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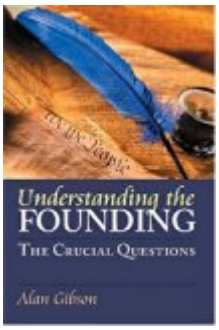
Alan Gibson. *Understanding the Founding: The Crucial Questions.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007. xiv + 314 pp. $29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-1519-3.



Reviewed by Kevin R. C. Gutzman

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Alan Gibson's*Understanding the Founding* is a guide to the leading historiographical issues surrounding the creation of the federal American Republic. In fewer than three hundred pages of text, Gibson provides readers with apt descriptions of the major interpretive debates in the field over the last century and more. In addition, he assays to point the way for future research. The book is divided into five chapters on the Beard thesis, debate over the extent to which the federal Constitution is democratic, linguistic contextualism, the liberalism-republicanism debate, and the relationship between historiography and political philosophy. The order of these chapters tracks the chronology of scholarship in this area.

The Beard thesis was, of course, a shot across the bow of American historiography and American society generally. Prior to Charles Beard's 1913 masterwork *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*, what Gibson rightly terms "hagiography" had dominated the American understanding of the founding (p. 15). Beard, Progressive that he was, adopted a completely contrary approach: not only did the Philadelphia Convention of 1787 not really act primarily out of concern for great constitutional issues in writing the Constitution, he said, but its members' acts also must be understood as driven by economic motivations. Here, he represented the general Progressive tendency to see purported ideological commitments as nothing more than masks for economic interests. Gibson follows the response to Beard's book through the counterattack phase and down to the present. As he tells it, Beard's book took the country by storm, and soon the idea of the revolutionaries as disinterested patriots had been nearly swept away. A response was not long in coming, he says, but it was not until fully two generations later that scholars in the 1950s, and particularly Forrest McDonald, exploded Beard's book completely.

What is left, then, of the once-great influence of *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*? According to Gibson, while the simplistic determinism Beard advanced proved wholly inadequate to describing divisions over the federal Constitution, later scholars have succeeded in adducing evidence not marshaled by Beard (some of it,

indeed, gathered by McDonald) to demonstrate that economic and geographic factors can indeed help to explain the shape of the debate over ratification. As Gibson states, Beard's assumption that economic motives had their effect has carried the day, despite the fact that the particular form of Beard's narrative is now largely rejected. In other words, having presented Beard's thesis and his critics' antithesis, Gibson concludes with the synthesis he considers nearly universally subscribed to today.

Chapter 2 is entitled "Democracy and the Founders' Constitution: Toward a Balanced Assessment," which explains all, or nearly all. Gibson tells us that the disputants of the question how democratic the Constitution is generally are disputing the question how estimable the Constitution is, and their consensus is "the more democratic, the better." Here, he doubtless is about right. One hastens to add that the arguments, heated and hackneyed as they are, simply are not very interesting. Seemingly, the only things new that anyone has added to the observations about the electoral college and suffrage, the Senate and the veto, the size of congressional districts and tenure of judges, etc., adduced by anti-Federalists of old are the recent gripes that the federal Constitution did not force the states to allow blacks, women, and Indians to vote. All of which, of course, overlooks the distinction between a national constitution (which the U.S. Constitution was not supposed to be) and a federal one (which could hardly have been expected to force unwanted and/or unwonted reforms on the states), as Gibson notes.

In chapter 3, Gibson considers the extent to which the American founding should be studied with an eye toward the present. Predictably, political philosopher Gibson is at odds here with historians who argue that the past should be understood as irretrievably past, its questions (and thus their answers) as entirely time bound, and thus without use to us. This is all a matter of taste, of course, except insofar as too rigorous an insistence that the past is irretrievable would make history--even, in the end, conversation--impossible. Gibson does not take up that point. Instead, he notes that great figures of the past took up some of the questions that occupy us, and he avers that there is utility in considering not only the answers at which they arrived, but also the processes that got them to those answers. Once more, your reviewer finds Gibson's point commonsensical.

Chapter 4 is concerned with the liberalism-republicanism debate that divided some of the historical and political philosophy professions' leading lights in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Gibson notes that disputants on both sides rejected the old Beard-Progressive notion that ideas were simply instrumental and opted instead to take what leaders of the Revolution said seriously. One side insisted that the American Revolution was basically a republican movement, which meant that it was animated by a set of intellectual commitments similar to those of classical republicans, while the other insisted that Lockean liberalism ruled the day circa 1776. In time, he says, leading participants tired of the contest--or, perhaps more accurately, saw the truth in opponents' arguments and opted to see the political thought of the Revolution as having been made up of some kind of pastiche (elements differed depending on the eye of the beholder). Here, unlike in say the democracy debate, one could see fruit being produced by the tree of scholarly dissension. A greater understanding of the Revolution was produced by the scholarly jousting recounted here, and it threw significant light, Gibson says, on later epochs in American history as well.

Finally, in chapter 5, Gibson considers the questions whether the founding had any great significance in the history of political thought and what might be made of that significance. Historians may find this chapter a bit off-putting, as the great-books (that is, decontextualized) version of

the past that sometimes peeks through in earlier chapters is on full display here. We do not really have a dog in this fight. Gibson, for his part, considers the study of the American Revolution both interesting and potentially practical, and he makes his case forcefully.

Like other books in this series, this one features lucid and pleasant prose, straightforward organization, and a tone neither too high nor too low. Little in Gibson's accounts of these academic struggles will surprise specialists in the field, for whom they are more than familiar. Yet, despite Gibson's insistence that the study of the way the founding is contested is as significant and interesting as the study of the founding itself, works of this kind--historiographical works--cannot be expected to obtain much of a general audience. The audience to which this book is directed, then, must be fledgling scholars. It is a work appropriate to a graduate history course in the American Revolution, American intellectual history, or pre-1877 America; it might also be of note to graduate political science students in American political philosophy or the American founding. I cannot see it being assigned in a law school course or to undergraduates.