The standard narrative of the development of American political thought in the late eighteenth century relies heavily on British Enlightenment figures such as Locke, Hume, Harrington and Hobbs. Additionally, the works of Montesquieu and Rousseau and accounts of the ancient Roman Republics are also seen as essential antecedents to understanding American constitutionalism. Conversely, the influence of the Dutch Republic generally goes unmentioned in the contemporary narrative of the American founding era. Roger Congleton asserts, “modern work, however, for the most part neglects the significance of the Dutch republic for founding the American republic” (Congleton, 2008, p. 36). Congleton’s article, “America’s Neglected Debt to the Dutch, An Institutional Perspective,” traces the Dutch Republic’s influence on key figures of the Enlightenment and how it played both a direct and indirect role in the development of American political institutions. In the Federalist 9, Hamilton alludes to the “new science of politics”- a systematic study of comparative forms of governments and political philosophies that served to inspire the Framers of our Constitution in 1787. Leading American political figures were enthusiastic observers of the comparative government systems and reflected on the Dutch Republic more than any other nation with the exception of Great Britain during the Critical Period and the ratification era from 1787-1789 (Riker, 1957). It is important to note, however, that the Framers of the Constitution were limited by both language and by a paucity of quality literature concerning Dutch Republic (Riker, 1957).

A revealing study by Donald Lutz sought to challenge the common perception that leading American political figures of the late eighteenth century relied solely on a “Whig Enlightenment dichotomy” in forming their political philosophies. His exhaustive
study entailed 916 sources, written between 1760-1805 by leading political figures, concluded that, “no one European writer or one tradition of writers dominated American political thought” (Lutz, 1984 p. 189). Lutz went beyond merely reviewing the private library collections of men such as Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton and James Madison; rather he analyzed over 2,200 individual writing samples to reveal precisely which authors were “cited, quoted or paraphrased” (Lutz, 1984, p. 191). It is important to note that four of the top fourteen most referenced writers were either born, lived or were first published in the Dutch Republic; Locke, Pufendorf, Grotius and Delolme. Jonathan Israel points out that Locke lived in the Dutch Republic for six years he did some of his most important work there. Additionally, the Bibliotheque Angloise created in 1717 in Amsterdam introduced many Enlightenment writers, such as Locke and Montesquieu to the continent (Israel, 1998).

The direct and indirect influence of the Dutch Republic on our founding documents are also worthy of careful consideration. The Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation and the U.S. Constitution are narrowly viewed as being exclusively rooted in the Scottish and English Enlightenments. This unfortunately neglects significant events such as the Dutch Revolt and the subsequent Union of Utrecht. Congleton argues that a century before the Enlightenment and two centuries before the Declaration of Independence, the Act of Abjuration, which outlined the offenses of King Phillip II’s abuses against the Dutch, served as a rudimentary template for social contract theory vis-à-vis the assertion of ancient individual liberties. Israel points out that the Act renounced the oath of allegiance to Phillip II, removed his image from currency and required new oaths of allegiance to the States. According to Israel, “to renounce that oath was a momentous step, confirming unequivocal allegiance to the Revolt” (Israel, 1995, p. 210). Jefferson et al. would make a strikingly similar assertion in the Declaration; that the newly formed united states “are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown” (Congleton, 2008). Additionally, both the Act of Abjuration and the Declaration of Independence served as official starting points to their respective rebellions. They were bold written proclamations, which assert the right of the people to cast off tyrannical rule. While Herbert Rowen cautions that it is a misnomer to refer to the Act of Abjuration as a declaration of independence, it certainly signals a sea change in political theory regarding
the relationship between a sovereign and the state and the right of the people to invoke higher law (Rowen, 1972).

In 1778 the Second Continental Congress ratified the Articles of Confederation. Congleton asserts that numerous parallels can be drawn between the confederation government established by the Articles and confederated government that created the Union of Utrecht two centuries earlier. Both documents created a system of government with very limited central authority and largely sovereign state/provincial governments. Congleton noted that “Jefferson’s overview of these first constitutional debates include more references to the Dutch Republic than any other nation” (Congleton, 2008, p. 53). Under the Articles, each state was given one vote in the confederal congress regardless of their population and the principle of equal representation was an area of great contention; as it had never been implemented by a modern state in their legislative assemblies (Congleton, 2008).

In 1787 James Madison’s drafted *Of Ancient and Modern Confederacies* it is noted that the purpose of the essay was to examine the nature of confederacies throughout history and to highlight the reasons why they were deficient. In 1784 Madison wrote to Thomas Jefferson to request that he acquire as many books as possible on comparative governmental systems, especially the Dutch, German and Helvetic confederated governments (Riker, 1957 p. 498). The impetus for Madison’s examination was the fragile state of affairs under the League of Friendship established by the Articles of Confederation. In 1786, Shays’ Rebellion served as a catalyst for leading American political thinkers to hasten their efforts to amend the deeply flawed Articles of Confederation. James Madison in fact published two influential essays in the spring of 1787, and the aforementioned *Vices of the Political System of the United States, Notes of Ancient and Modern Confederacies*. The former essay highlighted the deficiencies with the Articles of Confederation and other confederacies throughout history, including the Belgic Confederacy. Madison sought to underscore the numerous vices of the confederacies both in antiquity and in early modern Europe, the lack of central authority, jealousies between large and small states and wealthy and less wealthy states, sovereignty of individual states, and the problems of raising revenue to name only a few of the deficiencies he articulated. It belabors the obvious to conclude that Madison was seeking
to draw historic parallels with the Articles of Confederation. To this end, the circulation of these essays sought to persuade leading political figures to, at the very least, consider amending the Articles of Confederation. It is important to note that Madison was most likely drafting the Virginia Plan in the spring of 1787, which completely deviated from a confederal system of government. Thus, his interpretation of the six confederacies he examined were intended to point the reader toward confederacies as inherently flawed forms of government.

In *Notes of Ancient and Modern Confederacies*, Madison outlines the genesis of each union, the intended purpose of each confederacy, a general description of their government and their respective excesses and flaws. He cites a single source for his information on the Dutch Republic, Sir William Temple’s *Remarks on the United Provinces* (1674). Madison explains that the purpose of the Belgic Confederacy was twofold: “1. to fortify the Union—2. to repel the common enemy” (Madison, 1787). It is no accident that the vices Madison lists of the Dutch Republic are quite similar to deficiencies of the Articles of Confederation. These vices include the following: unanimity is required to make decisions and amendments to the Union, revenue quotas are raised by each province according to “what means it pleases” and these are “not settled without great difficulty”, and that the States General has only parchment authority over the provinces and the “jealously of each province and its sovereignty” renders any central authority to be a dead letter of law (Madison, 1787). Madison’s quote by Grotius that “the hatred of Austria has kept Holland from being destroyed by the vices of their constitution” underscores his interpretation of the Dutch union. In sum, a casual reader of Madison’s essay would observe the direct correlations he is making the Articles of Confederation and the Dutch Republic.

Following the Philadelphia Convention, fierce debate ensued regarding the ratification of the Constitution. The Dutch Republic again became fodder for examination and discussion during the period of ratification between 1787-1789. To this end, the *Federalist 20* was entirely devoted to a discussion of the Dutch Republic. Alexander Hamilton essentially made the same argument in *Federalist 20* as Madison regarding the deficiencies of the Dutch Republic. He elaborated more colorfully and descriptively on what were seen as the various vices of its decentralized government,
referring to the Stadholder as a “hereditary prince” and noting that the Republic yielded “imbecility in the government; discord in the Provinces; foreign influence and indignities; a precarious existence in peace and peculiar calamities from war” (Hamilton, 1788). Additionally, Hamilton asserts that in matters of fiscal deficiencies, revenue, must be collected from the Provinces “at the point of the bayonet” and in times of crisis the Republic has resorted to “overleap” their constitution. Moreover, he asserts, that “true patriots” in the Republic attempted on four different occasions to form “extraordinary assemblies to apply a remedy” but to no avail. Rather sanctimoniously, Hamilton, “thanks the heavens” that the Framers of the Constitution exercised the wisdom in remedying our flawed system of government under the Articles of Confederation (Hamilton, 1788).

Hamilton concludes his assessment of the Dutch Republic by asserting that “all of this chaos has resulted in war and popular uprising” and that “all nations have their eyes fixed on this awful spectacle” (Hamilton, 1788). While neither Madison nor Hamilton point to any positive aspects of the Dutch Republic, some historians conclude that the assessments of the constitutional structure of the Dutch Republic may have served as a “metaphor for domestic experience” rather than a precise account of the inner workings of Dutch political institutions (Riker, 1957, p. 514). In regard to the Stadholder being a hereditary prince, Jonathan Israel asserts, “even Oldenbarnevelt supported a proposal to make him the sovereign “count of Holland” and the Orangists supported the monarchial aspirations of Stadholder” (Israel, 1995). William H. Riker points out, however, that many of the framers of the American Constitution “misrepresented the House of Nassau” in that it frequently had the widespread support of the common people (Riker, 1957, p. 512). Also, Israel points to the lack of central authority and conflicting visions over the nature of the Republic as being primary factors in the chaotic events of 1672, which resulted in what Israel referred to as being “the most traumatic of the Dutch Golden Age” (Israel, 1995). Deep ideological differences and factions are evident throughout the history of the Dutch Republic. Israel points out that the English pottery manufacturer Wedgewood capitalized on these divisions in society in the 1780’s by making busts of Oldenbarnevelt and De Witt for the Patriots and lockets of the Stadholder for the Orangists (Israel, 1995, p. 1087) These deep divisions continued throughout the late 18th
century when the factions supporting Brunswick and Bentinck van Rhoon differed over the political direction of the Dutch Republic. The former viewed the Republic as a dynastic state and the latter as a constitutional republic that served to protect the sovereignty of the individual United Provinces (Israel, 1995, p. 1092). The issues of revenue and jealousies among the provinces raised by both Hamilton and Madison remained an issue of contention throughout the Dutch Republic. Israel points out that from 1616 onward Holland paid 58% of the revenue in the States General. The preeminent role that Holland played throughout the Dutch Republic certainly engendered great resentment at various periods during the history of the Republic.

According to historian William H. Riker, the most common misconception of the Dutch Republic by framers of the American constitution centered on the issue of the unanimity requirement for major decisions in the States General. As previously mentioned, both Madison and Hamilton included this observation in the *Federalist 20* and *Notes of Ancient and Modern Confederacies*. Israel, on the other hand, concluded that “hardly any major decisions of the United Provinces in the seventeenth century were taken unanimously” (Israel, 1995, p. 276). In fact, the Union of Utrecht proved to be remarkably flexible in that a majority vote was sufficient in a variety of area, which included the “regulation of shipping, administration of conquered districts, church affairs, and the promotion of colonial expansion” (Israel, 1995 p. 277). Additionally, although Madison cites Temple, he either overlooks or willfully ignores Temple’s remarks that explicitly state that a plurality was necessary for major decisions made by the States General (Riker, 1957).

William Riker noted that the framers misconceptions of Dutch institutions stemmed largely from the quality of literature to which they had access during the critical period of the making of the American constitution. He made a compelling argument that, while the Dutch Republic was mentioned with great frequency, the observations were essentially superficial or misrepresentative. According to Riker, most of the published literature to which the framers had access was written in either French or English and was confined to what was found in the writing of Temple, Stanhope, and translations of DeWitt. Riker points out that the framers ignored many statements by Temple, perhaps most importantly, Temple believed that the Dutch Republic actually functioned well.
Riker concluded that, “they read Dutch problems (what they knew of them) in the light of their own” (Riker, 1957, 514).

Perhaps no American had a better understanding of the Dutch Republic during the 1780’s than John Adams. Adams served as the U.S. ambassador to the Republic in the early 1780’s and was U.S. ambassador to Great Britain in the summer of 1787. In fact, Adams’s efforts led to the Dutch Republic being the first nation after France to recognize the United States (Nordholt, 1976). Initially Adams was greatly impressed with the Dutch: “I doubt much whether there is any nation of Europe more estimable than the Dutch in proportion” (Nordholt, 1976). Eventually, Adams grew disillusioned with the Dutch and concluded that “they are devoted to pursuit of gain” and were “encumbered with a complicated constitution divided among themselves in interest and sentiment—they seemed afraid of everything” (Nordholt, 1976, p.24).

Aside from Adams’s first hand knowledge of the Dutch Republic, Benjamin Franklin and Pierce Butler also traveled throughout Holland in the 1760’s. Riker points out that Franklin was very likely the most knowledgeable delegate at the Philadelphia Convention on the Dutch Republic. In fact, one of the only speeches given by Franklin at the Philadelphia Convention centered on Pierce Butler’s grossly erroneous assessment of the Dutch Republic. Publically, Franklin proclaimed that "In love of liberty and in the defense of it, Holland has been our example" (Thompson, 2012). Privately however, Franklin took a more cautionary stance on the Republic. Historian J.W. Schulte Nordholt explained that “at the Philadelphia Convention in 1787 Franklin warned the assembly that on no account should American take Dutch Stadholdership as a model, since it was in perpetual rivalry with regents, who possessed sovereignty in the town councils, the provincial states and in the States-General” (Nordholt, 1976, p.9).

During the ratification period of 1787-1789, the Antifederalists also reflected both directly and indirectly on the Dutch Republic. One of the pivotal arguments put forth by leading Antifederalists was that the Constitution was untenable because it destroyed state sovereignty. In the Antifederalist 14, George Clinton, although not directly citing the Dutch Republic asserts that, “The governments of Europe have taken their limits and form from adventitious circumstances, and nothing can be argued on the motive of agreement from them; but these adventitious political principles have nevertheless
produced effects that have attracted the attention of philosophy, which have established axioms in the science of politics therefrom, as irrefragable as any in Euclid” (Clinton, 1787). He went on to argue, “The strongest principle of union resides within our domestic walls. The ties of the parent exceed that of any other. As we depart from home, the next general principle of union is amongst citizens of the same state, where acquaintance, habits, and fortunes, nourish affection, and attachment” (Clinton, 1787). To many Antifederalists, he continued, those who did not support state sovereignty, must surely harbor monarchical tendencies. It is interesting to note that one Antifederalist writer assumed the pseudonym of Johan DeWitt, a friend of Temple.

Not all Antifederalists expressed a favorable impression of the Dutch experience. Several references in the Antifederalist Papers unfavorably compared the government established under the new Constitution with the Dutch Republic. Writing under the pseudonym “A Newport Man” one Antifederalist decried that the stadholder of the Republic, very much like our intended President, made him in reality a monarch, and subject to all of its calamities” (Anonymous, 1788). The Antifederalist 4 concludes, “Holland groans under a government like this new one. A stadholder, sir, a Dutch president, has brought on that country’s miseries which will not permit them to collect debts with fleets or armies … This President will bring miseries on us like those of Holland” (Anonymous, 1787). In sum, both the Federalists and the Antifederalists used what Riker refers to as the “Awful Example” to further their claims.

Without question, the Dutch Republic was a frequent topic of discussion during the Critical Period and ratification. Both the Federalists and the Antifederalists sought to use it to further their claims concerning what they viewed as the best system for our nascent republic. While many of their observations were erroneous or partially correct, inclusion of comparative governments added a measure of credibility and gravitas to their arguments. Hamilton’s new science of politics sought to avoid the mistakes of past systems of government. In order to create an effective system of government the Federalists held that confederations were intrinsically flawed and that a compound republic was the essential framework for good government. John Marshall stated in 1787: “we may derive many lessons from Holland beneficial to ourselves” (Riker, 1957, p. 495). Perhaps the most important legacy of the Dutch Republic to American political
thought in the late eighteenth century is rooted in the struggle to define the nature of
government and factionalism appeared to foreshadow many of the fundamental issues confronting their
own time. To this extent, the indirect influence of the Dutch Republic on the
Enlightenment may have ultimately been one of the most important factors in the creation
of American political thought in the late eighteenth century.

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