FIRST Principles

WHAT AMERICA’S FOUNDERS LEARNED FROM THE GREEKS AND ROMANS AND HOW THAT SHAPED OUR COUNTRY

THOMAS E. RICKS

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize
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Dedication

For the dissenters, who conceived this nation, and improve it still
Epigraph

Unless we can return a little more to first principles, & act a little more upon patriotic ground, I do not know . . . what may be the issue of the contest.

—George Washington to James Warren, March 31, 1779
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A Note on Language

I have quoted the words of the Revolutionary generation as faithfully as possible, including their unusual spellings and surprising capitalizations. I did this because I think it puts us nearer their world, and also out of respect: I wouldn’t change their words when quoting them, so why change their spellings? For some reason, I am fond of George Washington’s apoplectic denunciation of an “ananominous” letter written by a mutinous officer during the Revolutionary War. Seeing this reinforces our need to understand that the past really is “a foreign country” where they did things differently, and where words sometimes carried different meanings. The one point where I nearly broke this rule is with the variant spellings of the Roman conspirator Catiline, sometimes spelled as Cataline. But I decided to preserve their variations after realizing that this is necessary to enable readers to search for a given quotation in *Founders Online*, the National Archives’ wonderful digital compilation of the papers of the leaders of the early United States. Along the same lines, I have where possible quoted from the eighteenth-century editions of books that they might have used, including Greek and Roman authors in translation. The only alteration I have consistently made is to capitalize the first letter of sentences, because I found that leaving them in lowercase made their words more difficult to comprehend.

I also have chosen to use the term “First Peoples” rather than “Indian” or “Native American.” In researching this issue, I was struck by a statement by a group of musicians that “We do not call ourselves ‘Native American,’
because our blood and people were here long before this land was called the Americas. We are older than America can ever be and do not know the borders.”
Chronology

1732—Birth of George Washington
1735—Birth of John Adams
1743—Birth of Thomas Jefferson
1751—Birth of James Madison
1754–1763—Seven Years’ War, called by Americans the French and Indian War
1755—Washington witnesses Braddock’s Defeat
  —Adams graduates from Harvard

1762—Jefferson, considered graduated from William & Mary, begins to study law under George Wythe
1765—Stamp Act passed by Parliament to assert British authority over the colonies and to raise revenue to pay for the French and Indian War
1768—British troops are stationed in Boston for the first time
1770—Boston Massacre
1771—Madison graduates from College of New Jersey (Princeton)
1772—Boston town meeting creates a “Committee of Correspondence” to communicate about the political situation with other towns and colonies
1773—Boston Tea Party
1774—Massachusetts government suspended; colony is placed under British military rule

—First Continental Congress convenes

1775—February—Parliament declares Massachusetts to be in a state of rebellion

April—Battles of Lexington and Concord
June—Battle of Bunker Hill
June—Washington appointed to command the Continental Army
August—Parliament declares most of the American colonies to be in a state of rebellion
October—British shell and burn Falmouth, Massachusetts (now Portland, Maine)

1776—January—British fleet bombards Norfolk, Virginia, for three hours, destroying most of the city
July—Second Continental Congress issues Declaration of Independence

1777—September and October—American forces win two battles at Saratoga, comprising the most important victory in the war. Washington fights two battles near Philadelphia, at Brandywine and Germantown, then withdraws to encamp for the winter at Valley Forge
1778—February—France formally allies with the American rebels

—June—The British withdraw from Philadelphia, the rebel capital

1779–1780—The American effort almost collapses
1781—Articles of Confederation take effect
Battle of Yorktown signals the end of the war

1783—Peace treaty formally ends the war
1786–87—Shays’ Rebellion challenges the postwar distribution of power in Massachusetts
1787—Constitutional Convention devises new plan of government for the United States
1789—Washington becomes first president under the new government created by the Constitution

French Revolution begins

1793–94—Reign of Terror in France; Louis XVI and his queen executed
1794—The Whiskey Rebellion in western Pennsylvania poses another major challenge to the postwar distribution of American power and wealth
1796—Adams elected president
1798—Alien and Sedition Acts crack down on newspaper editors and other critics of Adams administration
1799—Washington dies
1801—Jefferson becomes president after the outcome is decided by the House of Representatives
1804—Aaron Burr, Jefferson’s alienated vice president, shoots and kills Alexander Hamilton
1808—Madison elected president
1820—Missouri Compromise formalizes geographic division of country along the lines of slavery
1826—Jefferson and Adams die on the same day, fifty years to the day after July 4, 1776
1836—Madison dies
1861—American Civil War begins
The American novelist and literary critic Ralph Ellison once remarked that, “Whenever we as Americans have faced serious crises we have returned to fundamentals; this, in brief, is what I have tried to do.” Me too. On that gray Wednesday morning after the presidential election of 2016, I woke up with a series of questions: What just happened? What kind of nation do we now have? Is this what was designed or intended by the nation’s founders?

Recalling that the people who made the Revolution and wrote the Constitution had been influenced by the thinkers of the ancient world, I decided to go back to fundamentals. I went to my library and took down Aristotle’s *Politics*, not knowing I was embarking on an intellectual journey that would last four years. Aristotle led me to other political thinkers, and eventually I found myself rereading the Declaration of Independence and other foundational documents.

Before that Tuesday night in November 2016, I had thought I understood my country. But the result of that election shocked me. Clearly, many of my fellow citizens had an understanding of our nation profoundly different from mine. Foremost among them was the new president-elect. I found myself examining my assumptions about this country and its design, not only questioning what the founders had thought but wondering what had shaped their thinking. What did they read, what did they think, what resonated with them? How different were their intellectual influences from today’s? What were they thinking as they constructed this nation? How did we get from
there to here? And where are we going on this ship they designed?

In recent years dozens of wonderful biographies of members of the Revolutionary generation have been published, but they tend to gloss over the educations of those people. The biographers would mention where these people went to college (or didn’t go, as in the case of George Washington) and the names of their tutors, and sometimes would list some of the books they read. But I couldn’t find what they took away from those tutors and books. Who were the men who taught them, and where did they come from? What books influenced them? Where did they get their political ideas, their political vocabularies? What ideas and attitudes would they take from college to adulthood and into the public arenas of Revolutionary America? What ancient works were in their minds as they drafted the Declaration of Independence or debated the Constitution? How does their reliance on Greco-Roman history affect how we live now?

In other words, I embarked on an intellectual quest to try to find my way toward answering a question: *What is America supposed to be, anyway?*

So I read the books they read and the letters they wrote to one another about those books. While much attention has been paid to the influence of Enlightenment thinking on the founders—in particular the writings of John Locke—the fact is that these men did not study Locke as much as they did the writings of the ancient world, Greek and Roman philosophy and literature: the *Iliad, Plutarch’s Lives;* the philosophical explorations of Xenophon, Epicurus, Aristotle; and the political speeches and commentaries of Cato and Cicero. In the course of this I revisited writers I had not considered since I was in high school and college four decades ago, and read some other things I had not encountered back then.

This journey took me a long way in time and space and to unexpected corners, as with the Scottish invention of geology in the late eighteenth century, and into some historical curiosities, such as the importance of Aristotle to the redoubled Southern defense of slavery in the first half of the nineteenth century. Along the way I learned many things to help me better understand my country, both its past and its present. Some of what I learned had been subjects of debate and discussion among scholars for decades. But some of it has been neglected, lying long in a letter or diary here, a military order there, and an obscure academic journal way over there.

I’ve been changed by this journey and seek in this book to share what I’ve learned. Not everyone has the time, opportunity, or inclination to spend
several years in the basements of college libraries reading ancient Roman political speeches or minor Greek philosophers, and then comparing them to the wartime letters of George Washington and the essays of James Madison and Alexander Hamilton. But I did, and I loved every day of it. As I burrowed through the library shelves, I also found my own views of the first four presidents began to shift. George Washington’s ability to observe and learn seems to me underappreciated. James Madison’s contributions, especially his designing gridlock into the American system, also seem to me to be undervalued. John Adams, by contrast, began to strike me as having an inflated reputation in recent years, with insufficient attention paid to his unhelpful commentary during the War for Independence and also his disastrous presidency. Likewise, though raised by my parents to revere Thomas Jefferson, I increasingly found myself disturbed by his habitual avoidance of reality.

Throughout, I marveled at what a rich and paradoxical history this country possesses. We are a nation fundamentally dedicated to equal standing before the law, yet also have developed a political system in which one of the two major parties always seems to have offered a home to white supremacists, up to the present day.

I dwell in these pages on the faults of the founders in part so we can better understand our own. Thus we can try to live up to their aspirations while perhaps avoiding some of their shortcomings. If there is one thing a reader should take away from this book, it is that there is little certain about our nation except that it remains an experiment that requires our serious and sustained attention to thrive.

To my knowledge, no one has written a book addressing these questions before, examining and comparing the educations of George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison. There have been many books about the early lives of each of these men, and there even have been specialized studies of the educations of Washington and Madison. Historians also have produced several illuminating biographical pairings—Jefferson and Adams, Jefferson and Madison, Jefferson and Washington, and so on. But as far as I can tell, there does not exist a study of what our first four presidents learned, where they learned it, who they learned it from, and what they did with that knowledge. That is what I endeavor to explore in this work.

Thus the first part of the book will look at their early lives and educations.
The second section will show how they used what they learned in their political deliberations as they sought independence and designed a new nation. The final chapters explore how the neoclassical culture that shaped them was altered by the powerful forces that emerged in the 1790s and the early nineteenth century, mainly the democratization of American politics and culture, but also the coming of the Industrial Revolution.

I examine them chronologically. I begin with George Washington, who managed to become the exemplar of the classical Roman values that meant so much to elite colonial society. I next turn to John Adams, who cast himself as a modern Cicero, a significant association because the parable of Cicero’s triumph over the Catilinarian conspiracy in 63 BC was the essential political narrative for the Revolutionary generation. I proceed to Thomas Jefferson, the only one in this quartet who favored the Greeks over the Romans, and look at how Jefferson’s Greek-inflected classicism steered him away from Federalism and also provided the philosophy embedded in the Declaration of Independence. Finally I examine James Madison, whose classicism was leavened by a greater cosmopolitanism and an understanding of the limits to which one could rely on what the Romans called virtue, by which they meant public-mindedness.

In the second part of the book, I look at how their classical perspectives were challenged as the American Revolution unfolded. Washington, despite his lack of a classical education, came at different times to embody three of the great Roman role models—Cato, Fabius, and Cincinnatus—while avoiding the temptation of becoming an American version of Julius Caesar. I’ll then show how the paradigm shifted away from virtue at the moment of the maximum classical influence during the writing of the Constitution, and then began to decline along with the Federalist party it inspired, bottoming out with Adams’ failed presidency. Finally I’ll explore the moral and intellectual void that opened as classical ideals yielded in the nineteenth to the rise of religious evangelism and commercial culture, and consider if we might develop a new sense of public-spiritedness in our own time.

This approach leads to some new observations. By looking at the first four presidents collectively and placing them in the classical context, we can see illuminating new patterns and contrasts. For example, it is one thing to read that Jefferson and Madison as young men were influenced by a Scottish tutor, but another to see that Scots again and again played a major role in colonial American education. In fact, those young Scots transmitted to America the
intellectual skepticism and dynamism of the Scottish Enlightenment, which was firmly rooted in classicism, and came even as the English universities of the time were mired in the intellectual doldrums and in fact sat out the Enlightenment. Likewise, Scottish legal thinking was far more rooted in Roman philosophy than was English law, which was more oriented toward local precedent and tradition.

Another case is Madison’s decision to leave Virginia for a college in New Jersey, which becomes more significant when contrasted with the fact that Adams and Jefferson, like most wealthy young men of the time, went to college in their home colonies. Madison chose to travel weeks to attend the most politically radical college in the country, one with a new, explicitly “continental” approach to recruiting its students—and one that was led by a politicized Scottish minister. Understanding the influence of classicism also helps us understand why, for example, George Washington placed such faith in “virtue,” why John Adams held such a fear of “faction,” and why Thomas Jefferson was so determined to give the official buildings of Washington, DC, a feel of ancient Rome.

“Synthesis demands regard for complexity,” Peter Gay cautioned in his colossal two-volume history of the Enlightenment. It is a useful admonition. As I wrote this work of synthesis, roaming across political, cultural, and intellectual aspects of history and literature both in the ancient world and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, I tried to respect the complexities of the matter. So while this book emphasizes the classicism of the Revolutionary generation of Americans, it is not meant to suggest that other narratives—such as the influence of English liberal thought—are incorrect, only that the classical dimension has been underappreciated, especially outside academia. This is important because the more we grasp the influence of the Greco-Roman world on the Revolutionary generation, the better we will understand them and their goals, problems, fears, and mistakes.

I also have tried to hold in mind the ambiguities and to acknowledge the unknowns and the mysteries. There are still aspects of this story that defy explanation. Most notable is that the starting point for the United States is the fundamental contradiction of a slaveholder’s declaring that the basic fact of public life is that all people are created equal. One of the more powerful commentaries on America was the arch question Samuel Johnson posed in 1777: “How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?” It is a question that still hangs in the air more than two centuries
The differences between these men ran deep. Washington absorbed classicism mainly secondhand, from the elite culture of his day. Adams focused on the laws and rhetoric of Rome, especially on the speeches of Cicero, the self-made orator of the first century BC who became a personal model for him as he scrabbled out of a depressing post-college job as a schoolteacher in a Massachusetts backwater. Jefferson delved deeper into classical philosophy than the others did, especially Epicureanism, the philosophy of pursuing happiness and avoiding pain, which (as we shall see) pervades the most significant sections of his Declaration of Independence. Madison was the most academic in his approach, studying the ancient world almost as a political scientist.

They grew into distinctly dissimilar men: Washington a stiff-necked soldier; Adams a brilliant, honest, self-absorbed crank; Jefferson a dreamer of liberty who lived in hypocritical luxury off the sweat of captive humans; Madison already with one foot in the next generation, perhaps more of an American than a Virginian, and an unapologetic politician. Like Alexander Hamilton, he was more skeptical than his elders of the verities of the Enlightenment, with its core faith in human improvement.

And of course each would play an essential role in the formation of the new nation—Washington, above all, in winning the war for independence and becoming the first president; but also Adams, who was a key member of the Continental Congress and then was the first president to carry out a peaceful transfer of power to the political opposition; Jefferson, whose Declaration is one of the nation’s two fundamental documents, and the more inspirational of the two; and Madison, the chief driver of the other foundational document, the Constitution, which not only put forth a set of ideals but was flexible and strong enough to survive as the supreme law of the land for more than 225 years—so far.

Their concentration on the classical world does not decline with each man, but actually intensifies from Washington to Adams to Jefferson to Madison. Washington, as was said, learned about the ancient world mainly by osmosis. It was for him, as for the others, a major part of the intellectual climate of the day, part of daily conversation and writing. Adams delved into classicism intensely but narrowly, mainly because of his ambition to become a great lawyer. Jefferson was broadly interested in classical philosophy and politics, but not always deeply. Madison, in order to prepare for the drafting of the
American Constitution, would spend years engaged in a methodical study of ancient political systems, especially the histories of Greek republics. He was aided greatly by the trunkloads of books shipped to him from Paris by Jefferson. It was partly because of him that the writing of the Constitution became the high-water mark of classical republicanism in America—but also because of him that the pursuit of virtue, the very core of the old viewpoint, was abandoned.

Emphatically, they were not detached philosophers. They were statesmen and revolutionaries, looking to the ancient world for the help it could give them in illuminating their situation. There was an abiding practicality in their approaches. “Their reading in the classics was highly purposeful, adaptive and selective,” notes Meyer Reinhold, one of the pioneer scholars of this topic. Before them, he writes, the classical world was important mainly to colonial Americans preparing to be clergymen. After them, it was used to train members of the elite, especially in law and oratory. But during the middle and later parts of the eighteenth century, the thoughts and stories of the ancient Greeks and Romans stood front and center in American political and intellectual life as the founders grappled with the questions of how to gain independence and then how to form a new nation.