

Political Ideas behind the Constitution

- I. **Attempt to compensate for the deficiencies of human nature through institutional arrangements.** Ambition would balance or check ambition.
- II. **Idea of the common good does not motivate people per se.** Common good will arise out of conflict within an institutional setting; if people follow the rules.
- III. **Balances Efforts.** Excess leads to distress. Every grant of power checked by another countervailing grant of power.
- IV. **Concern for any concentration of power.** Power unchecked is bad. Power corrupts.
- V. **Fearful of too much democracy.** Constitution had and still has many undemocratic features. Ex: electoral college, judiciary, etc.
- VI. **Freedom not extended to all.** Women excluded. African Americans excluded. Native American's excluded.

FOUNDING FATHERS VIEW OF HUMAN NATURE

The American Founding Fathers generally held a realistic, deeply pragmatic, and somewhat pessimistic view of human nature. Influenced heavily by the European Enlightenment, classical history, and Christian theology, they believed that while human beings are capable of reason and virtue, they are also fundamentally flawed, self-interested, and driven by a desire for power.

This specific dual understanding—that people can govern themselves but cannot be blindly trusted with unchecked power—became the foundational blueprint for the **United States Constitution**.

Core Tenets of Their View

- **Flawed and Self-Interested:** Founders like Alexander Hamilton and James Madison rejected the utopian idea that humans are naturally altruistic. They believed that individuals naturally prioritize their own passions, ambitions, and economic interests over the public good.

- **The Corrupting Nature of Power:** They maintained that anyone granted political power will naturally try to expand it. As Madison famously noted, power is of an "encroaching nature."
- **Capable of Reason and Virtue:** Despite their pessimism, they were not entirely cynical. They believed that through education, civic virtue, and rational thought, citizens could cooperate to maintain a stable republic.

How Their Views Shaped the Government

The structural design of the U.S. government is a direct answer to these perceived flaws in human nature. Rather than trying to change human nature, they built a system to contain it.

Concept	The View of Human Nature	The Constitutional Solution
Separation of Powers	Leaders will abuse power if given the chance.	Dividing government into Legislative, Executive, and Judicial branches.
Checks and Balances	Personal ambition must be blocked by someone else's ambition.	Giving each branch the constitutional tools to resist the encroachments of the others.
Federalism	Concentrated power leads to tyranny.	Splitting power between the national government and state governments .
Representative Democracy	The public can be swayed by temporary passions, mobs, or demagogues.	Creating an indirect democracy (like the Senate and Electoral College) to filter public opinion.

Key Quotes from the Founders

"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."

— **James Madison**, *Federalist No. 51*

"Why has government been instituted at all? Because the passions of men will not conform to the dictates of reason and justice, without constraint."

— **Alexander Hamilton**, *Federalist No. 15*

"There is a degree of depravity in mankind which requires a certain degree of circumspection and distrust."

— **James Madison**, *Federalist No. 55*

"Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."

— **John Adams**, *Letter to the Massachusetts Militia*

Yet they devised a system of government that depends on rational, educated citizens motivated by a concern for the common good.