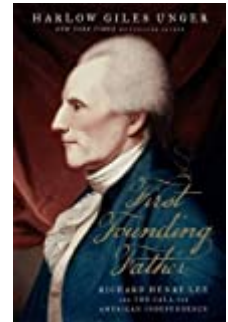


Harlow Giles Unger. *First Founding Father: Richard Henry Lee and the Call for Independence.* New York: Da Capo Press, 2017. 336 pp. \$28.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-306-82561-3.



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In *First Founding Father*, Harlow Giles Unger credits another historical figure with the founding of American democracy—Richard Henry Lee. Unger, a prolific scholar of US history, has published twenty-seven books, ten of which are biographies of the Founding Fathers. Through correspondence, autobiographies, memoirs, and relevant artwork, Unger brings Lee's role and his experience during the American Revolution to life. Unger traces Lee's life alongside the story of US independence and argues for the critical, yet unacknowledged, role that Lee played in uniting the thirteen colonies and shaping the first democratic government. Incorporating Lee into the pantheon of the Founding Fathers challenges a popular historical record, but also adds nuance and complexity to the story of US independence.

First Founding Father contains a beginning, middle, and end of sorts: before the war, during the war, and after the war. During these critical phases, Unger makes clear that Richard Henry Lee was among the first to call for three important ideas—*independence before the war, a union dur-*

ing the war, and a bill of rights after the war. All of these, as we know, eventually came to pass.

Richard Henry Lee began his political career in Virginia's House of Burgess. Acts of Parliament, such as the Stamp Act, the Intolerable Acts, and the Quartering Act, shaped Lee's perception of the colonies' relationship with Great Britain. In Virginia, and later as a delegate to the First Continental Congress, Lee proposed a complete ban on trade with Britain and for the colonies to organize militias in preparation for war. He took his proposition one step further and called for the colonies to separate themselves from Britain. According to Unger, Lee's proposition was "an invitation to Americans to unite in a new and independent nation" (p. 69)—one of the first calls for independence.

For the majority of the book (chapters 4–9), Unger tells the familiar story of the American Revolution through Richard Henry Lee's perspective. In chapter 4, Unger establishes Lee's role in the war, which provides the foundation for successive

chapters. In terms of duty, Lee was charged with overseeing the “logistics” of war, which included providing financial and military assistance to General Washington’s army. In chapter 5, Unger focuses on the important relationships Lee fostered abroad. Through correspondence with his brothers, Arthur and William, who lived in London, Lee established an intelligence network and enlisted their help to seek foreign assistance. At Richard Henry’s request, Arthur connected with Pierre-Augustin Beaumarchais, a French agent, who ends up promising France’s military and financial assistance during the war.

In addition to coordinating efforts abroad, Lee remained an influential political figure at home. In a prophetic statement to Congress, Lee claimed “that these United States are, and of right out to be, free and independent States” (p. 110). In chapter 6, Unger analyzes the drafting of the Declaration of Independence. Lee directly influenced this monumental document by campaigning for his resolution of self-determination and successfully influencing reluctant delegates. Moreover, Unger cleverly italicizes where Richard Henry Lee’s words appear in the Declaration, and strongly challenges the notion that Thomas Jefferson should so readily be accepted as “the Father of the Declaration.”

As the war drew to a close, Unger demonstrates, Lee’s efforts in securing military and financial assistance from France and providing troops for General Washington’s army helped the colonies win the war. When Washington needed troops and assistance most, he received a letter of alliance from France and reinforcements from the “States,” which Lee helped to secure. Through letters of correspondence between Lee and Washington, Unger establishes that the two maintained a strong relationship. Although Lee worked behind the scenes, he was nevertheless a critical orchestrator during the Revolutionary War.

After the war drew to a close, the revolutionists faced another challenge: governing the new United States of America. Lee served as president

of the United States Congress assembled in 1784, but as this was largely a symbolic position that lacked authority, Unger does not make it the focus of the remaining chapters. Instead, Unger discusses Lee’s campaign for Antifederalist principles. Lee was, once again, among the first to call for a bill of rights.

Lee had four main objections to the Constitution: the lack of a bill of rights, that the national government was granted power to tax the people, that the national government had too much power over the military, and the right of a simple majority in Congress to legislate against the interests of individual states. In many ways, Lee’s objections remain relevant and are still debated in modern society. Lee questioned the danger in giving a few men extensive power: “We are dispersed, and it is impracticable for any but the few to assemble in one place. The few must be watched, checked, and often resisted. Tyranny has ever shown a predilection to be in close amity with them.... Laws which were to be equal to all are soon warped into the private interests ... of a few” (p. 221).

It is difficult to judge the success of Lee’s Antifederalist campaign. For one, James Madison made an important compromise and promised a bill of rights if Lee agreed to ratify the Constitution. On the other hand, when Congress debated forming a central bank, Lee compromised; he abandoned his opposition in favor of moving the capital south. Unger claims this moment as the end of the Antifederalist movement. Nevertheless, Lee clearly raised important objections to the Constitution and suggested amendments that were eventually put in place. Lee retired from public life due to ill health and passed away in 1794.

Unger concludes *First Founding Father* by hypothesizing why Richard Henry Lee’s place in history has been overlooked and offers four different explanations. First, Antifederalists, a minority group, are generally obscured in US history and have received far less attention from scholars than the Federalists. Second, Lee’s home estate,

Chantilly, burned in a fire. This left Lee with no historical shrine, unlike George Washington's Mount Vernon or Thomas Jefferson's Monticello. Third, Lee did not live to challenge Jefferson's notion that Jefferson was the sole author of the Declaration of Independence. Fourth, Robert E. Lee, Richard Henry Lee's grandson and a Confederate general, overshadows Richard Henry's memory. Unger's reasoning seems practical and compelling and his explanations are thought-provoking, but he only discusses them briefly and does not fully develop his analysis.

Although Richard Henry Lee's role in the founding of the United States should not be undervalued, Unger's declarative statements, such as "As old as Washington, he had been president of Congress ... and, in fact, father of American independence" (p. 212) are problematic. Biography can be a tricky medium. As historian Jill Lepore explains, "biography is largely founded on a belief in the singularity and significance of an individual's contribution to history," which can lead the biographer to fall in love with their subject and overstate their significance.[1] Lee's story is not one of singularity, but instead demonstrates that the US founding was indeed the culmination of the deeds of a variety of actors. Lee himself worked with his brothers, not to mention many other people, to secure foreign assistance. Declaring Lee the "father of American independence" potentially obscures the memory of other historical figures, men and women alike, who contributed to the nation's founding. One is left wondering how many Richard Henry Lees exist whose stories are yet to be told.

Note

[1]. Jill Lepore, "Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography," *The Journal of American History* 88, no. 1 (June 2001): 129-44; 133.

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