

# Gordon Wood's America

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Peter Berkowitz on *The Idea of America: Reflections on the Birth of the United States* by Gordon Wood

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Gordon Wood. *The Idea of America: Reflections on the Birth of the United States*. Penguin Press. 385 Pages. \$29.95.

This superb collection of essays by Pulitzer Prize winning historian Gordon Wood spans his distinguished career. The essays deal with the ideas, individuals, and larger social and political forces that animated the American founding and cover the colonial era, the American Revolution, the making of the Constitution, and the rise of the early Republic.

A regular contributor to the *New Republic* and the *New York Review of Books*, and the Alva O. Way University Professor Emeritus at Brown University, Wood is the author of numerous books on the American founding, perhaps none of which was more influential than his 1969 work, *Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787*. It spurred a generation of historians, political theorists, and law professors to take an interest in the republican or civic humanist tradition, which stressed the importance of public virtue to popular government.

Would that Wood's readers had been as attentive as Wood has been to the other main sources of the ideas and actions that culminated in the Constitution and exercised influence alongside and in complicated interaction with the republican tradition. Indeed, no account of the American founding can be adequate which does not also recognize the impact on the American constitutional tradition of the liberal tradition, which emphasized individual rights and limited government and had deep roots in English political thought, law, and historical experience. Also essential to take into account is Christianity, which formed the background understandings and provided shared values that 18th-century Americans brought to moral and political life.

In the introduction, Wood invokes Sir Isaiah Berlin's famous observations, based on a line from the Greek poet Archilochus, of two types into which thinkers divide: "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." Foxes, according to Berlin, "pursue many ends, often unrelated and contradictory," while hedgehogs "relate everything to a single central vision, one system less or more coherent or articulate, in terms of which they understand, think and feel." Wood worries that he is a "simple hedgehog," but his worry is misplaced. Hedgehog though he may be, Wood is hardly of the simple sort.

In fact, over the course of his long and productive career Wood has not been devoted to a single idea or vision or system of thought but rather has been fascinated by a single event:

My preoccupation with the Revolution comes from my belief that it is the most important event in American history, bar none. Not only did the Revolution legally create the United States, but it infused into our culture all of our highest aspirations and noblest values. Our beliefs in liberty, equality, constitutionalism, and the well-being of ordinary people came out of the Revolutionary era. So too did our idea that we Americans are a special people with a special destiny to lead the world toward liberty and democracy. The Revolution, in short, gave birth to whatever sense of nationhood and national purpose we Americans have had.

Wood's book vindicates his preoccupation with the American Revolution.

In his quest to clarify the Revolution's past, present, and future, Wood combines moral passion and scholarly disinterestedness — a much admired virtue in the 18th century which, Wood stresses, meant not lack of interest but the ability to rise above private interest and pursue the public good. On the one hand, he rightly regards the Revolution as especially worth understanding because of its institutionalization and diffusion of the principles of liberty, equality, and self-government. On the other hand, he fully appreciates that properly understanding the origin and development of the principles he cherishes requires that he contain his enthusiasm so that he can patiently and thoroughly examine the ideas and behavior, material interests and higher aspirations, economic and political institutions, civic and religious associations, and social and cultural practices that combined to give birth to America. Wood would not have been able to bring into focus so many aspects of the one great object of his life's study were he not an exceptionally foxy hedgehog.

Wood's long introductory essay provides a stage-setting account of the changing views among historians about the meaning of the American Revolution that he encountered as a young scholar, and nicely demonstrates the fox's agile attention to complexity in the service of the hedgehog's steady pursuit of the big picture. For the first half of the 20th century the progressive paradigm, anchored by Charles Beard's *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* (1913), held sway. Beard and those who followed in his footsteps "tended to see American history as full of conflicts, especially conflicts between a populist majority, usually agrarian, and a narrow aristocratic or business majority." And they tended to interpret American history as driven by material interests but moving in a progressive direction. A nation that began with the Founders' selfish commercial and aristocratic intentions to limit government, they maintained, reoriented itself in the Jacksonian era toward the interests of ordinary people and reached a culmination of sorts in the progressive ambitions of the early 20th century to expand government to achieve greater democratic equality.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the consensus school of historians swept aside the progressive account. They emphasized the "similarity and like-mindedness of all Americans," arguing that 18th-century America was characterized by relatively high suffrage, relatively weak and disestablished churches, and a widely shared commitment to individual freedom and human equality. They viewed the American Revolution as "a peculiarly American affair, an

endorsement and realization, not a transformation, of the society.” American history, from their point of view, involved a steady working out of the liberal and democratic principles that inspired the Revolution and were embodied in the Constitution.

The late 1960s and the 1970s saw the rise of a new generation of historians focused on the impact of society and culture. They rejected the notion of consensus-driven development and turned away from the study of politics and diplomacy. Instead, they sought to recover the neglected dimensions of American life including

women and the family, the emerging professions, the decline of apprenticeship, the rise of statistics, the creation of common schools, the spread of alcohol drinking, the transformation of artisans, the emergence of capitalism, the change in urban mobs, the experience of the native Indians, the development of slavery and antislavery, and the emergence of the postal system.

Social and cultural historians, however, were not content to add social and cultural history to the mix. Like the progressive historians and the consensus school historians, they insisted that their focus and theirs alone not only provided the key to understanding American history but encompassed all that was of interest. Accordingly, they downplayed the American Revolution, treating it, “when they mentioned it at all,” as “a political event expressive of wide-ranging social and cultural changes that took longer than a decade to work out.”

Diplomatically omitting mention of the ruthless domination that social and cultural historians came to exercise in history departments, Wood instead stresses their contribution, which was to clarify the dramatic transformations that America had indeed undergone in “the colonial era and the early Republic up to the Jacksonian era.” According to Wood, the social and cultural historians vindicated the progressive historians by confirming that the birth of America could not be understood without grasping the competing interests and ideas at work in the emerging nation. Yet, Wood acknowledges, the progressives were wrong to see colonial America and the early Republic as defined by a rigid class structure, highly restricted franchise, and an exploitative commercial class. The consensus historians were right that assumptions about freedom and equality linked Americans across generations. Combining the insights of the several schools and setting aside the exaggerations and exclusions of each, the young Wood concluded that the explosion in early 19th-century America of individual freedom, democracy, and commercial activity did produce a remarkable national transformation, but one whose discontinuities and continuities with the founding required much greater exploration.

Wood’s scholarly ambition has been “to create a more refined, more complicated, and more nuanced version of the Progressive interpretation of the Revolution and the early Republic.” In fact, he forged a synthesis of the progressive view, based on conflict and material interest, and the consensus view, based on the continuity stemming from America’s commitment to individual liberty, human equality, and self-government, with generous attention along the way to the impact on politics of society and culture. To correct the crudities of the progressive

historians, Wood adopted an approach that emphasized the importance of ideas, and the need to avoid, in the study of history, partisan-inspired partiality. At the same time, he incorporates the crucial insight of the consensus historians by placing their ideas about the primacy of liberty and democracy in historical context. In the process, he accounts for the variety of ideas in play, examines their roots and implications, and shows how ideas can take on a life of their own, unleashing passions, generating demands, kindling aspirations, and contributing to the formation of a culture and politics that their authors may not have anticipated and in some cases would have found appalling.

Wood appreciates that great thinkers are both children of their times and capable of seeing more sharply than their contemporaries:

It turns out that when we thoroughly contextualize the thinking or the texts of the likes of Locke, Montesquieu, or James Madison, we find that they were expressing ideas that grew out of and had great resonance in the culture of their time. Others were saying similar things but not as elegantly, not as pointedly, not as persuasively as they were.

Rejecting the foolish dichotomy between studying history and studying great thinkers, Wood shows that mastery of one depends on mastery of the other.

Wood's reconstruction of the context in which the American Revolution took place yields a variety of valuable lessons. He demonstrates that our inheritance from the founding goes beyond the Constitution itself to include the robust and sophisticated debate over ratification between the Federalist proponents of the Constitution and the Anti-Federalists critics, who condemned the national government created by the Constitution for containing aristocratic and undemocratic tendencies. He stresses that "any intellectually satisfying explanation of the Revolution must encompass the Tory perspective that Americans plotted and schemed against a well-established order as well as the Whig interpretation that the Revolution was launched to uphold cherished moral and political ideals of individual liberty against their betrayal by a distant king. He analyses the influence on 18th-century American political thought of the model republics of ancient Rome, and of Enlightenment ideas about individual responsibility and the capacity of reason to grasp human motives. He examines the Founders' appreciation, built into the Constitution, of the prevalence of interest in politics, and their confidence that the Constitution's scheme of representation would help channel into high office men endowed with virtue. He explores the roots of American constitutionalism in the "English tradition of freedom," explaining how America's quest for independence was driven in part by the idea that "sovereignty remained with the people themselves" and could never be claimed by their agents or representatives. He sheds light on how the spirit of liberty and democracy that gave rise to the American Revolution and was institutionalized in the Constitution intensified in the first decades of the 19th century and produced a free-wheeling politics, society, and economy that was "unanticipated and unwanted by the Founding Fathers." He throws into sharp relief the radicalism of Thomas Jefferson's and Thomas Paine's "extraordinary faith in the moral capacity of ordinary people"

and its continuing resonance in American politics. He reminds that the Constitution's "extraordinarily strong and single executive" was intended by design to limit democracy in the states and secure for the new republic the benefits of monarchy — energy, dispatch, secrecy — without violating republican principles. He brings into focus the Founders' understanding that the virtues crucial to self-government — reasonableness, toleration, freedom from prejudice and zealotry, and the ability to take a large view of history and world affairs — depended for their full development on liberal education. He confirms that "From the beginning of our history we have been very rights conscious" even as the foundation, reach, and defense of our rights has been a subject of ceaseless debate. And without passing judgment on the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq in 2003 or its freedom agenda, Wood observes that the aspiration to spread liberty and democracy around the world was woven into the American spirit from the nation's birth, as was uncertainty about how best to accomplish it.

Wood's finely crafted explorations of these matters and more confirm the wise words with which he closes his introduction: "If the study of history teaches anything, it teaches us the limitations of life. It ought to produce prudence and humility." For the study of history to produce such virtues, it helps to be guided by a master historian such as Wood, who brings such virtues to his enterprise.

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