In *A Sovereign People*, Carol Berkin meticulously walks the reader through four crises the United States faced during the 1790s, a time when even American leaders expressed anxiety over the survival of their “experiment” in republican government. Berkin argues that Federalist leadership ensured the nation’s survival, bolstered nationalism, and demonstrated to Americans and foreigners alike the legitimacy of American sovereignty and the authority of the Constitution.

Berkin divides the book into four parts centered on the Whiskey Rebellion, the Genet affair, the XYZ affair, and the Alien and Sedition Acts. Each crisis tested the Federalist view of the purpose and extent of the powers written into the Constitution. The Federalists won the ratification debates, and if the federal government did not hold together during the 1790s, “it would be their failure” (p. 2). Each part is narratively driven and concludes with a brief analysis of how the resolution of each crisis led to the growth of nationalism.

In part 1, Berkin covers the Whiskey Rebellion when citizens of the United States refused to pay an excise tax approved by their own elected representatives. Berkin argues that the Whiskey Rebellion did not tear the nation apart because citizens respected how Washington handled the rebels without resorting to tyranny. In part 2, Berkin analyzes the Genet affair in which French diplomat Edmond Charles Genet attempted to prioritize France’s imperial desires over American sovereignty. Berkin argues that the Genet affair strengthened respect for the president and the federal government’s reach in foreign affairs. In part 3, she takes the reader through the XYZ affair, in which French officials again tried to treat the United States as a pawn in their imperial game during the quasi-war between the two nations. She argues that this crisis bolstered an American identity. And finally, the Jeffersonian Republican arguments against the Alien and Sedition Acts demonstrated that even those who originally argued against the Constitution showed loyalty to that document and pushed for the primacy of their own interpretation. Berkin contends that authors typically place these events as leading up to the transfer of power to the Jeffersonian Republicans but they are far more important in understanding how a weak nation survived such a tumultuous decade and how the Constitution provides a framework that allows the nation to continue to survive.

Berkin emphasizes that these crises led to feelings of nationalism. Her narrative focuses primarily on the handling of these crises by Federalist leaders and the responses to their political decisions mostly by federal and state leaders. This is a story about leaders, not citizens, and throughout the chapters she details well-known historical actors’ opinions on these crises but occasionally does not reach the pulse of contemporary popular opinion. Although she uses newspapers as sources, they mostly point to the partisan divides that made these crises so dramatic. Berkin also sometimes defines nationalism as respect for the authority of the Constitution and federal government and at others as the existence of an American identity.

Without reading the 1790s teleologically to the Civil War and beyond, regionalism and sectionalism continued to plague the nation after the 1790s, which Berkin
herself acknowledges. It took decades for individuals to refer to the United States as a single entity rather than a conglomeration of states. Additionally, respect for the Constitution as a form of government by opposition leaders is different than the formation of a national identity. Federalist leaders also faced other crises that threatened the nation’s security and subsequently solidified the authority of the Constitution. Although Berkin mentions the threat and defeat of the western Confederacy in passing in the chapter on the Whiskey Rebellion as a concern of the rebels, she does not highlight the threat of Native American warfare on the new nation’s western borders as a primary concern for federal leaders. The heart of Berkin’s contribution, then, is the detail she provides of the achievements of the Federalists during the 1790s as they carefully navigated both domestic and foreign affairs and prevented the union from falling apart before it truly existed.

Regardless of these criticisms, Berkin is a natural storyteller and *A Sovereign People* is a pleasant and easy read. It will be of interest to those who study early national foreign policy, constitutional history, and the founding fathers. This book will be particularly of use to those teaching undergraduates about the precarious position of the new nation, political debate among the developing parties, and early foreign affairs.

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