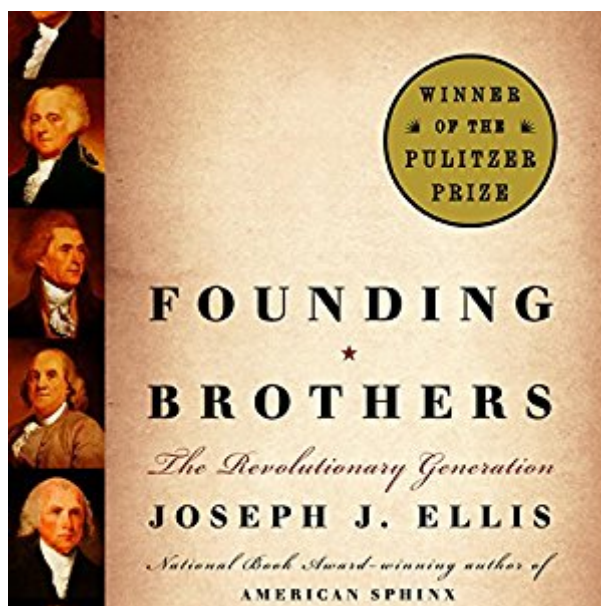


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Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation



Synopsis

An illuminating study of the intertwined lives of the founders of the American republic - John Adams, Aaron Burr, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and George Washington. During the 1790s, which Ellis calls the most decisive decade in our nation's history, the greatest statesmen of their generation - and perhaps any - came together to define the new republic and direct its course for the coming centuries. Ellis focuses on six discrete moments that exemplify the most crucial issues facing the fragile new nation: Burr and Hamilton's deadly duel and what may have really happened; Hamilton, Jefferson, and Madison's secret dinner, during which the seat of the permanent capital was determined in exchange for passage of Hamilton's financial plan; Franklin's petition to end the "peculiar institution" of slavery - his last public act - and Madison's efforts to quash it; Washington's precedent-setting Farewell Address, announcing his retirement from public office and offering his country some final advice; Adams' difficult term as Washington's successor and his alleged scheme to pass the presidency on to his son; and finally Adams and Jefferson's renewed correspondence at the ends of their lives, in which they compared their different views of the Revolution and its legacy. In a lively and engaging narrative, Ellis recounts the sometimes collaborative, sometimes archly antagonistic interactions between these men and shows us the private characters behind the public personas: Adams, the ever-combative iconoclast whose closest political collaborator was his wife, Abigail; Burr - crafty, smooth, and one of the most despised public figures of his time; Hamilton, whose audacious manner and deep economic savvy masked his humble origins; Jefferson, renowned for his eloquence but so reclusive and taciturn that he rarely spoke more than a few sentences in public; Madison - small, sickly, and paralyzingly shy yet one of the most effective debaters of his generation; and the stiffly formal Washington, the ultimate realist, larger than life, and America's only truly indispensable figure. Ellis argues that the checks and balances that permitted the infant American republic to endure were not primarily legal, constitutional, or institutional but intensely personal, rooted in the dynamic interaction of leaders with quite different visions and values. Revisiting the old-fashioned idea that character matters, *Founding Brothers* informs our understanding of American politics - then and now - and gives us a new perspective on the unpredictable forces that shape history.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In *Founding Brothers*, Joseph Ellis offers an excellent portrayal of the primary players of post-revolutionary America. The book is extremely readable which makes it appealing to a wide range of readers, yet provides the serious scholar with insightful historical analysis. Ellis establishes his thesis and develops it throughout the book, though, arguably, some chapters are more successful than others. The book is by design not chronological, but does include detailed analysis of each founding father. Yet the book is not patriotic flag waving. Ellis' style is reminiscent of the consensus historians of the 1950s but with a modern approach. His portrayal shows the founding fathers separated by personalities and differences of opinion, but with the unique ability to set ambitions aside (more or less) to accomplish the nation's business. For instance, Alexander Hamilton and John Adams were both Federalists yet they hated one another, Ben Franklin drew criticism for anti-slavery beliefs, Thomas Jefferson ceased correspondence with George Washington (forever) and Adams (for fifteen years), James Madison and Hamilton divided the government, and Aaron Burr eventually killed Hamilton. But with the exception of this final example all were able to deal with these differences for the good of the country. Ellis illustrates his chapters with masterful synthesis. There are times when Ellis' theory appears to wander, as with the case of slavery and the official "silence" that governed the subject. In this case the problem did not go away but instead exploded seventy years later in civil war. He also meanders throughout the chapter on Jefferson and Adams to the point that reading becomes tedious, but his overall effort is not adversely impacted.

This book is a gem, and probably the most focussed piece of historical writing I've ever read. Professor Ellis tells us in his two-page introduction that his objective was to write a "modest-sized account of a massive historical subject", implicitly ragging on his professional colleagues who seem

inclined more often towards just the opposite. In just 248 pages he takes on the thirty or so years following ratification of the U.S. Constitution, portraying this period as the most politically treacherous in our nation's history. He focuses primarily on the roles of six protagonists: Jefferson, John Adams, Madison, Washington, Hamilton, and Franklin. Aaron Burr appears too, but as a tragic foil to Hamilton more than as a significant player in his own right. Professor Ellis's technique, odd but effective, is to build six short chapters around various interactions among these key figures, arranging them artfully like a series of inter-connected short stories. Each chapter elucidates a key dimension in the political dynamics of the period, and the emotional impact of the book by the end is like that of a powerful piece of fiction, even though the author's adherence to the factual record is scrupulous. What emerges is a picture of the revolutionary nation facing the kind of crisis that undermines most revolutions as personal ambitions and conflicting agendas give rise to new tyranny or ongoing civil war. At one level, these were a group of jealous and bickering men with diverging views on the direction of the republican government they were laboring to craft. Yet in the end it is these very contradictions which allowed the improbable project to succeed, bringing in the diverse political threads necessary to bind the new nation.

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