

Revolutionary Characters

What Made the Founders Different



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Introduction

The Founders and the
Enlightenment



AMERICA'S FOUNDING FATHERS, or the founders, as our antipatriarchal climate now prefers, have a special significance for Americans. Celebrating in the way we do this generation that fought the Revolution and created the Constitution is peculiar to us. No other major nation honors its past historical characters, especially characters who existed two centuries ago, in quite the manner we Americans do. We want to know what Thomas Jefferson would think of affirmative action, or George Washington of the invasion of Iraq. The British don't have to check in periodically with, say, either of the two William Pitts the way we seem to have to check in with Jefferson or Washington. We Americans seem to have a special need for these authentic historical figures in the here and now. Why should this be so?

Scholars have a variety of answers. Some suggest that our continual

concern with constitutional jurisprudence and original intent accounts for our fascination with the founding and the making of the Constitution. Still others think that we use these eighteenth-century figures in order to recover what was wise and valuable in America's past. They believe that the founders of two hundred years ago have become standards against which we measure our current political leaders. Why don't we have such leaders today? seems to be the implicit question many Americans ask.

Others quite sensibly think that the interest in the revolutionary generation has to do with an American sense of identity. The identities of other nations, say, being French or German, are lost in the mists of time and usually taken for granted (the reason why such nations are having greater problems with immigrants than we are). But Americans became a nation in 1776, and thus, in order to know who we are, we need to know who our founders are. The United States was founded on a set of beliefs and not, as were other nations, on a common ethnicity, language, or religion. Since we are not a nation in any traditional sense of the term, in order to establish our nationhood, we have to reaffirm and reinforce periodically the values of the men who declared independence from Great Britain and framed the Constitution. As long as the Republic endures, in other words, Americans are destined to look back to its founding.

By the time Thomas Jefferson and John Adams died on the same day, July 4, 1826, exactly fifty years following the adoption of the Declaration of Independence, an aura of divinity had come to surround the founding generation. The succeeding generations of Americans were unable to look back at the revolutionary leaders and constitution makers without being overawed by the brilliance of their thought, the creativity of their politics, and the sheer magnitude of their achievement. The founders always seemed larger than life, giants in the earth, "a forest of giant oaks," as Lincoln called them, possessing intellectual and political capacities well beyond those who followed them.

But this view would not hold, unchanging, over time. Lincoln warned that the founders' achievements "must fade upon the memory of the world, and grow more and more dim by the lapse of time."¹ In fact by the

end of the nineteenth century this awe for the founders and their mythical reputation was being questioned, and historians began puncturing the aura of divinity surrounding them. In 1896 a popular historian of the period, John Bach McMaster, wrote an essay, entitled “The Political Depravity of the Founding Fathers,” in which he contended that “in all the frauds and tricks that go to make up the worst form of practical politics, the men who founded our State and national governments were always our equals, and often our masters.” According to McMaster, the founding generation was not above the worst kinds of political shenanigans, including the silencing of newspapers, the manipulation and destruction of votes, and the creation of partisan gerrymandering.²

McMaster’s muckraking of the revolutionary leaders was only the beginning of what soon became a full-scale campaign. In 1897 Sydney George Fisher attempted to refute William Gladstone’s view that the American Constitution was “the most wonderful work ever struck off at a given time by the brain and purpose of man” with his *Evolution of the Constitution of the United States, Showing That It Is a Development of Progressive History and Not an Isolated Document Struck Off at a Given Time or an Imitation of English or Dutch Forms of Government*. Fisher thought that the reputation of the founders was so inflated with myths and fables that he devoted his entire career to bringing the events of the American Revolution and its leaders down to earth. In a paper, *The Legendary and Myth-Making Process in Histories of the American Revolution*, delivered before the American Philosophical Society in 1912, Fisher called for the substitution of “truth and actuality for the mawkish sentimentality and nonsense with which we have been so long nauseated.” As his contribution he wrote books with such titles as *The True Benjamin Franklin* (1900) and *The True History of the American Revolution* (1902).³

It was the seemingly divinely inspired and democratic character of the Constitution, however, that provoked most revisionist scholars. When Progressive reformers at the beginning of the twentieth century became increasingly frustrated with the undemocratic character of many of the institutions of the national government, especially a Senate elected by the

state legislatures and a life-tenured Supreme Court, professional academics responded by showing that the Constitution not only was not divinely inspired but was not even a natural expression of American popular democracy. In 1907 J. Allen Smith in his *Spirit of American Government* set forth the emerging view that the Constitution was a reactionary, aristocratic document designed by its checks and balances, difficulty of amendment, and judicial review to thwart the popular will.

With more and more scholars in the Progressive Era stressing the undemocratic nature of the Constitution, the way was prepared for the historiographical explosion that Charles Beard made in 1913 with *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*. Beard's book, which was part of the "revolt against formalism" occurring everywhere in the Western world in those years, became the most influential history book ever written in America. It came to represent and dominate an entire generation's thinking about history and especially about the origins of the Constitution. By absorbing the diffused thinking of Marx and Freud and the assumptions of behaviorist psychology, Beard and others of his generation came to conceive of ideas as rationalizations, as masks obscuring the underlying interests and drives that actually determined social behavior. For too long, it seemed, historians had detached ideas from the material conditions that produced them and had invested them with an independent power that was somehow alone responsible for the determination of events. As Beard pointed out in the introduction to the 1935 edition of his *Economic Interpretation*, previous historians of the Constitution had assumed that ideas were "entities, particularities, or forces, apparently independent of all earthly considerations coming under the head of 'economic.'" Beard, like many of his contemporaries, sought to bring to the fore "those realistic features of economic conflict, stress and strain" that previous historians had ignored.⁴

By suggesting that the framers of the Constitution were motivated by their underlying economic interests, Beard removed the mantle of disinterested virtue that they had traditionally been wrapped in. However crude and mistaken Beard's particular findings have turned out to be, his

underlying assumption that people's consciousness and ultimately their behavior were the products of their social and economic circumstances had a lasting effect on American historical scholarship.

After Beard's book, debunking of the myths and legends surrounding the founding generation became increasingly popular. Because George Washington had been especially subject to mythologizing, he was often singled out for deflating. Indeed, in the 1920s the popular writer W. E. Woodward invented the word *debunk* to describe the process of revealing the unattractive qualities of particular characters, and Washington became one of his favorite targets.

Given this century-long tradition of deflating the reputations of the founders, we should not be surprised by any current criticism of the revolutionary generation. Precisely because these founders have become so important to Americans, so central to our sense of who we are, there is a natural tendency to use them as a means of criticizing America and its culture. If one wants to condemn, say, America's treatment of minorities or its imperialistic behavior, there is no better way than to bash one or more of the founders. Indeed, demonizing the founders, especially Jefferson, has become something of a cottage industry over the past forty years or so.

Although criticizing the founding generation has been going on for more than a century, there does seem to be something new and different about the present-day academic vilification. Historians' defaming of these elite white males seems much more widespread than it used to be. Sometimes this criticism has taken the form of historians' purposely ignoring the politics and the achievements of the founders altogether, as if what they did were not all that important. Instead, as has been pointed out, much of the best work on the history of the early Republic during the past several decades has concentrated on recovering the lost voices of ordinary people—a midwife in Maine or a former slave in Connecticut—or on emphasizing the popular cultural matrix of the period that transcends the leadership of the great white males.⁵ Of course, historians with no connection to academia or no interest in esoteric academic debates continue to write histories and biographies of the founders that are widely popu-

lar. But academic historians over the past forty years have tended to focus on issues of race, class, and gender in the early Republic and to shun issues of politics and political leadership.

When the founders are not ignored but confronted directly, present-day criticism of them is much more devastating than that of the past. Despite his exposing of what he took to be the founders' underlying economic motives, Beard always respected the men who framed the Constitution. "Never in the history of assemblies," he wrote in 1912, "has there been a convention of men richer in political experience and in practical knowledge, or endowed with a profounder insight into the springs of human action and the intimate essence of government."⁶

Recent historians critical of the founders express little of this kind of respect. They are not interested, as earlier critics were, in simply stripping away myths and legends to get at the human beings hidden from view. If anything, some of these critical historians want to dehumanize, not humanize, the founders. Because our present-day culture has lost a great deal of its former respect for absolute values and timeless truths, we have a harder time believing that the eighteenth-century founders have anything important or transcendent to say to us in the twenty-first century. Even in constitutional jurisprudence, which has a natural bias toward discovering the intentions of the framers of the Constitution, the reputation of the founders has lost some of its former appeal, and original intent is no longer taken for granted but has become a matter of contentious debate among scholars and jurists. It appears more evident than ever before that the founders do not share our modern views about important matters, about race, the role of woman, and equality. Hence it is easier now to dismiss them as racists, sexists, and elitists.

Certainly debunking has become much more common for generations of young people raised on reading about J. D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield and his condemnation of adult phoniness. As popular writer Dave Eggers points out, debunking is what he does as a magazine editor. Every day he edits one article after another "in a long line of contrarian articles point-

ing out the falsity of most things the world believes in, holds dear." Since even "a version of the Bible written for black kids," and "the student loan program," and "the idea of college in general, and work in general, and marriage, and makeup, and the Grateful Dead" are not immune from debunking, it stands to reason that the founders and their achievements would not be either.⁷ In fact some historians today do not believe that the revolutionaries got much of anything right. In their scholarly opinion, the Revolution has become pretty much a failure. As one historian has put it, the Revolution "failed to free the slaves, failed to offer full political equality to women, . . . failed to grant citizenship to Indians, [and] failed to create an economic world in which all could compete on equal terms."⁸

Despite all the criticism and debunking of these founders, they still seem to remain for most Americans, if not for most academic historians, an extraordinary elite, their achievements scarcely matched by those of any other generation in American history. Most Americans appear to believe that these revolutionary leaders constituted an incomparable generation of men who had a powerful and permanent impact on America's subsequent history. The founders appear even more marvelous than even those they emulated, the great legislators of classical antiquity, precisely because they are more real. They are not mythical characters but authentic historical figures about whom there exists a remarkable amount of historical evidence. For our knowledge of the founders, unlike that of many of the classical heroes, we do not have to rely on hazy legends or poetic tales. We have not only everything the revolutionary leaders ever published but also an incredible amount of their private correspondence and their most intimate thoughts, made available with a degree of editorial completeness and expertness rarely achieved in the Western world's recovery of its documentary past.

In spite of the extent and meticulousness of this historical recovery, to most Americans the founders still seem larger than life as well as possessing political and intellectual capacities well beyond our own. The awe that most of us feel when we look back at them is thus mingled with an acute

sense of loss. Somehow for a brief moment ideas and power, intellectualism and politics, came together—indeed were one with each other—in a way never again duplicated in American history.

There is no doubt that the founders were men of ideas, were, in fact, the leading intellectuals of their day. But they were as well the political leaders of their day, politicians who competed for power, lost and won elections, served in their colonial and state legislatures or in the Congress, became governors, judges, and even presidents. Of course they were neither “intellectuals” nor “politicians,” for the modern meaning of these terms suggests the very separation between them that the revolutionaries avoided. They were intellectuals without being alienated and political leaders without being obsessed with votes. They lived mutually in the world of ideas and the world of politics, shared equally in both in a happy combination that fills us with envy and wonder. We know that something happened then in American history that can never happen again.

But there is no point now, more than two centuries later, in continuing to wallow in nostalgia and to aggravate our deep feelings of loss and deficiency. What we need is not more praise of the founders but more understanding of them and their circumstances. We need to find out why the revolutionary generation was able to combine ideas and politics so effectively and why subsequent generations in America could not do so. With the proper historical perspective on the last quarter of the eighteenth century and with a keener sense of the distinctiveness of that period will come a greater appreciation of not only what we have lost by the passing of that revolutionary generation but, more important, what we have gained. For in the end what made subsequent duplication of the remarkable intellectual and political leadership of the revolutionaries impossible in America was the growth of what we have come to value most, our egalitarian culture and our democratic society. One of the prices we had to pay for democracy was a decline in the intellectual quality of American political life and an eventual separation between ideas and power. As the common man rose to power in the decades following the Revolution, the inevitable consequence was the displacement from power of the un-

common man, the aristocratic man of ideas. Yet the revolutionary leaders were not merely victims of new circumstances; they were, in fact, the progenitors of these new circumstances. They helped create the changes that led eventually to their own undoing, to the breakup of the kind of political and intellectual coherence they represented. Without intending to, they willingly destroyed the sources of their own greatness.

GREAT AS THEY WERE, the revolutionary leaders were certainly not demigods or superhuman individuals; they were very much the product of specific circumstances and a specific moment in time. Nor were they immune to the allures of interest that attracted most ordinary human beings. They wanted wealth and position and often speculated heavily in order to realize their aims. Indeed, several of the most prominent founders, such as financier of the Revolution Robert Morris and Associate Justice of the Supreme Court James Wilson, ended up in debtors' prison.

They were not demigods, but they were not democrats either, certainly not democrats in any modern manner. They were never embarrassed by talk of elitism, and they never hid their sense of superiority to ordinary folk. But neither were they contemptuous of common people; in fact they always believed that the people in general were the source of their authority. As historian Charles S. Sydnor pointed out long ago, they were the beneficiaries of a semiaristocratic political system, and their extraordinary leadership was due in large measure to processes that we today would consider undemocratic and detestable.⁹

But even in their own undemocratic time and circumstances they were unusual, if not unique. As political leaders they constituted a peculiar sort of elite, a self-created aristocracy largely based on merit and talent that was unlike the hereditary nobility that ruled eighteenth-century English society. It was not that there were no men of obscure origins who made it in England. Benjamin Franklin's English friend William Strahan, like Franklin, began life as a printer and ended up a member of Parliament.

Edmund Burke, an Irishman of undistinguished origins, rose to become one of the great writers and orators of his age. But there was a difference between Britain and America. Bright Britons of humble origins could have spectacular rises, but they needed patrons and sponsors, those who were often the titled lords and hereditary aristocrats in control of British society. Burke would never have acquired the eminence he did without the patronage of William Hamilton and the marquess of Rockingham. Members of the American revolutionary elite seem much more self-made, no doubt often achieving distinction with the help of patrons, as in Britain, but nonetheless coming to dominate their society in a way that upward-thrusting men like Strahan or Burke never dominated English society.

Eighteenth-century Britain remained under the authority of about four hundred noble families whose fabulous scale of landed wealth, political influence, and aristocratic grandeur was unmatched by anyone in North America. While Charles Carroll of Maryland, one of the wealthiest planters in the American South, was earning what Americans regarded as the huge sum of eighteen hundred pounds a year, the earl of Derby's vast estates were bringing in an annual income of over forty thousand pounds. By English standards, American aristocrats like Washington and Jefferson, even with hundreds of slaves, remained minor gentry at best. Moreover, by the English measure of status, lawyers like Adams and Hamilton were even less distinguished, gentlemen no doubt but nothing like the English nobility. The American revolutionary elite was thus very different from the English aristocracy. By its very difference, however, it was ideally suited to exploit the peculiar character of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.

THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY Anglo-American Enlightenment was preoccupied with politeness, which had a much broader meaning for people then than it does for us today. It implied more than manners and decorum. It meant affability sociability, cultivation; indeed, politeness

was considered the source of civility, which was soon replaced by the word *civilization*.

Civilization implied a social process. Societies, it was assumed, moved through successive stages of historical development, beginning in rude simplicity and progressing to refined complexity of civilization. All nations could be located along this spectrum of social development. The various theories of social progress current in the late eighteenth century had many sources, but especially important to the Americans was the four-stage theory worked out by that remarkable group of eighteenth-century Scottish social scientists Adam Smith, John Millar, Adam Ferguson, and Lord Kames. These thinkers posited four stages of evolutionary development based on differing modes of subsistence: hunting, pasturage, agriculture, and commerce. As societies grew in population, so the theory went, people were forced to find new ways of subsisting, and this need accounted for societies' moving from one stage to another. Nearly every thinker saw the aboriginal inhabitants of America as the perfect representatives of the first stage, which Adam Smith called the "lowest and rudest state of society."¹⁰ Indeed, it would be hard to exaggerate the extent to which the European discovery of the Indians in the New World influenced the emergence of the theory of different stages of history. The Indians helped create the notion, as John Locke put it, that "in the beginning all the world was *America*."¹¹

Since civilization was something that could be achieved, everything was enlisted in order to push back barbarism and ignorance and spread civility and refinement. Courtesy books that told Americans how to behave doubled in numbers during the middle decades of the eighteenth century. From such conduct manuals people learned how to act in company, how to clean their bodies, how to refine their tastes. Compilers of dictionaries attempted to find the correct meanings, spellings, and pronunciations of words and freeze them between the covers of their books. In these ways peculiarities of dialect and eccentricities of spelling and pronunciation could be eliminated, and standards of the language could

be set. Even dueling, which flourished in the eighteenth century as never before, was justified as a civilizing agent, as a means of refinement; the threat of having to fight a duel compelled gentlemen to control their passions and inhibited them from using “illiberal language” with one another.

All sorts of new organizations and instruments sprang up to spread light and knowledge among people: learned societies, lending libraries, debating clubs, assembly rooms, reading groups, gentlemanly magazines, concerts, galleries, and museums. Eighteenth-century English speakers saw the beginning of culture as a public commodity, as something that was valuable, that gave status, and that could be acquired. The cultural world that we are familiar with today was born in the Age of Enlightenment. And provincial Americans, anxious to display their learning and politeness, were doing all they could to be part of that cultural world.

At the center of this new civilized world was the idea of a gentleman. A gentleman, as the principal teacher of manners in the eighteenth century Lord Chesterfield defined him, was “a man of good behavior, well bred, amiable, high-minded, who knows how to act in any society, in the company of any man.”¹² No word in the English language came to denote better the finest qualities of the ideal man than *gentleman*, and it was the enlightened eighteenth century above all that gave it that significance. Defining a proper gentleman was a subject that fascinated the educated public of the eighteenth-century English-speaking world, and writers from Richard Steele to Jane Austen spent their lives struggling with what constituted the proper character of a gentleman; John Adams and Thomas Jefferson were still going at it in their correspondence at the end of their lives.

For many in the eighteenth century, including the American revolutionaries, being a gentleman assumed a moral meaning that was more important than its social significance. Pure monarchists might still define aristocrats exclusively by the pride of their families, the size of their estates, the lavishness of their display, and the arrogance of their bearings, but others increasingly downplayed or ridiculed these characteristics. This

enlightened age emphasized new man-made criteria of aristocracy and gentility—politeness, grace, taste, learning, and character—even to the point where titled peers like Lord Chesterfield liked to think their exalted social positions were due to talent and not to inheritance.

To be a gentleman was to think and act like a gentleman, nothing more, an immensely radical belief with implications that few foresaw. It meant being reasonable, tolerant, honest, virtuous, and “candid,” an important eighteenth-century characteristic that connoted being unbiased and just as well as frank and sincere. Being a gentleman was the prerequisite to becoming a political leader. It signified being cosmopolitan, standing on elevated ground in order to have a large view of human affairs, and being free of the prejudices, parochialism, and religious enthusiasm of the vulgar and barbaric. It meant, in short, having all those characteristics that we today sum up in the idea of a liberal arts education. Indeed, the eighteenth century created the modern idea of a liberal arts education in the English-speaking world.¹³ Of course, as Noah Webster said, having a liberal arts education and thereby becoming a gentleman “disqualifies a man for business.”¹⁴

When John Adams asked himself what a gentleman was, he answered in just these terms of a liberal arts education. “By gentlemen,” he said, “are not meant the rich or the poor, the high-born or the low-born, the industrious or the idle: but all those who have received a liberal education, an ordinary degree of erudition in liberal arts and sciences. Whether by birth they be descended from magistrates and officers of government, or from husbandmen, merchants, mechanics, or laborers; or whether they be rich or poor.”¹⁵ Whatever their fathers were, however, gentlemen could not themselves be husbandmen, mechanics, or laborers—that is, men who worked for a living with their hands.

This age-old distinction between gentlemen and commoners had a vital meaning for the revolutionary generation that we today have totally lost. It marked a horizontal cleavage that divided the social hierarchy into two unequal parts almost as sharply as the distinction between officers and soldiers divided the army; indeed, the military division was related to the

larger social one. Gentlemen, who constituted about 5 to 10 percent of the society, were all those at the top of the social hierarchy who were wealthy enough not to have to work, or at least not to have to work with their hands, and who thus seemed able to act in a disinterested manner in promoting a public good.

Disinterestedness was the most common term the founders used as a synonym for the classical conception of virtue or self-sacrifice; it better conveyed the threats from interests that virtue seemed increasingly to face in the rapidly commercializing eighteenth century. Dr. Johnson had defined *disinterested* as being “superior to regard of private advantage; not influenced by private profit,” and that was what the founders meant by the term. We today have lost most of this earlier meaning. Even educated people now use *disinterested* as a synonym for *uninterested*, meaning “indifferent or unconcerned.” It is almost as if we cannot quite imagine someone who is capable of rising above a pecuniary interest and being unselfish or impartial where an interest might be present.

In the eighteenth-century Anglo-American world gentlemen believed that only independent individuals, free of interested ties and paid by no masters, could practice such virtue. It was thought that those who had occupations and had to work strenuously for a living lacked the leisure for virtuous public leadership. In the ideal polity, Aristotle had written thousands of years earlier, “the citizens must not live a mechanical or commercial life. Such a life is not noble, and it militates against virtue.” For Aristotle not even agricultural workers could be citizens. For men “must have leisure to develop their virtue and for the activities of a citizen.”¹⁶ Over several millennia this ancient ideal had lost much of its potency, but some of it lingered even into the eighteenth century. Adam Smith in his *Wealth of Nations* (1776) thought that ordinary people in a modern complicated commercial society were too engaged in their occupations and the making of money to be able to make impartial judgments about the varied interests and occupations of their society. Only “those few, who being attached to no particular occupation themselves,” said Smith, “have leisure and inclination to examine the occupations of other people.”¹⁷

These independent gentlemen of leisure who were presumed to be free of occupations and the marketplace were expected to supply the necessary leadership in government. Since well-to-do gentry were “exempted from the lower and less honourable employments,” wrote the British philosopher Francis Hutcheson, they were “rather more than others obliged to an active life in some service to mankind. The publick has this claim upon them.”¹⁸ All the American founders felt the weight of this claim and often agonized and complained about it. The revolutionary leaders were not modern men. They did not conceive of politics as a profession and of officeholding as a career as politicians do today. Like Jefferson, they believed that “in a virtuous government . . . public offices are what they should be, burthens to those appointed to them, which it would be wrong to decline, though foreseen to bring with them intense labor, and great private loss.” Public office was an obligation required of certain gentlemen because of their talents, independence, and social preeminence.¹⁹

In eighteenth-century America it had never been easy for gentlemen to make this personal sacrifice for the public, and it became especially difficult during the Revolution. Many of the revolutionary leaders, especially those of “small fortunes” who served in the Continental Congress, continually complained of the burdens of office and repeatedly begged to be relieved from those burdens in order to pursue their private interests. Periodic temporary retirement from the cares and turmoil of office to one’s country estate for refuge and rest was acceptable classical behavior. But too often America’s political leaders, especially in the North, men like Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr, had to retire not to relaxation in the solitude and leisure of a rural retreat but to the making of money in the business and bustle of a city law practice.²⁰

In short, America’s would-be gentlemen had a great deal of trouble maintaining the desired classical independence and freedom from the marketplace that philosophers like Adam Smith thought necessary for political leadership. Of course, there were large numbers of southern planter gentry whose leisure was based on the labor of their slaves, and these

planters obviously came closest in America to emulating the English landed aristocracy. But some southern planters kept taverns on the side, and many others were not as removed from the day-to-day management of their estates as were their counterparts among the English landed gentry. Their overseers were not comparable to the stewards of the English aristocracy; thus the planters, despite their aristocratic poses, were often very busy, commercially involved men. Despite Jefferson's illusion that the subsistence of these planters was not dependent "on the casualties and caprice of customers," their livelihoods were in fact tied directly to the vicissitudes of international trade, and most of them, if not Jefferson, always had an uneasy sense of being dependent on the market to an extent that the English aristocracy never really felt.²¹ Still, the great southern planters of Virginia and South Carolina at least approached the classical image of disinterested gentlemanly leadership, and they knew it and made the most of it throughout the decades following the Revolution.²²

In northern American society such independent gentlemen standing above the interests of the marketplace were harder to find, but the ideal remained strong. In ancient Rome, wrote James Wilson, magistrates and army officers were always gentleman farmers, always willing to step down "from the elevation of office" and reassume "with contentment and with pleasure, the peaceful labours of a rural and independent life." John Dickinson's pose as a farmer in his popular pamphlet of 1768 is incomprehensible except within this classical tradition. Dickinson, a wealthy Philadelphia lawyer, wanted to assure his readers of his gentlemanly disinterestedness by informing them at the outset that he was a farmer "contented" and "undisturbed by worldly hopes or fears."²³ Prominent merchants dealing in international trade brought wealth into the society and were thus valuable members of the community, but their status as independent gentlemen was always tainted by their concern, as the minister Charles Chauncy of Massachusetts put it, to "serve their own private separate interest."²⁴

Wealthy merchants like John Hancock and Henry Laurens knew this,

and during the imperial crisis both shed their mercantile businesses and sought to ennoble themselves. Hancock spent lavishly, brought every imaginable luxury, and patronized everyone. He went through the fortune he had inherited from his uncle, but in the process he became the single most popular and powerful figure in Massachusetts politics during the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Laurens knew only too well the contempt in which trading was held in South Carolina, and in the 1760s he began curtailing his merchant activities. During the Revolution he became president of the Continental Congress and was able to sneer at all those merchants like Philadelphia's Robert Morris who were still busy making money. "How hard it is," he had the gall to say in 1779, "for a rich, or covetous man to enter heartily into the kingdom of patriotism."²⁵

For mechanics and other middling sorts who worked with their hands, being a disinterested gentleman was generally considered impossible. They were, as one lady poet put it, the "vulgar" caught up "in trade,/ Whose minds by miserly avarice were swayed."²⁶ Yet many middling people were ambitious and often sought to "pass" as gentlemen, this being the term that was commonly used. Because the aristocracy was so weak and so vulnerable to challenge in America—the perennial problem from the beginning of the first European settlements—it was always difficult to keep upstarts from claiming gentry status. When Washington arrived in Massachusetts in June 1775 to take up leadership of the Continental army, he was stunned to find that many of the New England officers not only had been elected by their men but had been cobblers and common farmers in civilian life. Not having enough gentlemen to staff the officer corps became a continuing problem for Washington and the Continental army. Instead of the status of gentleman entitling a man to be an officer, too many ordinary men tried to use their military rank to prove that they were in fact gentlemen.²⁷

Still, revolutionary America was far from an egalitarian society, and most middling sorts, however rich, were not readily accepted as gentlemen. Artisans and tradesmen who had acquired wealth and were politi-

cally ambitious, such as Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania and Roger Sherman of Connecticut, found that they had to retire from business in order to attain high political office.

As aspiring gentlemen the leaders of the revolutionary generation shared these assumptions about work, politeness, and civilization. They were primed to receive all these new enlightened ideas about civility and gentility. Because America, as the future governor of New Jersey William Livingston declared, was “just emerging from the rude unpolished Condition of an Infant country,” it was especially eager to move along the spectrum of social development toward greater refinement and civilization, more so perhaps than England itself.²⁸ Indeed, all the talk of acquiring the enlightened attributes of a gentleman had a special appeal for all the outlying underdeveloped provinces of the greater British world, Scotland as well as North America.

As historian Franco Venturi once observed, the Enlightenment was created not in the centers of European culture but on its peripheries. It “was born and organized in those places where the contact between a backward world and a modern one was chronologically more abrupt and geographically closer.”²⁹ Both Americans and Scots were provincial peoples living on the edges of the metropolitan English world. Both provincial societies lacked the presence of the great hereditary noble families that were at the ruling center of English political life. In both North America and Scotland, unlike metropolitan England, the uppermost levels of the aristocracy tended to be dominated by minor gentry—professional men or relatively small landowners—who were anxious to have their status determined less by their ancestry or the size of their estates than by their behavior or their learning.

Both the Scots and the North Americans, moreover, were acutely aware of the contrast between civilization and the nearby barbarism of the Highland clans and the North American Indian tribes. Both were keenly aware too of the degrees of civilization and spent much time writing and reading essays on the stages of social progress from rudeness to refinement. They knew that they lived in cruder and more simple societies than

the English and that England was well along in the fourth and final stage of social development—commercial society—and had much to offer them in the ways of politeness and refinement. When the twenty-two-year-old Scot James Boswell, the future biographer of Samuel Johnson, first experienced London society, he was very excited and began “to acquire a composed genteel character very different from a rattling uncultivated one which for some time past I have been fond of.”³⁰

Yet at the same time both the Scots and Americans knew only too well that the polite and sophisticated metropolitan center of the empire was steeped in luxury and corruption. England had sprawling, poverty-ridden cities, overrefined manners, gross inequalities of rank, complex divisions of labor, and widespread manufacturing of luxuries, all symptoms of over-advanced social development and social decay. It was part of the four-stage theory of social development, as Samuel Stanhope Smith of Princeton put it, “that human society can advance only to a certain point before it becomes corrupted, and begins to decline.”³¹ And to many provincials England in the 1760s and 1770s seemed to be on the verge of dissolution. Those North American colonists who came in direct contact with London were shocked at the notorious ways in which hundreds of thousands of pounds were being spent to buy elections. This “most unbounded licentiousness and utter disregard of virtue,” the young law student at the Inns of Court John Dickinson told his parents, could only end, as it always had in history, in the destruction of the British Empire.³²

At the same time these provincial peoples living on the periphery of the British Empire began to experience an increasing arrogance on the part of the English. Especially with their success over France in the Seven Years’ War, the English developed an ever-keener sense of their own Englishness, a sense of nationality distinct from that of the Scots, Irish, and North Americans. The English now began to regard the North American colonists less as fellow Englishmen across the Atlantic than as another set of people to be ruled. Indeed, in 1763 Lord Halifax, former head of the Board of Trade and secretary of state for the Southern Department in charge of the colonies during the Grenville ministry, went so far as to say

that “the people of England” considered the Americans, “though H.M.’s subjects, as foreigners.”³³

Hence these provincials in Scotland and North America began to feel an acute ambivalence about being part of the British Empire. Proud of their simple native provinces but keenly aware of the metropolitan center of civilization that was London, both Americans and Scots had the unsettling sense of living in two cultures simultaneously.

Although this experience may have been unsettling, it was at the same time very stimulating and creative.³⁴ It helps explain why North America and Scotland should have become such remarkable places of enlightenment and intellectual ferment in the English-speaking world during the last part of the eighteenth century. Scots like David Hume, Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, and John Millar certainly matched, if they did not exceed, the American founders in brilliance and creativity. Benjamin Rush noted as early as 1766 that “useful and pleasing” conversation was coming to characterize both Edinburgh and Philadelphia.³⁵ Living so close to what they regarded as savagery and barbarism, both the Scottish and North American leaders felt compelled to think freshly about the meaning of being civilized, and in the process they put a heightened emphasis on learned and acquired values at the expense of the traditional inherited values of blood and kinship. Wanting to become precisely the kind of gentlemen that their contemporaries Jane Austen and Edmund Burke idealized, they enthusiastically adopted the new enlightened eighteenth-century ideals of gentility: grace without foppishness, refinement without ostentation, virtue without affectation, independence without arrogance.

All the founders would have heartily endorsed William Livingston’s injunctions for becoming truly enlightened gentlemen: “Let us abhor Superstition and Bigotry, which are the Parents of Sloth and Slavery. Let us make War upon Ignorance and Barbarity of Manners. Let us invite the Arts and Sciences to reside amongst us. Let us encourage every thing which tends to exalt and embellish our Characters. And in fine, let the Love of our Country be manifested by that which is the only true Manifestation of it, a patriotic soul and a public Spirit.”³⁶ They struggled to

internalize the new liberal man-made standards that had come to define what it meant to be truly civilized—politeness, taste, sociability, learning, compassion, and benevolence—and what it meant to be good political leaders: virtue, disinterestedness, and an aversion to corruption and courtierlike behavior. Once internalized, these enlightened and classically republican ideals, values, and standards came to circumscribe and control their behavior. They talked obsessively about earning a character, which, as Dr. Johnson defined it, was “a representation of any man as to his personal qualities.”

Preoccupied with their honor or their reputation, or, in other words, the way they were represented and viewed by others, these revolutionary leaders inevitably became characters, self-fashioned performers in the theater of life. Theirs was not character as we today are apt to understand it, as the inner personality that contains hidden contradictions and flaws. (This present-day view of character is what leads to the current bashing of the founders.) Instead their idea of character was the outer life, the public person trying to show the world that he was living up to the values and duties that the best of the culture imposed on him. The founders were integrally connected to the society and never saw themselves standing apart from the world in critical or scholarly isolation. Unlike intellectuals today, they had no sense of being in an adversarial relationship to the culture. They were individuals undoubtedly, sometimes assuming a classic pose of heroic and noble preeminence, but they were not individualists, men worried about their social identities. They were enmeshed in the society and civic-minded by necessity; thus they hid their personal feelings for the sake of civility and sociability and their public personas. Jefferson and Martha Washington destroyed their correspondence with their spouses because they believed that such letters were exclusively private and had no role to play in telling the world the nature of their public characters. In his infamous “Reynolds Pamphlet,” of 1797, in which Hamilton sacrificed his private virtue for the sake of his public virtue, Hamilton argued that the private lives of gentlemen like him should have nothing to do with their public character and their fitness for public office. Benjamin Franklin

never thought that his characteristic behavior—his artful posing, his role playing, his many masks, his refusal to reveal his inner self—was anything other than what the cultivated and sociable eighteenth century admired.³⁷ Today we are instinctively repelled by such calculation, such insincerity, such willingness to adapt and compromise for the sake of society, yet our distaste for such behavior is just another measure of our distance from the pre-Romantic eighteenth century.

The gentility and civility that these revolutionary leaders sought to achieve were public; they made sense only in society. Knowing how to act in company, knowing how to lead and govern men meant being acutely aware of other people and their feelings and reactions. Society needed what Joseph Addison called a “Fraternity of Spectators” who “distinguished themselves from the thoughtless Herd of their ignorant and unattentive Brethren.” These “Spectators,” consisting of “every one that considers the World as a Theatre, and desires to form a right Judgment of those who are the Actors on it,” had the responsibility of creating politeness.³⁸ A gentleman’s behavior was to be judged by how it affected other people and the society.

The culture of gentility and virtuous leadership thus implied audiences, spectators, and characters, a theatrical world of appearances and representations, applause and censure, something that both Washington and John Adams appreciated more than most. Adams always thought he and his colleagues were onstage. At one point he was taken with what he called “The Scenery of the Business” of public life, which he said had “more effect than the characters of the *dramatis personae* or the ingenuity of the plot.” By 1805 he had witnessed enough theater to last a lifetime, and unfortunately he thought he was not one of the stars. “Was there ever a *coup de théâtre*,” he asked his friend Benjamin Rush, “that had so great an effect as Jefferson’s penmanship of the Declaration of Independence?” And what about Hamilton’s demand, “upon pain of a pamphlet,” for a command at Yorktown? he asked.³⁹ Life was theater, and impressions one made on spectators were what counted. Public leaders had to become actors or characters, masters of masquerade.

The revolutionary leaders knew this and committed themselves to behaving in a certain moral, virtuous, and civilized manner. Indeed, the intense self-conscious seriousness with which they made that commitment was what ultimately separates them from later generations of American leaders. But that commitment also sets them sharply apart from the older world of their fathers and grandfathers. They sought, often unsuccessfully but always sincerely, to play a part, to be what Jefferson called natural aristocrats—aristocrats who measured their status not by birth or family that hereditary aristocrats from time immemorial had valued but by enlightened values and benevolent behavior.

They had good reason for doing so, for they were men of high ambitions yet of relatively modest origins, and this combination made achieved rather than ascribed values naturally appealing to them. Almost all the revolutionary leaders, even including the second and third ranks of leadership, were first-generation gentlemen. That is to say, almost all were the first in their families to attend college, to acquire a liberal arts education, and to display the new eighteenth-century marks of an enlightened gentleman. Of the ninety-nine men who signed the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution, only eight are known to have had fathers who attended college. (Those revolutionary leaders, such as Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, and Nathanael Greene, who did not attend college usually made up for this lack by intensive self-cultivation in liberal enlightened values.) As Benjamin Rush noted in 1790, “Many of the first men in America are the sons of reputable mechanics or farmers.”⁴⁰

Jefferson’s father, Peter Jefferson, was a wealthy Virginia planter and surveyor who married successfully into the prestigious Randolph family. But he was not a refined and liberally educated gentleman: He did not read Latin, he did not know French, he did not play the violin, and as far as we know, he never once questioned the idea of a religious establishment or the owning of slaves.

His son Thomas was very different. Indeed, all the revolutionaries knew things that their fathers had not known, and they were eager to prove themselves by what they believed and valued, by their virtue and dis-

interestedness. But there was one prominent revolutionary leader who did not seek to play the role that the others did. On the face of it, Aaron Burr had all the credentials for being a great founder: He was a Revolutionary War veteran, a Princeton graduate, and a charming and wealthy aristocrat. He eventually became a senator from New York and the vice president of the United States. But something set his character apart from his colleagues. He behaved very differently from the other revolutionary leaders—especially in promoting his own selfish interests at the expense of the public good—and in the end that difference provoked his fellow statesmen into challenging him. Since he became the great exception that proves the rule, recounting his deviant experience helps us better understand the character of the founders.

YET THE VERY high-mindedness of these mainstream founders raises fundamental questions. If it was the intense commitment of this generation of founders to new enlightened values that separates it from other generations, why, it might be asked, and indeed, as it has been asked by recent critical historians, did these so-called enlightened and liberally educated gentlemen not do more to reform their society? Why did they fail to enhance the status of women? Eliminate slavery entirely? Treat the Indians in a more humane manner?

It is true that the founders did not accomplish all that many of them wanted. It turned out that they did not control their society and culture as much as they thought they did. They were also no more able accurately to predict their future than we can ours. In the end many of their enlightened hopes and their kind of elitist leadership were done in by the very democratic and egalitarian forces they had unleashed with their Revolution.

No doubt all the founders assumed instinctively that the western territories would eventually belong to American settlers. But many of them were at the same time scrupulously concerned for the fate of the Indians who occupied those territories; indeed, the statements of Washington's

secretary of war Henry Knox in the 1790s about the need for just treatment of the Native Americans a modern anthropologist might even applaud. But purchasing the Indians' rights to the land and assimilating or protecting them in a civilized manner as Knox recommended depended on an orderly and steady pace of settlement. The ordinary white settlers who moved west, flush with confidence that they were indeed the chosen people of God their leaders told them they were, paid no attention to the plans and policies concocted in eastern capitals. They went ahead and rapidly and chaotically scattered westward and thus stirred up warfare with the Indians into which the federal government was inevitably drawn.

Democracy and demography did the same for the other hopes and plans of the founders. All the prominent leaders thought that the liberal principles of the Revolution would eventually destroy the institution of slavery. When even southerners like Jefferson, Patrick Henry, and Henry Laurens publicly deplored the injustice of slavery, from "that moment," declared the New York physician and abolitionist E. H. Smith in 1798, "the slow, but certain, death-wound was inflicted upon it."⁴¹ Of course such predictions could have not been more wrong. Far from being doomed, slavery in the United States in the 1790s was on the verge of its greatest expansion. Indeed, at the end of the revolutionary era there were more slaves in the nation than in 1760.

But such self-deception, such mistaken optimism, by the revolutionary leaders was understandable, for they wanted to believe the best, and initially there was evidence that slavery was dying out. The northern states, where slavery was not inconsequential, were busy trying to eliminate the institution, and by 1804 all had done so. The founders thought the same thing might happen in the southern states. Not only were there more antislave societies created in the South than in the North, but manumissions in the upper South grew rapidly in the years immediately following the end of the War for Independence. Many believed that ending the international slave trade in 1808 would eventually kill off the institution of slavery. The reason the founders so readily took the issue of slavery off the table in the 1790s was this mistaken faith in the future. As

Oliver Ellsworth, the third chief justice of the United States, declared, "As population increases, poor labourers will be so plenty as to render slaves useless. Slavery in time will not be a speck in our country."⁴² The leaders simply did not count on the remarkable demographic capacity of the slave states themselves, especially Virginia, to produce slaves for the expanding areas of the Deep South and the Southwest. Also, whatever the revolutionary leaders might have wished for in ending slavery was nullified by the demands of ordinary white planters for more slaves.

If we want to know why we can never again replicate the extraordinary generation of the founders, there is a simple answer: the growth of what we today presumably value most about American society and culture, egalitarian democracy. In the early nineteenth century the voices of ordinary people, at least ordinary white people, began to be heard as never before in history, and they soon overwhelmed the high-minded desires and aims of the revolutionary leaders who had brought them into being. The founders had succeeded only too well in promoting democracy and equality among ordinary people; indeed, they succeeded in preventing any duplication of themselves.