

crats to parade around pretending to keep markets competitive.

My complaints with this book are minor. *Myths of Rich and Poor* is a major accomplishment. Buy a copy and learn how remarkably productive a free society is. □

*Donald Boudreaux is president of FEE.*

## **The Letters of Centinel: Attacks on the U.S. Constitution, 1787–1788**

by Samuel Bryan

edited and introduced by Warren Hope

Fifth Season Press • 1998 • 160 pages •

\$19.99 paperback

Reviewed by Richard M. Gamble

Understanding the Antifederalist complaint against the Constitution requires a sympathetic ear and an active historical imagination. It is not easy for a generation taught to revere the Constitution as holy writ to recognize what the Antifederalists feared in the form and powers of the new government proposed by the Philadelphia convention. Where today we see a model document praiseworthy for well-defined constraints, precise separation of powers, carefully balanced interests, and wise checks on political ambition, the Antifederalists saw a conspiracy to rob the American people of the liberties recently preserved by them in their war against Britain. Assuming telling pseudonyms like “Brutus” and “Cassius,” the Antifederalists campaigned relentlessly against what they saw as a diabolical plot to build an empire, a plot as bold and dangerous as Julius Caesar’s bid to overthrow the ancient Roman Republic.

Among the lesser-known Antifederalists was “Centinel,” the pen name of the eloquent and contentious Pennsylvania patriot Samuel Bryan. In step with Antifederalist themes, he blasted the new frame of government as a conspiracy of the “well-born few” to enslave the many, a stealthy and calculated attempt to found a despotic empire by means of unwarranted innovations in government, contrary to the history, habits, and senti-

ments of the American people. A handy compilation of Centinel’s trenchant critique of the Constitution is now available thanks to Warren Hope, who has edited and annotated 24 brief topical letters that appeared in Pennsylvania newspapers during and just after the ratification debate in 1787 and 1788. While the quality of these essays is uneven, the content redundant, and the tone at times shrill, the best of them brilliantly answer Publius’s more famous pro-ratification arguments in *The Federalist Papers*. Centinel’s warnings are arresting and prophetic.

Centinel’s objections to the Constitution and his predictions for the future of the Republic stand up well, especially in contrast to Hamilton’s comical reassurances in *The Federalist Papers* that the new government would be a model of restraint, modesty, and frugality. Subsequent experience with Leviathan has proven Centinel and his fellow Antifederalists correct on a number of counts. He warned with penetrating foresight about the very features of the Constitution that we have come to regret by sad experience: the ambiguous “necessary and proper” and “general welfare” clauses as windows to limitless federal power; the imperial tendencies of a standing army; the bottomless pit that the federal Congress’s power of taxation has become; and, above all, the “melting down” of the state legislatures and courts into meaningless and redundant entities, hopelessly inadequate bulwarks against national encroachment and consolidation.

Moreover, Centinel’s essays help puncture two enduring myths about the Antifederalists: first, that they opposed the Constitution *in toto* and without offering a reasonable alternative, and second, that they were reckless political radicals who loved liberty to the point of anarchy. Throughout his letters, Centinel conceded the need for a more “energetic” general government, including a solution to the nagging problems of taxation and a hobbled Congress. He denied that the choice was between *this* constitution and *no* constitution, between the order, prosperity, peace, security, and happiness promised by the Federalists and the anarchy, poverty, fragmentation, international humiliation, and misery

allegedly certain if the Antifederalists had their way.

Centinel asked for time to debate, revise, and "correct" the Constitution, not to destroy it. His central concern was that once lost, liberty would never be regained, and once gained, power would never be relinquished.

Far from a lover of anarchy, Centinel sought a modest and frugal government that suited the disposition of the American people. He praised tradition, experience, and America's rootedness in the common law; he warned of the "lust of dominion" that lay at the heart of human nature and human history; and he appealed to the authority of Blackstone and Montesquieu to expose the proposed Constitution's flaws. In his mind, the Federalists were the true innovators who would unsettle the habits of the people. Sounding like the patriots of two decades before, Centinel renewed the fight to defend inherited English rights from the encroachments of a remote and despotic government. He was determined to preserve the liberties that Pennsylvanians already enjoyed under their state constitution. In short, he believed he was trying to prevent a revolution in government.

Centinel was on the losing side of American history, but his essays force the modern reader to confront uncomfortable questions about the meaning of the founding. Did the Constitution preserve the name and form of the Republic while subverting its character? Did the design of the Constitution itself slowly but inexorably transform the United States into the bloated empire that Centinel predicted? Was the Constitution of 1787, even with the addition of a Bill of Rights, fatally flawed? The Antifederalists would not be the least surprised by the vastly changed condition of the United States two centuries later. □

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## **Foundations of Economics: Beginner's Companion**

by Yanis Varoufakis

Routledge • 1998 • 396 pages • \$100.00 cloth;  
\$32.99 paperback

Reviewed by Paul Heyne

**T**his is an angry book. The administration of the University of Sydney, Australia, where Varoufakis is a senior lecturer in economics, did something in 1997 that "with a stroke of brilliance destroyed the atmosphere of collegiality and public spiritedness" that had previously characterized efforts to make the introductory economics course "a decent educational experience for the students." The administration thereby released Varoufakis, he writes, "from any moral imperatives, namely teaching introductory economics passionately," and led him to turn this book "into a kind of a testimonial."

The author never discloses exactly what the University of Sydney did. But if he and his colleagues were introducing undergraduates to economics in the manner that this book recommends and exemplifies, I know what it ought to have done: It should have told them to choose between teaching introductory economics in a reasonable way or turning the course over to someone who would.

Varoufakis does not disclose whether he was required to teach general equilibrium theory in the introductory course or whether he (and his colleagues) decided on their own that general equilibrium theory was the best form in which to present it. And there is another possibility. Disliking standard economic theory intensely, they decided to teach it in a form that was most likely to repel college students encountering economics for the first time.

The author tells us that the book was designed to complement conventional introductory economics textbooks and to relieve the "monotony and austerity" that is usually associated with them. If Varoufakis is a charismatic teacher, he may be able to teach this book along with a standard text without inciting a student rebellion. However, for anyone who is not both charismatic and thor-