About The Author:
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General Overview:
The last quarter of the eighteenth century remains the most politically creative era in American history as a dedicated and determined group of men undertook a bold experiment in political ideals. It was a time of triumphs, but also a time of tragedies – all of which contributed to the shaping of our burgeoning nation. *American Creation* is a revealing and highly ironic examination of the founding years of our country as it strips the mythic veneer of the revolutionary generation to reveal men both human and inspired, possessed of both brilliance and blindness.

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Introduction
The 28 years (1775-1803) that constituted the American founding remain the most politically creative period in American history. In truth, the Revolution was an evolution brought about by a group of extraordinary men (rather than a single individual), and these factors distinguish it from the more violent revolutions of other countries. Indeed, the gradual nature of America’s Revolution was a key factor in its enduring success.

The Founding Fathers (especially Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Adams, and Hamilton) were not of one mind. They were complex men, frequently at odds with one another – and with themselves! – yet they created a framework for debating and addressing civic questions that stands as perhaps the boldest and most successful political experiment ever attempted. In other words, the Constitution they bequeathed us was not designed to answer political matters for all-time, rather it was intended as a template future generations could use to solve issues for themselves.

The American Revolution was filled with triumphs, contradictions, ironies, and tragedies. Perhaps the founders’ greatest legacy was a political novelty – the emergence of a two-party system – though this outcome was hardly their intention. On the other hand, the founders’ failure to address slavery and reach a just settlement with the American Indians would lead to two great tragedies: the Civil War and the ethnic cleansing of Native Americans.

“The core question posed at the founding was not whether the United States should become a democracy, but whether it should become a viable nation state.” The founders were divided between: 1) the Federalists (Washington, Adams, and Hamilton) who believed in the necessity of a strong federal government and 2) the Republicans (Madison and Jefferson) who wanted to preserve state sovereignty and limit the authority the federal government had over individual lives.

Tragically, the triumph of the Republican perspective, represented by Jefferson’s election to the presidency in 1800, eliminated the possibility of addressing slavery, an issue only a strong federal government could solve. Ironically, however, Jefferson was willing to betray his Republican principles in so far as he appropriated the extraordinary executive authority required to make the Louisiana Purchase, a land transaction that more than doubled the size of the country and effectively turned the American republic into an empire. Jefferson consciously ignored Constitutional niceties to complete the purchase – his energetic exercise of executive power violated Jefferson’s own political creed – and his action has become a template for aggressive executive action ever since, particularly in times of crisis.

The founders never resolved the issue of federal versus state sovereignty. The system they created allows for a perpetual give and take as competing power centers – the legislative, the executive, and the judiciary – joust with one another over who has the authority to do what. This was the founders’ revolutionary innovation: “the very purpose
of government was subtly transformed from an ultimate arbiter to a framework for ongoing argument.” The political foundation they have left us is unparalleled in its capacity to engender a combination of stability and agility.

The Founding
It is an amazing story. Sometime over the last quarter of the 18th century a former colony of Great Britain developed the ideas and institutions that would become a model of political and economic success and inspire mankind. Indeed, over the course of more than two centuries, America’s republican form of government would hasten the decline of monarchical dynasties in Europe in the 19th century and help defeat the totalitarian despotisms of the 20th century.

George Washington believed two factors would be responsible for America’s eventual success: time and space. America’s founding came at a propitious moment in time – “the gloomy age of Ignorance and Suspicion was over,” Washington wrote “and the rights of mankind were better understood and more clearly defined, than at any former period.” In other words, America’s founding had its origins in the Enlightenment.

The space Washington was referring to, of course, was primarily the abundant land and natural resources that made up the North American continent, but Washington also had in mind the distance the Atlantic Ocean provided America from meddling European powers. The intellectual legacy of Enlightenment ideas and geographic assets made it seem to men like Washington that America was singled out by Providence for “the display of human greatness and felicity.” Nevertheless, the founders recognized that America’s success would depend on wise management of the advantages conferred by history and geography.

The founders, though they were elitists, by and large rejected any attempt to venerate political leaders. As Benjamin Rush put it, “I shall continue to believe that ‘great men’ are a lie.” In other words, the founders believed that events, not men, were the driving force of history. The founders actually feared they would be mythologized and that fear has come true. However, we do a disservice to them (and ourselves) if we view them as superhuman; they were complex figures with strengths, contradictions, and foibles.

The revolutionary generation, however, did manage to muster five undeniable achievements:

1) Against all odds they managed to defeat the most powerful military in the world and win the first successful War for Independence in the modern age.
2) The founders managed to establish the first nation-sized republic.
3) They founded the first entirely secular state.
4) They created the first government with multiple and overlapping forms of authority, thus defying the conventional wisdom that held that sovereignty must
be singular and indivisible. This blurring of the boundaries between state and federal power would become an asset as it encouraged creativity and flexibility.

5) The founders lay the groundwork for political parties, which became institutionalized vehicles for ongoing debate, thus fostering political dialogue and the idea of legitimate political opposition (both hallmarks of the modern liberal state).

It is rare for the same men who waged a revolution to secure it. The overarching achievement of the founders was to reconcile two competing, if not contradictory, political impulses: one that emphasizes individual rights and liberty as distinct from government and the second impulse that envisions government as a guarantor of liberty.

Two failures, however, cast a dark shadow over the founders’ achievements: slavery and the failure to work out a just settlement with the Native Americans. By any historical standard, the founders’ exhibited extraordinary political creativity, but they were unable to muster the creativity and energy to solve these issues. Recognizing both their triumphs and failures, however, should help us avoid the temptation to treat the founders as either otherworldly heroes or racist and elitist villains.

The founders did not glimpse eternal political truths that they then handed down to mere mortals. Nor were they hypocrites because some of them held slaves (when their rhetoric suggested all men were created equal). Rather, they were men improvising on the edge of chaos, trying to establish a country, and doing their best to balance the pragmatic choices they had to make with their principles.

**Independence**

The year 1776 was both the most consequential and the strangest year in American history. On the one hand, men were fighting and dying, spies and traitors were being executed, and entire towns were being burnt to the ground, but the official posture of the colonies remained loyal to the Crown. Nevertheless, it was the year the rationale for America’s independence became clear. Jefferson had spelled out his belief that “governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes.” In fact, if anything, the founders were reluctant revolutionaries. It is not surprising, then, that the American Revolution would be an explosion in slow motion.

One of the paradoxes of the American campaign for independence is that it included a revolutionary political agenda, but that this agenda unfolded gradually. The fact that the American Revolution took place in slow motion was a creative act of statesmanship that probably spared the United States the chaos and bloodshed that invariably attends other revolutionary movements.

The impetus for the American Revolution was the conflict between the colonists and Great Britain over the role and rights of the colonies within the British Empire. The British saw themselves as trying to fold the colonies into their empire, which required
taxing the colonists and placing them under the authority of Parliament, presumably for their own good. The colonists, however, believed that the taxes they were being asked to pay were coercive, unjust, and that their interests were not represented by Parliament. In short, the Americans believed that their interests would be best represented by their own colonial legislatures.

In retrospect, a little creativity on the part of the British might have avoided the Revolutionary War altogether. However, the British were wedded to the idea that sovereignty must be singular rather than shared. That is, a power sharing arrangement that allowed the colonies to govern their own domestic affairs, while the colonists remained loyal subjects of the Crown, might have averted the War for Independence. In hindsight, the lack of imagination of the British ministry during that period represents one of the great failures of British statecraft.

In 1775, the Second Continental Congress consisted of two camps: 1) the moderates who favored a political rapprochement with Britain and 2) the radicals who favored outright independence. As a result, the colonists adopted a two-track policy; they pursued conciliatory measures, but prepared for war at the same time. Events, however, would soon prove decisive. A bloody skirmish at Bunker Hill, for instance, convinced George III that the American rebellion would have to be crushed. The Battle of Bunker Hill – a “ruinous victory” for the British (they suffered more than one thousand casualties, or about 40% of their attacking force) – however, convinced the colonists that the British Army was not the invincible leviathan everyone supposed.

British brutality after the Battle of Bunker Hill insured there was no turning back. George Washington was chosen to lead the American army, though in truth this force existed more in name than reality. Washington soon realized he was in charge of an insurgency, not an organized military force. Initially, Washington believed that the notion that men fighting for their freedom could defeat a professional army was a romantic illusion. Washington recognized the irony “that in order to win a war for freedom, Americans must be coerced to fight, and the proper model for an effective fighting force was nothing less than the British army itself.”

The composition and character of the Continental Army included some notable achievements. First, the army was racially integrated to an unprecedented level – at any given time, 6-12% of the total fighting force included African Americans. This fact had less to with idealism than practical necessity. Similarly, talent and leadership ability would count for more than class and bloodlines, a clear difference from the way the aristocracy dominated the British officer corps. And finally, Washington set the tone for the principle of civilian control over the military, which was later symbolized when America’s first commander-in-chief surrendered his sword to Congress at the end of the war.
The founders were not intent on establishing democracy — for elitists like them, democracy conjured up notions of mob rule, which had always proven fatal to states — but their stated ideals (all men are created equal, for instance) naturally put into question the issue of slavery, and later equal rights for women. John Adams’ wife, the extraordinary Abigail Adams, deftly reminded her husband that the principles animating the American Revolution (particularly regarding the illegitimacy of arbitrary authority) had profound implications for the status of women. The founders were far too cautious and conservative to champion universal suffrage or address an issue like slavery in one swoop, but the seeds of the civil rights and feminist movement were arguably sown in 1776.

In the spring of 1776, it was by no means clear what form of governance should replace those being jettisoned. John Adams is credited with making the case for the constitutional framework we recognize today, which included the three branches of government (executive, legislative, and judicial) and embodied the principles of a separation of powers, a bicameral legislature, and an independent judiciary. It is worth noting, however, that Adams aimed his proposal at the state rather than the federal level. Nevertheless, Adams’ republican form of governance was a landmark in so far as it rejected the premise that sovereignty must rest with a single authority — i.e., a monarch or a monolithic abstraction like “the people.” Instead, Adams’ innovation consisted of envisioning multiple sources of overlapping authority that would engender an ongoing conversation. This was truly a revolutionary conception of the nature of political authority.

Adams believed that most of the key political questions had been answered by the time the Declaration of Independence was issued on July of 1776. Indeed, most of the founders believed the Declaration was more of an “ornamental afterthought” than anything else. Nevertheless, Jefferson’s stirring prologue — “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal . . .” — would grow in meaning to exemplify the American promise. The Declaration of Independence that went out to the world on July 4th, 1776 insured that the War for Independence was more than just that. It was the American Revolution.

At this stage, of course, the colonies had yet to win their war with Great Britain. In retrospect, George Washington acknowledged that America’s victory in the War for Independence defied all logic. After all, the conventional wisdom was that a global empire with the world’s most powerful army, not to mention unlimited financial resources, should be able to defeat a local insurgency. The strategic dilemma for the British, however, was considerable: how to subdue a rebellion in a vast, populous, and distant continent. It was Washington’s genius to recognize what the British did not: winning battles was less important than winning hearts and minds of their fellow colonists (most of whom were evenly split or neutral when it came to their loyalties).
Washington understood that if the Continental army fought a conventional war with the British, the colonists would lose. But if the war was a protracted conflict for the hearts and minds of the American people, the British would surely lose. Washington’s insights went against conventional wisdom, and his personal instincts, but he concluded that since time and space were on America’s side “the only way to lose the war was to try and win it.” Thus, the decisive period in the war (1777-1778) took place in a wintry hamlet called Valley Forge where the greatest battles Washington faced were to keep his army fed and intact as he pursued a defensive strategy designed to control the countryside and outlast the British.

Washington resisted advice to launch offensives against either Philadelphia or New York, which the British occupied, opting to “wait on events” while the larger strategic context (winning the hearts and minds of the populace) turned in his favor. In short, Washington realized that most crucial battlefield was the psychological terrain. Once that terrain was conquered, Washington’s conventional victory at Yorktown, which sealed Britain’s defeat, was almost a formality.

The Argument
America’s victory not only meant independence from the British Empire, but also the creation of an American empire that would dominate the continent. There was deep divide among the founders, however, on the question of whether to empower a strong federal government or whether political sovereignty should be vested with each individual state. Thomas Jefferson and James Madison opted towards the view that concentrating power in the federal government was a betrayal of principles that prompted the War of Independence in the first place. While the nationalists (Washington and Adams) believed that a growing American empire would require a strong federal government to manage its expansion across the continent.

Taking sides in this debate “is like choosing between the words and music of the music of the American Revolution. Both sides had legitimate claims to historical truth.” Resolving this debate would entail remarkable political creativity and an unprecedented vision of federalism. The framework that emerged was not a product of any single thinker or the victory of one side over another. Rather, the form of federalism the founders arrived at was a framework where state and federal authorities engaged in a perpetual contest for supremacy. In other words, the founders deliberately fudged and left unresolved the issue of state versus federal authority, thus ensuring that the Constitutional system was an open-ended negotiation for power on a case by case basis. Madison, who had done more than anyone to devise this scheme, privately fretted that this blurring of sovereignty would be a weakness, but it would prove to be an enduring strength.
The Shadow of Slavery and Plight of the Native Americans

The founders intended to form a republic, but the vast geography of the American continent ensured that they were founding an empire. “This new imperial status raised for the first time a disquieting question that has haunted American foreign policy ever since. Put simply, how could a republic be an empire?”

At this stage, two great shadows hung over the nascent American experiment – slavery and the predicament of the Native Americans. Men like Jefferson recognized that slavery was antithetical to the values of the American Revolution, but they also believed confronting it directly would inevitably lead to civil war.

The founders also recognized that the demographic surge into Indian Country was unstoppable. In general, the founders believed that a genuine republic should not emulate the imperial conquest practices of European empires, thus there was a sincere effort to craft a just and equitable policy towards the Native Americans. However, the founders were never able to muster the political courage and creativity necessary to solve the issue of slavery or arrive at a just settlement with the American Indians.

The Louisiana Purchase

The Louisiana Purchase – where the United States bought all the land between the Mississippi and the Rocky Mountains at 4 cents an acre from France – essentially doubled the size of the United States. This feat marks the rise of the United States as a world power. Many consider the Louisiana Purchase Thomas Jefferson’s most consequential triumph. Yet Jefferson made a point of not including it in his list of accomplishments. Perhaps the reason for this is the fact that there is a doubly tragic dimension to the Purchase: 1) Jefferson’s failure to bar slavery from the newly acquired territories, which would set the stage for the Civil War and 2) the fact that the Purchase would signal the end of the American Indian presence east of the Mississippi.

There is also a rich irony in how Jefferson went about making the Louisiana Purchase. A steadfast opponent of executive power, Jefferson nonetheless seized extraordinary executive powers in order to complete the transaction. Recognizing his own inconsistency, Jefferson remarked, “[I] have done an act beyond the Constitution,” but he did so in order to advance the interests of the country.

Many have argued that Jefferson was not in fact exceeding the Constitution, but there is little doubt Jefferson was sinning against his own political creed. In any event, Jefferson’s aggressive use of executive authority has become a model for future presidents, particularly when they are facing a crisis. Ironically, if anyone had dared to ask Jefferson why he had not banned slavery in the newly acquired territories, he likely would have claimed he lacked the constitutional authority to do so.
Conclusion
The American founding was a gradual revolution that has yet to run its course. It has been filled with many triumphs and many tragedies. The American Revolution was never chiefly a clash between democrats and aristocrats, as some suppose, but more a contest between those advocating for a strong federal government and those defending states’ rights. Ironically, when the later perspective prevailed, as it did with Jefferson’s election in 1800, the limitation of federal authority virtually eliminated the possibility of solving slavery or the Native American Indian problem.

“The unresolvable issue of the founding era was federal versus state sovereignty. Any effort to enforce an unambiguous answer to that question would probably have killed the infant American republic in the cradle.” In deferring that question, if you will, the founders created a framework where that question is continually raised and answered anew. Thus, the founders introduced a subtle but profound transformation in the way we understand government, not as the ultimate arbiter, but the facilitator of ongoing debate and discussion.

Much of the political genius of the founders was accidental, at least in the sense that these were men improvising on the edge of chaos and making things up as they went along. They frequently contradicted each other, and themselves. Nevertheless, they managed to create a political foundation that is both stable and agile. In this, the founders’ most creative act was to ensure that America’s founding would extend well into the future.