



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on May 12, 2010

Review: Jack Rakove's Revolutionaries

Jack Rakove knows how to stoke the fires of amateur historians. In the "Founders Lit" genre of popular non-fiction, Rakove is one of the elite. Rakove won the Pulitzer Prize in 1997 for his book *Original Meanings: Politics and Ideas in the Making of the Constitution*, wherein he presented a balanced and nuanced approach to interpreting the Founders' intent behind some of the most debated aspects of our national Constitution.



To date, Rakove, the William Robertson Coe Professor of History and American Studies at Stanford University, has penned five books dealing with the founding era and the men who won renown for their work during that critical epoch in American history.

In his latest work, [*Revolutionaries: A New History of the Invention of America*](#), Rakove once again offers up an engaging and fair-handed history of the men who shaped our early national character, culminating in the ratification of the Bill of Rights in 1791. The book's sub-title is a reference to the author's intent to illustrate how the early lives, the years before the spotlight, of those in the national pantheon worked to craft men of skill, insight, and ability, thus preparing them for their roles as "Founding Fathers."

To wit, Rakove begins his narrative recounting the tumultuous "times that tried men's souls" in the early 1770s. In this fulcrum of revolt, the men who would one day fashion a national government were enjoying relatively peaceful, uneventful lives in the pastoral regions of the colonies. "None [of the Founders]," writes Rakove, "joined the protests of the 1760s and early 1770s out of a secret hankering for independence, or from calculations of ambition and power, or in resentment over the cruel hand that life and fate had dealt him."

Rakove then proceeds to enlighten his readers as to how the plowmen of Virginia and the schoolmasters of Massachusetts were converted into generals and lawmakers nonpareil. In Part I of the book titled "The Crisis," Professor Rakove delves deftly into the why and hows of the particular transformations experienced by our Founders. While this section does not exactly chronicle the embryonic stage of the development of our first leaders, it does present tantalizing tableaux of how talented revolutionary toddlers, so to speak, grew into fully matured makers of world history and builders of the world's mightiest republic.

An especially intriguing addition to Rakove's tale is the inclusion of the story surrounding the speech delivered in the House of Commons by the noted "friend of America" and member of Parliament from Bristol, Edmund Burke. Burke, most famous for his later [*Reflections on the Revolution in France*](#), delivered an impassioned appeal to Parliament to reconcile with the colonies. Burke's address is a model discourse and contains a most adroit delineation of the reasons why "coercion" would be a fatal



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policy choice for Great Britain. Of his American cousins, Burke declared, “They augur misgovernment at a distance; and snuff the approach of tyranny in every tainted breeze.”

If only such could still be said of our countrymen!

In the next section of the book, entitled “Challenges,” Rakove sets about recounting the critical role of George Mason in Virginia; John Dickinson in Pennsylvania; John Adams in Massachusetts; and Charles Carroll of Maryland, among others, played in clearing the path toward the effective enumeration of a national founding charter. These men drafted model declarations, constitutions, and principles for use in their home states (or “countries,” as they called them) that would become the blueprint for similar efforts on a continent-wide scale.

Lastly, it is in the third and final section of *Revolutionaries* where Rakove’s skill is most remarkably displayed. This ultimate section is subdivided into three chapters, each describing the development of three of the Founding Era’s brightest lights: Thomas Jefferson (the “Optimist Abroad”), James Madison (the “Greatest Lawgiver of Modernity”) and Alexander Hamilton (“The State Builder”). In these three chapters, comprising approximately 150 pages, Rakove briefly examines the extraordinary careers of these three luminaries.

In his book Rakove effectively untangles the bundle of connections uniting these men. With commendable dexterity the author pries each thread from the ball of history and lays it on the table, simultaneous exposing its particular hue and drawing attention to the tensile strength of each individual strand. As Rakove says of Madison, “If theory and practice meshed as well as they did in these years, it was not least because Madison creatively thought his way through a set of problems no lawgiver before his time had been fortunate enough to confront, much less managed to solve.”

The message conveyed by Rakove is that no one of these men could have single-handedly confronted all the crises that threatened our early republic, however, each was uniquely qualified and prepared to assume the mantle of authority placed on his shoulders by the Hand of Providence.

When asked what message he would like readers to take away from *Revolutionaries*, Professor Rakove responded, “To think what it was like to have been pursuing the kinds of lives these men led, caring about public affairs yet primarily devoted to the pursuit of private visions of happiness, and then to be sucked into a political vortex in 1774 and given the opportunity to join in the formation of an independent national republic.” A republic, one should add, that thanks in full measure to the manifold inspired and inspiring contributions of our Founders, persists as the pinnacle of self-government.

Overall, *Revolutionaries* is a worthy addition to Jack Rakove’s impressive oeuvre. His insights are laudable and his prose page after page reveals why he won the Pulitzer Prize. The story he tells is thoughtful, as well as thought-provoking; cogent, as well as cohesive; and respectful without being hagiographic. Rakove is a master chef with the experience and innate sense of proportion required of one who sets out to prepare a feast as rich, varied, and oft-devoured as the Founding Fathers and their time. As the famed Roman orator Cicero once noted, “It is valuable to look to the words of our Founders, but it is more valuable to study the principles that inspired their words.” In *Revolutionaries*, Jack Rakove humbly and ably follows Cicero’s counsel. Jack Rakove

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