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Gentlemen Revolutionaries

By PETER BERKOWITZ

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BOOKS

Gentlemen Revolutionaries

By PETER BERKOWITZ

GORDON WOOD. *Revolutionary Characters: What Made The Founders Different*. THE PENGUIN PRESS. 306 PAGES. \$25.95

THE NATURAL inclination to simplify public reality to suit private interests is amply illustrated by the attempts of successive waves of scholars to present America's founders as the standard bearers for one favorite idea or another to the exclusion of all the rest. In the 1960s and 1970s, the founders were credited with laying the foundations for liberal pluralism and interest group politics by establishing a constitutional framework for the competition among a multiplicity of factions. Later, proponents of civic republicanism discovered that the founders put a premium on classical virtue and community and regarded the

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corruption that came from commercial life as the great enemy of liberty. Meanwhile, higher law and natural rights theorists argued vigorously that the Constitution represents an exemplary modern embodiment of a politics grounded in transcendent moral truths. Most recently, democratic theorists have found in the American Constitution a blueprint for a form of political legitimacy that altogether dispenses with higher law and natural rights.

Just as often, and perhaps more these days, scholars have portrayed the founders as in urgent need of deflating and debunking. Early twentieth-century progressives thrilled to the indictment put forward by Charles Beard. In his great work, *An Economic Interpretation of the United States Constitution*, he set out to overthrow the nineteenth-century idolization of the founders by demonstrating that they had crafted a constitution whose guiding purpose was to advance their economic interests. Recently, scholars have been eager to go much further. George Washington, for example, has been depicted as a bumbling oaf and ineffective military commander who never had an original idea or uttered a memorable word. Another favorite target is Thomas Jefferson, who has been sneered at as a colossal hypocrite who showed his true beliefs by keeping his slaves and using one of them, Sally Hemings, for his sexual pleasure. Nor is there any shortage of angry historians and political theorists blaming the founders for sowing the seeds of American imperialism and preparing the ground for the endless offenses based on race, class, and gender allegedly perpetrated by the nation

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across the centuries.

The scholarly battle over the founders takes place against the backdrop of — and is fueled by — a larger contest among politicians and the people in America to lay claim to the founders' enduring prestige and affirm their abiding authority. In this continuing fascination with the “generation that fought the Revolution and created the Constitution,” there is something peculiar, observes Pulitzer Prize winning historian Gordon Wood. Indeed,

No other major nation honors its past historical characters, especially characters who existed two centuries ago, in quite the manner we Americans do. We want to know what Thomas Jefferson would think of affirmative action, or George Washington of the invasion of Iraq. The British don't have to check in periodically with, say, either of the two William Pitts, the way we seem to have to check in with Jefferson or Washington. We Americans seem to have a special need for these authentic historical figures in the here and now.

In the introduction to his new book, a collection of previously published and newly revised essays, Wood observes that our “special need for these authentic historical figures” does not have its source in our concern with “constitutional jurisprudence and original intent,” or even in the determination to “recover what was wise and valuable in America's past.” The true source, he says, is the peculiar manner in which the nation was constituted:

The United States was founded on a set of beliefs and not, as were

other nations, on a common ethnicity, language, or religion. Since we are not a nation in any traditional sense of the term, in order to establish our nationhood, we have to reaffirm and reinforce periodically the values of the men who declared independence from Great Britain and framed the Constitution. As long as the Republic endures, in other words, Americans are destined to look back to its founding.

But the spirit in which we explore our inheritance is a matter not of destiny but of choice, and a more learned or lucid guide to the founding than Gordon Wood would not be easy to find.

Contrary to the dominant tendencies of his profession, Wood is a historian who, without scanting the impact of larger social forces, respects ideas and the actions of outstanding historical figures — not least, in the case of America's founders, the actions they undertook to implement their ideas about constitutional government. He has sympathy for the common opinion among nineteenth-century Americans, still shared by many Americans today, that the founders were great men, larger-than-life figures, brilliant thinkers and bold politicians who brought forth a new kind of nation dedicated to principles of universal appeal and application. He rejects for good and sufficient reason the effort to reduce the founders to place-holders for somebody else's favorite — or despised — ideology and the attempt to reduce the founders to instruments of their time and circumstances. Wood is acutely aware that the founders' Constitution involved a compromise with evil, but he inclines to

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Lincoln's position that the ideas about freedom and equality on which it was based and the political institutions it established set the country on the path to slavery's eventual extinction. In the process of examining the founders' characters and principles, and the distinctive importance they attached to both, Wood restores the founders' complexity and humanity while making their achievements all the more vivid and worthy of study.

Wood's book as a whole, like each individual portrait, proceeds from the identification of a provocative puzzle. The largest puzzle concerns the connection between eighteenth-century America and America today: How did the founders, in carrying out their intentions, bring into existence a country that would come to have no place for men of their convictions and conduct?

To bring this into focus, argues Wood, it is necessary to appreciate the unique manner in which the founders' lives combined ideas and politics:

There is no doubt that the founders were men of ideas, were, in fact, the leading intellectuals of their day. But they were as well the political leaders of their day, politicians who competed for power, lost and won elections, served in their colonial and state legislatures or in the Congress, became governors, judges, and even presidents. Of course they were neither "intellectuals" nor "politicians," for the modern meaning of these terms suggests the very separation between them that the revolutionaries avoided. They were intellectuals without being alienated and

political leaders without being obsessed with votes. They lived mutually in the world of ideas and the world of politics, shared equally in both in a happy combination that fills us with envy and wonder. We know that something happened then in American history that can never happen again.

One critical development above all, contends Wood, "made subsequent duplication of the remarkable intellectual and political leadership of the revolutionaries impossible in America." It was nothing other than "the growth of what we have come to value most, our egalitarian culture and our democratic society."

Though thoroughly committed to enlightenment, the sovereignty of the people, and popular government, the founders, including Jefferson, Wood stresses, were not democrats in our sense of the term. They believed themselves to constitute a genuine elite. At the same time, they were conscious, and indeed proud, of how the elite to which they belonged differed from those of England and Europe. Where the aristocrats of the old world based their claims to preeminence on blood and land, the founders constituted "a natural aristocracy" — to borrow Jefferson's term — whose claims were based on talent and merit. Indeed, of the eight founders Wood explores, only Aaron Burr was born into substantial wealth and privilege. Washington, Franklin, Jefferson, Hamilton, Madison, Adams, and Paine were all, to varying degrees, self-made men, certainly compared to the landed nobility that governed eighteenth-century England.

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The name the founders' era gave to the new type of aristocrat was "gentleman." Unlike aristocrats in the old world, the gentleman in America was defined not by lineage and inherited goods, but rather by the qualities he exhibited and the character he cultivated. Civility and refinement were of the essence. The gentleman was also expected to be "reasonable, tolerant, honest, virtuous, and 'candid,' an important eighteenth-century characteristic that connoted being unbiased and just as well as frank and sincere." He was a democrat in the crucial sense that he did not consider himself to be born of, or cut from, finer materials than the people. And he was a liberal in an old-fashioned and equally crucial sense: He believed in natural rights and that under a government that protected them one could attain a wider, freer, more generous vantage point. His ideal was "grace without foppishness, refinement without ostentation, virtue without affectation, independence without arrogance."

Noting that the eighteenth-century English-speaking world invented the modern idea of the liberal arts education, Wood argues that John Adams was quite correct to understand the formation of a gentleman as its highest aim. "By gentleman," Adams observed in his masterwork, *A Defense of the Constitution of the United States*,

are not meant the rich or the poor, the high-born or the low-born, the industrious or the idle: but all those who have received a liberal education, an ordinary degree of erudition in liberal arts and sciences. Whether by birth they be descended from magistrates and officers of

government, or from husbandmen, merchants and mechanics, or laborers; or whether they be rich or poor.

By placing the attainment of aristocratic status, at least in principle, within the reach of all, the founders sought to harmonize the need for excellence with the claims of equality. Although contemporary Americans don't speak about the matter as candidly, we continue to embrace the founders' solution and to struggle with the instabilities inscribed in it.

OF THE DIFFERENCES in sensibility between the founders' generation and ours, perhaps the most important, suggests Wood, is their devotion to disinterestedness and their closely connected concern for reputation or public virtue. Disinterestedness referred to the ability to set aside private interest and personal advantage to exercise the public virtues that advanced the common good. In prizing it, the founders were both more idealistic and more realistic than we are. On the one hand, they firmly believed in the attainability of the ideal. On the other hand, they were quite convinced that the attainment of disinterestedness depended on the acquisition of wealth sufficient to relieve the gentleman of the need to work. It was not that they regarded work as contemptible, but rather that they thought those whose livelihood was tied to work would necessarily approach politics in the grips of selfish calculation. Few of the founders themselves could easily afford to set aside their private affairs to attend to the public interest. Yet this was consistent

with their political outlook. “Like Jefferson,” Wood writes, “they believed that ‘in a virtuous government . . . public offices are what they should be, burthens to those appointed to them, which it would be wrong to decline, though foreseen to bring with them intense labor, and great private loss.’” The founders accepted the burden both because they were ambitious men who agreed with Hamilton that “love of fame [is] the ruling passion of the noblest minds” and because the fame they craved was not for wealth or power but for honor, or a reputation for public virtue.

In a wonderful chapter on Washington, Wood shows that of all the founders, none made the cultivation of character and a reputation for public virtue more central to his life, and of all the founders’ achievements, none were more dependent on excellence of character than those of Washington. Wood concedes that there was something unlikely in Washington’s attainment of heroic stature in his own lifetime. He was not a learned man, he was not a military genius, he was not a great orator, and he was not a brilliant statesman. Rather, “he became a great man and was acclaimed as a classical hero because of the way he conducted himself during times of temptation.” Washington stunned the world a first time after leading the Continental Army to victory. Even as many of his countrymen would have welcomed a military dictatorship under his command, and to the astonishment of Europeans who could not conceive of a victorious commander doing anything other than seizing political power, Washington resigned his commission and returned to his beloved Mount

Vernon. He stunned the world a second time, and for a similar reason: After having twice won election to the office of what many in the United States and Europe were prepared to view as a constitutional monarch, Washington announced that he would not seek a third term as president of the United States. In both of these acts of splendid

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renunciation, Washington confirmed his own public virtue as well as the principles of popular sovereignty and liberty under law for which his soldiers had fought and bled and died.

It is particularly for his character, as well, that Benjamin Franklin is best remembered, though its connection to his critical diplomatic contribution to the war efforts, Wood observes, often goes unappreciated. Franklin could scarcely have differed more from Washington. Businessman, writer, scientist, bon vivant, man about town, and cosmopolitan intellectual, Franklin rose from humble origins to delight

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British and European nobility with his wit and charm during a number of extended overseas journeys over the course of several decades. The oldest of the founders, he was seventy in 1776 and came late to the revolutionary camp. Sent to Paris in 1776 to serve as the newly declared nation's leading representative abroad, Franklin during the

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war refined to perfection his carefully and cleverly crafted image as the “symbolic American.” He became a celebrity and socialite and was feted everywhere he went. And he used the unrivalled access conferred by his star status to play a vital role in bringing France into the war on behalf of America and in securing from the French a succession of crucial loans.

Other founders achieved greatness through the principles they championed. In chapters on Jefferson, Hamilton, and Madison, Wood shows how they could affirm common ideas of liberty and equality while disagreeing bitterly about the policies and even

the nature of a government best suited to securing them. For example, on one side of the angry debate in the 1790s over the powers and scope of the new national government was Alexander Hamilton. First distinguishing himself as a 20-year-old aide-de-camp to Washington in 1777, Hamilton went on to write 51 of the 85 essays that compose *The Federalist* and then served from 1789 through 1795 as secretary of the treasury, which made him the most powerful member of Washington's administration. In a series of four landmark reports to Congress, Hamilton sketched plans for making the United States a “powerful nation like Great Britain and the other states of modern Europe, a state with a centralized bureaucracy, a professional standing army, and the capacity to wage war on equal terms with other nations.” To advance these goals, he proposed the creation of a national bank and the encouragement by the federal government of an economy based on manufacturing.

On the other side of the debate were Jefferson and Madison. The author of the Declaration of Independence, the successor to Franklin in 1785 as minister to France, and the third president of the United States, Jefferson was a man of contradictions, “a human being,” writes Wood, “with every human frailty and foible.” Notwithstanding the highly refined tastes he developed — Wood reports that no American knew more about wine — Jefferson was distinguished by his fervent belief in the virtue of ordinary people, in the corruptness of powerful central governments, and in the need to keep the state small and at a distance to allow the people's natural sociability to guide

their affairs. He was convinced that Hamilton's bank was not only a threat to the nation's democratic ethos, but also an unconstitutional usurpation of power by the federal government. And yet, as Wood brings out, in retirement Jefferson was plagued by doubts concerning the growth of democracy in America. Optimistic and confident as he was in the people's simplicity and virtue, he became more and more alarmed as he saw what were to his eyes rude and uneducated upstarts assuming more and more political power.

In the 1790s, James Madison sided with his lifelong friend Jefferson against Hamilton. Thus was born what Wood calls "the James Madison problem." Main coauthor with Hamilton of *The Federalist*, a key architect of the Constitution, author of the Bill of Rights, and fourth president of the United States, Madison served four frustrating years as a young man in the Virginia legislature in the mid-1780s. He concluded from this experience that democracy was not a solution but a political problem, and he saw the states as agents of tyrannical majorities. In his most famous contributions to *The Federalist*, Madison defended the variety of mechanisms incorporated into the Constitution to constrain popular will while insisting on the supremacy of the federal government in protecting the liberty of minorities from infringement by the states. Yet the Madison of the 1790s became the "states' rights cofounder of the Democratic-Republican party who feared the national government and its monarchical tendencies and trusted the popular majorities in the states."

Still, Wood suggests that the James

Madison problem is soluble once one understands that Madison clung to the idea throughout the 1780s and 1790s that the federal government was "a kind of super judge and arbiter" in which legislators would transcend narrow partisan interests and make laws with a view to the public good. In the 1790s, he opposed the creation of a more powerful federal government for the same reason that he had defended the utility of factions, the constraints of separated powers, and the supremacy of the federal government in the 1780s: to insure the protection of individual liberty and the rights of minorities.

John Adams was a cantankerous character whose political principles put him at odds not only with Hamilton and the team of Jefferson and Madison, but also, and perhaps even more, with the theory of government on which the Constitution was based. The first vice president and second president of the United States, Adams is slighted in historical memory, and he felt acutely during his lifetime that his achievements were slighted by his contemporaries. As Wood suggests, this neglect is related to his 1776 pamphlet *Thoughts on Government* and his *A Defense of the Constitution of Government of the United States of America*, published in 1787 and 1788, the very writings that established Adams as eighteenth-century America's foremost student of constitutional government. His emphasis in these documents — and in outspoken public and private remarks — on the necessary limits on egalitarian politics, even in a country based on liberty and equality, was hardly novel. Other founders agreed that although America was a land blissfully free of distinctions

based on rank, it could not eliminate ambition or the desire for distinction, which fed competition, vanity, the love of luxury, and corruption. But Adams harped on the theme.

Moreover, his political solution — the balanced or mixed constitution which seeks to represent in government the monarchical, aristocratic, and pop-

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ular orders of society — looked backward to classical political philosophy while his fellow founders were developing “a new science of politics.” Adams never appreciated the break with the classical model his contemporaries had made. They rejected the idea of natural political divisions in society and instead located sovereignty in the people as a whole. Though not in attendance at the Constitutional Convention, Adams could embrace its product in the mistaken belief that through such institutions as representation, bicameralism, an independent executive, and an independent judiciary, the Constitution sought to represent the three orders of

society. The great student of constitutional government failed to grasp how the founders' Constitution transposed the idea of natural orders within society to natural tendencies within the individual and created governmental offices and institutions that would both draw energy from and harness these natural tendencies.

Contrary to convention, and in some tension with his own model, Wood includes Thomas Paine and Aaron Burr among the founders. Paine enjoyed unparalleled influence through his political writings — *Common Sense* (1776), *The Rights of Man* (1791–1792), and *The Age of Reason* (1795) — but he was not a gentleman in the founders' sense of the term, being a rough-edged figure who neither gained nor sought entrance into polite society. Moreover, Paine was America's first public intellectual — that is, a writer about politics who did not hold office or participate in governing.

Aaron Burr also stood out from other founders. He was born into an aristocratic family, and he had no interest in cultivating public virtue or reputation. A man of immense talent, Burr served as U.S. senator, came within a whisker of being elected the third president of the United States (before losing to Jefferson in an election that was thrown into the House of Representatives), became the third vice president of the United States, subsequently killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel in 1804, and was tried for and acquitted of treason in 1807 for a scheme to create a new nation in the Southwest. Burr was a womanizer who spent lavishly and had no compunctions about using political office to advance and enrich friends. So devoted

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were the founders generally to the ideal of the disinterested gentleman — and, argues Wood, so repelled by Burr’s repudiation of it was Alexander Hamilton — that Hamilton threw all of his considerable support to his lifelong enemy Jefferson in the contested election of 1800.

WOOD BRINGS HIS book to a close with an epilogue on the creation of modern public opinion. The founders lived through a cultural transformation that the triumph of their political ideas accelerated. Formulated in erudite pamphlets and sophisticated newspaper essays on behalf of liberty and equality for a cultivated but narrow audience of fellow gentlemen, their attacks on monarchy and inherited rank encouraged the people to take a livelier interest in politics. At the same time, their writing promoted a democratization of literary practices and tastes. Indeed, during the Revolutionary era, the reading public underwent a huge expansion. According to Wood, “by 1810 Americans were buying more than 22 million copies of 376 papers sold annually, the largest aggregate circulation of newspapers of any country in the world.” Many of the founders looked aghast upon this new public world. To their way of thinking, the new democratic free-for-all was a world in which nothing was sacred, all was fair, and every hack had his day.

In other words, the world that the founders’ revolution brought into being is ours. Recalling the complexity and distinctiveness of theirs, along with the reason behind their choices and the character animating their principles, encourages a certain sympathy for our

inevitable excesses, a gratitude for our constitutional government — whose establishment was anything but a foregone conclusion — and a sober concern for our politics because of its continuing dependence on virtues that seem increasingly difficult to summon and sustain.

