(RE)VIEWS

Founders Chic As Culture War

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Something funny happened to the founding fathers on their way to the twenty-first century. Without a bi- or tricentennial in sight, they became, suddenly, newsworthy. “Founding Rivals: Startling New Research Shows Why America’s First Political Wars Were Far Worse Than Today’s,” proclaimed the headline of the February 26, 2001 issue of U.S. News and World Report. “More like squabbling brothers than ‘fathers,’ how did they succeed?” Despite the rivals’ tendency to attack each other, wrote Jay Tolson, “it was the human element that gave this peculiar politics its messy, improvised quality—and, in the end, made the founders’ achievement all the more remarkable.”1 Not to be outdone, Evan Thomas of Newsweek went even further a few months later, explaining that “Adams, Jefferson, Washington, and all the rest were the real thing, all right. They were an Even Greater Generation.”2 Recent best-sellers made it clear that “they cut political deals and stabbed each other in the back on the way to inventing freedom.” Compared to the current crop of Washington insiders, the founders deserved to be “suddenly hot again.”3

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Tolson posed renewed interest in the founders’ personal battles as an alternative to academic trends:

Most academic historians of the past 30 years have ignored them, focusing on the marginalized and downtrodden and stressing social history rather than the grand political narrative. But political history of the founding generation is making a comeback. . . . What distinguishes this new political history is “a greater sense of irony and skepticism about the founders,” an effort to show how things turned out quite differently from what the founders intended—and could easily have turned out far worse.¹

During 2000 and 2001, several of the scholars praised by Tolson and Thomas—Ellis, John Ferling, and Gordon S. Wood, to name names—went on record identifying scholarship critical of the founders with a stance sympathetic to nonelite women, Native Americans, and African Americans in history.² At times they presented social history and the serious exploration of people besides “dead white men” as the antithesis of the true history of the early republic’s leaders, whom they—before the journalists—enthusiastically named the real “greatest generation.”³

Ferling is the most direct and Manichaean, lamenting (and exaggerating) that “where once the likes of Benjamin Franklin and James Madison, or epic events such as the French and Indian War or the Constitutional Convention, received considerable attention in the pages of scholarly journals, today’s reader is more likely to read about the plight of urban chimney sweeps or unwed mothers.”⁴ Ferling is referring to award-winning articles by Cornelia Hughes Dayton and by Paul Gilje and Howard Rock, works that linked experience to the politics of gender and race in the eighteenth century and the early republic, though Ferling refuses those terms and imagines the content of these articles as simple storytelling about the experiences of the ordinary and downtrodden. Social and cultural history as it came to be practiced in the 1990s is thus dismissed as subversive, the naive inversion of biographical political history, as venerable methods perversely applied to inappropriate subjects.⁵

Ellis performs his academic generational politics with more care and more panache. He prefaces his series of paired character studies by presenting his approach as a middle ground between the “golden haze” of founders worship and the “radioactive cloud” of demonization—extremes we continue to enact because the founders were so (to coin a phrase) foundational (12). He can’t resist a parting shot at the academic left, though, so he contrasts the real world’s “smaller but quite vocal group of critics unhappy with what America has become or how we have gotten there” with “the scholarly community in recent years, [where] the main tendency has been to take the latter side, or to sidestep the controversy by ignoring mainstream politics altogether” (12). It is easy to see the PC-bashing here; less apparent, because all too commonsensical, is the equation of “mainstream politics” and its hist-
tory with biography and a focus on the founders. Ellis admits that there might be something to learn from bottom-up history, and especially from biographical approaches to ordinary people, but only to distance it from political history. In this view, the founders’ relationships not only represent, or symbolize, ideological and political struggles of the era (e.g., Hamilton versus Jefferson). They were those struggles, in toto: “The shape and character of the political institutions were determined by a relatively small number of leaders who knew each other, who collaborated and collided with each other in patterns that replicated at the level of personality and ideology the principle of checks and balances imbedded structurally in the Constitution” (17). Things fell apart, but character—greatness—held.

For their insistence on the overwhelming importance of leadership and national unity, as opposed to political economy, foreign policy, and the struggle for democracy, all three of these books mimic the concerns of the Federalists, who also receive especially sympathetic treatment. Founders chic, as Jeffrey L. Pasley has suggested, may be little more than Federalist chic. It may be a sign of the times that it is possible to return to a neo-Federalist interpretation of the so-called Federalist era (which is then conflated with a narrowed “early republic”) through an appropriation of cultural history. In a culturalist reinvention of the school of Lewis Namier (of which she shows no awareness), Joanne B. Freeman depicts early national politics as nothing less and nothing more than the deeply charged interactions of statesmen in the new capitals of New York, Philadelphia, and Washington. A code of honor was “the very infrastructure of national politics” (xviii), while enmities, challenges, and “friendship” stood as its “central organizing force” (146). In Freeman’s hands, the “ethno-historical” or cultural perspective, which once signaled a desire to understand what historical changes meant to the ordinary people who lived through them, or to probe the changing modes of popular politics, is instead made to relegate the validity of the Washington beltway vision of how politics works, as Freeman throws most of the rest of political history—particularly ideologies and parties, but also policy and institutional development—out the window. Even the presidential election of 1800, an event that arguably changed the course of U.S. history, becomes “an honor dispute of grand proportions” (199), the character of which is revealed not by the ideas or strategies of the thousands who passionately worked for Federalists or Democratic-Republicans in the multileveled, if informal, electoral system, but rather by the true, personal reasons for which vice presidential candidate Aaron Burr refused to withdraw from the field after the tie in the electoral college. National politics becomes a game as engaging for its small number of participants as a Balinese cockfight, but just as structurally enclosed. And history becomes a snapshot of a cultural moment, a founding generation narrowed to a few hundred people between 1789 and 1804. Time moves forward only to reveal how that moment’s compelling personalities, like war veterans, spent the rest of their lives nursing their wounds.
Because these stories were deeply felt, and can be rendered in loving detail, they become the most real. The greatest generation speaks, indeed.

Freeman claims to be studying “complex dialogue between politicians and the public” from the perspective of elites, and thus contributing to a revival of political history under the sign of culture. Her own slight nod in the direction of social history is tellingly disingenuous. She opens with a mob stoning Alexander Hamilton when he tried to speak in support of the Jay Treaty: “In a democratic republic the crowd had the ultimate say” (3). But in a kind of perverse nod to the way parades were once used as transparent vignettes to introduce social histories, the politically active people in the streets never reappear or say anything else. Freeman is too concerned with the maneuvers between leaders and leaders to ever say much about the dialogue between politicians and the people, except that it existed somewhere off the cultural map of honor. Some of her affairs of honor were actually major media events, but there is no analysis of how this contributed to what Pasley has argued was essentially a newspaper-based two-party system.

Elsewhere Freeman has rightly maintained that “political subterfuge became increasingly difficult . . . new alliances, national in scope, and increased popular participation were complicating politics.” In Affairs of Honor she avoids such complications and treats her founders as a world unto themselves and as neglected, misunderstood men—which is to say, exactly how they viewed themselves. The tools of cultural history validate an ironic, personalized kind of fondness for founders tripping pathetically over their male egos. What they lose in heroism they gain in cuteness. You can’t take your eyes off them. In founders chic à la Freeman, the personal battles, the protests about wounded pride, gain our sympathy where ideology and glory fail to move our jaded souls. The founders had careers and reputations at stake in their gossip and duels; it is too much to expect them to have actually been battling over anything of significance.

Actually, honor itself was a tool that high Federalists used quite cynically when challenged by the popular success of the opposition. David McCullough quotes Secretary of State Timothy Pickering’s assertion that the “honor of the country is prostrated in the dust” when President Adams decided, on the brink of war, to send another diplomat to Paris (523–24, emphasis in original). Freeman’s concern with personal honor causes her to miss this far more important conflation of national honor with male identity. Such invocations helped mobilize high-toned Federalist private militias who took over public space during the quasi war. During the summer of 1798, they made so much noise in Philadelphia that members of Congress could barely hear each other debate the merits of the Sedition Act. This honor discourse directly challenged the Jeffersonian language of brotherhood, equality, and solidarity with the French Revolution. In short, Federalists embraced honor discourse and war itself at least in part to stave off criticism and retain power.
tic politics, foreign affairs, and personal identities converged when Federalists spoke of honor in public and private.

The political contexts that McCullough’s *John Adams* de-emphasizes are also striking: that Adams’s political theory came to be considered antidemocratic in his time; that as president during a brief cold war with France his gleeful embrace of the Alien and Sedition acts intentionally silenced the opposition and set a precedent for government-sponsored attacks on immigrants and radicals; in short, that both Adams’s love of order and his well-known pride actually had results during his controversial presidency, even if his very truculence kept him from being an arch-Federalist tool for very long. There was a crucial relationship between the Federalists’ bellicose foreign policy and their attempt to suppress the opposition at home; it was not a mere political miscalculation. The Alien and Sedition acts represented a backlash against the rise of popular politics. Perhaps the contemporary round of wartime jingoism and antiradicalism will remind us that in America as elsewhere, wars are pursued enthusiastically by weak regimes that want to retain power at home.

McCullough has to ignore several generations of progressive historiography to make Adams a champion of democracy. Given current interest in the “character issue”—an interest encouraged by the right—it seems that the best way to ignore the critical scholarship is to swoop down to the personal level, either through biography or culturalist microhistory. Here, sometimes, biography is to be preferred, for at least the biographer must deal with contemporary political criticisms of the hero. Ellis carefully constructs his pairs of men to balance criticisms and seem even-handed. For Freeman, political criticism is just the name of the political game: the content is reduced to the form. In a striking reduction of history to personality, she reserves her highest praise for William Plumer, the frustrated Congressional diarist: “Unlike Jefferson, he was more interested in revealing personal qualities than exposing political sins, another product of his historian’s sensibility” (269). Early national politicians, in other words, were doing both politics and history just as Freeman does them. In such a world, the leader of a national popular movement who gradually embraces his role as an ideologue—Thomas Jefferson—is guilty of not playing by the rules. His perspective, as opposed to that of his Federalist opponents, becomes ahistorical.

Where the personalizing approach leads Freeman away from anything recognizable as a political issue, for McCullough it at least allows for a selective, if warping, employment of real issues. The results are especially striking in his almost obsessive treatment—bordering on equation—of Jefferson and slavery. (Jefferson’s slaves appear as twenty separate entries in the index. The Alien and Sedition acts appear five times.) Because John and Abigail’s antislavery is such a feather in their moral caps, McCullough turns Jefferson’s slaveholding into the key to his less savory char-
acter. It is brought up whenever possible, as are the “spendthrift” habits (he bought ladies’ gloves and an expensive thermometer on July 4, 1776!) that kept him from acting on his own antislavery principles (320). In a kind of caricature of recent critical work, Jefferson’s complex politics become a function of his dandyish inclinations and his ostrichlike obtuseness about the bottom line. It is Jefferson as radical chic, the original wooly-headed liberal. What McCullough and Ellis perform so gracefully is the art of contrast, the duel of character: Adams looks greater when Jefferson looks bad. History need no longer take as its subject presidential elections when its dramatic and moralistic structure actually mimics a presidential election (in this case the election of 1800 itself, when northern Federalists denounced Jefferson as—you guessed it—a crazed idealist propped up by slaves).

Whoever wins, character is king. McCullough’s ultimate subject is less John Adams than it is a certain sort of heroic greatness. Adams is of course not an arbitrary choice. In the Bush–Clinton–Bush era, sincere, war-embracing conservatives like Adams and Hamilton are up; pandering idealist peaceniks who have sex scandals and get tainted by racial politics are down. The irreplaceable common denominator seems to be that the founders were, in fact, great, if sometimes only in their ambition and venality. Greatness itself then justifies the personalizing approach, which in its more rigorous, professional versions (as in Ellis and Ferling) does mean judging these characters on their political and military performances, but which succeeds all the better when character and culture, rather than politics or context in any other sense, become destiny.

In retrospect, Ellis’s 1996 explanation of Jefferson as a slippery sphinx—and his denial of the possibility of the Jefferson–Hemings affair on those grounds—and then his dexterous about-face, which still leaned on character as explanation, may have signaled the advent of a new phase in the old battle between genially celebratory consensus history and progressive history. Ellis could instantly flip-flop, and even play the role of declaring the DNA evidence conclusive, because the Jefferson-Hemings “revelation” kept the focus where, for him, it belongs: on founders and their personal characters. Certain founders became expendable in order to preserve greatness itself. Debunking itself can be insulated from its corrosive politics through a renewed emphasis on the trials and tribulations of the heroic self and his quest for honor and glory. The genre increasingly requires psychic failures and rogues, and it is all the better if sex and slavery can be sloughed off onto them.

Will the rubrics of generation and greatness be able to contain the challenge of the slavery question? The reader of John Adams who is sensitized to the possibility that black people have history will be left wanting more. What were the slaves Abigail sympathized with and Jefferson ignored doing? Freeman herself misses the chance to investigate James Thomson Callendar’s exposé of the Jefferson-Hemings liaison as an honor affair: perhaps because it was not one, which would suggest limits to the honor rubric. Ellis is more consistent and deserves credit for trying to deal
with the question of slavery. In a chapter of *Founding Brothers* built around the controversy over abolitionist petitions in the first Federal Congress, he sets up Benjamin Franklin as an antislavery foil to the temporizing James Madison. A kind of personal mea culpa for the author’s past mistakes, perhaps, but one which unfortunately fails to do the subject justice insofar as it reduces each man’s long, complex, multigenerational political career—in which the slavery question came up repeatedly—to a kind of judgment on the character of each one: Franklin up, Madison down. It might be added that this is precisely the kind of moralism that Ellis condemns as anachronistic. It is depressing, though, to see Ellis and McCullough performing what debunkers are accused of doing, but in an even nastier, because personal, way. One almost wishes that, like Freeman, they hadn’t bothered to try. I began to long for the psychological sympathy of a Fawn Brodie, or even Ellis’s earlier condescension toward Jefferson’s Reaganesque, pitiable self-deception.\(^{17}\)

When they use character and desire for personal reputation as engines of specific behaviors and events that were solely elite in nature—the dinner table bargain, the writing of memos and memoirs, the Burr-Hamilton duel before it actually became a public event—Ellis and Freeman are on more stable, if narrow, ground. They seem sharpest when they are most postmodern, reflecting on the founders’ own reflections on their greatness. Freeman’s artful deconstruction of elite politicians’ manuscripts, her bringing of those documents into the status of self-conscious artifacts, will not likely be noticed by those who are doing the same to 1990s fanzines or 1930s fiction, given that its ultimate effect is to enrich our sense of what the founders went through at the expense of everything and everybody else. But in obscuring the distinction between formal politics and private or personal “resistance,” Ellis and Freeman have a great deal in common with contemporary cultural studies and its familiarizing strategies (everyone a *bricoleur*). McCullough’s Adams is rendered about as familiar as the grandfather you never met, despite his quality relationship with Abigail. Not so Ellis’s and Freeman’s founders. They had psychic conflicts. They were captives of their culture, straining at its bounds. Their politics really were personal. They really *are* chic.

The lure of character and reputation is understandable: it is, after all, the modus operandi of contemporary politics as we experience them through the same media outlets that have been promoting these books. When joined with a politicized discourse of generations—a discourse less reported than produced and commodified by the media continually since the 1960s—it makes for a potent and familiar combination. And, in fact, we’ve been there before, long before. The popular historical culture industry first emerged in the 1820s to celebrate the American Revolution—and to forget its more disturbing aspects, as well as the political problems at hand. Founder chic 1826-style helped Americans work through the unhappy truths that most of them had not fought in a heroic nation-making war, that the most recent war had been something of a farce as well as divisive on the home front, and
that they had just experienced a brokered presidential election, the distinctly partisan resolution of which seemed to call into question the legitimacy of the national political system. If this sounds familiar (and in the case of Ellis, perhaps all too personal), it should. Is it a fad? Yes and no, no more than what it is meant to answer. If we are careful, the synergy of founders chic and the “greatest generation” will only partly obscure the good debunking work that provoked the backlash in the first place.

Notes
3. David Broder, quoting from an advance copy of Freeman’s book, also argued that the founders’ squabbling should make us feel better about contemporary politics. If such failings could still produce heroic results, so might our own, he concluded, in a liberal version of Tolson and Thomas’s neoconservative nostalgia. Broder, “Founders and Foibles,” Washington Post, July 4, 2001.

10. Freeman boldly and falsely avers that “dialogue” between leaders and followers “is studied most frequently from the perspective of the constituent rather than the congressman, detailing the birth of a political consciousness and public voice among the American people” (xxiii). A journalist for the Chronicle of Higher Education swallowed her argument whole, stating that “now that social historians have filled out the picture of the early republic with less-powerful actors, the New New [Political Historians] are turning back to the dead white guys.” Jeffrey Sharlet, “I Was a Teenage Hamiltonian: Joanne Freeman Turns Her Obsession into a Landmark Revision of Political History,” Chronicle of Higher Education, September 14, 2001. Most of the “new new political history” does not focus solely on elites. See, for example, Jeffrey L. Pasley, Andrew W. Robertson, and David Waldstreicher, eds., Beyond the Founders: New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, forthcoming).


13. James Roger Sharp, American Politics in the Early Republic: The New Nation in Crisis (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 180. Fifteen years later, during the war of 1812, Federalists continued to use “a language that monopolized masculine characteristics for the Federalists, while it associated the Republicans with unmanly behavior . . . a set of stories that allowed them to present themselves as the only men fit to govern.” Albrecht Koschnik, “Young Federalists, Masculinity, and Partisanship during the War of 1812,” in Pasley, Robertson, and Waldstreicher, Beyond the Founders, chap. 5; David Waldstreicher, “Federalism, the Styles of Politics, and the Politics of Style,” in Federalists Reconsidered, ed. Doron Ben-Atar and Barbara Oberg (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 98–117.


16. The answers, which point to slaves’ very real political agency in the period, are present in recent work that none of these authors cite: Sylvia Frey, Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

17. Fawn Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (New York: Norton, 1974); Ellis, *American Sphinx.* Ellis is still capable of more subtle analysis. For example, he has written recently that “the intensity of [Jefferson’s] political radicalism, in short, was inextricably tied to the intensity of his white racism,” a comment which, if he carried it through, would complicate as well as more thoroughly justify the downgrading of Jefferson he has advanced. Ellis, “Why Jefferson Lives: A Meditation on the Man and the Myth,” in *Thomas Jefferson: Genius of Liberty,* ed. Garry Wills et al. (New York: Viking, 2000), 166.