



Figuring Out the Founders

Stroll casually along the bulging bookshelves of your local bookseller, and you're sure to see rows and rows of books chronicling the lives and times of the generation of men known reverently to us as the "Founding Fathers."

These were the fearless men who boldly declared independence from the tyranny of the world's most formidable empire and then set about establishing the steadfast moorings upon which to build the mightiest republic in the history of the world. This plot of land on the field of history is ripe for scholarship, and there is never an end to the "hows" and "whys" of the founding and growth of the United States and the lives of those men whose hands were on the plow as the first seeds were sown.



What follows is a survey of four recently published books about the Founders and their time. These books were chosen because of the reputation and noted skill of the authors and the important contribution of their works. As stated above, there are stacks of books to be read on this subject, and the books reviewed in this article are but a taste of the richness offered in the Founding Fathers book buffet.

First up is the latest book by John Ferling, the author of several best-selling books on the founding era, including the award-winning *Almost a Miracle*. Ferling's latest work is an analysis of the emergence and rise of the first American to be called the "Father of his country": George Washington. [The Ascent of George Washington](#) is an entertaining description of the roots and branches of the political career of our first president and most prominent Founding Father.

Despite its disfavor at the time of our founding, "ambitious" is the word Ferling uses to describe the chief motivation for the extraordinary rise of George Washington. According to Ferling, George Washington was ambitious for many things: the freedom of his country, personal renown, power, wealth, and success. The last four of these traits, although not traditionally ascribed to Washington, do not, the author states, make Washington a villain or corrupt. In fact, Ferling avers, it was Washington's remarkable ability to "fulfill those ambitions" that is the signal mark of his greatness. Many men strive for wealth, fame, and power, but few are possessed of discipline and drive sufficient to the task. Washington combined an unmatched strength of will with a consuming desire to preserve the liberty of his country, and created a name and fame that is unparalleled among his more-educated and wealthier contemporaries.

Ferling documents how Washington, although not born to immense wealth nor trained in the finest schools, was clever and determined enough to manipulate (in the strictest use of that word) every small opportunity to great advantage. Washington's ascent was fueled by "powerful patrons" who helped



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establish him as a military leader (despite a lack of soldiering experience) from a very early age. Ferling makes it clear that in his view this sponsorship in no way diminishes Washington's accomplishments. Many young men benefit from similar support and make nothing of themselves and, in fact, squander their advantages. To George Washington, however, much was given, much was required, and much was produced. He made himself "indispensable" in both war and peace.

A crucial component of Washington's indispensability was the reliability of his unwavering moral strength and unquestioned integrity. Ferling points to two written sources of Washington's moral compass: Seneca's *Morals* and Joseph Addison's *Cato*. From Seneca, Washington learned that dedication to the cause of liberty had always demanded adherence to the "virtues of sacrifice, tenacity, courage, restraint, and the control of one's emotions." From *Cato* he recognized that sacrifice was not enough, one must also be "deserving of success." Ferling demonstrates ably that from his earliest days in the Virginia militia to his retirement to his beloved Mt. Vernon, Washington proved himself an outstanding alumnus of this autodidactic academy of moral instruction through his consistent display of grace and leadership. Furthermore, his virtue and unwavering commitment to the cause of American liberty, married to his determination to conquer his weaknesses, guaranteed that George Washington would always be "first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen."

Ferling's contribution to Washingtoniana presents nothing new, but the familiar stories he tells is done in a well-crafted and compelling manner that recommends itself to a general audience.

Chance and Circumstance

In [American Creation: Triumphs and Tragedies in the Founding of the Republic](#), Joseph J. Ellis, in his latest skillful narrative of the history of the early republic, takes off the table two possible (and popular) explanations for the establishment of the American republic: "divine intervention" and "dumb luck." While the former has an army of adherents, the pews in the second chapel are nearly empty, so it is no great stretch for Ellis to disregard it as a serious contender for the likely source of American success. To eliminate the hand of Providence as a contributor (the primary contributor, some would argue) in the formation of the foundation of the United States, however, is to ignore the recorded opinions of those who themselves helped frame the Constitution and the institutions it brought into being. That said, Ellis is a masterful storyteller and his unmasked admiration for the Founding Fathers makes his book a superb contribution to the library of recent books on the topic and a worthwhile subject for study.

To his credit, Ellis begins by proclaiming (correctly and remarkably among modern historians) that the Founders would have resented the use of the word "democracy" to describe the "ideas and institutions" they developed and adapted for the government of the nascent republic. Ellis explains that the wise men of the founding era considered democracy a byword, and, as a political system, a step just above, mob rule. Indeed, Ellis states, the Founders regarded democracy as unworkable and unsuitable to the "genius" of America.

Ellis declares that a unique coalescence of time and space was more responsible than anything else for the development and nurturing of the American republic. To support his thesis, Ellis quotes George Washington, whom he calls "the most prominent revolutionary of all," with regard to the perfect storm of events and geography that provided the rich soil that sustained the tree of liberty: "A multiplicity of circumstances ... appear to have cooperated in bringing about the happy resolution." The time was right for the securing of American independence because the Founders benefited from the learning of the Enlightenment and the bellicose disposition of the government of George III, which led to protracted wars with France and Spain, thus requiring England to spread precious resources around and prevent



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her from focusing exclusively on subduing the American rebels. (Of course, one might conclude that such an argument is really a claim that coincidence, or “dumb luck,” is responsible for America’s founding.)

Finally, Ellis says that America’s geographic separation from England (and the might of its army and navy) and the rich store of natural resources combined to provide for and protect the young nation from those determined to deprive her of her rightful legacy of self-rule.

Creating a Constitution

R.B. Bernstein, in his latest book, [The Founding Fathers Reconsidered](#), takes only a slightly different approach than that taken by Ellis. His contribution to this survey is a synthesis of the “fascinating scholarship” produced over the last 40 years of study of the founding era. For his part, Bernstein proposes to “take the Founding Fathers down from their pedestals without knocking them down.” For the most part, he is successful and adroitly describes the Founders and their time without diminishing the glory of their accomplishments.

Generally, in today’s historical zeitgeist for digging through all the scraps of paper paving the paths of greatness (particularly those trod by the Founding Fathers) to find whatever little bits of clay that can be stuck to the feet of remarkable men, one should be wary of any book proclaiming a new consideration of our nation’s Founders. Fortunately, Bernstein does not subscribe to this manner of treatment of the Founders and his book is a logical and easily read examination of the history that made the Founders, the history they made, and what history has made of their handiwork.

In this book, as with the one reviewed above by Joseph Ellis, Bernstein attributes America’s size and distance from the powers of Europe as the two primary reasons for her miraculous formation and growth. Despite setting that forth as his thesis, the narrative in the book points to Americans’ resentment of the unchecked and disdainful tyranny of the government of George III and his ministers as the spark that ignited the flame of independence. Americans, Bernstein correctly asserts, saw themselves as “free-born English subjects” with a history and a right of self-rule and local government free from the meddling and legislated disregard of the English parliament. The question that had to be answered and the debate of which led to the American War for Independence was, “How did the English Constitution apply to Britain’s exercise of authority over her American colonies?” Britain’s unwillingness to even address this question led to the American rebellion, a struggle fought not to overthrow a government, but to restore the freedom and self-determination that was their rightful inheritance as Englishmen, albeit a far-flung one.

Most of the ink used by Bernstein is in his analysis of the Constitution. His book describes how the Founders ably combined the lessons of history — the advancement of the Enlightenment — with their own unique experience to produce a novel, though historically sound, form of balanced government. He argues that the Constitution is a “human artifact that human beings made and that human beings must make work.” That description is almost accurate, but it leaves out one crucial adjective. I would suggest the following re-write: “The Constitution is a *remarkable* human artifact that *extraordinary* human beings made and that human beings must make work.”

Considering the Classics

The last book in this review is by renowned classicist Carl J. Richard, who delves into the lessons of history that the Founders leaned upon — the lessons Bernstein describes in more truncated form. Richard’s latest study of the influence of the classics on the Founders is entitled [Greeks and Romans](#)



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[Bearing Gifts: How the Ancients Inspired the Founding Fathers](#). There is very little of new scholarship in Richard's book, but it is a necessary reminder of where to look if one seeks the deepest roots of American liberty.

As in his other books on this subject, Richard laments the lack of training modern Americans receive in the history of ancient Greece and Rome. However, in this latest work, Richard places some of the blame on the Founders themselves. He argues that the Founding Fathers emulated the ancients so well that they eventually replaced their heroes as models for how to establish and maintain a balanced, republican government. As Richard expresses it: "The Founders drove the ancients from their pedestals and occupied their places."

Richard identifies among the displaced ancients several ancient chroniclers as the chief influences on the Founders' understanding of the lessons of history. Among these were Herodotus ("human behavior [is] the prime determinant of history"); Thucydides (democracy is simply mob rule and was the ruin of Athens); Polybius (history showed that governments were cyclical and the solution to breaking the cycle was mixed government); Cicero ("natural law is derived from nature and stamped in invisible characters upon our very frame"); Sallust (corruption and the love of wealth destroyed Rome); and Livy (the past is prologue to the future and one must study history to know what models to follow and what traps to avoid).

There were other ancient historians who served as tutors to the Founders. The Founders benefited from an educational system that demanded reading and study of the works of Greek and Roman classics. In fact, an ability to read these works and translate them from the original tongue into English was a basic requirement for college admission in the time of the founding. From about the age of eight, the men who fought for our independence and formed the system of checks and balances that is the hallmark of our Constitution were taught to read, write, and believe the words of Plutarch, Tacitus, and Suetonius. These men regarded the lessons taught them by the ancients as articles of faith by which their actions should be guided. As Patrick Henry said: "I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided, and that is the lamp of experience." The Founding Fathers walked fearlessly down the path of history thanks in great measure to the record of the errors made by their republican forebears.

From the stories and lessons related by Richard in his engaging book, one learns from the history of Sparta, Athens, and Rome that the cause of freedom is best served by people of sincere heart, spurred by love of country, fed on a diet of the cautionary and inspirational tales of history, and exercised in the daily demonstration of republican virtue. Those who would live freely must be vigilant in resisting the internal and incremental encroachment of tyranny. They must be zealous guardians, ready to sound the alarm and call their fellow citizens to arms when even in the distance they regard the approach of any force, friend or foe, that through ambition or avarice, whether one man or a congress, would seek to pull down the pillars of self-determination and free government.

The books reviewed in this brief survey are worthy additions to anyone's library of books about the Founding Fathers and the early republic. The authors are well-educated and rightfully renowned for their skill in identifying and analyzing the swirl of factors and figures that combined so uniquely and successfully to establish and maintain the world's most enduring republic. It is the responsibility of the reader to glean from their words the lessons and warnings necessary for the continued enjoyment of the liberty bought by our Founders at the price of their lives and fortunes.



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