

Chapter 14

The Founding Father's Motives

Over the past 200 years, Americans have perceived the motives of the men who wrote the Constitution in different ways. The historians who wrote the first interpretations of the Founders' motives tended to idealize these men. The Founders were cast as demi-gods who put aside personal ambition to devote their superior wisdom and intelligence to create a perfect constitution. The Founders were heroes who rescued the young nation from the chaos and bankruptcy of the Critical Period and established a central government capable of preserving order, protecting the country against foreign nations, and protecting the rights and liberties of all. The Constitution, in short, was not only the expression of the great ideals for which the American Revolution was fought, but was designed to preserve the country to which it gave birth.

But not everyone has seen the Founders in this way. Some historians have criticized the Founders for writing a Constitution that made them rich, helped others of their social class, and neglected the interests of slaves, women, and individuals with little or no property. They believe they did all this while, at the same time, they created a government capable of taking away the rights of the people it was supposed to protect.

In this chapter, you will read some of the arguments for these conflicting views of the Founders. Then you will have a chance to make your own decision.

The Founders as Heroes—John Fiske and Clinton Rossiter

The view of the Founders as heroes has been echoed by many historians. In the 1880's, John Fiske pronounced the Constitution "one of the longest reaches of constructive statesmanship in the world." Writing eighty years later, Clinton Rossiter called the Founders "heroes" who engaged "with clear eye and silent heart in an uncertain enterprise for some purpose larger than the gratification of their own ambition"

*It is worth our while to pause and observe the character and composition of one of the most memorable assemblies the world has ever seen. Mr. Gladstone [Prime Minister of England] says that "... the American Constitution is the most wonderful work ever struck off at a given time by the brain and purpose of man."*¹¹

I call these men heroes in deliberate defiance of the ban placed upon this word by most serious-minded historians. By hero I mean a leader of men who engages with clear eye and stout heart in an uncertain enterprise for some purpose larger than the gratification of his own ambition or the rewarding of his own friends, and whose deeds work a benevolent influence on the lives of countless other men... The men of 1787 were, in short, both dutiful wards of the past and creative makers of the future, and that is why they should have a special appeal to the troubled men of this

¹¹ John Fiske, *The Critical Period in American History*, Little, Brown, Boston, 1888, p. 223).

*generation. They were heroes who stayed within the limits of the political, social, economic and cultural circumstances of their time, heroes who seemed to know instinctively just how far to push their luck in choosing among the alternatives that were to be found within these limits.*¹²

The Founders as Feathering Their Own Nest—Charles Beard

Beginning in the early 1900's, the romantic view of the Founders has been challenged by a group known as the Progressive historians. It was a time of reform, when corrupt deals between businessmen and politicians were being uncovered. Led by Charles Beard, these historians claimed they found evidence that the Founders were not *idealistic, patriotic, or disinterested*. First published in 1913, Beard's *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* concluded that the Founders "immediately, directly, and personally...derived economic advantages" from the new government under the Constitution.

The basis for some of Beard's startling conclusions were U.S. Treasury records showing that 40 of the 55 Founders held federal bonds that were later sold back to the government for much more than they cost. Beard also pointed out that the Founders were generally wealthy individuals, engaged in shipbuilding and other commercial ventures including money lending, speculation in Western lands, slavery and the slave trade. All of these enterprises, Beard claimed, would be far more profitable with a strong central government capable of establishing a uniform currency, enforcing trade treaties, protecting its commercial shipping, and pushing the British and the Indians off western lands.

The movement for the Constitution of the United States was originated and carried through principally by four groups of [property] interests which had been adversely affected under the Articles of Confederation: Money, public securities, manufacturers, and trade and shipping. The first firm steps toward the formation of the Constitution were taken by a small and active group of men immediately interested through their personal possessions in the outcome of their labors.

*The members of the Philadelphia convention, which drafted the Constitution were, with few exceptions, immediately, directly, and personally interested in, and derived economic advantage from, the establishment of the new system. The Constitution was essentially an economic document based upon the concept that the fundamental private rights of property are [superior] to government and morally beyond the reach of popular majorities.*¹³

The Founders as Representing the Whole People—Robert Brown

Beard's economic interpretation was widely condemned by many historians and outraged the public. But other works tended to support some of Beard's conclusions. By the mid-1930s, with the United States in the midst of the Great Depression, Beard's work had become respectable.

Serious research into Beard's theory was not conducted until after World War II, at the beginning of the Cold War with the Soviet Union. This was a period of strong American patriotism. Whether these post-war historians were directly influenced by the events of the 1940's and 1950's is hard to say, but their research did find serious flaws in Beard's work. Robert E. Brown, for instance, traced every footnote of

¹² Clinton Rossiter, 1787: *The Grand Convention*, Macmillan, New York, 1967, pp. 18-20).

¹³Charles Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*, Macmillan, New York, 1956, pp. 324-325.)

Beard's book back to its original source. There he found ample reasons for rejecting Beard's interpretations. For instance, Brown learned that many who opposed the Constitution also owned government bonds. Furthermore, he discovered that many of the bonds owned by the Founders were bought after the Constitution was written. As to the Founders' business involvement, Brown asserted,

If members of the convention were directly interested in the outcome of their work and expected to derive benefits from the establishment of the new system, so also did most of the people of the country....

A constitution which did not protect property would have been rejected without question, for the American people had fought the Revolution for the preservation of life, liberty, and property....

The Constitution was created about as much by the whole people as any government could be which embraced a large area and depended on representation rather than on direct participation ... And it was created by compromising a whole host of interests throughout the country, without which compromises it could never have been adopted. ¹⁴

The Founders as Aristocrats—Jackson Turner Main

Although most of Beard's conclusions are no longer accepted, reputable historians still see knowledge of economic concerns as important. In a carefully researched study of the Anti-Federalists, Jackson Turner Main concluded they were concerned with democracy and opposed to the centralizing and aristocratic tendencies of the Founders,

What the Anti-Federalists feared, then, was that the power given to a national government would be wielded by an upper class. The easiest way of avoiding such dominance would have been to concede no power at all, but if some had to be granted, it should not be so much as to enable the few to oppress the many. The Philadelphia convention, they believed, had gone too far. William Findley... remarked that "the natural Course of Power is to make the Many as Slaves to the few." Samuel Chase wrote to John Lamb that he objected to the Constitution chiefly because "the bulk of the people can have nothing to say to it. The government is not a government of the people." In the Maryland convention he said (or planned to say) that only the rich and well born would be chosen to Congress. Most Anti-Federalists were convinced of this, and had little doubt what would happen under the proposed system... An "aristocratic tyranny" would arise, in which (as Timothy Bloodworth wrote) "the great will struggle for power, honor and wealth, the poor become a prey to avarice, insolence, and oppression." John Quincy Adams noted in his diary that the Constitution was "calculated to increase the influence, power and wealth of those who have any already." ¹⁵

Two Opposing Views 200 Years after the Convention

In a book published in the year of the 200th anniversary of the writing of the Constitution, noted historian Richard Morris lent support for the heroic interpretation of the Founders' motives. Morris's work, *The Forging of the Union*, praised the Fathers as "sober realists" and dismissed those opposed to the Constitution as isolated, state-centered, and libertarians."

¹⁴ Robert E. Brown, *Charles Beard and the Constitution*, Norton, New York, 1956, pp.

¹⁵ Jackson Turner Main, *The Anti-Federalists: Critics of the Constitution*, Quadrangle, Chicago, 1964), pp. 132-133.

*The statesmen of that day, a collection of dedicated and creative figures, wrestled with these central issues and argued them at length both in print and in the forums provided by the Federal Convention and the state ratifying conventions that followed. Seemingly intractable problems were resolved by combining audacious initiatives with a series of compromises deemed necessary to forge a union, preserve the states, and guarantee the people's liberties . . .*¹⁶

*[The Constitution] endowed a federal republic with powers necessary to promote the general welfare and secure the blessings of liberty ... and [placed] the national interest on a durable foundation.*¹⁷

Thurgood Marshall, the first African American to have served on the Supreme Court, voiced one of the few criticisms of the Constitution that attracted widespread attention in the year of the bicentennial. Marshall, focusing on what he considered to be the Founders' interest in preserving their own position in society at the expense of slaves, women, and the indebted and landless, did not see the Founders' "sense of justice particularly profound."

*I [do not] find the wisdom, foresight, and sense of justice exhibited by the Framers particularly profound. To the contrary, the government they devised was defective from the start, requiring several amendments, a civil war, and momentous social transformation to attain the system of constitutional government, and its respect for the individual freedoms and human rights, we hold as fundamental today.*¹⁸

Student Exercises:

1. Contrast the different views of the Founding Fathers held by the historians quoted in this chapter.
2. *Based on what you have learned in this unit – with which historian(s) do you agree? With whom do you disagree? Why?*
2. Write a 2000-2500-word essay on your view of the Founders' motives for writing the US Constitution.

Were they noble innovators? Selfish aristocrats? Or somewhere in-between these two extremes?

Your essay must cover:

➤ **How the Founders resolved two of the issues they faced at the convention:**

These resolutions should form the basis for your essay: if you think the Founders arrived at good solutions, you will probably write a favorable opinion: if you strongly disagree with their solutions you will probably accept Beard's, Main's, or Marshall's interpretation. The issues are as follows:

1. Representation: state vs. population
2. Democracy (possibly including slavery and lack of a bill of rights) vs. checks and balances
3. Power: state vs. national government.

¹⁶ Richard B. Morris, *The Forging of the Union, 1781-1789*, Harper and Row Publishers, New York, 1987). pp. xii-xiii.

¹⁷ Quoted in John Back McMaster, ed., *Pennsylvania and the Federal Constitution*, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Lancaster, 1888, pp. 457-72, edited

¹⁸ Quoted in *The New York Times*, May 8, 1987

- **How well the Constitution was put together:**
Here you should examine what makes the Constitution great or not so great. Look carefully at the Constitution and clearly explain why it works or doesn't work – i.e. flexibility, attention to details (such as President and Congress being barred from voting themselves a raise in pay), wording, etc; or
- **What was actually said at the convention, what you know about the Founders themselves, and/or what historians have said about them?**
Here you will want to review the speeches made at the convention and study the descriptions of the delegates, and/or re-read historian's comments. You might also research this topic in a library.

Suggestions for Organizing Your Essay:

Your essay should have four major parts:

- a. **statement of your introduction and thesis,**
- b. **Foreshadowing**
- c. **a main body, and**
- d. **a conclusion.**