Understanding the Federalists and Anti-federalists

The anti-federalists were a group of statesmen that took issue with parts of the Constitution and refused to ratify it until their concerns were addressed. Read the following excerpts from their writing to learn a few of their main concerns.

Anti-Federalist #46

My object is to consider that undefined, unbounded and immense power which is comprised in the following clause—"And to make all laws which shall be necessary and proper for carrying into execution the foregoing powers, and all other powers vested by this constitution in the government of the United States; or in any department or offices thereof." Under such a clause as this, can anything be said to be reserved and kept back from Congress?... Where then is the restraint? How are Congress bound down to the powers expressly given? ... In giving such immense, such unlimited powers, was there no necessity of a Bill of Rights, to secure to the people their liberties? Is it not evident that we are left wholly dependent on the wisdom and virtue of the men who shall from time to time be the members of Congress? And who shall be able to say seven years hence, the members of Congress will be wise and good men, or of the contrary character?

Anti-Federalist #84

For [the Constitution] being a plan of government received and ratified by the whole people, all other forms which are in existence at the time of its adoption, must yield to it.... Ought not a government, vested with such extensive and indefinite authority, to have been restricted by a declaration of rights? It certainly ought. So clear a point is this, that I cannot help suspecting that persons who attempt to persuade people that such reservations were less necessary under this Constitution than under those of the States, are wilfully endeavoring to deceive, and to lead you into an absolute state of vassalage.

1. What is the anti-federalists' main concern with the Constitution?

2. How do they propose to solve that concern?

The federalists were a group of statesmen that supported the Constitution and wanted to see it ratified as-is. They attempted to address the concerns of the anti-federalists in the following excerpts

Federalist #1

Among the most formidable of the obstacles which the new Constitution will have to encounter may readily be distinguished the obvious interest of a certain class of men in every State to resist all changes which may hazard a diminution of the power, emolument, and consequence of the offices they hold under the State establishments ... The vigor of government is essential to the security of liberty; that, in the contemplation of a sound and well-informed judgment, their interest can never be separated; and that a dangerous ambition more often lurks behind the specious mask of zeal for the rights of the people.

1. What are the federalists accusing the anti-federalists of?

Federalist #84

The most considerable of the remaining objections is that the plan of the convention contains no bill of rights ... It has been several times truly remarked that bills of rights are, in their origin, stipulations between kings and their subjects, abridgements of prerogative in favor of privilege, reservations of rights not surrendered to the prince It is evident, therefore, that, according to their primitive signification, they have no application to constitutions professedly founded upon the power of the people, and executed by their immediate representatives and servants. Here, in strictness, the people surrender nothing; and as they retain every thing they have no need of particular reservations. "WE, THE PEOPLE of the United States, to secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ORDAIN and ESTABLISH this Constitution for the United States of America."... I go further, and affirm that bills of rights, in the sense and to the extent in which they are contended for, are not only unnecessary in the proposed Constitution, but would even be dangerous. They would contain various exceptions to powers not granted; and, on this very account, would afford a colorable pretext to claim more than were granted. For why declare that things shall not be done which there is no power to do? Why, for instance, should it be said that the liberty of the press shall not be restrained, when no power is given by which restrictions may be imposed?

The federalists say that a bill of rights would be both "unnecessary" and "dangerous."

- a. Why do they say a bill of rights is "unnecessary?"
- b. Why would it be "dangerous?"