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Amazon Ablaze: What's Going On in the World's Largest Rain Forest?

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The world's largest tropical rain forest, the Amazon, has seen a devastating rise in man-made fires since January. Most of these fires are being legally set by farmers as a precursor to planting, as the dry season in the Amazon, in which fires could be set to prepare the land, runs from April to September. However, many are being started illegally by land grabbers, expanding their lands by clearing protected areas of the rain forest for profit. A significant portion of the fires is in savanna areas of the Amazon, where

tree coverage is scarcer. The fires are now threatening the region's more biodiverse sections, which not only are home to around

40,000 plant species and 430 types of mammals, but also absorb about two billion tons of carbon dioxide per year (roughly five percent of the planet's total annual emissions). With the increasing threat that climate change poses to the Earth and future generations, it's pivotal to critically and holistically assess the environmental crisis currently affecting the Amazon, and what it means in the grand scheme of our future.

The Amazon extends across Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Suriname, Guyana, and French Guiana; but Brazil accounts for about 60 percent of the total region. The data presented in this article and in most media coverage of the Amazon fires refer to Brazil's portion. The Brazilian space agency reports that there have been 43,421 fires from January through August, a 57 percent jump from the average number (27,665) occurring in those months over the past five years. It also reports that from January to July alone, about 4,700 kilometers of rain forest were cleared, 67 percent more than last year. Scientists estimate that about 18 percent of the

original forest is gone, and warn that it can't lose too much more cover before drying out and becoming a savanna. The Amazon recycles moisture from nearby oceans which then evaporates into the air, causing rainfall. Therefore, if it loses too much tree coverage, dry periods will last longer and the forest will be more prone to wildfires, which could produce even more devastating deforestation.

The city of São Paulo was covered in smoke on August 21 as blackened skies darkened the city two hours earlier than usual, and researchers said the forest fires more than 2,000 miles away were partly to blame. Hospitals in Amazonian cities have reported

an increase in respiratory problems as well. Outraged Brazilian citizens posted photos on social media of the skies and neighboring fires, and celebrities and the media were quick to pick up the story. Norway and Germany have halted their aid to the Amazon Fund due to increasing tension between Brazil and the European Union due to the fires and Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's budget cuts to IBAMA, the government's environmental protection and natural resources agency.

Climate change activists and other citizens were in disbelief at the initial lack of coverage of the fires. And the media's later awakening seemed to involve mostly the political implications of Bolsonaro's environmental policies rather than a more complete reporting of the situation and its history.

President Bolsonaro took office last January, ending the Workers' Party 13-year governance from 2003 to 2016 (a successor to the impeached Workers' Party president held office from 2018 to 2019). He has championed controversial right-wing policies and has been called "the Trump of the Tropics" by the media

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The Federalists and their Vision of American Exceptionalism

By EDWARD SHVETS
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The Constitution is the bulwark of the American experiment. *The Federalist Papers* encouraged Americans to ratify it, a decision that Alexander Hamilton suggests at the beginning of the first essay will do much to determine whether "societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or [are] forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force." Publius (Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay) argues that America finds itself at a crossroads in history. If the states are able to surmount the problem of factionalism and establish a strong union, then the Constitution and the pro-Constitution vanguard, including the authors and their colleagues, will help to bring about a new political age. In *Federalist* numbers 10 and 11, Madison and Hamilton envision something like a fall of European triumphalism and a rise of American exceptionalism.

Madison in #10 discusses the causes of factions and the threat they pose to popular government—to democratic republics, which the United States would be. Since previous pure democracies have disintegrated into majoritarian tyrannies, he says that controlling the effects of factions, a potential cause of majority tyranny, is the only way to preserve a system of self-government. Contrary to the French political philosopher Montesquieu, he contends that a republic is more likely to survive in a large territory than a small one. The multiplicity of factions in an extended (meaning extensive) republic, he argues, serves to prevent the rise of a tyrannical majority faction to power.

To destroy liberty would be "a remedy that is worse than the disease" of faction, and it is "impracticable" to give all people the same opinions and interests. Madison therefore addresses another question: the difficulty of convincing a majority faction "to sacrifice its ruling passion or interest [for] both the public good and

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in the United States. They are in no way favorable toward a Latin American Trump, and that may help to explain the amount of inaccurate and biased reporting on the Amazon fires this year in the U.S. media, including numerous reports with false and incomplete data and photographs of fires from years ago, in many instances not even fires in the Amazon. For comparison, in 2010, during the last year of leftist President Lula da Silva's 8-year term, researchers reported a 261 percent

increase in the number of fires year-on-year to a peak of 109,940 fires. The media coverage of those fires was scarce, as most Brazilians and much of international opinion favored Lula's presidency.

Bolsonaro should be held accountable for lack of action against illegal loggers, budget cuts to environmental agencies protecting the Amazon, and his government's general encouragement of expanding economic activity in the Amazon to improve the country's

economy. While a portion of the Amazon can (and arguably should) be used to promote economic activity in the region's cities, which are among the poorest in Brazil, this should be done in an amount which still allows the rain forest to regrow at a natural rate. However, the media and its readers or viewers have a responsibility to report data accurately and to propose solutions that would combat the forest fire crisis, rather than focus on the demonization of a disliked political figure.

THE FEDERALISTS ... cont.

the rights of other citizens." He asserts that it seems "neither moral nor religious motives can be relied on as an adequate control," because historically, pure democracies—democracies consisting of a small number of citizens, who decided public affairs in person—"have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths."

A large republic, which the United States would be, would amplify the benefits of representative government (rather than direct rule by the people) because of its extended sphere of operations—because, in other words, of its greater size. Electing representatives in a relatively sizeable nation would tend "to refine

and enlarge the public views by passing them through the medium of a chosen body," those who are elected. In contrast, such refinement and enlargement would happen less in a smaller society, since

it is likely that "men of factious tempers" and other dangerous dispositions would "first obtain the suffrages [votes] and then betray the interest of the people." Another advantage of a wider arena—an extended "sphere," meaning a large rather than small nation or society—is that it would be "less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive [and ability] to invade the rights of other citizens." Madison sees a direct positive correlation between the two key points of difference that distinguish a republic from a strictly defined democracy. By stressing the problem of faction, he inverts Montesquieu's argument, saying that republics will actually survive best in a large territory.

After Madison addresses the problem of conflict at home in *Federalist 10*,

Hamilton tackles threats from abroad in *Federalist 11*. A strong union, he insists, will foster commercial prosperity and national security. Hamilton envisions a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. He understands the fragility of the United States at this dangerous moment and explains how the proposed Constitution will address the problem.

The strength of a real American union, Hamilton says, would not only subdue European jealousy and reduce its dangers, but also secure for the nation a central position on the world stage. As things are now, without a real union among the states, foreign powers with interests in the

"arbiter of Europe" in the New World.

According to Hamilton, a United States of America could both avoid Europe's hegemony and "vindicate the honor of the human race." With the aid of "wisdom," her advantages in enterprise and geography would enable her to "make herself the admiration and envy of the world." Due to the "genius of the American merchants and navigators" and to the securing, by the creation of a real union, of greatly important fisheries and navigational rights, the new nation could enjoy a prosperous "ACTIVE COMMERCE." Hamilton asserts that Europe has maintained dominion over

the world for far too long and has been "tempted ... to consider the rest of mankind as created for her benefit." By emphasizing that "Disunion will add another victim," America, "to [Europe's] triumphs," Hamilton suggests the full weight of the American experiment.

Madison and Hamilton convey the prophetic. Their vision for the United States juxtaposes Jay's warning in *Federalist 2* against disunion—against the states as mutually "unsocial, jealous, and alien sovereignties"—with an invitation. The essay ends with a warning that a disunited America would be forced to "exclaim" the famous lament in Shakespeare: "FAREWELL! A LONG FAREWELL, TO ALL MY GREATNESS." And the reader of the *Federalist Papers* may think that if its citizens, through their elected representatives in the state ratifying conventions, instead approve the Constitution, America will have reason to exclaim: "Greetings! A Joyous Greetings to All of Humanity's Greatness!"

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Americas have the incentive and means to "foster division among" the states and would proceed with "clipping the wings by which [they] might soar to a dangerous greatness." Furthermore, Hamilton argues, a disunited America would decline toward a "PASSIVE COMMERCE," since a nation, when made "despicable by its weakness, forfeits even the privilege of being neutral." He uses the example of an embargo on Great Britain to show how a relatively large and united nation, rather than a league of 13 states as under the current Articles of Confederation, can extract the best trade deals from a foreign nation and influence the conduct of other countries. The addition of an "opportunist" deployed navy, he points out, would swing pivotal campaigns in the Atlantic in America's favor and make the U.S. the

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CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

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