

The Histories

Volume 9 | Issue 1

Article 7

A Review of Ellis' Founding Brothers

Mary Kate Kimiecik

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the_histories



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kimiecik, Mary Kate () "A Review of Ellis' Founding Brothers," *The Histories*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

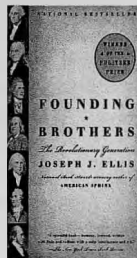
Available at: https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the_histories/vol9/iss1/7

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Scholarship at La Salle University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Histories by an authorized editor of La Salle University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact careyc@lasalle.edu.

Book Review II

Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation

By Joseph J. Ellis



Reviewed by Mary Kate Kimiecik '10

The lives and politics of Abigail and John Adams, Aaron Burr, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and George Washington inspired the work of Mount Holyoke History professor and Pulitzer Prize author Joseph Ellis, who explores the early problems faced by the fragile American nation. The Burr-Hamilton Duel, the secret dinner between Jefferson, Madison and Hamilton, the silence in Congress concerning the slavery issue, Washington's farewell address, John and Abigail's collaboration during Adams' presidency, and the failed friendship of Adams and Jefferson following the Adams' presidency inextricably links the lives and contributions of America's greatest generation of political leaders. The personal relationships of the revolutionary generation sustained America through its volatile early years even when political disagreements occurred. But, by the conclusion of the 1790s, a new generation of American leaders that did not take part in the debates of the revolutionary generation broke into factions, resembling modern political parties, driven by different ideologies.

The Burr-Hamilton Duel is the one exception to Ellis' narrative, for it is chronologically out of order and does not fit the noble standard of behavior assumed by the characters who lead the new American government. The duel occurred on the morning of July 11, 1804, after Hamilton accepted Burr's challenge on the grounds that Hamilton had libeled his name. Although no source can verify who shot first, Burr fatally hit Hamilton with a shot to the abdomen. With the popular consensus being that Burr killed Hamilton "in cold blood," (26) Hamilton was buried a martyr while Burr fled to the western territories, his political career destroyed. The duel is the exception in Ellis' narrative because a "dominant pattern of nonviolent conflict," (39) was momentarily broken. An inextricable link between personal and political agendas led two temperamental men to view violence as the only recourse to preserve the honor they upheld above all else.

Ellis' narrative develops further at Thomas Jefferson's dinner in 1790, which introduced the debates of how to settle the war debt and where to establish the permanent seat of government. Ideological differences held by the leaders concerning the future of America's economy made this question difficult to debate. Hamilton saw America's future in commercial business and developed a plan to promote such practices, while Madison and Jefferson supported an agrarian future and distrusted Hamilton's goals. Speculating and federal assumption of the war debt reminded Jefferson and Madison of the strong central

government they broke from during the early revolution. In the other debate, each state wanted to house the seat of government. Yet, no amount of debate could lead states to compromise on an agreeable region. Through a compromise negotiated between Hamilton and Madison, the desperately needed financial plan was enacted and the long debated "residency question" (69) was resolved in favor of the Virginians on land adjacent to the Potomac River. This allowed for debate on more pressing issues.

The resolution of the assumption plan and the residency question made way for Quaker legislation, supported largely by Ben Franklin, to end the slave trade and the practice of slavery in the United States. Franklin hoped his last contribution to the new nation would reconcile the part of the *Declaration* that stated "all men are created equal." The problem with legislation concerning slavery was that it was unconstitutional; action could not be taken on the slavery issue until 1808. Without this provision, the Constitution would not have been ratified. Beyond this provision, ending slavery was a major problem, because southern states depended on slaves for the cultivation of labor intensive crops. In addition, slaves were property and were passed down from one generation to the next. An insurmountable amount of money would be required to pay southern plantation owners the price for their slaves. Another problem was that once slaves were free, the founders could not decide where they should go. Since there was not an easy answer to these problems, the discussion of freeing the slaves was exhausted quickly in order to preserve the unity of the still fragile nation.

In hopes of preserving the unity created during the early revolutionary era, Washington's Farewell Address of 1796 relays final advice to the nation that viewed him as indispensable. Washington understood the challenges of the new American nation, based on varying interpretations of revolutionary ideology that initially united America's greatest political minds. Alexander Hamilton drafted the address which defined the benefits of a strong federal government and neutrality in issues of foreign policy. In addition, Washington dreamed of creating a national university where men from the different colonies could study – an idea which Hamilton barely discussed. The university would promote unity rather than divisiveness among men from the various colonies, creating a more unified citizenry, like that in the Continental Army towards the end of the war. Washington's advice not only suggested his future vision for America, but also symbolized a peaceful transition of power, for the executive does not serve for life, but an elected term.

By the end of 1796, after Washington announced his final retirement, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson were the two likely successors to the presidency. Adams and Jefferson were polar opposites, but their work throughout the early revolution developed into a collaborative effort that seemed to transcend differences in political ideology. The last two of the revolutionary generation, these two were "a band of brothers" (164) that symbolized the "head and heart of the American Revolution" (164). Unfortunately, the great collaboration divided after Adams assumed the presidency and Jefferson chose to lead the party and the ideology of the opposition. As Jefferson turned to Madison and partisan opposition, Adams looked to the wisdom of Abigail. The final separation of the brotherhood that represented the greatest generation of American thought created factions that were driven by party loyalty rather than personal loyalties and friendships.

Adams viewed Jefferson's decision to lead the Republican opposition as a personal betrayal, since personal and political relationships in the new American government were inextricably linked. In an effort to bring down the federalist opposition, Jefferson had to slander the name of his good friend. While Jefferson seemed able to distinguish between personal and political, that distinction was not clear for Adams or arguably any person other than Jefferson who was politically active before and during the Revolutionary War. While Hamilton was Adams' greatest adversary, Jefferson's betrayal hurt Adams the most.

Although Adams and Jefferson never resorted to violence like Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton, Jefferson's betrayal prevented both individuals from rekindling their strong friendship from the 1770's and 1780's. On their death beds on July 4, 1826, the fiftieth anniversary of the *Declaration of Independence*, each man resented the other for living longer, as both hoped to be the last man that lived the "spirit of '76" (44). Ironically, this title fell to Samuel Chase, a signer from Maryland.

Ellis' book offers a fresh look at some of the problems faced by the leaders of the fragile American experiment. Ellis does not choose traditionally examined events as the basis for his story, for he does not examine the atmosphere of *The Declaration of Independence* or the ratification of the *Constitution*; rather, he strings together moments of history to create a narrative that gives breadth to the problems the early leaders faced. The narrative style adds to the readability of the book and invites the reader to feel like a participant during some of the most tumultuous years of the American nation. Defining moments describe how the Congress faced many problems following the ratification of the Constitution, driven largely by how the two major ideologies, Federalist and Republican, interpreted the *Constitution* and its reflection of sentiments from the *Declaration* and other Revolutionary rhetoric. Assumption of the national debt, the permanent location of the federal government, and the slavery issue were only a few of the major issues debated by the Congress in order to establish a precedent which today's government continues to follow. The work of the early generation of American leaders steered a fragile America from an experiment in republican government to the success it has become in the last two hundred years.

Ray Raphael offers an interesting criticism of Ellis' book as he suggests that Ellis does not credit enough people with the founding of the American nation. Raphael's main argument is that the spirit and thought of the revolution belonged not only to the revolutionary generation, but to the common citizens as well. The revolution was not merely, as Raphael suggests, "the ideas of a few great and learned men". Without the assistance of ordinary citizens who believed and advocated the message of the revolution, Washington would not have had an army and the Continental Congress would not have been able to manufacture the supplies needed by the army. The success of the revolutionary generation derived from the support these representatives received at home from their patriotic constituents.

While Raphael makes excellent points and argues in favor of the revolution as a collective effort of all classes of American society, he misses the point of Ellis's book. Ellis would likely agree with Raphael that the success of early America was a collective effort by the ordinary citizens since he views the successes of the governing body as a collective effort of all members involved. By choosing a few key members and seemingly unimportant events in early American history, he is able to speak volumes about the collective effort required to maintain the fragile American nation.

Ellis explores the roles of the leaders of the revolutionary generation since they made the groundbreaking decisions that paved the way for future generations. They organized and gave life to the patriotism and independence that Americans of all classes cherished and continue to cherish today. These leaders orchestrated America's future like Paul Revere who organized signs with local Massachusetts' town leaders or George Washington who led and made strategic movements with the Continental Army. While Washington was arguably the only indispensable figure of the American Revolutionary era, the revolutionary generation, as a whole, is arguably indispensable to the future success of the United States. Without their ability to compromise, the United States may have broken apart from irresolvable debates as quickly as it became united.

Unlike the aristocracies of Europe, the leaders of early America were not born to their positions. While the men who led the country were white men of privilege that had access to education, lack of fortune or education did not eliminate certain individuals, for Franklin and Hamilton came from poor families and Washington was largely self educated. As Ellis asserts throughout his work, no other age of political leaders can match the talent of the leaders during the 1770s through to 1800. As leaders like Washington and Franklin died, leaders like Madison carried America to its future. While Madison's partisan ideology largely differs from the unified brotherhood, exemplified in the collaboration between Adams and Jefferson, Madison's view of partisan politics provides a more realistic future for the new nation, for the debates inspired by parties with different ideological interpretations of the "spirit of '76" will allow the political bodies well into the future to solve problems faced by a nation that continues to have great potential.

Publisher: First Vintage Books Edition

Number of Pages: 278.

Year: 2002

Genre: American History

Price: \$28.95