



To Begin the World Anew: The Genius and Ambiguities of the American Founders

Bernard Bailyn

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With these character sketches of key figures of the American Revolution and illuminating probes of its circumstances, Bernard Bailyn reveals the ambiguities, complexities, and uncertainties of the founding generation as well as their achievements.

Using visual documentation—portraits, architecture, allegorical engravings—as well as written sources, Bailyn, one of our most esteemed historians, paints a complex picture of that distant but still remarkably relevant world. He explores the powerfully creative effects of the Founders' provincialism and lays out in fine detail the mingling of gleaming utopianism and tough political pragmatism in Thomas Jefferson's public career, and the effect that ambiguity had on his politics, political thought, and present reputation. And Benjamin Franklin emerges as a figure as cunning in his management of foreign affairs and of his visual image as he was amiable, relaxed, and amusing in his social life.

Bailyn shows, too, why it is that the Federalist papers—polemical documents thrown together frantically, helter-skelter, by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay in a fierce political battle two hundred years ago—have attained canonical status, not only as a penetrating analysis of the American Constitution but as a timeless commentary on the nature of politics and constitutionalism.

Professor Bailyn concludes, in a wider perspective, with an effort to locate the effect of the Founders' imaginative thought on political reformers throughout the Atlantic world. Precisely how their principles were received abroad, Bailyn writes, is as ambiguous as the personalities of the remarkably creative provincials who founded the American nation.

To Begin the World Anew: The Genius and Ambiguities of the American Founders Details

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Brian says

Reading more about the process from which the American Constitution emerged is one of my new resolutions. Bernard Bailyn and Edward S. Corwin are two writers whose work I know has been routinely admired in the recent half-century, thus I start with them.

Bailyn's work here is quite eclectic, from theoretical rumination to multimedia symbolic interpretation (his discussion of the various busts of Franklin was fascinating), but he is always respectfully restrained, never hyperbolic or inflammatory, and thus able to transmit calm reflection and consideration, habits of mind it seems lacking in the public discussion about the nature of our democracy that prevails in contemporary America.

I will add some of his other titles to my list of "to read."

David Eppenstein says

I am a avid reader of history and I'm especially interested in our American and constitutional history. Saying that I must report that this book was pretty thin, literally and figuratively, on both of those subjects. I cannot say that I found my knowledge of the events or concepts discussed to have been anyway significantly increased. The book is certainly well written but not particularly informative for any but a new student of the subjects discussed.

Tres Herndon says

This set of essays about the Founding Fathers and the documents they created was interesting, but it would have been nice if the author had tied them all together into a single narrative.

I thought the most interesting piece was on the Federalist Papers (Chapter 4). It's amazing how many of the dangers warned by the anti-Federalists came true - high taxation, the federal government dominating the states, etc. Didn't happen overnight, and I'm glad they didn't win the ratification debate, but their views are food for thought on how we should move forward from here as a country.

Dave Wilson says

A brilliant, fascinating exploration of issues beyond the mere "who wrote what and when" of the key American revolutionary texts. Wide-ranging, very well contextualised, written so that a reader with an average interest in the subject (like me) can understand it. Recommended to anyone who wants to get behind and beyond the characters and simple events of the revolution, and explore the thinking, tensions and impacts of it all.

Jerry says

This is a fascinating, breezy discussion of the influence of provincial Americans on the philosophy of freedom around the Western world. He does this first by talking about Jefferson, then Franklin, and finally tracing the use of the federal and state constitutions in Europe and South America. It is a fascinating book, a very quick read, and a great introduction to Bailyn's histories.

David Dunlap says

A series of five well-written essays on various aspects of figures in the early history of the American republic. As is to be expected from such a book, the reader's interest varies from one subject to the next. I was especially interested in the essays "Politics and the Creative Imagination," which demonstrated connections between the way colonial/Revolutionary Americans saw themselves and their homes and portraits, and "Realism and Idealism in American Diplomacy," which dealt largely with Benjamin Franklin (and, again, how various artists depicted him in his lifetime and how this impacted the public perceptions of his persona). Franklin, Bailyn maintains, was one of the first to realize that America's greatest successes take place when idealism is combined with realism. (Bailyn's essay on Jefferson shows how these two, seemingly opposed, points of view flowed through his character throughout his life -- a helpful perspective!) The essay on the Federalist Papers is insightful. The concluding essay -- outlining the impact the American Constitution had on both sides of the Atlantic -- is also interesting, but perhaps of insufficient depth to have great impact. -- On the whole, then, valuable reflections from an historian who has specialized in the era.

G.K. Noyer says

Bailyn is an excellent writer, easy to read. This little collection of essays (only 150 pgs) is probably of more interest to those already somewhat familiar with these subjects, if only because each is a very thought-provoking synthesis and overview of the subjects treated. A few of them challenge the conventional wisdom (re The Federalist papers, for ex., or America's influence abroad in the last chapter, full of fascinating information I have not encountered elsewhere). And the chapter on Jefferson is far and away the most level-headed and well-informed portrait of the man, and all his seeming contradictions, that I have yet encountered. It was my favorite chapter, I think, and I would highly recommend it to anyone seeking an objective summary view of Jefferson, a man who has excited too many half-informed or misinformed passions. It's a little treasure trove of information though for anyone interested in these subjects, by a highly competent and respected American historian.

Bruce says

A rather provocative work by a well known scholar who posits that the politics of Revolutionary America were based on provincialism. In essence, the American Revolution pitted metropolitan (i.e. European) worldliness and sophistication against that of the Provincials. This apparent lack of sophistication was used

by Franklin and others as they promoted the country during the Revolutionary Era.

In the debate over the Constitution and the form government would take there were distinct differences among the founding fathers. These 'provincials' were learned men. Thus, Jefferson's fear that northern economic power would be advanced by Hamilton's program was based on British history early in the 1700s where P.M. Walpole collaborated with Britain's banking and commercial interests to build up the British Treasury enabling him to buy the votes he needed in the House of Commons to "usher in an age of limitless greed and political squalor."

Prof. Bailyn also notes America's greatest historical moments occur when idealism and realism are combined. For instance, the Constitution was written by idealists but they realized they needed to create 'the dangerous instruments of centralized power' in order for the country to survive.

Un a discussion of The Federalist Papers Bailyn notes Madison admitted the authors had distinct differences in the general complexion of their political theories," and had no desire "to give a positive sanction to all the doctrines and sentiments of the other." The essays were written as polemical briefs at the time and were viewed as such. They were written not as the sacrosanct relics they are viewed by many today.

This work, short as it is, provides important arguments against the ideas of 'strict constructionism' based on 'original intent'.

Paul says

This little volume (150 pages plus notes in the paperback edition) consists of five essays abstracting many of Bailyn's larger historiographic theses concerning the American Revolution and its leading participants. Two of the essays—"Jefferson and the Ambiguities of Freedom" and "The Federalist Papers"—strike me as quite convincing. Two others—"Politics and the Creative Imagination" and "Atlantic Dimensions"—could use some fleshing out, but are definitely interesting starting points for discussion. The remaining essay, "Realism and Idealism in American Diplomacy", consists of an interesting middle section that appears to me nearly unrelated to the introduction and conclusion.

In "Jefferson and the Ambiguities of Freedom," Bailyn outlines the love/hate relationship between American political theorists and the legacy of Thomas Jefferson. The object of both lauds and villifications, Jefferson has cast a shadow that few can ignore. Bailyn argues that his contradictory reception is indicative of the ambiguities in Jefferson himself and in the freedom he sought for his country. Jefferson is the rare political theorist who was also a successful administrator. The larger goals of implementing his ideals often strained Jefferson's pragmatic side. Where goals-as-ends conflicted with goals-as-means, the means would typically lose to the ends.

The starting point of "The Federalist Papers" is an extremely interesting phenomenon: of the 291 citations of the Federalist papers in U.S. Supreme Court decisions published before January 2000, two-thirds of them have appeared since 1950. Bailyn explores the propriety of this increasing reliance of the opinions expressed in those often hastily composed eighteenth-century polemics. They are certainly not perfect guides to constitutional political theory, but they are relevant, Bailyn argues, because "they address masterfully our permanent concerns with political power—under our Constitution and in general."

The opening essay, "Politics and the Creative Imagination," argues that the American founders were able to break out of the ossified European modes of political thinking because, although they certainly knew continental political theory, their "provincialism, and the sense they derived from it of their own moral stature, had nourished their political imagination." Bailyn succeeds in his portrayal of colonial provincialism,

but he doesn't do as much as he might to demonstrate how their wild strains of political thought comingled with the status quo to produce Constitutional thought.

In the closing essay, "Atlantic Dimensions," Bailyn seeks to argue that American Revolutionary thought was still powerful and relevant after the onslaught of the French Revolution. There are some interesting bits here, but his thesis is at best suggestive, in need of further elaboration.

In the middle of the book stands the most problematic article, "Realism and Idealism in American Diplomacy." Bailyn's prolog suggests that he wants to reinforce the judgment of Felix Gilbert that the greatest American historical moments have come when Idealism and Realism have joined forces. Inexplicably, Bailyn then proceeds with an analysis (admittedly interesting in its own right) of the iconography of Benjamin Franklin. At the essay's end come a half-dozen paragraphs that revert to the opening theme. It's an odd essay, suggestive but hardly convincing.

In all, however, this is a nice little volume for someone looking to return to a study of revolutionary America. Bailyn's themes are largely congratulatory, full of admiration for the Founders and their creation; he entices the reader toward further studies by suggesting their moral and philosophical excellence.

Johns says

This book by Bernard Bailyn makes no pretense of being other than a collection of scholarly essays probably written previously. The reader will need to bear with the author's near-hagiography of Benjamin Franklin in Paris. But this history is interesting if only to show the progression of wild acclaim that Franklin did receive in France. The two most helpful essays for me were The Federalist Papers (chapter IV) and the impact of our creative constitutional experiment in countries across the Atlantic and even down into Latin America (chapter V). A good companion read to this book is Stuart Leibiger's "Founding Friendship: George Washington, James Madison, and the Creation of the American Republic." Leibiger's book is not analogous to Bailyn's work but it does give much needed detail on the characters of both Washington and Madison who only receive passing mention in Bailyn.

Nathan Albright says

While I cannot say that I would entirely agree with the author's politics, especially as he shows a sense of rhetoric about the complexities of modern life that would indicate too easy an embrace of the wicked progressives of our time, this book certainly makes for a thoughtful and witty discussion of various important and often neglected aspects of the experience of the American founding [1]. As a notable and preeminent historian of the Atlantic world, the author's far-ranging reading and research and his embrace of quantitative data as well as his concern with individual and overarching narratives serve him well in this intriguing series of essays on the American founding and on the achievements of the founders to create a new nation despite and because of their marginal position on the periphery of European civilization. Partly because the author is in command of a diverse amount of material relating to the history of early European imperialism in the Atlantic world, and partly because the author appears to have a sense of wit and a love of indirection, these essays are vignettes rather than a large work of history, but the book is an immensely thought-provoking one

and enjoyable one that encourages me to read more of his works.

For readers of history, this book does not make a demanding read but it does make an enjoyable and insightful one, taking about 150 pages to cover five essays relating to the situation of American independence. The first essay looks at the issue of politics and creative imagination, showing how the peripheral status of American provincials allowed them to come up with creative and novel political solutions that overcame the settled conventional wisdom of their time, and reminds us that our novel solution has become settled conventional wisdom in our own time. The second essay looks at Jefferson and the ambiguities of freedom, showing how the combination of immense idealism and ruthless pragmatism in the strain of Jefferson's character has made him vulnerable to being seen as a hypocrite because of his refusal to address the problems of slavery in his own life. The third essay looks at the combination of realism and idealism in American diplomacy through an image-based discussion of Benjamin Franklin's experience in Paris during the Revolution. The fourth essay looks at how the context of the Federalist Papers and their creation has made them such a seminal discussion of American constitutionalism and then provides an additional note on how these papers have been used by the Supreme Court over history in seeking to understand the boundaries of American constitutional law and seek legitimacy for their own decisions. The fifth and final essay looks at the subject of Atlantic dimensions, specifically the way in which the American experience during the War of Independence reverberated in European and South American history [2].

It is unclear why I have been unaware of this author's work before. Being a person of somewhat provincial background myself, born in the hinterlands of Appalachia, growing up in rural Central Florida, and long conscious of the way in which my background made me somewhat stigmatized by the more cosmopolitan people with whom I have often been associated, this author's research interests strike a definite personal chord. A combination of deep reading and broad interests makes this author's work consistently appealing, and he was a prolific enough writer that it is quite possible there will be many more such books for me to uncover and maybe a few for me to add to my own library, seeing as my local library system only has a few of his works. If you are looking for a book that gives a brief discussion of the importance of the marginality of the American experience for its influence on the world, this is a worthwhile book to read, especially in the way it makes the reader think about the influence of our background and context on our behavior and worldview.

[1] See, for example:

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2015...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2015...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2014...>

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<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2015...>

[2] One of the more notable ways this occurred was in Swiss history, where one writer in the pro-American Helvetic Society said that Swiss governments must be "aus dem Volke, durch das Volk, und fur das Volk," or "of the people, by the people, and for the people," thus anticipating Lincoln's own memorable rhetoric of the Gettysburg address (144).

Carl says

An eye-opening view of the founding fathers.

Rob Shurmer says

Bailyn's pep-talk on American constitutionalism. It should be read by anyone who wishes to call themselves an educated American and, more importantly, an informed citizen.

"American constitutionalism, having radiated throughout the world, has become a classic formulation for the world at large of effectiveness and constraint in the humane uses of power But like all classic formulations, it has been and is now being questioned by people with other values, other aspirations, other beliefs in the proper uses of power -- people who do not believe with Tocqueville and Troxler that American constitutionalism is a 'work of art' or with Condorcet that the rights embedded in the American Constitution are 'the natural rights of humanity,' and who emphatically challenge Jefferson's belief that ot is America's destiny to extend to other regions of the earth what he called 'the sacred fire of freedom and self-government'." (149)

Jake M. says

This book is a collection of short essays on the ingenuity of America's founding fathers. Topics range from the societal conditions favorable to political experimentation, to the chameleon-like image of Benjamin Franklin in Paris. Each essay demonstrates how America did not quite know how to see itself yet knew what it wanted to become. Bailyn is a complex thinker who can communicate with academic and history buff alike. While the essay format may steer some readers away, others may get bogged down in his over-analysis of portraits and provincial architecture in two chapters. Aside from this, essays on the Federalist Papers, Benjamin Franklin's Parisian escapades and America's flirtation with realism and idealism are solid.

Efox says

I borrowed this book from Nich, who is the early American History expert in our home. I, have still never

had formal education of Early American history. However, I did enjoy Bailyn's 5 essays on various topics surrounding the American Revolution. At first I thought my favorite essay would be the second one, on Jefferson's ambiguities and how he struggled with his idealism and the realistic problems he faced throughout his life, but then I read the essay on the Federalist Papers and now I'm torn. The discussions of the importance of the papers over time versus how they were written was fascinating. I would recommend this very smart, a little difficult, but very insightful book to anyone who has interest in our government.
