

JOSEPH
J. ELLIS

Founding Brothers

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Founding Brothers

THE REVOLUTIONARY GENERATION

JOSEPH J. ELLIS



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American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson

Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams

After the Revolution: Profiles of Early American Culture

School for Soldiers: West Point and the Profession of Arms
(with Robert Moore)

The New England Mind in Transition

Founding Brothers

For Ellen



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THE IDEA that gives this book its shape first came to mind while rereading a mischievous little classic by Lytton Strachey entitled *Eminent Victorians*. My problem, at least as I understood it at that early stage, was a matter of scope and scale. I wanted to write a modest-sized account of a massive historical subject, wished to recover a seminal moment in American history without tripping over the dead bodies of my many scholarly predecessors, hoped to render human and accessible that generation of political leaders customarily deified and capitalized as Founding Fathers.

Eminent Victorians made Strachey famous for the sophistication of his prejudices—his title was deeply ironic—but I want to thank him for giving me the courage of mine. His animating idea, a combination of stealth and selectivity, was that less could be more. “It is not by the direct method of scrupulous narration,” Strachey wrote,

that the explorer of the past can hope to depict a singular epoch. If he is wise, he will adopt a subtler strategy. He will attack his subject in unexpected places; he will fall upon the flank and rear; he will shoot a sudden revealing searchlight into obscure recesses, hitherto undivined. He will row out over the great ocean of material, and lower down into it, here and there, a little bucket, which will bring up to the light of day some characteristic specimen, from those far depths, to be examined with a careful curiosity.

Acknowledgments

With this model in mind, I rowed out over the great ocean of material generated in the founding era of American nationhood, lowered my little bucket as far down as my rope could reach, then made sense out of the characteristic specimens I hoisted up with as much storytelling skill as my imagination allowed.

The characteristic specimens were drawn from that rich depository of published letters and documents generated by scholarly editors over the past half-century. Like everyone else who has tried to make sense out of America's revolutionary generation, I am deeply indebted to the modern editions of their papers. The endnotes reflect my dependence on specific collections, but let me record here a more comprehensive appreciation for the larger project of preservation and publication that, thanks to federal and private funding, permit us to recover the story of America's founding in all its messy grandeur.

As soon as I had drafted a chapter, I sent it out for criticism to fellow scholars with specialized knowledge about the issues raised in that particular story. The following colleagues saved me from countless blunders: Richard Brookhiser, Andrew Burstein, Robert Dalzell, David Brion Davis, Joanne Freeman, Donald Higginbotham, Pauline Maier, Louis Mazur, Philip Morgan, Peter Onuf, and Gordon Wood. As anyone familiar with the historical profession can attest, I had the benefit of criticism from some of the best minds in the business. What I chose to do with it, of course, remains my responsibility.

Three friends and mentors read the entire manuscript and offered substantive or stylistic suggestions on the book as a whole: Eric McKittrick, who knows more about the political culture of the early republic than anyone else; Edmund Morgan, who first taught me to do American history and still does it better than anyone else; Stephen Smith, whose current position as editor of *U.S. News and World Report* somewhat conceals his calling as the sharpest pencil inside or outside the beltway.

The entire manuscript was handwritten in ink, not with a quill but with a medium-point rollerball pen. The art of deciphering my scrawl and transcribing the words onto a disk fell first to Helen Canney, who worked with me on three previous books but was taken away at an early stage of this one. Holly Sharac picked up where she left off without missing a beat.

My agent, Gerald McCauley, handled the contractual intricacies of

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publication and then became a one-man cheering section on the sidelines. Ashbel Green, my editor at Knopf, lived up to his reputation as the salt of the earth. His able assistant, Asya Muchnick, supervised the editing process with a hard eye and a soft heart.

My older sons, Peter and Scott, drifted to different ends of the earth while these pages filled up. My youngest son, Alexander, doodled in the margins of several pages while practicing his own handwriting. Taken together, my children served as models for the affectionate rivalry that is brotherhood.

My wife endured the vacant stares of a partner whose physical presence belied the mental absence of an author living back there in the eighteenth century. For that, but not for that alone, she deserves the dedication offered at the start.

Joseph J. Ellis
Amherst, Massachusetts

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joseph J. Ellis is the Ford Foundation Professor of History at Mount Holyoke College. Educated at the College of William and Mary and Yale University, he served as a captain in the army and taught at West Point before going to Mount Holyoke in 1972. He was dean of the faculty there for ten years.

He is the author of five previous books: *The New England Mind in Transition*; *School for Soldiers: West Point and the Profession of Arms* (with Robert Moore); *After the Revolution: Profiles of Early American Culture*; *Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams*; and *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson*.

The author lives in Amherst, Massachusetts, with his wife, Ellen, and their three sons.

A NOTE ON THE TYPE

This book was set in Adobe Garamond. Designed for the Adobe Corporation by Robert Slimbach, the fonts are based on types first cut by Claude Garamond (c. 1480–1561). Garamond was a pupil of Geoffroy Tory and is believed to have followed the Venetian models, although he introduced a number of important differences, and it is to him that we owe the letter we now know as “old style.” He gave to his letters a certain elegance and feeling of movement that won their creator an immediate reputation and the patronage of Francis I of France.

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Founding Brothers

PREFACE

The Generation

NO EVENT in American history which was so improbable at the time has seemed so inevitable in retrospect as the American Revolution. On the inevitability side, it is true there were voices back then urging prospective patriots to regard American independence as an early version of manifest destiny. Tom Paine, for example, claimed that it was simply a matter of common sense that an island could not rule a continent. And Thomas Jefferson's lyrical rendering of the reasons for the entire revolutionary enterprise emphasized the self-evident character of the principles at stake.

Several other prominent American revolutionaries also talked as if they were actors in a historical drama whose script had already been written by the gods. In his old age, John Adams recalled his youthful intimations of the providential forces at work: "There is nothing . . . more ancient in my memory," he wrote in 1807, "than the observation that arts, sciences, and empire had always travelled westward. And in conversation it was always added, since I was a child, that their next leap would be over the Atlantic into America." Adams instructed his beloved Abigail to start saving all his letters even before the outbreak of the war for independence. Then in June of 1776, he purchased "a Folio Book" to preserve copies of his entire correspondence in order to record, as he put it, "the great Events which are passed, and those greater which are rapidly advancing." Of course we tend to remember only the prophets who turn out to be right, but there does seem to have

been a broadly shared sense within the revolutionary generation that they were “present at the creation.”¹

These early premonitions of American destiny have been reinforced and locked into our collective memory by the subsequent triumph of the political ideals the American Revolution first announced, as Jefferson so nicely put it, “to a candid world.” Throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America, former colonies of European powers have won their independence with such predictable regularity that colonial status has become an exotic vestige of bygone days, a mere way station for emerging nations. The republican experiment launched so boldly by the revolutionary generation in America encountered entrenched opposition in the two centuries that followed, but it thoroughly vanquished the monarchical dynasties of the nineteenth century and then the totalitarian despotisms of the twentieth, just as Jefferson predicted it would. Though it seems somewhat extreme to declare, as one contemporary political philosopher has phrased it, that “the end of history” is now at hand, it is true that all alternative forms of political organization appear to be fighting a futile rearguard action against the liberal institutions and ideas first established in the United States in the late eighteenth century. At least it seems safe to say that some form of representative government based on the principle of popular sovereignty and some form of market economy fueled by the energies of individual citizens have become the commonly accepted ingredients for national success throughout the world. These legacies are so familiar to us, we are so accustomed to taking their success for granted, that the era in which they were born cannot help but be remembered as a land of foregone conclusions.²

Despite the confident and providential statements of leaders like Paine, Jefferson, and Adams, the conclusions that look so foregone to us had yet to congeal for them. The old adage applies: Men make history, and the leading members of the revolutionary generation realized they were doing so, but they can never know the history they are making. We can look back and make the era of the American Revolution a center point, then scan the terrain upstream and downstream, but they can only know what is downstream. An anecdote that Benjamin Rush, the Philadelphia physician and signer of the Declaration of Independence, liked to tell in his old age makes the point memorably. On July 4, 1776, just after the Continental Congress had finished making

its revisions of the Declaration and sent it off to the printer for publication, Rush overheard a conversation between Benjamin Harrison of Virginia and Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts: "I shall have a great advantage over you, Mr. Gerry," said Harrison, "when we are all hung for what we are now doing. From the size and weight of my body I shall die in a few minutes, but from the lightness of your body you will dance in the air an hour or two before you are dead." Rush recalled that the comment "procured a transient smile, but it was soon succeeded by the solemnity with which the whole business was conducted."³

Based on what we now know about the military history of the American Revolution, if the British commanders had prosecuted the war more vigorously in its earliest stages, the Continental Army might very well have been destroyed at the start and the movement for American independence nipped in the bud. The signers of the Declaration would then have been hunted down, tried, and executed for treason, and American history would have flowed forward in a wholly different direction.⁴

In the long run, the evolution of an independent American nation, gradually developing its political and economic strength over the nineteenth century within the protective constraints of the British Empire, was probably inevitable. This was Paine's point. But that was not the way history happened. The creation of a separate American nation occurred suddenly rather than gradually, in revolutionary rather than evolutionary fashion, the decisive events that shaped the political ideas and institutions of the emerging state all taking place with dynamic intensity during the last quarter of the eighteenth century. No one present at the start knew how it would turn out in the end. What in retrospect has the look of a foreordained unfolding of God's will was in reality an improvisational affair in which sheer chance, pure luck—both good and bad—and specific decisions made in the crucible of specific military and political crises determined the outcome. At the dawn of a new century, indeed a new millennium, the United States is now the oldest enduring republic in world history, with a set of political institutions and traditions that have stood the test of time. The basic framework for all these institutions and traditions was built in a sudden spasm of enforced inspiration and makeshift construction during the final decades of the eighteenth century.

If hindsight enhances our appreciation for the solidity and stability