The

FOUNDERS

and the

CLASSICS

GREECE, ROME, *and the* AMERICAN ENLIGHTENMENT

CARL J. RICHARD

The Founders and the Classics

Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment

Carl J. Richard

Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England

Printed in the United States of America
Fourth printing, 1996

First Harvard University Press paperback edition, 1995

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Richard, Carl J.
The founders and the classics : Greece, Rome, and the American enlightenment / Carl J. Richard.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.
ISBN 0–674–31425–5 (cloth)
ISBN 0–674–31426–3 (pbk.)
1. Political science—United States—History—18th century.
2. Political science—Greece—History. 3. Political science—Rome—History. I. Title.
JA84.U5R48 1994
320—dc20
93–28468
CIP

Preface

In this work the "founders" are defined as prominent late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century American leaders, excluding loyalists. By such a definition the term includes Antifederalist leaders. The "classics" are defined as Greek and Roman writings (both in their original languages and in translation) and art, excluding Christian artifacts. The classical tradition and the Christian heritage are treated as distinct, though overlapping, legacies which the founders interwove to form a unique cosmology.

No accomplishment of any worth is ever made by a single person alone. In the words of the Greek maxim, "One man is no man." I must begin by thanking Richard Cusimano, my undergraduate Greek teacher. Although I subsequently specialized in American intellectual history, the classics became my favorite pastime. Richard M. Gummere, Meyer Reinhold, and the other pioneering scholars of the classical influence lighted my path. Without them, I would have stumbled in the darkness. Samuel T. McSeveney and Joyce Chaplin reviewed an early draft of this book. Jack P. Greene and Meyer Reinhold critiqued a paper, extracted from the work, concerning the classics and the U.S. Constitution. Forrest McDonald, Jennifer Tolbert Roberts, and James Broussard commented insightfully on a paper containing my principal conclusions. Lance Banning, James H. Dormon, and Jim Williams contributed helpful advice during the later stages of this work. Thomas McGinn was frequently willing to drop his own work in order to substantially improve mine. Ann Hawthorne contributed her considerable editorial skills to the book's improvement. Ramona Abshire provided valuable aid in proofreading. Carl Brasseaux's computer assistance proved essential. I thank the *Journal of the Early Republic* for permission to use the substance of a

1989 article, "A Dialogue with the Ancients: Thomas Jefferson and Classical Philosophy and History," in Chapter VI and throughout this volume. I thank Senator Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia, a lover of Roman history, for two astute corrections to the first printing.

I owe the greatest debt of gratitude to my Vanderbilt mentors in American intellectual history and the classics, Paul K. Conkin and Susan Ford Wiltshire, who embody all that is good in their respective disciplines. It was incredible good fortune (the Fates?) which brought me to their tutelage. They have given me what the founders valued most in the classics, models of excellence.

Contents

Introduction

It is a surprising fact that this is the first book-length study of the founders' classical reading. Although historians of the founders have often alluded to the influence of "classical republicanism," they have seldom focused much attention upon individual ancients and their relationship to the founders' thought. Carl Becker's "Jeremiah Wynkoop," his composite of the Revolutionary American, exulted in the classics. Merle Curti described the classics as both "a practical tool and a badge of gentility," providing the founders with "lessons of patriotism and statesmanship, models of pure taste in writing, and personal solace and inspiration." C. Dewitt Hardy and Richard Hofstadter noted the privileged position of the classics in eighteenth-century education. Howard Mumford Jones considered the classics a formative influence on American culture. Henry Steele Commager credited the classics with helping Revolutionary Virginia produce George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, George Mason, George Wythe, John Marshall, and other great men. Commager claimed: "Intellectually, the founding fathers knew the ancient world better perhaps than they knew the European or even the British world, better, in all likelihood, than they knew the American outside their own section." Yet despite their enthusiasm for the idea of classical influence, these historians provided little detail concerning its origin and nature. Other historians addressed some of these questions in pioneering articles and essays, many of which were thoughtful, provocative, and original. But, however elegant and essential, these works remained isolated pieces of a larger puzzle, scattered strands capable of being woven into a larger fabric.[1]

Only Clinton Rossiter and Bernard Bailyn dissented from the view that the classics had exerted a formative influence upon the founders. In

Seedtime of the Republic (1953) Rossiter argued: "Most authors used the ancient Greeks for window dressing . . . The Americans would have believed just as vigorously in public morality had Cato and the Gracchi never lived." In the pathbreaking *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967) Bailyn agreed that eighteenth-century American leaders had used the classics as mere "window dressing." He concluded that the classics were "illustrative, not determinative, of thought." Bailyn cited Charles F. Mullett for the term "window dressing," neglecting to note that Mullett had applied it only to a few isolated instances. Mullett had emphasized the numerous cases in which the classics had exerted real influence.[2]

While the source of Rossiter's judgment is obscure, Bailyn's conclusion can be traced to two faulty assumptions. One was that the founders were entirely dependent upon seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century British Whigs for their interpretation of ancient history, because their own classical learning was "superficial." But there is abounding evidence that Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, James Madison, James Wilson, John Dickinson, Patrick Henry, and numerous other founders read and interpreted classical works for themselves. Second, Bailyn assumed that the Whig interpretation of ancient history was entirely their own creation. But in fact this interpretation was largely (though not entirely) the creation of Greek and Roman historians, nostalgic aristocrats disgruntled by monarchical and democratic encroachments upon the power of their class. Fixtures in the classical canon which had dominated the western world since the Middle Ages, these classical historians were virtually the sole source of knowledge concerning ancient history available in the eighteenth century. Although Bailyn was correct to recognize the founders' intellectual debt to the Whigs, who had influenced American perceptions of classical thought through the emphasis of certain themes and the transformation of others, he failed to recognize the Whigs' vast intellectual debt to the ancients. The founders knew well the fountainhead where the Whigs drew their water, having spent most of their childhood filling their own buckets there. But, constrained by the presupposition that the founders could approach the ancients only through the Whigs, Bailyn had no reason to examine the founders' classical reading. The thoroughness and originality which characterized his treatment of the British Whig tradition were absent from his analysis of the role of the classics in the founders' intellectual lives.

Gordon S. Wood and Joyce O. Appleby have since established a new

paradigm, which has restored the significance of classical influence to the Revolutionary era. But Wood and Appleby add that the early national period witnessed a shift from "classical republicanism," which emphasized civic duty and social cohesion, to "liberalism" (or "modern republicanism"), which stressed individual rights and the self-regulating marketplace. In *The Creation of the American Republic* (1969) Wood claims that Revolutionary classicism "was not only a scholarly ornament of educated Americans; it helped to shape their values and their ideals of behavior." But in the same work Wood concludes that the ratification of the Constitution marked the "end of classical politics." Similarly, in *Capitalism and a New Social Order* (1984) and *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (1992), Appleby argues that American ideology during the Revolutionary and Constitutional eras combined classical and liberal elements. During the early national period, however, the economic opportunities which the Napoleonic Wars afforded American farmers provided the material basis for the triumph of liberalism. The tremendous demand for grain in war-torn Europe lured American farmers even farther into the marketplace, prompting a new confidence in the ability of nature to regulate human behavior without government interference. Jeffersonian Republicans were not romantics, wedded to the pastoral tradition, but rationalists, confident of progress through individual effort. They looked forward, not backward. Appleby writes concerning this shift from classical republicanism to liberalism: "Necessity was the mother of this intellectual invention in part because classical republicanism offered only a language for lamenting, as opposed to understanding, commerce." Again, these historians' scant treatment of the founders' classical reading contrasts sharply with the boldness of their statements concerning classical republicanism and with the true brilliance with which both deal with other matters.[3]

Not until classicists entered the field, contributing provocative articles and essay collections, was there any attempt at a comprehensive analysis of the founders' classical reading. The most thorough of these works is Meyer Reinhold's *Classica Americana* (1984), a survey of the classical tradition throughout American history. Reinhold's chapters on the eighteenth century represent the best attempt yet at an exploration of the founders' relationship with the classics. Yet even he is too inclined to accept the new paradigm. He contrasts the Revolutionary and Constitutional eras, which he terms the "golden age" of the classics in America, with the early national period, which he dubs the "silver age." Reinhold

concludes: "Belief in a morally better society after the classical pattern, which had no deep roots in America, began to wither rapidly after 1789. The classical models and classical political theory had served useful purposes in the crisis of the independence movement and the forging of the Constitution. They were now to be jettisoned. The retreat from antiquity and disenchantment with the ancient guidelines were in full swing in the early national period. The ancient world was losing its bloom as an absolute standard for testing modern political innovations." Reinhold's only evidence for this conclusion consists of some reformers' unsuccessful efforts to remove the Greek and Latin requirements from the schools and a few ambiguous statements made by Thomas Jefferson. Oddly, much of Reinhold's own research concerning the continued vibrancy of the classics during the early national period refutes his conclusion. It is conceivable that Reinhold, who is acutely aware of some American historians' skepticism concerning the classical influence, has overreacted against the tendency of his predecessor, classicist Richard M. Gummere, to overemphasize such influences. Though justly acclaimed for its pioneering efforts, Gummere's collection of essays, *The American Colonial Mind and the Classical Tradition* (1963), had tended to ascribe direct influence to every classical allusion. While expressing admiration for Gummere's contributions, Reinhold adds that Gummere went too far. But, in my opinion, Reinhold's determination to avoid overstating classical influence has led him to understate it.[4]

J. G. A. Pocock, Lance Banning, and Drew R. McCoy have led an assault against the new paradigm, extending classical republicanism into the early national period. In *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975) Pocock reasserts the primacy of classical republican ideology in the founders' intellectual lives. The founders derived their political thought from the British Whigs, who had inherited it from the Florentines. Indeed, in an article published three years earlier, Pocock had characterized the American Revolution less as the first great act of liberalism than as "the last great act of the Renaissance." In the same article he had drawn a parallel between the "Country-Court" struggles of seventeenth-century Britain, which had pitted the classically oriented Whig opposition against the supporters of the monarchy, and the Republican-Federalist disputes of the 1790s. In *The Jeffersonian Persuasion* (1978) Banning makes even greater efforts to demonstrate the influence of classical republicanism on the polemics of the 1790s. Banning believes that classical politics continued until the end of the First Party System in 1815. In *The Elusive Repub-*

lic (1980) McCoy ascribes Thomas Jefferson's determination to expand the nation to classical pastoralism, which maintained that only an agricultural lifestyle could produce the virtue necessary to societal happiness. By forestalling landlessness among an exploding population, Jefferson believed, geographical expansion could prevent the otherwise inevitable degeneration and corruption of society predicted by classical texts. But like Bailyn, these historians continue to subordinate direct classical influence to that of the Whig mediators. Consequently, they devote as little attention to the founders' classical reading as their predecessors.[5]

The strict dichotomy between classical republicanism and liberalism which has dominated Revolutionary and early republican historiography for the past generation undervalues the complexity of the relationship between the two intellectual constructs, underestimates the human propensity for inconsistency, and ignores the contribution of Christianity to the founders' thought. Although classical republicanism and liberalism are two distinct constructs, the former ideology provided the latter's intellectual foundation. The Stoic theory of natural law and the optimistic view of human nature from which it derived gave birth to the modern doctrines of natural rights and social progress which undergird liberalism. Bolstered by the Scientific and Commercial Revolutions, modern republicans drew radical social implications from the theory of natural law—implications which would have astounded the theory's creators. Furthermore, the classical pastoral tradition was partially responsible for the growth of that laissez-faire economics which so distinguished liberalism from classical republicanism. Economists like the French Physiocrats and Adam Smith sought free trade partly as a means of neutralizing mercantilist threats to an agricultural lifestyle to which they were emotionally attached. However rational their arguments concerning the greater productivity of agriculture, laissez-faire economists often exhibited a strong devotion to classical authors who preached that agriculture was essential to the creation of societal virtue. In addition, since one of the chief elements of "classical virtue" was an independent cast of mind, it sometimes served as the inspiration for anticlassical ideas. The founders knew that intellectual independence had been a defining characteristic of their Greek and Roman heroes, who had formulated the revolutionary theories of popular sovereignty, natural law, and mixed government and had defended them against the rampant absolutism of the ancient world. Ironically, emulating the intellectual independence of such heroes sometimes involved rejecting their theories for more liberal doctrines. Classi-

cal republicanism was, in many ways, the parent of liberalism. The birth of liberalism was messy, painful, and debilitating to the parent. Liberalism has since reached a hardy old age and seems destined to outlive even its own prodigal son, Marxism. Whether it will serve as parent to yet another ideology remains to be seen.

The neat dichotomy between classical republicanism and liberalism also masks the notorious inconsistency of humans, who have always proven quite capable of holding contradictory views simultaneously. The founders wandered the unmarked borderlands between classical republicanism and liberalism, scavenging for building materials. The specific materials selected on each foray depended upon the nature of the problem at hand and upon the mood of the scavenger, which helped determine the scavenger's perception of the nature of the problem. While humans are attracted to intellectual systems, because they bring meaning to the puzzling complexity of the world, static concepts cannot reflect their many moods. Hence, even the wariest and most systematic philosophers will occasionally be captured off the grounds of their favorite systems. This principle holds especially true for educated laymen, like the founders, whose knowledge gave them the building materials for many different intellectual constructs, but who were not as obedient to the rules of geometric construction as formal philosophers.

The founders' susceptibility to inconsistency was further enhanced by the tremendous turmoil their generation experienced. During their lifetime, American society was transformed by the effects of the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, the Financial Revolution, the Commercial Revolution, the two Great Awakenings, the American Revolution, the spate of state and federal constitutions, the Industrial Revolution, and the transition to representative democracy. Since the concepts embodied in each of the founders' ideologies were necessarily abstract and static, like those of all cosmologies, none could explain a world in rapid transition to the complete satisfaction of these multifaceted individuals. Hence, the intellectual scavenging endemic to humans reached a fever pitch in the founders' age. Historians distort the past when they dismiss either the founders' classical republican dicta or their liberal pronouncements, which may be cited in equal abundance, for the sake of maintaining inviolate categories. Categories are important tools for reducing the vast and varied totality of experience to some meaning, but since they do so by eliminating contradictory information, they should not be considered a photograph of reality. To insist that the founders

were always hopeful or always fearful, that they were always rational or always romantic, that they always looked forward or always backward—or to deny the significance of one or the other of these moods and tendencies and its corresponding ideology—is unrealistic.

Finally, the classical republican–liberal dichotomy ignores the contribution of Christianity to the founders' thought. Although many of the founders held unorthodox religious views, they sometimes interpreted classical virtue in a Christian light. They also retained purely Christian beliefs in positive benevolence and the afterlife.

Indeed, historians of the founders are beginning to demonstrate a greater appreciation for the complexity of their thought. As early as 1986 Lance Banning concluded: "It should be evident that Appleby and her opponents have all grasped portions of important truths, that all have been incautious, and that insights from both camps must be combined for further progress. As things now stand, the literature appears to force a choice between mutually exclusive interpretations of Jeffersonian ideology—a choice we do not really have to make, and one that would impede a better understanding." Similarly, in *New Order of the Ages* (1988) Michael Lienesch contends: "The truth lies somewhere in between. That is, in the late eighteenth century, American political thought was in transition, moving from classical republicanism to modern liberalism. Yet the transition was inconclusive, neither clear nor complete, and the result was a hybrid mixture that combined republican and liberal themes in a creative but uneasy collaboration." While Gordon Wood continues to emphasize the emergence of liberalism in post-Revolutionary American society in *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (1992), he also demonstrates the persistence of classical republican values, particularly among the founders' generation and aristocratic class. Likewise, while Paul A. Rahe's magisterial *Republics, Ancient and Modern* (1992) stresses the liberal character of the founders' thought, he recognizes the classical elements in their ideology as well: "Where American historians debate whether the regime produced by the American Revolution was republican or liberal, ancient or modern, or simply confused, I argue that it was a deliberately contrived mixture of sorts—liberal and modern, first of all, but in its insistence that to vindicate human dignity one must demonstrate man's capacity for self-government, republican and classical as well."[6]

It is my contention that the classics exerted a formative influence upon the founders, both directly and through the mediation of Whig and

American perspectives. The classics supplied mixed government theory, the principal basis for the U.S. Constitution. The classics contributed a great deal to the founders' conception of human nature, their understanding of the nature and purpose of virtue, and their appreciation of society's essential role in its production. The classics offered the founders companionship and solace, emotional resources necessary for coping with the deaths and disasters so common in their era. The classics provided the founders with a sense of identity and purpose, assuring them that their exertions were part of a grand universal scheme. The struggles of the Revolutionary and Constitutional periods gave the founders a sense of kinship with the ancients, a thrill of excitement at the opportunity to match their classical heroes' struggles against tyranny and their sage construction of durable republics.

In short, the classics supplied a large portion of the founders' intellectual tools. It is true that, when confronted with unprecedented dilemmas, the founders hammered the old tools into a variety of new shapes, often without fully appreciating the extent of their modifications. But just as minds constantly reshape intellectual tools, such tools leave an indelible imprint upon the minds accustomed to using them. The founders' very interpretations of the new dilemmas they faced were often quintessentially classical. Steeped in a literature whose perpetual theme was the steady encroachment of tyranny upon liberty, they became virtually obsessed with spotting the early warning signs of impending tyranny, so that they might avoid the fate of their classical heroes. They learned from the political horror stories of the ancient historians that liberty was as precarious as it was precious—precarious because cunning individuals were constantly conspiring against it, precious because virtue could not survive its demise. Tyranny was the worst fate not so much because it deprived one of liberty, as because it deprived one of virtue. The corrupting effects of living in tyranny—the dehumanizing sycophancy and the degrading collaboration necessary to avoid the tyrant's bad graces—were more abhorrent and disgusting than the oppression itself. While the obsessive fear of conspiracies which the founders derived from the classics served them well in the struggle against George III, it poisoned their postwar relations with one another. The theory that there were always talented and ambitious people plotting against liberty was an intellectual tool that could cut both ways.

The founders' thought never lost the imprint of their classical tools. Indeed, most never stopped reading the classics, relishing the gift of time

granted by retirement to reacquaint themselves with their ancient friends. Far from presaging an end to classical republicanism, the very obsolescence of certain tools, like mixed government theory, required a return to the tool kit. While Federalists remained attached to mixed government, Republicans reached for the equally worn and revered tool of classical pastoralism. Republicans comforted themselves with the idea that the United States could safely adopt a democracy, however vilified by classical political theorists, since the abundance of land allowed for a citizenry of Virgilian farmers. The fact that the ideals of mixed government and classical pastoralism were myths which had originated in the prejudices of ancient aristocrats was lost on the founders. Whatever their origin, these ideals had taken on a life of their own. The existence of one classical tool made possible the relinquishment of another. Old myths became the essential catalysts for the production of new realities. People will rarely brave the cold uncertainty of new realities without the warm comfort of old myths.

It is true that the founders used "classical tools" of a more modern origin as well. But they did not segregate their Greco-Roman, Whig, and colonial American tools in separately marked boxes, as modern historians are inclined to do. In viewing these traditions as one, the "tradition of liberty," the founders were partly correct. The classics had provided the British Whigs with most of their ideas and many of their supporting examples. Even the Whig concept of natural rights, which served as the principal bridge between classical republicanism and modern liberalism, was not entirely unknown to, though rarely pursued by, the ancients themselves. Although the Greeks and Romans had emphasized civic duties over individual rights, they had also acknowledged the right of society to be free from arbitrary government, an idea revolutionary for its day and fraught with (then unpursued) implications for the individual. The founders viewed the American experience (including their own experiences) through the same classically based prism. Free from the stain of feudalism and possessed of abundant land, American society was uniquely capable of translating classical ideals into reality. The ancients, the Whigs, and the founders were bound together by the strong fibers of a common tradition, though each clung to a different strand of it.

The principal means by which the classical heritage was transmitted from one generation to the next was the educational system, a standardized system which had originated in the Middle Ages. The classical

canon established in the schools remained virtually unchanged from era to era and nation to nation throughout the western world. Standardization possessed two advantages. First, it provided a stable basis for awarding status. Classical knowledge, including a facility with classical symbols, was a badge denoting class, taste, wisdom, and virtue. Ironically, as American wealth and social mobility increased, the aristocratic classics became a means by which the rising middle class could acquire social status. By appropriating what had previously been purely aristocratic symbols, middle-class figures like John Adams gained social acceptance, and through it, political power. In the process, however, the middle class imbibed the aristocratic fears of democracy common in classical texts, as well as the religious rationalism of the classical philosophers. The canon's ancient lineage inhibited the founders' critical instincts. They accepted the accuracy of these select sources as an article of faith and remained largely oblivious to the literature's aristocratic and other biases. The existence of a canon also discouraged the publication of classical works outside the canon, making it difficult for the founders to escape its confines. Since modern archaeology was still in its infancy, there was no source of information regarding the ancient world other than these meager volumes and a few modern histories similarly lacking in skepticism. Yet the founders possessed a firm command of, and a zealous devotion to, those works fortunate enough to be included in the western canon.

Second, by supplying a common set of symbols, knowledge, and ideas, the classical canon facilitated discourse. Eighteenth-century authors and orators who referred to Helvidius Priscus could be as confident of creating a certain image in the minds of their audience as the modern American writer or speaker who refers to George Washington. The canon exerted as great a homogenizing influence as that often ascribed to television today. Even those who fell outside the realm of formal education could not escape this form of social conditioning. Indeed, men who lacked formal education frequently proved even more eager to demonstrate their classical knowledge in order to secure status. Social conditioning left many unable to imagine the teaching of virtue independent of the teaching of the classics and, hence, made the transmission of the classical heritage an urgent concern.

To reassert the founders' direct connection to the works of antiquity, as this book seeks to do, is neither to deny the influence of their Whig intermediaries nor to question the impact of liberal and Christian doctrines upon their thought. It is, rather, to attempt to uncover the means

by which the founders mediated between these diverse perspectives. If the attempt reveals founders who were sometimes inconsistent, opportunistic, confused, or inaccurate, it will merely demonstrate their shared humanity with our own generation. Indeed, it is a great comfort to know that humans who were often as confused as ourselves, and who faced problems of equal complexity and terror as our own, built a record of achievement so stunning that they long commanded a degree of awe and reverence usually reserved for the divine.

The organization of this book is designed to elucidate the origins and nature of the various classical influences. The work begins by examining classical conditioning in the eighteenth century, particularly through the educational system. It then explores the founders' various uses of the classics, including their utilization of classical symbolism, models, "anti-models," mixed government theory, pastoralism, and philosophy. It concludes by examining the evidence which Meyer Reinhold has presented for the decline of classical influence in the early national period, demonstrating that Benjamin Franklin, Benjamin Rush, Thomas Paine, and other reputed critics of the classics were, at worst, ambivalent toward the classics and that fierce resistance blocked even their most modest attempts at educational reform.