a perfection in republican government heretofore unknown and unprecedented.

Ambitious men who sought distinction had to undergo a trial by political ordeal to achieve fame. Like the Jeffersonian educational system intended to “rake . . . from the rubbish” those who proved themselves “the best geniuses,” republican politics provided tiered tests of manhood to separate the less deserving many from the meritorious few who were sufficiently trustworthy to lead men and wield political authority.

Of course, the founders were greatly concerned that men’s quest for fame could be perverted by “the bold effrontery of those interested and avaricious adventurers for place who, intoxicated with the ideas of distinction and preferment, have prostrated every worthy principle beneath the shrine of am-
bition.” Mercy Otis Warren believed such men were more than malevolent; they were also foolhardy because they exposed themselves to the eternal pain of “infamy.” The grammar of manhood suggested that a worthy person preferred a manly death to infamy. David Ramsay recounted a battle in which George Washington exposed himself to the enemy “as if in an expectation that by an honorable death he might escape the infamy he dreaded from the das-
tardly conduct of troops on whom he could place no dependence.” It was ter-
rible to die forgotten; but it was worse to be eternally remembered as a scoundrel like Benedict Arnold, who would be forever associated with “the blackest crimes” of “treason” and “patricide.”

The founders thought that men’s dread of infamy provided a modest guar-
antee of their integrity and leadership. A pretender to popularity would think twice about deceiving other men because his self-aggrandizement might be exposed and open him to humiliating charges of infamy. A respectable official would be a cautious decision maker lest he make serious mistakes that in-
vited infamy. That was Benjamin Franklin’s warning to Lord Howe shortly after the British went to war with its colonies: “I consider this war . . . as both unjust and unwise; and I am persuaded cool dispassionate posterity will con-
demn to infamy those who advised it; and that even success will not save from some degree of dishonor those who voluntarily engaged to conduct it.” Finally, a truly worthy leader would endure significant self-sacrifice rather than risk infamy for himself and his loved ones. When General Horatio Gates lost a key battle, he immediately tendered a “manly resignation” to avert infamy. And when Henry Laurens, imprisoned by the British for his role in the Revolution, was offered a pardon in return for a public apology, he declared, “I will never subscribe to my own infamy and to the dishonor of my children.”

The founders conceptualized “the love of fame” as a manly motivation and compelling justification for free and equal men to aspire to membership among the Better Sort and to recognize, respect, and obey the leadership of the Better Sort. Fame was the carrot. The many men who sought it and the few who partook of it were enticed by posterity’s grateful remembrance. Thus, Gouverneur Morris eulogized Alexander Hamilton by instructing mourners, “I charge you to protect his fame—it is all he has left.” Infamy was the stick. It poked and prodded ambitious men to avoid disgrace and humiliation by disciplining their passions, exercising liberty with restraint, and sustaining order in the ranks of men. Men who misdirected their am-
bitions potentially mutilated themselves with “a deep and . . . lasting mark of infamy.”
Fraternity and Fratricide

Many men tested their masculinity, cultivated refinement, established reputations, and sought fame by participating in fraternities that joined norms of self-improvement and social civility to more-or-less intricate ranking systems. For example, “Shopkeepers, traders, and merchants bonded into clubs and societies” that fostered “mutual consideration,” “mutual benevolence,” and “friendly feeling.” Membership was often a tryout for social fit and mobility. Apprentice printers and artisans complied with craft norms as a means to survive and advance. Apprentice status provided the contrast needed to bolster masters’ social standing “by highlighting the value of craft skills, the significance of training, and the achievement of manly respectability through work.” In the legal fraternity that emerged in the late eighteenth century, aspiring and new lawyers were expected to excel at “responsible manhood” to establish their place in the profession. The “manly advocate” could anticipate moving up in the ranks.51

John Adams was a master psychologist of fraternal life. He argued that men first sought to fit into social groups and then to rise above their peers: “Every man desires not only the consideration of others but he frequently compares himself with others . . . and in proportion as he exults when he perceives that he has more of it than they, he feels a keener affliction when he sees that one or more of them are more respected than himself.” Adams’s mix of fraternal membership and hierarchical status aptly described Freemasonry. Benjamin Franklin wrote of his fellow Masons, “They speak a universal language and act as a passport to the attention and support of the initiated in all parts of the world. . . . They have made men of the most hostile feelings and most distant religions and most diversified conditions rush to the aid of each other and feel social joy and satisfaction that they have been able to afford relief to a brother Mason.” Freemasonry coupled international fraternal equality to a complex ranking system that challenged members to demonstrate manhood and earn elevated status by performing prescribed deeds and secret rituals. All Masons were brethren but some, like George Washington, demonstrated exceptional merit and earned elevated status.52

Freemasonry opened its meritocracy to most white men. Mary Ann Clawson suggests that it helped to “deny the significance of class difference” by creating a “kin-like bond” among members and leaders. Masonic lodges were quite popular among veteran soldiers and officers, providing them an opportunity to perpetuate martial fraternities and hierarchies in peacetime. DeWitt Clinton claimed that Freemasonry procreated an “artificial consanguinity”
that operated with “as much force and effect as the natural relationship of blood.” The ideal Mason was an extended family man who would sacrifice individual interest and even family aggrandizement to promote fraternal good. His willingness to cooperate with a fellow Mason rather than compete against him in the marketplace helped “moderate the excesses of the emerging capitalist system.” Gordon Wood concludes, “Freemasonry . . . repudiated the monarchical hierarchy of family and favoritism and created a new hierarchical order that rested on ‘real worth and personal merit’ along with ‘brotherly affection and sincerity.’”

Two of the most controversial fraternities of the founding era were the Society of the Cincinnati founded in the 1780s and the Democratic Societies that proliferated in the 1790s. The Cincinnati was an exclusive “society of friends.” Membership was limited to former officers and inheritable by their oldest sons. Its ideology was that postrevolutionary America was threatened by disorder in the ranks of men and Cincinnati members were responsible for fostering “liberty without anarchy.” General Henry Knox believed the Cincinnati was “the only bar to lawless ambition and dreadful anarchy.” Members played key roles in quelling Shays’s Rebellion, promoting the U.S. Constitution, and sustaining the memory of “immortals.” One manifestation of their immortalizing mission was the practice of naming their sons after war heroes, as in George Washington Cobb, Horatio Gates Cook, William Augustus Steuben North, Henry Knox Hall, Rufus Putnam Stone, and Alexander Hamilton Gibbs.

Critics condemned the Cincinnati as an aristocratic, factional organization. Benjamin Franklin and Mercy Otis Warren argued that members were infected by an envy for monarchy and aristocracy during their association with Washington’s European officer corps. Jefferson described members as “monocrats” and suggested that the Society was “carving out for itself hereditary distinctions, hovering over our Constitution eternally, meeting together in all parts of the Union, periodically with closed doors, accumulating capital in their separate treasury, corresponding secretly and regularly . . . to suppress the friends of general freedom.” If Jefferson saw the Cincinnati as an elitist secret society, William Manning portrayed the Cincinnati as a self-conscious power elite conspiring to rule the “swinish multitude.” Critics focused on its exclusiveness, hereditary membership policy, questionable intentions, and destructive effects.

By contrast, Jefferson praised the Democratic Societies as champions of men’s rights and “the republican principles of our Constitution.” These fraternities opposed “the chains of customs and outworn creeds” to support poli-
cies aimed at greater equality, penal reform, public education, women’s rights, and antislavery and democratic politics. Henry May suggests that the Democratic Societies generally “stopped short of advocating any sweeping changes in existing institutions in the American republic.” Their primary purpose was to encourage “the vigilance of the people” in order to preserve and protect liberty. Manning proposed a continental version of the Democratic Societies in his plan to create a national “Society of the Many” that would apply the Cincinnati’s organizational acumen for democratic ends. He wrote, “If the Many were one-quarter part so well organized as the order of Cincinnati . . . , they would always carry their points in elections—being in numbers so vastly superior.” Once organized and empowered, the common people would have little cause to promote social and political disorder.56

David Osgood and others saw the Democratic Societies as groups of men whose passions were inflamed “to a degree of fury” by “demagogues well skilled in the business of faction.” Noah Webster excoriated these “self-created” societies for lawless violence and belittled their members for sacrificing “independence of mind” to become “dupes of other men.” Alexander Hamilton called the Democratic Societies the “Grecian horse to a republic”; they praised liberty but practiced licentiousness. Washington thought they were “instituted by artful and designing” schemers “to impede the measures of government” and “destroy the confidence which is necessary for the people to place . . . in their public servants.”57 The critics emphasized members’ unmanly slavishness, leaders’ licentious demagoguery, and the groups’ divisive impact on society.

If fraternalism promised male solidarity and order, actual fraternities as well as emerging political parties seemed to produce factional conflicts and fratricidal tendencies. That was why President Washington argued that Americans should submerge their petty differences and identify with the one national brotherhood borne of constitutional government. He used the same reasoning to convince Secretaries Hamilton and Jefferson to set aside their differences for the greater good of the administration, government, and nation. A few years later, President Jefferson was the one seeking to counteract men’s fraternal prejudices, party factionalism, and fratricidal tendencies by reminding American men that they were all “brethren of the same principles.”58

One National Brotherhood

On one plane of analysis, most founders could imagine that the stigmatized but redeemable Bachelor, the meritorious but parochial Family Man, and the
reputable but ambitious Better Sort of man provided a manly foundation for a unified, orderly, stable republic. Brutish men would be restrained and reformed. Responsible fathers would provision and protect families, govern women, and perform the basic functions of citizenship. Many men would aspire to leadership, but only the trustworthy few would be empowered to serve as leaders and lawmakers. Consensual norms of manhood would bind American citizens and their leaders into one national brotherhood.

James Madison suggested that the gap between ordinary men and their leaders might be narrowed in time. The Family Man was likely to become less parochial and more cosmopolitan when participating in elections. His views would be refined and enlarged “by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations.” A more sophisticated citizenry would be less apt to be deceived by demagogues and more likely to elect to public office men of real worth. Gradually, voters would develop a “manly confidence” in public officials who were from the people but “particularly distinguished” among them as contributors to the “dearest interests of the country.” Relatedly, Edmund Randolph suggested that consent of the governed registered through a national electoral process would encourage a sense of “fellow-feeling” between the farmers who comprised the bulk of the citizenry and the lawmakers chosen “by and from the people” to represent them.59

Madison argued that men’s sense of fellow feeling would be reinforced by constitutional guarantees that leaders could “make no law which will not have its full operation on themselves and their friends as well as on the great mass of society.” He called this one of “the strongest bonds by which human policy can connect the rulers and people together.” Alexander Hamilton heartily agreed. The principle that legislators and citizens were obliged to obey the same laws sounded “true and . . . strong chords of sympathy between the representative and the constituent.” In addition, Hamilton believed that national fraternal bonds would be fortified by ties of “common interest” that urged manufacturers and mechanics to view the merchant as “their natural patron and friend,” landholders to recognize a shared “natural interest” against excessive taxation, and members of the learned professions to gain the confidence of all classes. Ultimately, common interest would be “the surest bond of sympathy” between voters and an elected government staffed by “landholders, merchants, and men of the learned professions.”60

On another plane of analysis, however, most founders doubted that fraternal unity between citizens and leaders was sufficient to ensure enduring order
in the ranks of men and lasting stability for the Republic. A strong bond between the Family Man and the Better Sort may have provided a sufficient foundation for republican government in ordinary times. But most founders were convinced that they lived in extraordinary times. They daily encountered uncertainties, exigencies, emergencies, and crises that aroused citizens’ furious passions; and they beheld unprecedented opportunities to guide, shape, and improve a future that demanded more wisdom and virtue than even reputable leaders and lawmakers could muster. Needed in extraordinary times were a few heroic men who could neutralize the people’s unruly passions and inspire public support for innovative measures that promised a better future for America and all posterity.

Writing as “Solon, Junior,” David Howell suggested that the destiny of the Republic ultimately depended on the actions of a few extraordinary men. How did America win the Revolution? Howell answered, “During the war and while that was the rage of the day, was not an act passed putting every freeman in the state under martial law to be inflicted by a general over whom even the Legislature had no control? Yet the people bore it—and those who complained of it being unconstitutional were answered that the safety of the people is the highest law.” Great generals who stood above positive law led the Revolution and most patriots followed them. Now, what were the prospects for the new U.S. Constitution? Howell argued, “Whatever the new federal Constitution is in itself, its administration is all that can ever affect the people.” Howell’s insight and the founders’ sacred truth was that the future of the Republic depended not simply on citizen consent to worthy lawmakers and laws but also on citizen compliance with the great authority and extralegal prerogative of a few heroic men.