Modern Republicanism and the Education of Achilles: An Interpretation of *Tom Sawyer*

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For our part, if we are forced to make our choice between the first shoemaker and the author of three books "On Anger," we pronounce for the shoemaker. It may be worse to be angry than to be wet. But shoes have kept millions from being wet; and we doubt whether Seneca ever kept anybody from being angry.—*Macaulay*¹

Publius, the *nom de plume* of the federalists, presents the American founding as a repudiation of past foundings which resulted more from "accident and force" than "reflection and choice." He asserts its reasonable and principled character. Publius, nevertheless, understands the new nation to be in need of sustaining myths which produce prejudice and habits favorable to the new Constitution. Within the breasts of ambitious office-seekers, the American founder thought it necessary to install "sacred reverence" for the Constitution. To this end, Publius asserts that men "of pious reflection" cannot help but see "the finger of that Almighty hand" in the work of the constitutional convention. He prepared the groundwork for what would become reverence for the Founding Fathers, whom a good many still esteem as a race of demi-gods.

Yet Publius did not rest satisfied with "reverence" to secure the new republic. Alexander Hamilton and James Madison deliberately chose the name of Publius Valerius Publicola to defend the Constitution. Their reasons for doing so become clearer once one considers that the founding of republican Rome is commonly attributed to L. Junius Brutus. Brutus roused the Romans against the Tarquins, which led to their banishment, and established the consulate, which was the highest civil and military authority in Rome. But before Brutus could complete his work, he fell in battle against the remnants of the Tarquins' forces. His second

colleague in the consulship, Publius Valerius, established the institutional framework and republican modes necessary to secure the republic. Although Publius served as consul four times, he performed his most impressive and useful services to Rome while he served alone after the death of his colleague. He enacted a series of reforms: he increased the size of the Senate by adding men well disposed toward the new republican orders; granted defendants the right to appeal the consuls' decisions to the people; increased the people's zeal for manufactures and commerce; made it a capital offense to assume any office not bestowed by the people, and ordered that the lictors' rods be lowered toward the people when either consul entered the assembly.⁷ This last innovation, in Plutarch's words, "emphasized the majesty of the people." Publius's renunciation augmented "his real influence over (the people) just as much as he seemed to take away from his authority and the people submitted to him with pleasure and bore his yoke willingly." The people gave him the name Publicola, which means "peoplecherisher "8

The American founder enacted "legislation" quite similar to the innovations of Publicola. We restrict ourselves to a discussion of the *least* deliberative of Publius's founding enactments. Publius intended to increase the people's zeal for manufactures and commerce. We do not insist that he believed a commercial republic to be an unmixed blessing, for he gave to America "the best constitution the (then) present views and circumstances of the country" permitted. Suffice it for our purposes to add that his discussion of commerce arises in a two-fold context: (1) a prudent discussion of "a republican remedy" for "domestic faction and insurrection," and (2) a demonstration of the necessity of meeting external threats to the peace and security of the nation. His understanding of the utility of commerce issues from profound reflections on human nature. 11

The utility of commerce in helping to render men, or at least most men, pacific is a lesson well and clearly taught by David Hume. He writes that

... Where luxury nourishes commerce and industry, the peasants, by a proper cultivation of the land, become rich and independent, while the tradesmen

and merchants acquire a share of the property, and draw authority and consideration to that middling rank of men, who are the best and firmest basis of public liberty. These submit not to slavery, like the peasants, from poverty and meanness of spirit, and having no hope of tyrannizing over others, like the barons, they are not tempted, for the sake of that gratification, to submit to the tyranny of their sovereign. They covet equal laws, which secure their property, and preserve them from monarchical, as well as aristocratical tyranny.¹²

Certainly Publius understood too that "all orders of men look forward with eager expectation and growing alacrity to . . . reward of their toils." ¹³ But reward cannot be understood, as even Hume implies with mention of barons, aristocrats, and monarchs, to mean merely money and those needful and pleasant things which it can purchase. Publius understood "love of fame" to be "the ruling passion of the noblest minds." ¹⁴ Love of fame, however, issues in conflict unless properly directed. To learn more about its education, we turn to Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer*.

Mark Twain closes Tom Sawyer by informing his readers that it is "strictly a history of a boy." 15 If it were not for our estimable predecessors, we would have to begin by making the case that Twain's "history of a boy" is that and much more. 16 Moreover, as a more or less careful reading of the more recent Lord of the Flies indicates, stories using boys as major characters are not necessarily merely stories about boys. Bernard DeVoto, for example, read *Tom Sawyer* merely as "the supreme American idyll."17 He later came to see the novel as "something more than realism, it is a distillation, a generalization, a myth." ¹⁸ James L. Johnson states that "so successful is Tom's domination of the world that he becomes the culture hero of St. Petersburg, not merely the chief exemplar of community values, but a figure able to decree what values and activities are most acceptable."19 Finally, Harry V. Jaffa makes a compelling case that Tom is "the master figure of American literature in whom, more than any other, Americans fancy themselves to be reflected and idealized."20 If these testimonials are correct, Twain endeavors to convey the essence of America through his history of a boy. Tom Sawyer conveys to us a regime-sustaining myth. Tom then personifies not only what is characteristic of the American experience

but also the character required for the new republican order. He is the new "Model boy."

To help demonstrate our point, we linger at the end of the novel. Tom is clearly the hero of St. Petersburg. He is "the center of all activity. Other characters are important only in their relation to him." This orphan, from modest means, who does not shine in school and appears to have no outstanding vocation, has risen to the top of society by his wits and courage. He is crowned, so to speak, by Judge Thatcher who "said he meant to look to it that Tom should be admitted to the National Military Academy and afterward trained in the best law school in the country" (433). What accords better with the genius of America than this rise from obscure beginnings to that great career envisioned by Judge Thatcher? The quintessentially American hero is "merely" a boy. Through Tom, we are presented as young, full of promise, and consequently more the stuff of comedy than tragedy. Nonetheless, Tom's heroism prompts one student to declare Twain a "seriocomic" Homer. Homer.

As the novel opens, Tom is introduced as one whose frauds seem forever new. Aunt Polly asserts that he is capable of fooling adults and complains of "old fools," such as herself, who "can't learn ... new tricks" (288). Tom's frauds are so innovative that "he never plays them alike two days, and how is a body to know what's coming?" (288). Shortly after making this observation, she questions him about whether he had played hooky to go swimming. Aunt Polly thinks she has devised a foolproof stratagem for catching him because she had sewn on his shirt-collar. Yet upon inspection she finds the collar still sewn. Alas for Tom, his cousin Sid alerts Aunt Polly to the fact that the thread is different from the one she had used. This fraud is good enough to fool Aunt Polly, but not good enough to fool another child. We learn later that Tom will use other means to bring Sid into line. Although Tom's preferred mode is fraud, he does not scruple to resort to force.²⁵

As careful modern readers might surmise, one gains better insight into Tom's nature when it is tested. Twain has Aunt Polly test Tom before our eyes by punishing him for playing hooky. She orders him to spend that uniquely American children's holiday, Saturday, whitewashing her fence. The results of this famous incident hardly need retelling. Tom's shrewd analysis of human nature helps him defraud

his fellows. He cleverly separates the other boys from their possessions. The fence gains three coats of whitewash. The narrator adds, as if sharing in Tom's triumph, "If he hadn't run out of whitewash, he would have bankrupted every boy in the village" (296). The author draws the famous moral, which he, as "great and wise philosopher . . . comprehended." Our wise and great philosopher is not certain Tom understands that famous moral: "Work consists of whatever a body is *obliged* to do, and that Play consists in whatever a body is not obliged to do" (296).

We fear, however, that our wise philosopher, like his character Tom, ²⁶ is not always entirely honest with us. Tom does not merely make "work" seem akin to "play, " but also makes that "work" appear exceedingly difficult, nay exacting: ²⁷

Aunt Polly's awful particular about this fence—right here on the street you know—but if it was the back fence I wouldn't mind and *she* wouldn't. Yes, she's awful particular about this fence, it's got to be done very careful, I reckon there ain't one boy in a thousand, maybe two thousand, that can do it the way it's got to be done (295).

Tom understands, in the effectual sense, that the natural inclination for pleasure can be transformed into a "raging" yearning. He first makes fence painting appear to be pleasant "play." The boys' thirst for distinction, however, is piqued by Tom's presentation of whitewashing as a rare skill of the most exacting kind, they are not merely enticed by "play." The other boys pay for the opportunity to demonstrate their quality. Tom appears to understand that in modern republics distinction is hard to come by. This difficulty does not, of course, diminish the natural inclination of some souls. "I told you before that children love Liberty I now tell you, they love something more, and that is Dominion." These are the words of the celebrated philosopher of modern republicanism, John Locke.²⁸ What is true of children is also true of adults when their passions have not been properly directed, or redirected. The yearning for honor, while mainly repressed and frustrated in democratic regimes, nonetheless seeks an outlet.²⁹ It is more prudent, as sober republicans recognize, to offer a controlled outlet - such as "fence painting"—to which those animated by the quest for glory might aspire. To maintain the public peace, prudent friends of republican government have consciously redirected the competitive spirit of men into more profitable and less violent pursuits.³⁰ Where there were once captains in war, there are now captains of industry and finance.

What we have in mind can be gleaned from reflecting on Hobbes's view that all men have a "similitude of *Passions*," but not a "similitude of the *objects*" of those passions.³¹ Among the passions natural to all men is "the contestation of honor and preferment."³² This passion leads to conflict and war, unless redirected, because honor is indivisible.³³ To maintain the public peace, nay to avoid sinking back into ancient chaos, the sovereign power must redirect the yearning for honor and preferment into less violent and more profitable pursuits.³⁴ The passion to be preferred ought to be taught to desire wealth, so to speak.³⁵ As this paper indicates, Publius adopted "the commercial republic" because it was necessary and useful. He also left another avenue for the operation of the passion for preferment. That other avenue is the subject of the remainder of our analysis of *Tom Sawyer*.

Tom demonstrates how wealth may serve higher aspirations and purposes. On the Sunday following the fence painting venture, Tom spends his time before church trading away his newly acquired goods for Bible verse tickets. Each blue ticket represented two verses, ten blue tickets equaled one red ticket, ten red tickets equaled one yellow ticket, and ten yellow tickets, two thousand verses memorized. Two thousand verses memorized merited a Doré bible. That Bible, worth merely 40 cents, was not itself a worthy prize. But the reputation which came with the prize was earnestly desired:

It was possible that Tom's mental stomach had never really hungered for one of those prizes, but unquestionably, his entire being had for many a day longed for the glory and the éclat that came with it (303).

On this particular Sunday, Tom's desire for glory was especially keen. Inside the church sat a distinguished visitor, "altogether the most august creation these children had ever looked upon," Judge Thatcher. The judge's presence was a major event for all in attendance. All the boys and girls "showed off" in various ways, and "the only thing wanting to make Mr. Walter's (the Sunday-school superintendent) ecstasy complete, and that was the chance to deliver a Bible prize and exhibit

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a prodigy" (305). When the appointed time arrives, Tom presents himself and his nine yellow, nine red, and ten blue tickets. Despite his shock, for "he had not expected an application from this source for the next ten years," Mr. Walters awards the prize to Tom. Tom's fellows are quickly beside themselves with envy. Their envy adds relish to his already savory victory. Tom's victory is not rendered less delectable by his erroneous identification of David and Goliath as the first two disciples. Judge Thatcher certainly does not appear to be rendered ill-disposed to Tom. ³⁶ And there is not even an allusion to his error in the remainder of the novel.

Tom is, as these incidents demonstrate, no stranger to the yearning for honor.³⁷ Later in the novel we catch a glimpse of the object to which Tom's love of glory is attached:

Even the glorious Fourth was in some sense a failure, for it rained hard, there was no procession in consequence, and the *greatest man in the world* (as Tom supposed), Mr. Benton, an actual United States Senator, proved an overwhelming disappointment—for he was not twenty-five feet high, nor even anywhere in the neighborhood of it. (381)

Tom's ambitions are kept within legitimate bounds, although they are not limited to the pursuit of wealth. "There were some," as the narrator informs us, "that believed (Tom) would be President, yet, if he escaped hanging" (387). As Jaffa rightly contends, "Tom's destiny is that of a guardian of the democratic republic." There are then other means of harnessing ambition to serve the public good in a modern republican context. The American republic by design, it has been convincingly argued, allows lovers of fame "to compete before the people for its favor." The few do the many benefits while gratifying their own ambition. While love of honor can be made compatible with civil society, it becomes less useful and increasingly malignant as it gains force and its scope increases. The malignant form of love of honor is reflected in the character of Injun Joe.

We should recall that the ancient poem of glory par excellence, Homer's Iliad, literally opens with "the wrath of Achilles." Achilles is angry because he feels slighted by Agamemnon. This perceived insult makes him reckless. He disregards both his own well being and that of his

companions in order to vent his spleen. This is the classic view of "great vainglory," or excessive pride. Injun Joe is moved by revenge for perceived slights. This is his motive for Dr. Robinson's murder:

'Look here, what does this mean?' said the doctor. 'You required your pay in advance and I paid you.'

Yes and you done more than that . . . five years ago you drove me away from your father's kitchen one night . . . you said I wasn't there for any good, and when I swore I'd get even with you if it took a hundred years, your father had me jailed for a vagrant. Did you think I'd forget? . . . And now I've got you and you got to settle you know!' (330).

On "Injun Joe's" enmity toward the Widow Douglas now that they have found Murrel's gold, Joe comments:

You don't know me. Least you don't know all about that thing.' 'Tain't robbery altogether—it's revenge!' and a wicked light flamed in his eyes. (397)

Later, the accomplice wishes to take the gold and leave for Texas and, upon learning that there are people in the vicinity of the Widow Douglas's house, he tells Joe, "better give it up." Joe's retort demonstrates the depths into which frustrated honor can lead:

Give it up, and I just leaving this country forever! Give it up and maybe never have another chance. I tell you again, as I've told you before, I don't care for her swag—you may have it. But her husband was rough on me . . . he had me *horsewhipped!*—horsewhipped in front of the jail . . . HORSE-WHIPPED!—do you understand? (407)

In the novel, Injun Joe exemplifies the danger of love of honor. Much like an Achilles, his desire for retribution—to avenge his sullied honor—prods him on. He demonstrates the threat posed to civil society by the passion for preferment. The moderating education of modern republicanism has not touched Injun Joe.⁴³ As long as he lives he presents a danger to the community:

The villagers had a strong desire to tar and feather Injun Joe and ride him on a rail, for body-snatching, but so formidable was his character that nobody could be found to take the lead in the matter, so it was dropped. (339)

Unlike Tom, Injun Joe's customary mode is force. Tom's thirst to distinguish himself, moreover, and to remind the reader, can be sated within the limits set by the regime.

Tom has begun to pave the way for his eventual career as foreseen by Judge Thatcher. His honor is, moreover, circumscribed by the conventions inculcated by the American regime. His attachment to convention is reflected in his respect for the written word. For a boy who seems such a poor student, Tom is a stickler for precision. He does not enjoy prayers, nevertheless, he resents even the most trifling emendation of prayer as "unfair and scoundrelly" (309). We can think of few characteristics more compatible with the American innovation of a written Constitution, 44 i.e., a nation under written laws. Tom is, moreover, concerned with appearing "respectable" (434). Even when playing Robin Hood, he goes strictly by the book:

'Fall! Fall! Why don't you fall?'

'I shan't! Why don't you fall yourself? You're getting the worst of it.'

'Why, that ain't anything. I can't fall, that ain't the way it is in the book. The book says.'

There was no getting around the authorities. (326).

On Jackson's Island, where the boys play hostile Indians and then seek peace, they must smoke a peace pipe. Tom and Joe Harper had just spent the better part of the day recovering from their first experience with smoking pipes, but now they were confronted with the need to make peace, which was "a simple impossibility without smoking a pipe of peace. There was no other process that ever they had heard of. Two of the savages [Tom and Joe] almost wished they had remained pirates" (361). Tom's ambition is not lawless, although he does claim an inordinate share in "lawmaking."

For all his apparent rebelliousness, Tom defers in some sense to "authority." His commercial success is undeniable, from whitewashing Aunt Polly's fence to investing his profits. Yet he seems destined for an even more glorious future. That glorious future is shaped by the American regime. That regime was deliberately designed to take advantage of Tom's "ruling passion." Publius thought it prudent to harness and moderate love of honor, "one of the strongest incentives

of human conduct," to the public good. A moderated love of honor encourages one "to plan and undertake extensive and arduous enterprises for the public benefit" without hazarding the anarchy and violence unleashed by an Achilles.

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NOTES

¹Thomas Babington Macaulay, "Francis Bacon," Critical and Historical Essays, ed. A. J. Grieve (New York: Everyman's Library, 1931) 2: 358-59.

²Federalist No. 1, The Federalist Papers, ed. Clinton Rossiter (New York: Mentor, 1961) 33. All further references to The Federalist Papers will be to this edition.

³Even Plato's "nation of philosophers," Publius avers, would require sustaining prejudices (*Federalist* No. 49, p. 315, compare *Republic* 414d).

⁴Compare Federalist No. 25, p. 125, and No. 49, p. 315.

⁵Federalist No. 2, p. 38.

⁶As students of classical history know, the founders of the ancient cities of the Western world were reputed to have been the sons or students of gods. See, for examples, Livy, From the Founding of the City, trans. B. O. Foster (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1988) I.7-8, and Fustel de Coulanges, The Ancient City (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980) III.xi.

⁷"Life of Publicola," *Lives*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, vol. 1 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1993) X.5-XI. Cf. Livy II.vii.7-8. Compare Charles R. Kesler, "The Founders and the Classics," *The Revival of Constitutionalism*, ed. James W. Muller (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1988) 76.

⁸Compare Livy II.viii.1-2.

⁹Federalist No. 85, p. 523. In Federalist No. 9, the commercial republic is introduced as part of a larger "catalogue of circumstances." Publius does not choose it in the sense in which he could have chosen otherwise. He makes a virtue of necessity by using it to control factions which mechanism he explores more fully in the over-celebrated No. 10. A more adequate understanding of this point requires reconsideration of No. 10 in light of Nos. 51 and 63. Cf. Alexander Hamilton's Continentalist No. 6.

¹⁰See Federalist No. 9 (beginning), 10, and 11. Cf. Alexander Hamilton, Report on Manufactures in Alexander Hamilton's Papers on Public Credit, Commerce, and Finance, ed. Samuel McKee, Jr. (New York: Liberal Arts P, 1957) 227.

¹¹Publius takes issue, however, with those who claim that commerce necessarily renders mankind pacific. Commerce is useful for controlling domestic strife but not for moderating conflicts between nations (see No. 6, pp. 57-59). Although the question

is by no means adequately answered, our experience makes it seem unlikely that commerce can completely transform human nature by altogether eliminating spiritedness. It remains useful.

12"Of Refinement in the Arts," Essays Moral, Political and Literary (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1987) 277-78.

¹³Federalist No. 12, p. 91.

¹⁴Federalist No. 72, p. 437.

¹⁵The Favorite Works of Mark Twain, ed. Owen Wister (Garden City: Garden City Publishing Co., 1950) 435. All subsequent references to Tom Sawyer will be to this edition by page number in text.

¹⁶But cf. Judith Yaross Lee, who speaks of "the hero's induction into the adult world" ("Tom Sawyer," The Mark Twain Encyclopedia, ed. J. R. LeMaster and James D.Wilson [New York: Garland Publishing Co., 1993] 657).

¹⁷Mark Twain's America (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1932) 304. Apparently accepting DeVoto's notion of idyll, Robert K. Miller argues that Tom Sawyer portrays a dream vision of American childhood (Mark Twain [New York: Frederick Publishing Co., 1983] 59).

¹⁸Mark Twain at Work (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1942) 19.

¹⁹Mark Twain and the Limits of Power: Emerson's God in Ruins (Knoxville: The U of Tennessee P, 1982) 59.

²⁰"Tom Sawyer: Hero of Middle America," Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy 2 (Spring 1972): 194-225.

²¹John C. Gerber, "Adventures of Tom Sawyer," The Mark Twain Encyclopedia 14.

²²Tom is obviously the hero of the novel despite the fact that he does not "get the girl." But cf. John Seeley, "What's in a Name," Mark Twain: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (Engelwood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1994) 49-62. Seeley argues that "although celebrated as a hero by the town, he refuses to accept the final act in all hero stories" (61). Seelye ought to consider that neither does Achilles. Tom's ambition precludes serious romance (see Jaffa 200). Miller suggests that Tom's "all-consuming ambition to achieve personal distinction" forecloses such things (72).

²³Iaffa 195.

²⁴Van Wyck Brooks, *The Times of Melville and Whitman* (New York: Dutton, 1947)

²⁵Jaffa 196, and Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985) chs. 18 and 25. Cf. Discourses III.ii-iii, and ix.

²⁶Tom, for example, later tells Aunt Polly he was going to leave a message to let her know he was all right and on Jackson's Island. He says he left the bark with the message in his jacket. After he leaves the house she goes to the closet tempted to seek out the bark in the pocket. But she hesitates: "No I don't dare. Poor boy, I reckon he's lied about it—but it's a blessed, blessed lie, there's such a comfort come from it It's a good lie—it's a good lie—I won't let it grieve me" (327).

²⁷Compare Jaffa 198-99.

²⁸Some Thoughts Concerning Education, Educational Writings of John Locke, ed. James Axtel (Cambridge: CUP, 1968) sec. 109, 103-05.

²⁹But cf. Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., "Returning to the Founders: the debate over the Constitution," The New Criterion (September 1993): 50-51.

³⁰In addition to the passages cited above, see Adam Smith, *Lectures on Police, Justice, Revenue, and Arms*, ed. Edwin Connan (New York: August M. Kelley, 1964), esp. 257-58.

³¹Leviathan (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1947), "The Introduction."

³²De Cive, ed. Sterling P. Lemprecht (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1949) V.5.

33 De Cive I.2, Leviathan, chs. 6, 8, and 13.

34 Leviathan, ch. 30 and "A Review and Conclusion."

³⁵Censuring minds will complain that this analysis imputes a Hobbean cast to Publius's work. It suffices to quote Publius: "The prudent inquiry, in all cases, ought surely to be not so much *from whom* the advice comes, as whether or not the advice be good" (Federalist No. 40, p. 254).

³⁶The notion that Tom is humiliated is common. See, for example, Everet Emerson, "Mark Twain and Humiliation," *Mark Twain Journal* 29 (Spring 1991): 2-7. Emerson comments that "Tom is humiliated as fully and completely as possible . . . " (7). Jaffa's point that essentially nothing distracts from Tom's triumph is more persuasive (203).

³⁷In the unfinished "Tom Sawyer's Conspiracy," *Mark Twain's Hannibal, Huck and Tom,* ed. Walter Blair (Berkeley: U of Califoria P, 1969), Tom is animated almost exclusively by the desire for glory. Huck tells Tom that he (Tom) will "get up to something that's full of danger and fuss and worry and expense and all that" Tom replies, "You're forgetting the glory—forgetting the main thing" (165). See also 167.

³⁸Jaffa 195 and 225.

³⁹"Returning to the Founders: The debate on the Constitution" 52.

⁴⁰Cf. Federalist Nos. 72, p. 437, and Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., America's Constitutional Soul (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993) 126.

⁴¹To see that this lesson was well understood by a prudent friend of republicanism, please consult Abraham Lincoln, "Lyceum Address," *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writing*, ed. Roy P. Basler (New York: Da Capo Press, 1990) 76-85.

 42 It literally opens with wrath (I.1): "Μῆνιν ἄειδε, θεά, Πηληϊάδεω ' Αχιλῆος [(the) wrath sing goddess, of Peleus' son Achilles]."

⁴³Cf. Francis Bacon, "Of Revenge," The Essays (New York: Penguin, n.d.) 72-73.

44 Federalist No. 53, p. 331. Cf. Federalist No. 9, pp. 72-73, and 78, pp. 467-68.

⁴⁵Federalist No. 72, p. 437, and No. 51, p. 322.