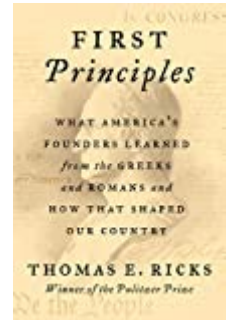




Thomas E. Ricks. *First Principles: What America's Founders Learned from the Greeks and Romans and How That Shaped Our Country.* New York: Harper, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2020. xxiv + 386 pp. \$22.49, cloth, ISBN 978-0-06-299745-6.



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In *First Principles: What America's Founders Learned from the Greeks and Romans and How That Shaped Our Country*, Thomas E. Ricks explores the impact of classicism on George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison and how, through them, it affected the new American nation. Ricks divides his fourteen chapters into three parts. The first, "Acquisition," focuses on his four founders' formative years. The next, "Application," examines their careers during the American Revolution and its immediate aftermath. The last, "Americanization," describes the demise of classical ideals amid the political turmoil of the early republic.

Ricks argues that, contrary to modern tastes, the revolutionary generation generally preferred the lessons of Roman history to the wisdom of Greece. "The dominant political narrative of colonial American elites," he writes, "was the story of how the Roman orator Cicero put down the Catiline conspiracy to take over Rome" (p. 41). In Ricks's mind, however, classical republicanism "steered the founders wrong on three crucial is-

ssues:" their reliance on public virtue to maintain a republican government, their opposition to political parties, and their tolerance of slavery (pp. 10-11).

The founders learned their classicism from the original sources, plays, popular histories, contemporary translations, and textbooks, and given its cultural prominence, by osmosis. George Washington did not read widely and never went to college, but by the end of the Revolution, "he had proven himself to be the noblest Roman of them all" (p. 160). Ricks devotes considerable space to Washington's "practical education on the frontier (p. 40)." As a young militia officer he played a pivotal role in the struggle between Great Britain and France for control of the West. The hardships he experienced undoubtedly helped shape his character, which included a public stoicism in the face of adversity, but Washington also sought to at least familiarize himself with the classical authors. For Washington, "classically shaped behavior was the road to respectability" (p. 13). If reading Virgil, Tacitus, and their literary compatriots suggests a

conservative elitism today, for Washington, knowledge of the classics represented a path to self-advancement.

John Adams consciously modeled himself after Cicero, and they shared several virtues and faults: civic-mindedness, vanity, and a sarcasm that could easily offend others. Son of a modest but well-respected farm family, Adams attended Harvard College, where he “learned to be a child of the Enlightenment,” which included an embrace of classicism (p. 55), but, Ricks speculates, he may have suffered from the lack of a mentor. Washington, as a young man, had admired his older half-brother Lawrence Washington, and he had served in the West with the veteran frontiersman Christopher Gist. The irascible Adams, by contrast, never learned to work well with others.

Thomas Jefferson had multiple mentors, including the law professor George Wythe. Jefferson, according to Ricks, “was the only one of the first four presidents to be arguably more Greek than Roman, more Epicurean than Ciceronian” (pp. 65-66). Epicureanism probably better suited Jefferson’s temperament, and Wythe’s instruction likely encouraged his natural tendencies. Wythe’s approach to the law mirrored the Scottish tradition, which in turn followed French law in relying more heavily on classical precedents, which led back to Greece, than did English jurisprudence.

A Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and specialist in military history, Ricks writes well and is obviously comfortable in recounting Washington’s role as commander of the Continental Army, but the narrative begins to falter when he reaches James Madison. Ricks calls Sawney, one of the most prominent enslaved Africans on the Madisons’ Montpelier plantation, “Swaney” (p. 92). He falls back on outmoded clichés, describing Madison, for example, as antisocial. Madison, to be sure, did not shine in large social settings, but intimates knew he had a far livelier sense of humor than did Jefferson. Far worse, portraying Jefferson as Madison’s mentor, he calls Madison, only eight

years Jefferson’s junior, “the white son Jefferson never had” (p. 102), thus grossly mischaracterizing their relationship. It could better be described as a partnership between two Virginians with different but complementary skills.

First Principles is marked by other questionable assertions. Ricks characterizes Bunker Hill as a “stunning American victory” (p. 137) since American forces inflicted heavy losses on the British, but because the Americans ultimately abandoned their position, “a pyric British victory” would be more apt. Ricks criticizes the logic and literary style of Jefferson’s revolutionary manifesto, *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* (1774) and attributes its influence to Jefferson’s originality. Jefferson did stretch the facts in explaining the origins of American liberty, but his denial of Parliament’s jurisdiction over the colonies echoed ideas entertained by Pennsylvania’s James Wilson, North Carolina’s James Iredell, and others. In reality, to contemporaries, the vigor of Jefferson’s prose helped make his reputation. Ricks considers the Declaration of Independence to be “remarkably un-Jeffersonian in its style.... It is a model of strong, plain political prose” (p. 123). It might better be described as quintessentially Jeffersonian in its elegant simplicity. *First Principles* may, moreover, leave readers confused about the date the Declaration was signed. Ricks seems to imply it was signed on July 4, 1776, when the general signing most likely took place on August 2.

Ricks returns to his element when he rejoins Washington on the battlefield. In fact, much of Ricks’s treatment of Washington consists of recounting the fairly well-known story of his military campaigns, where the classical connection appears in the person of Fabius, the Roman general who spent fifteen years avoiding a major battle with Hannibal, before the exhausted Carthaginian returned home. Over the course of the Revolution, Washington went from waging an offensive war to a war of posts to a Fabian strategy. Ricks’s greatest

contribution here is in clarifying the sometimes confused distinction between a war of posts and the Fabian approach. The former refers to defending fortified positions. The latter is a strategy of minimizing one's losses while slowly wearing down an opponent.

Classical influences appear as well in the lives of Ricks's other founders. According to Ricks, John Adams, in *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America* (1787), took the idea of the separation of political powers from Polybius's history of the rise of Rome. Jefferson used his considerable clout to ensure that Virginia's new state capitol building and government buildings in Washington, DC, were built along classical lines, even requiring that bricks for the national Capitol be made to Roman proportions. Madison based his proposals for the federal Constitution in large part on his study of the Greek city-states, and in particular, on the failure of the Amphictyonic League.

Ricks, however, argues that classicism, at least in the political realm, began to decline during the Constitutional Convention of 1787. Delegates Charles Pinckney and Benjamin Franklin questioned the relevance of classical precedents. The retreat from the classics accelerated during the ratification debate. To Madison, the putative "Father of the Constitution," the success of the new government would depend less on public virtue than on its capacity to manage competing and self-seeking "factions."

Factions soon morphed into political parties, and parties went hand-in-hand with the growing politicization of, mainly, ordinary white men. With no concept of "a loyal opposition," most of the founders lacked the intellectual framework to see the value and the virtual inevitability of a party system. Increasingly identified with the nascent Federalist Party, Washington, as president, bitterly resented the criticism he received from their emerging Democratic-Republican opponents, but his personal stature and political dexterity en-

abled him to weather a series of partisan storms. Adams, his less adroit successor, was less fortunate. The Sedition Act of 1798, which Adams signed, represented, Ricks writes, "the last gasp effort of classical republicanism to stave off surging populism" (p. 240). After defeating Adams's bid for reelection in 1800, Jefferson delivered an inaugural address in which "the old war horse" of virtue "had shrunk to something nice to have" (p. 252).

First Principles is an example of what is often dismissed, often unfairly, as "founders chic," or in other words, the kind of a book that makes a handy Father's Day present, with one caveat: Ricks is quite "woke" and may irritate some fathers. Much of what Ricks tells us can be found in the standard biographies of his principals. Ricks, however, should not be criticized for attempting to explain America's founders to a general audience. Admittedly, his focus on four founders means that he cannot provide a thorough survey of classicism in early America. Serious students would do well to consult the extensive writings of Carl Richard and Caroline Winterer.

Classicism, of course, was not the only intellectual or cultural force at work during the Revolution. Ricks gives little attention to Lockean liberalism and, even though only a minority of Americans were regular church-goers at the time, he underestimates the importance of religion in the American Revolution. Recent scholarship, including Richard's *The Founders and the Bible* (2016), James P. Byrd's *Sacred Scripture, Sacred War: The Bible and the American Revolution* (2013), and Thomas K. Kidd's *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution* (2010), has demonstrated the centrality of religion in the founding era. Ricks rightly notes that "it was no secret to his contemporaries that Jefferson had been influenced far more by the philosophers of the ancient world and of the Enlightenment than he had been by Christian beliefs" (p. 269). Nevertheless, Jefferson claimed to admire the ethical teachings of Christ, and someone who prepared

his own version of the Four Gospels was not indifferent to religion. Madison had been a pious young man and was first drawn to politics by a commitment to freedom of religion and the separation of church and state, a commitment he retained after his youthful faith had apparently waned. Rivalries among denominations had contributed to the expansion of religious liberty in Virginia and provided Madison with a working example of his theory that in “an extended republic” like the United States, a multitude of factions would create an informal system of checks and balances. As for the supposed Deist John Adams, Edwin Gaustad observed in *Faith of the Founders: Religion and the New Nation, 1776-1826* (2004) that the second president believed in the sovereignty of God, the nexus between religion and morality, and the immortality of the soul.

One pitfall of founders chic is a tendency to exaggerate, at least implicitly, what the great men could have accomplished if only they had tried. The issue of slavery illustrates the danger. Ricks criticizes the founders for failing to take steps to abolish the institution, and their antislavery actions tended to be timid and painfully ineffective. Yet, in the mid-1780s, Jefferson tried and failed, by one vote, to persuade Congress to ban slavery in the western territories. Meanwhile, Madison had his hands full trying to prevent the Virginia assembly from repealing a state law giving slave owners a unilateral right to free their enslaved people. Ricks complains, understandably, that slavery was “the greatest failing of the founders,” and then adds, “hardly explainable even today” (p. 247). But ought not a historian try to explain unpleasant realities? *First Principles* would have been a better book, or at least a more interesting one, had Ricks tried to explain why a slave owner like Madison, whose civic-mindedness and personal integrity could not otherwise be questioned, allowed himself to be complicit in such a disreputable institution. In summary, *First Principles* is a spritely and engaging narrative—informative in places and disappointing in others.

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