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Michael J. Klarman has done what few scholars have dared: to write a comprehensive narrative on the creation of the United States Constitution. Surely, many others have written on the subject. But most have focused principally on one of its four phases. A few have looked at the crises of the 1780s and the conditions that gave rise to a new constitution. Most examine the Philadelphia Convention itself, fixing on its players, their arguments, and their outcomes. Of late, thanks in great part to The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution series (1976-2017), edited by John P. Kaminski and others, and Pauline Maier’s synthesis of those materials (*Ratification: The People Debate the Constitution, 1787-1788* [2010]), scholars have set their attention on the state battles over its approval. Scholars typically address the final phase, the drafting of the Bill of Rights, as either a postscript to the conventions or as a subject unto itself, especially fetishizing James Madison’s superhuman effort in distilling the states’ recommendations down to one marketable list. Klarman does something quite different. He exhaustively sews all four acts together in one book. The stories he tells are not all that new. The packaging, however, is ambitious and remarkable.

The author reinforces the interpretation that the new republican constitution’s creation was a counterrevolutionary moment. Constitutional delegates and lawmakers drafted a conservative document, redressing the states’ economic and political missteps that had plagued the country since the Revolution. As Klarman notes, this result was logical considering the advantages that nationalist-minded delegates had in getting selected to both the Philadelphia Convention and the state ratifying meetings. These elite statesmen “designed a constitution that dramatically extended the powers of the national government while insulating it far more from popular political influence than most Americans would have anticipated or desired” (p. 6). This is the essence of what Klarman calls “The Framers’ Coup.”

The author’s first two chapters set a familiar stage, exploring the American crises of the 1780s. These postrevolutionary years unveiled a perceived need for a constitutional framework stronger than the Articles of Confederation provided. The national government struggled to maintain financial solvency and social peace in the face of foreign and domestic debt defaults, state failures to pay national requisitions, Spain’s closing of the Mississippi River, pirate attacks in the Mediterranean, the continued presence of British soldiers in western forts, and worsening sectional differences. The articles did not secure for the national government the necessary pow-
ers to address these unanticipated setbacks. In particular, the national government had no authority to collect taxes from the states, effectively govern commercial affairs, or adjudicate interstate matters. Even more troubling, the articles were not designed for responsive flexibility. Unanimous consent was required for amendments, and supermajorities controlled important issues like treaties and appropriations. As a final glaring flaw, strict term limits curbed procedural efficacy and legislative competency. Concerned elites, including Madison, urged his colleagues to amend or replace the ineffective articles. But too many were skeptical of such drastic change, as the failed 1786 Annapolis meeting confirmed. Shays’ Rebellion and its uncontrolled lawlessness changed many minds, nudging delegates to attend a convention in Philadelphia the following summer.

Examining the convention itself, Klarman separates general debates on the new constitution’s form (chapter 3) from the more politically charged issue of slavery’s future (chapter 4). He argues that the constitution represented a radical departure from revolutionary-era experiences in two critical ways. First, Americans crafted a constitution that consolidated authority in a manner that clearly criticized state incompetence. This centralization was especially telling after having recently thrown off a tyrannical imperial monarchy led by a distant and insensitive Parliament. They created a national assembly that monopolized control over treaties, appointments, appropriations, and taxation, and a singular executive who was to carry out Congress’s bidding without the aid of an advisory council. Secondly, the new government was designed to check populist (or highly democratic) impulses in the young country. This is best illustrated by the Electoral College that buffers the easily charged public from the selection of the chief executive. This indirect process was supposed to prevent the misinformed masses from elevating incompetent and unprepared demagogues to the nation’s highest office.

Slavery also defined the trajectory of the convention’s final product. Most delegates understood that any real discussion of ending slavery threatened the convention altogether, as many southern members vowed to walk out. Therefore, the final product was a compromise of sorts, a constitution of two minds. In practical terms, it preserved the political and financial security of the Republic with clauses protecting Atlantic trade, fugitive recovery, and three-fifths apportionment. Klarman, however, argues that the constitution also had an idealist bent, one that allowed slavery’s opponents to amend it easily once slavery met its presumed inevitable end. With both sides appeased, the delegates approved a constitution that was sent to the states for the people’s approval.

The next two chapters study the ratification debates after the Philadelphia Convention closed in September 1787. Chapter 5 explores the theoretical divides that drove conversations on the constitution, laying out the broad categories of objections through an Antifederalist-Federalist call-and-answer chorus. These objections include Antifederalist concerns with absent rights protections; the elitist power of the Senate and the president; and the expansive military, taxing, and commercial authority of the national government. Klarman hones his sights on the practical considerations that created such divides. He frames most of these conflicts in clear dialectics: urban and rural interests, creditors and debtors, East and West, and North and South. In the next chapter, Klarman dives into the state debates over the constitution, led by popularly elected conventions sitting for the exclusive purpose of ratification. Here, the author recreates the theater, not the theory, of ratification—a procedural unfolding of the document’s approval. Klarman highlights the acrimony and personal assaults that came to characterize the debates. Although he does his best to
give each state its due share, Virginia and New
York unsurprisingly take up a great deal of his en-
ergy. Hailing from two of the largest states in pop-
ulation, political influence, and economic impor-
tance, Virginians and New Yorkers fully expected
to dictate much of the national debate. But both
states delayed their conventions. In doing so, they
handcuffed their abilities to direct other states’
decisions. In fact, because eight states had rati-
fi
ced the constitution before these key states sat, their
delegates faced a much different political land-
scape than they had expected, including the possi-
bility of a United States without them.

Virginia’s influence might have been muted
during ratification, but as Klarman shows in his
final substantive chapter, the commonwealth’s
constitutional hero took center stage in creating a
much desired bill of rights. The author argues that
the Bill of Rights was built on two puzzling contra-
dictions. First, Madison—who once opposed such
a bill as both dangerous and unnecessary—took
the lead in drafting it. He hoped a bill of rights
would alleviate Antifederalist anxieties and entice
outliers North Carolina and Rhode Island to ratify
the constitution. The second contradiction points
to the exasperating backbiting of the moment. Many Antifederalists ardently opposed the consti-
tution for its lacking rights protections. But once
Madison compiled and reduced the states’ sugges-
tions for amendments, Antifederalists became the
bill’s most vocal opponents. Many were still hold-
ing out hopes for a second convention, so they as-
sailed the tightly written list as weak and vacu-
ous. Regardless, the First Congress approved the
Bill of Rights as an essential component of a limit-
ed republic, providing safeguards for individual
liberties and placing constraints on governmental
authority.

Klarman does his best to humanize the story
of the constitution’s creation. Resisting the ten-
dency to elevate the constitutional players, he re-
minds readers that these men “were not demigods; they had interests, prejudices, and
moral blind spots” (p. 5). For the most part he up-
holds this ideal. Aside from lumping them toget-
her under the hagiographical label of capital-F
“Framers,” he writes a story that braids the efforts
of genuinely concerned republicans, intellectual
heavyweights, and petty political strategists. This
is no more obvious than in his treatment of Madi-
son, the so-called Father of the constitution. Klar-
man is understandably conscious of Madison’s
importance in this creation story, his fingerprints
present at every stage of its development. He,
however, withholds Madison’s canonization, often
portraying him as a frustrating cynic, an electoral
malcontent, and a political bully. The author also
leans on Mary Bilder’s recent scholarship calling
the veracity of Madison’s convention notes into
question (Madison’s Hand: Revising the Constitu-
tional Convention [2015]), warning readers that
his incomplete and edited notes represent a delib-
erate effort to manipulate constitutional interpre-
tations and historical memory.

Klarman’s varied note styles uniquely en-

dance this book’s accessibility. Nearly two hun-
dred pages of endnotes confirm his thorough re-
search, his work richly grounded in the current
and classic secondary literature, as well as prima-
ry sources. But he also embeds vibrant footnotes
in the main text without disrupting his argumen-
tative flow. These narrative notes appear in sever-
al forms. The first third of the book is peppered
with biographical notes introducing the back-
grounds of leading players. Other footnotes o
ffer

For example, John Hancock excused himself from
the Massachusetts ratifying convention, suffering
from gout. But history suggests Hancock was politically skittish, that he was likely feigning illness to see which way his colleagues landed before he took a public stand (p. 439n). Placed as footnotes, readers need not scan for narrative annotations at the end of the book (which most students would not dare do). Instead, they can directly link these gems to their accompanying text. It is a refreshing nod to older publishing practices, and demonstrates to readers—especially budding student writers—the various roles that notes can play.

In a student's hands, this book would bear one undeniable limitation—its length. Timid students might blanch at such an imposing monograph with chapters that test audiences' endurance. Klarman’s quest for comprehensiveness has assured readers they must lift this book with their knees, not their backs. But ambitious students should not be hesitant. Klarman’s accessible prose and excellent source work models the kind of clear historical writing to which all students should aspire. Nor should instructors be reluctant. Not only does this book serve well as a ready reference on the constitution’s creation, but the lengthy chapters are also extractable as short-form subjects for fruitful study. Regardless of its classroom use, Klarman’s book should grace the libraries of all American constitutional scholars, who will surely benefit from having such a comprehensive volume at their fingertips.

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