



**COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA**  
*Office of the Lieutenant Governor*

***Literature & Government: A Lecture Series***

**“What Air is to Fire”: Factions and Our Contemporary Politics**

*Lecture One*

*Delivered at William & Mary*

*April 15, 2026*

Thank you, President Rowe and William & Mary, for hosting this inaugural lecture of the ***Literature & Government*** lecture series: ***L&G with the LG***.

Thank you to Dr. Christine Nemacheck for joining me on stage and for following my comments with your own observations.

Thank you to everyone here for the warm welcome.

You may be asking why I decided to establish this initiative, a lecture series focused on the intersections of literature and government.

The reality is that the role, impact, and scope of American writing in shaping our national identity, in defining our government and its institutions, and in giving voice to individual experiences within the broader collective of social, political, and economic structures cannot be overstated.

Through the lens of literary writing, whether those texts take the form of speeches, essays, poetry or fiction, the outline and the substance of American thought emerges, branches out, dives inward, and helps us to navigate the complexities of our contemporary experiences.

Let me share the scope of this lecture series: ***Literature & Government*** is meant to be an interdisciplinary lecture series designed to explore the dynamic relationship between literary expression and political thought across history, cultures, and communities. This series examines how American writers have defined, challenged, and interrogated

systems of governance and institutional power, and how political authority, in turn, has influenced literature's place, purpose, and voice. It presents me with the opportunity to build on my own experiences of teaching American literature and extend those experiences into an assessment of my work within Virginia's state government.

I will be traveling to as many of our institutions as possible during my term in office, including both public and private colleges, HBCUs, and community colleges. I anticipate holding four lectures every academic year beginning Fall 2026. Each lecture will be unique, focused on issues that are timely and relevant, and seek to connect dots across our literary and governmental landscapes.

Upcoming topics will examine the literary influences on critical social, legal, and cultural movements, including civil rights, rights for women and minorities, workers rights. We will also examine periods of historical significance through literary contexts. Importantly, I hope that we will collectively examine how the literature of our country helps us to understand our contemporary experiences, our state government, and the issues with which we currently grapple.

I chose William & Mary as the site of the first lecture because of its historical significance and resonance with the selected texts. I do not need to tell this audience about the special place that William & Mary holds, both in the Commonwealth and in the nation. As an educator of America's Presidents and a training ground for revolutionary leaders, this institution continues to shape leaders in every field, scholars and researchers, and, hopefully, more American Presidents.

Thomas Jefferson wrote, "Above all things I hope the education of the common people will be attended to; convinced that on their good sense we may rely with the most security for the preservation of a due degree of liberty" ("Letter to Madison"). Jefferson recognized that education for the "common people" is a public good; it is the essential substance for the preservation of democracy. I too fervently hope that in Virginia, "the education of the common people will be attended to" by all of our leaders, current and future.

### **Differences between academic and political discourse**

As I entered into the distinctive spaces of political discourse a few years ago, I realized quickly how different these spaces are from the academic. I miss what I have now come to regard as a true luxury: the opportunity to entertain—in discussion—multiple perspectives and competing ideas at the same time, and the chance to provide students with tools to engage issues at their own level and from their own experiences. As most of

our faculty agree, I'm sure, the goal of a liberal arts education is to help students learn how to think, not to tell them what to think.

Political discourse does not afford one that same luxury, unfortunately. Too often, the political actor is engaged in the efforts of directing thought and persuading toward a specific outcome. In political discourse, one is expected to assuage an impatient audience with a 15- or 30-second soundbite. Nuance and reflection are often frowned upon.

Ironically, soundbites and simple, digestible arguments are not found in the format and language of our founding documents, a few of which I will touch upon today. These texts reflect a serious sophistication of thinking. They are grounded in a rich knowledge of history and literature. And they deploy well-crafted rhetorical strategies to argue and persuade. Even in the exchange of letters, as we see in many of Jefferson's documents, thoughts are crafted with a depth rarely found in most political discussion these days.

### **Foundational Texts**

For this first lecture, I want to focus primarily on the *Federalist Papers* because they are foundational to so much of American political writing, history, constitutional law, and legal argument.

As we embark on this 250th celebration of the founding of this nation, it is important to study and analyze these texts and to assess our own social and political circumstances through their lens.

Texts such as the *Federalist Papers* lay the foundation for political rhetoric and effective argumentation; they provide the template for political writers and legal scholars well into our own century and in other countries. The essays are sophisticated, built on a deep knowledge of Western culture and classics, history, and political thought. And though they may be a bit challenging for some readers today, they were written *to be accessible*; after all, they were public essays designed to persuade a populace to support the ratification of the Constitution, most especially those eligible voters in New York.

### **“What Air is to Fire”: Factions and Our Contemporary Politics *Observations on Virginia State Government through the Lens of Madison, Mason, Jefferson, and Hamilton***

Alexander Hamilton opens Federalist No. 1 with a question that resonates even more profoundly in our time. He asks if “societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever

destined to depend – for their political constitutions – on accident and force.” It is this question that the Federalists sought to answer, and roughly 250 years later, we are still working to answer that question for Mr. Hamilton.

The goal of the *Federalist Papers*, 85 essays written primarily by Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, and a handful by John Jay, in the span of just a few months in 1787 and 1788 was primarily to persuade New Yorkers, as well as the reluctant voters of a few other states, to ratify the Constitution. The intention was to inform, educate, and persuade. These essays, however, continue to resonate long past their time. The *Federalist Papers* have in fact served to shape much of our constitutional interpretation, influence Supreme Court opinions, and they serve as models for rhetorical strategies and argument. As we debate today about the reach and strength of executive power, analyze the separation of powers across the branches of government, bemoan the toxicity of polarized communities, and ponder the role of our judiciary, we find these discussions already well-anticipated and developed within these essays.

I would like to begin with Madison’s Federalist No. 10 from which the title of this lecture comes. James Madison writes, "Liberty is to faction what air is to fire, an aliment without which it instantly expires." I like that word *aliment*. It’s a good, old-fashioned word meaning "food" or "nourishment."

Madison argues that political liberty inevitably creates opposing groups (factions), but removing liberty to stop factional divisions is as foolish as removing air to stop fire. Liberty is the very oxygen that nurtures dissent, and while factional divisions can be destructive and dangerous – like fire – the answer is not to remove the liberty that allows factions to develop. For Madison, the proper response to factions is to *control* their dangerous effects.

Of course, Madison is thinking about factions and the role of political division at the very moment that deep and bitter divides are brewing in the heated debates about the Constitution, about the need for this new nation to define clear protections for fundamental individual rights, about the dangers of centralized federal power versus more state-level control authority, and more. Madison is challenged by his close friend Thomas Jefferson who in a letter to him in 1787 shares his distrust of strong federal powers: “I own I am not a friend to a very energetic government. It is always oppressive.”

These debates grew so heated that they erupted in violence on the streets of Albany, New York. The Federalists who were gathered in Albany heard the news that Virginia had ratified the Constitution, the tenth state to do so, and they wanted to celebrate in the

streets of the city; they were persuaded – one might say tricked – by the anti-federalists to restrain themselves. The very next day, July 4, 1788, 50 of these anti-federalists marched through the streets of Albany themselves and burned the constitution. As an eyewitness account details, these actions by the competing faction made the federalists very unhappy:

The federalists who were then collected, determined immediately to have a procession . . . themselves. . . [They were met] by a large party who had collected there to oppose them; after a few words, a general battle took place, with swords, bayonets, clubs, stones, &c. which lasted for some time, both parties fighting with the greatest rage, and determined obstinacy, till at last the antifederalists being overpowered by numbers gave way and retreated . . . .

These contentious debates that sometimes resulted in physical violence did not, of course, happen in a vacuum. These debates followed the conclusion of a Revolutionary War that was a revolt against vastly asymmetrical political control, economic injustices, and the rule of hereditary aristocracy. It was also a revolt that was ignited, in large part, by texts, by the words and carefully-crafted arguments of the *Virginia Declaration of Rights*, the *Declaration of Independence*, and the subversive pamphlets of Thomas Paine.

Adopted just weeks before the signing of the *Declaration of Independence*, the *Virginia Declaration of Rights*, authored primarily by George Mason, proclaimed human rights to be inherent, including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness and served as a foundational blueprint for Jefferson's arguments. The *Virginia Declaration* dared to put forward the arguments of the Enlightenment that power is vested in the people and that government officials are trustees and servants answerable to the people. The *Virginia Declaration* also argued that government is not immutable. In fact, governments are instituted for the common benefit and security; if a government fails its critical responsibilities, the people have the right to reform or abolish it.

Understanding the fragility of a government that was meant to be responsive to the people it served—a citizenry that men such as George Mason argued had every right to reform or abolish their government—Madison and the Federalists sought to establish institutions that were sturdy and resilient to the divisions and struggles of factional politics.

That government has been tested repeatedly in the course of our American history, the greatest test of which, thus far, was the American Civil War. Many would argue that we

are witness to other such tests today whose magnitude, severity, and import we are only now beginning to understand.

And so, setting aside national politics, I have to ask the question: if Madison were dropped into the contemporary Virginia political context, how would he react? What might he think and say about our situation? I suspect that he would be both *not surprised* and rather *uneasy*.

Our current landscape reflects the clear existence of the factions described by Madison; we have polarized parties, a rich and varied compilation of activist groups, regional blocs, economic compatriots, and issue-driven alliances. Madison would say that these factions are exactly what liberty produces.

But as we know, Madison's real concern was not in the existence of factions; it was in *their effects*. He feared the situations in which majority factions had enough power to override minority rights; he knew that intense partisanship could harm the common good, and he had deep mistrust of those leaders who exploited factional passions for personal or political gain.

And so, looking at contemporary Virginia, where politics often divides along urban versus rural lines, party polarization, and cultural issues, Madison might make a few key observations:

First of all, he would likely argue that the republic is working, but it is under strain. Madison designed a system to control factions, not eliminate them. A large, pluralistic republic, of which Virginia is part, should dilute extreme views, he argues. But we are in quite different circumstances; the large and diverse republic on which Madison counted has shrunk and has been compartmentalized by our modern media, by algorithms that feed us content curated to our existing biases, and to political echo chambers that are *amplifying* factions instead of diffusing them.

Madison sought representation by those who would *refine* public opinion. He believed that our elected officials should be able to filter and elevate public viewpoints, and not serve as mere mirrors to the impulses of raw partisanship. He would likely ask us to question whether today's elected leaders are acting as *thoughtful representatives* or as *agents of factional ideologies*.

Madison argued for negotiation and coalition-building. Repeatedly, he reminds us that compromises are a sound representation of functioning governance structure and not signs of weakness. The good news in Virginia is that compromises among competing groups are frequently necessary, whether they are compromises across the two Chambers,

across branches of government, or across party lines. For example, with the current narrow, one-seat majority in the Virginia Senate, Democrats walk a tenuous line; the risk of losing even one vote can trigger intense internal debates and compromises, and one or two members within the Senate may end up holding inordinate power on singular issues.

Of course, Madison warns us to watch for the dominance of a majority faction. Given the results of this past November's elections in which Virginia's House Democrats hold a considerable majority, these concerns are under regular discussion on issues of rising costs of living, protections for workers, challenges to healthcare systems, and more.

Our dilemma now is how do we apply the standards and perspectives of the 18th century emerging republic to a reality that is markedly different. For example, our champions of federalism could not have anticipated the changing dynamics of political communication that have – within my own lifetime – accelerated to a level and pace that were not imagined even as recently as the early 2000s. They may have anticipated, but hardly fathomed, the unworldly amounts of capital and resources invested in candidates and campaigns.

And so while Madison would not be shocked that factions are present and perhaps dominating our Virginia politics since he predicted this condition, he would ask us to respond to one important question: Are these factions being controlled in a way that protects liberty and promotes the common good—or are they controlling the system itself? The answers to this question are not entirely clear, but I would argue that – in large part in Virginia – the common good is protected by an electoral system that is not aligned with federal elections and thus relatively freed of the sweeping impacts of national politics; it is also protected by the distinct branches of government that operate independently of each other.

In Federalist No. 51 (penned by either Madison or Hamilton, as both claimed authorship)<sup>1</sup>, the writer asks, “But what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: You must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place, oblige it to control itself.”

Federalist No. 51 asks us to consider, how is Virginia faring under these particular constraints?

---

<sup>1</sup> All of the *Federalist Papers* were published under a single pseudonym, Publius.

When the author writes, “you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place, oblige it to control itself,” he captures a core tension of governmental authority: that a government must be strong enough to rule, but constrained enough to avoid abuse. In this regard, Virginia is a useful case study because it shows both strengths and weaknesses as it tries, ostensibly, to balance between those two goals.

If we examine the first clause that we must “enable the government to control the governed,” we can make the argument that Virginia is generally functioning well. In this regard, we can say that the Commonwealth has a fully operational state apparatus; we have a judiciary, legislature, and executive with clear separation of powers. We can also point to the strengths of our bicameral system in which the House and the Senate have distinct authorities, leadership, and governing structures of their own. The two Chambers must negotiate, compromise, and cooperate in order to pass legislation and to deliver a balanced budget.

Further, Virginia has regular and competitive elections. Just this past November, we observed a peaceful transfer of power. Additionally, the Commonwealth produces large shifts among its electorate as the pendulum swings with certain regularity from one party in power to another.

Additionally, our governor is term-limited to one consecutive term, a structure that prevents the entrenchment and consolidation of power. Still, the governor has broad authority, and one might argue that the one-term is liberating to the executive, freeing her – and I am so delighted that Virginians can at last say *her* – freeing her to act without a focus on the politics of reelection.

Thus we might say that Virginia’s governmental structures have no problem in exercising authority as Hamilton defined it: laws are passed and enforced, and state and local governments change hands without instability. Virginia does well in satisfying Hamilton’s first requirement that we must “enable the government to control the governed.”

The second clause that we “oblige government to control itself” through checks, limits, and systems of accountability is a bit more complicated. We can say that the Commonwealth has important structural protections in place. These include the following:

Separation within our elections: the governor, lieutenant governor, and attorney general are elected independently; this electoral structure can create internal checks within the executive branch. In fact, we can have executives from different political parties serving at the same time; Virginia has experienced this interesting political situation in the past.

Additionally, because of the off-year election cycles on which we vote, our state politics are somewhat insulated from the turbulence of national politics, and voters are able to focus on local and state concerns.

Our courts and judiciary are largely independent actors and function as a coherent third branch of government. Judges in Virginia are elected by a majority vote of the General Assembly rather than by popular election, as is the case in many other states. The role of the legislative body in judicial selection is intended to produce qualified judges rather than political campaigners; our judges do not need to raise campaign funds or court voters in order to secure a seat on the bench. Virginia's Canons of Judicial Conduct emphasize an independent, impartial, and competent judiciary to maintain confidence in the legal system.

These are the sorts of balancing structures that the writers of the *Federalist Papers* envisioned. One might say that we largely do well because "ambition counteracts ambition," as self-interest and desire for power serves to check political pursuits and prevents domination by any single person or branch.

However, looking through the lens of the dictum that we must oblige government to control itself, we must also acknowledge that our Commonwealth has important structural weaknesses:

We have weak campaign finance laws and limits. Campaign finance reform efforts are proposed every session, and they largely go nowhere.

We operate under something called the "Virginia Way" which—dependent on who is explaining it—can either be the proud heritage of gentlemanly agreements that maintain decorum and the status quo, or that is the gateway to entrenched behaviors, cronyism, and the structural blocks that are hard to overcome by those who, historically, have been kept out of political systems.

The good news is that our governmental structures and systems are not static; they are being contested and adjusted. We see these most transparently with the election of more women and minorities. We see it also in the growing strengths of advocacy communities which were once on the margins of political power but are now gaining visibility as they demand accountability, transparency, and a seat at the decision-making tables. Our government in Virginia is frequently contested, and it adjusts to those challenges.

I would argue that Virginia passes the first half of the test of Federalist No. 51 comfortably. It governs effectively, maintains order, and runs stable elections. We might

also say that our Commonwealth is not fully living up to the ideals defined in the essay. While we have solid institutional checks and balances, we also have uneven ethical and political restraints, given the unlimited contribution and spending allowed in political campaigns.

As we launch this year's anticipated 250th celebrations of the anniversary of the nation's founding, several questions are in front of us: Were the Federalists right and has the American Constitution succeeded in appropriately delineating, limiting, and dividing power? Or have the Anti-Federalists' warnings about consolidated power and a national government seated outside of the states' reach and with centralized authority proven to be more prophetic?

Virginia and our state government do not operate in a vacuum. We must be responsive both to Virginians and to the national agendas that impact our communities economically, politically, culturally, and oftentimes quite personally.

Thank you for this opportunity to share my thoughts and few reflections on a few of our founding documents and their relationship to current concerns in Virginia.

For our faculty and administrators, I acknowledge the stress and the challenges that our institutions of higher education are facing. I applaud you for your commitment to this profession, your expertise in your disciplines, and your dedication to our students.

And to our students here today, I thank you for your attentiveness, your curiosity and intellectual engagement. I hope that you will continue to engage with intensity on the issues that face all of us, but that confront your generation especially.

### **References**

- Hamilton, Alexander, James Madison, and John Jay. *The Federalist Papers*. Accessed March 28, 2026. Library of Congress. <https://guides.loc.gov/federalist-papers/full-text>
- Jefferson, Thomas. n.d. "Letter to Madison," Thomas Jefferson to James Madison on December 20, 1787. Accessed April 4, 2026. <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/the-jefferson-madison-exchange>

*Report on a brawl between Federalist and Anti-Federalists*. 16 July 1788. The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, New York. Accessed April 4, 2026. <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/sites/default/files/T-00259.01.pdf>