Were the Founding Fathers Democratic Reformers?

p. 141, ¶ 1, line 1 – “The United States possesses the oldest written constitution of any major power. The 55 men who attended the Philadelphia Convention in 1787 could scarcely have dreamed that 200 years later the nation would venerate them as the most ‘enlightened statesmen; of their time.”

p. 142, ¶ 2, line 1 – “Beard’s research method was fairly simple. Drawing upon a collection of old, previously unexamined treasury records in the National Archives, he discovered that a number of delegates to the Philadelphia Convention and, later, the state ratifying conventions, held substantial amounts of continental securities that would sharply increase in value if a strong national government were established.”

p. 142, ¶ 3, line 1 – “Beards socioeconomic conflict interpretation of the supporters and opponents of the Constitution raised another issue: How was the Constitution ratified if the majority of Americans opposed it?”

Question: What is a progressive historian?

p. 142, ¶ 4, line 8 – “For the progressive historians, reality consisted of uncovering the hidden social and economic conflicts withing society.”

Yes- The Founding Fathers: A Reform Caucus in Action

p. 143, ¶ 2, line 4 – “It is not my purpose here to argue that the ‘Fathers’ were, in fact, radical revolutionaries; that proposition has been brilliantly demonstrated... My concern is with the further position that not only were they revolutionaries, but also they were democrats.”

p. 143, ¶ 3, line 1 – “What they did was to hammer out a pragmatic compromise which would both bolster the ‘national interest; and be acceptable to the people.”

p. 144, ¶ 1, line 3– “No doubt the goals of the constitutional elite were ‘subversive’ to the existing political order, but it is overlooked that their subversion could only have succeeded if the people of the United States endorsed it by regularized procedures...”

p. 144, ¶ 2, line 1– “When the Constitutionalists went forth to subvert the Confederation, they utilized the
mechanisms of political legitimacy.”

p. 144, ¶ 3, line 1– “The group which undertook this struggle was an interesting amalgam of a few dedicated nationalists with the self-interested spokesmen of various parochial bailiwicks.”

p. 144, ¶ 4, line 1– “What distinguished the leaders of the Constitutionalist caucus from their enemies was a ‘Continental’ approach to political, economic, and military issues.”

p. 145, ¶ 2, line 4– “In fact, the great achievement of the Constitutionalisists was their ultimate success in convincing the elected representatives of a majority of the white male population that change was imperative. A small group of political leaders with a Continental vision and essentially a consciousness of the United States’ economic impotence, provided the matrix of the movement.”

p. 145, ¶ 3, line 3– “Their opponents were caught in an old political trap: they were not being asked to approve any specific program or reform, but only to endorse a meeting to discuss and recommend needed reforms.”

p. 145, ¶ 4, line 1– “Perhaps because of their poor intelligence system, perhaps because of over-confidence generated by the failure of all previous efforts to alter the Articles, the opposition awoke too late to the dangers that confronted them in 1787.”

p. 146, ¶ 1, line 4– “Much has been made of the fact that the delegates to Philadelphia were not elected by the people; some have adduced this fact as evidence of the ‘undemocratic’ character of the gathering.”

p. 146, ¶ 3, line 4– “What is striking to one is analyzes the Convention as a case-study in democratic politics is the lack of clear-cut ideological divisions in the Convention.”

p. 146, ¶ 4, line 1– “Basic differences of opinion emerge... but these were ideological; they were structural.”

p. 147, ¶ 1, line 3– “There was no legal means of binding the tongues of the delegates: at any stage in the game a delegate with basic principled objections to the emerging project could have taken the stump (as Luther Martin did after the exit) and denounce the convention to the skies. Yet ... the delegates generally observed the injunction.”

p. 147, ¶ 3, line 1– “It was indeed astonishing how those who have glibly designated James Madison as the ‘father’ of Federalism have overlooked the solid body of fact which indicates that he shared Hamilton’s quest for a unitary central government.”

p. 148, ¶ 1, line 7– “Apparently realizing that under the Virginia Plan, Massachusetts, Virginia, and Pennsylvania could virtually dominate the national government – and probably appreciating that to sell this
program to ‘the folks at home’ would be impossible – the delegates from the small states dug in their heels and demanded time for a consideration of alternatives…”

p. 148, ¶ 3, line 8– “A serious case can be made that the advocates of the New Jersey Plan, far from being ideological addicts of states’-rights, intended to substitute for the Virginia Plan a system which would both retain strong national power and have a chance of adoption in the states.”

p. 151, ¶ 4, line 2– “No one seemed to think well of the [Electoral] College as an institution; indeed, what evidence there is suggest that there was an assumption that once Washington had finished his tenure as President, the electors would cease to produce majorities and the chief executive would usually be chosen by the House.”

p. 152, ¶ 2, line 4– “[The Electoral College] was merely a jerry-rigged improvisation which has subsequently been endowed with a high theoretical content...”

p. 152, ¶ 3, line 1– “The second issue on which some substantial practical bargaining took place was slavery.”

p. 152, ¶ 4, line 1– “These problems came to a head in late August and, as usual were handed to a committee in the hope that, in Governeur Morris’ words, ‘...things may form a bargain among the Northern and Southern states.’”

p. 153, ¶ 2, line 1– “Drawing on their vast collective political experience, utilizing every weapon in the politician’s arsenal, looking constantly over their shoulders at their constituents, the delegates put together a Constitution. It was a makeshift affair; some sticky issues (for example, the qualification of voters) they ducked entirely; others they mastered with that ancient instrument of political sagacity, studied ambiguity (for example, citizenship), and some they just overlooked.”

p. 153, ¶ 3, line 1– “The Framers were busy and distinguished men, anxious to get back to their families, their positions, and their constituents... They were trying to do an important job, and do it in such a fashion that their handiwork would be acceptable to very diverse constituencies.”

p. 154, ¶ 3, line 1– “The Constitution... was a patchwork sewn together under the pressure of both time and events by a group of extremely talented democratic politicians. They refused to attempt the establishment of a strong, centralized sovereignty on the principle of legislative supremacy for the excellent reason that the people would not accept it.”

p. 154, ¶ 3, line 1– “…[T]he Constitution was neither a victory for abstract theory nor a great practical success.”
No: The Framers of the Constitution and the “Genius” of the People

p. 155, ¶ 1, line 1– “On June 18, 1787, about three weeks into the Constitutional Convention at Philadelphia, Alexander Hamilton delivered a six-hour address that was easily the longest and most conservative the Convention would hear. Gouverneur Morris, a delegate from Pennsylvania, thought it was ‘the most and impressive he had ever heard.’”

p. 155, ¶ 2, line 1– “If others quickly saw a resemblance in all of this to the King, House of Lords and House of Commons of Great Britain, with the states reduced to colonies ruled by royal governors, they were not mistaken. The British Constitution, in Hamilton’s view, remained ‘the best model the world has ever produced.’”

p. 155, ¶ 4, line 1– “Three days later a delegate reported that Hamilton’s proposals ‘had been praised by everybody,’ but ‘he has been supported by none.’”

p. 155, ¶ 5, line 1– “Why did the framers reject a plan so many admired?”

p. 156, ¶ 2, line 1– “The Convention was unmistakably an elite body.”

p. 156, ¶ 2, line 5– “The 55 were weighted with merchants, slaveholding planters and ‘monied men’ who loaned money at interest. Among them were numerous lawyers and college graduates in a country where most men and only a few women had the rudiments of a formal education.”

p. 156, ¶ 3, line 2– “The Constitution was ‘intended for the ages.’”

p. 156, ¶ 4, line 2– “The British government cannot be our model.”

p. 156, ¶ 5, line 1– “This was a long-range political philosophy.”

p. 156, ¶ 5, line 6– “Repeatedly, conservatives recoiled from extreme proposals for they knew they could not win popular support.”

p. 157, ¶ 1, line 1– “Benjamin Franklin, the patriarch, speaking for one of the few times in the convention, paid tribute to ‘lower class of freemen’ who should not be disenfranchised.”

p. 157, ¶ 3, line 3– “The delegates, one might say, were haunted by ghosts, symbols of the broadly based movements in the making of the Revolution from 1765 to 1775, in waging the war from 1775 to 1781 and in the years since 1781 within their own states.”

p. 157, ¶ 4, line 1– “The first ghost was of Thomas Paine, the most influential radical democrat of the
The second ghost was that of Abraham Yates, a member of the state senate of New York typical of the new men who had risen to power in the 1780s in the state legislatures.

The third ghost was a very fresh one—Daniel Shays. In 1786 Shays, a captain in the Revolution, led a rebellion of debtor farmers in western Massachusetts which the state quelled with its own somewhat unreliable militia.

The fourth ghost was the ghost of Thomas Peters, although he had a thousand other names. In 1775, Peters, a Virginia slave, responded to a plea by the British to fight in their army and win their freedom.

During the Revolutionary Era elites divided in response to these varied threats from below. One group, out of fear of ‘the mob’ and then ‘the rabble in arms,’ embraced the British and became active Loyalists.

Livingston and his group were able to shape New York’s constitution, which some called a prefect blend of ‘aristocracy’ and ‘democracy.’

The major leaders of the Constitutional Convention in 1787 were heirs to both traditions: coercion and accommodation – Hamilton and Gouvernuer Morris to the former, James Madison and James Wilson much more the latter.

Southern slaveholders correctly interpreted the same powers as available to shackle the ghost of Thomas Peters. As it turned out, Virginia would not need a federal army to deal with Gabriel Prosser’s insurrection in 1800 or Nat Turner’s rebellion in 1830, but a federal army would capture John Brown after his raid in Harpers Ferry in 1859.

The second solution to the problem of the states was decidedly democratic. They wanted to do an end-run around the state legislatures.

This was a prescription for a non-colonial empire that would expand across the continent, taking in new states as it dispossessed the Indians.

Among agrarian democrats there was a gut feeling that the Constitution was the work of an old class enemy.

Democrats who were skeptical found it easier to come over because of the Constitution’s
redeeming features.”

**p. 161, ¶ 2, line 1**—“In drafting the Constitution in 1787 the framers, self-styled Federalists, made their first accommodation with the ‘genius of the people. In campaigning for its ratification in 1788 they their second.”

**p. 161, ¶ 3, line 1**—“What the anti-Federalists wanted were dozens of changes in the structure of the government that would cut back national power over the states, curb the power of the presidency as well as protect individual liberties. What they got was far less. But in the first Congress of 1789, James Madison, true to his pledge, considered all the amendments and shepherded 12 amendments through both houses. The first two of these failed in the states; one would have enlarged the house. The 10 that were ratified by December 1791 were what we have since called the Bill of Rights...”

**p. 161, ¶ 4, line 1**—“There is a cautionary tale here that surely goes beyond the process of framing and adopting the Constitution and Bill of Rights from 1787 to 1792. The Constitution was as democratic as it was because of the influence of popular movements that were a presence, even it not present [at the Convention].”

**p. 161, ¶ 5, line 1**—“In American history popular movements often shaped elites, especially in times of crisis when elites were concerned with the ‘system.’ Elites have often divided in response to such threats and according to their perception of the ‘genius’ of the people. Some have turned to coercion, others to accommodation.”

*Note:* The Postscript section on page 162 is an effective summary.