

REVOLUTIONARY CHARACTERS: WHAT MADE THE FOUNDERS DIFFERENT¹

REVIEWED BY MAJOR KYLE D. MURRAY²

*The United States was founded on a set of beliefs and not, as were other nations, on 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 at its founding.*³

“Traditionally, Americans are regarded as worshippers of their Constitution. . . . Traditionally, also, Americans are credited or charged, as the case may be, with veneration of ‘The Founding Fathers’ whose words and deeds, like the beads of a rosary, keep believers in touch with their faith.”⁴ However, “[w]hat 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.”⁵ In *Revolutionary Characters: What Made the Founders Different*, Professor Gordon S. Wood attempts to reveal the answers to those questions by placing a “proper historical perspective on the last quarter of the eighteenth century.”⁶ Upon assembling a collection of eight essays on eight individual founders, Professor Wood comes to the conclusion that these extraordinary men distinguished themselves because of their character.⁷ The founders’ character-driven leadership enabled the creation of a governmental system that ultimately “destroyed the sources of their own greatness.”⁸ This destruction further leads Professor Wood to conclude that the founders could never be replicated.⁹ However, despite his excellent factual accounts of these eight extraordinary men, I disagree with the author’s analysis of the character of the founders, his interpretation of the founders’ contribution to their own demise, and his conclusion regarding the inability to recreate such great leaders.

Prior to examining these three points of contention, it is necessary to comment on the way Professor Wood assembled this book. From a structural perspective, the book fails to flow smoothly throughout. *Revolutionary Characters* consists of eight individual essays, slightly modified, yet previously published elsewhere, pieced together to form one body of work.¹⁰ Professor Wood presents essays on George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, John Adams, Thomas Paine, and Aaron Burr, accompanied by an introduction and an epilogue. Each essay begins with a minor transitional sentence referring to the previous essay that barely ties the two together and somewhat trivializes the previous chapter. Additionally, a reading of the essays independent of the introduction and epilogue would fail to reveal the author’s overall themes, while a reading of only those two sections would lead to a significant understanding of Professor Wood’s points.

First, according to the author, examination of the character of each of the selected founders serves an important role in understanding their accomplishments.¹¹ He cautions the reader to view character as it was defined at the end of the eighteenth century and not as it is defined today.¹² “[T]heir 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 culture imposed on him.”¹³ Professor Wood

¹ GORDON S. WOOD, *REVOLUTIONARY CHARACTERS: WHAT MADE THE FOUNDERS DIFFERENT* (2006).

² U.S. Marine Corps. Written while assigned as a student, 55th Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General’s Legal Center and School, U.S. Army, Charlottesville, Virginia.

³ WOOD, *supra* note 1, at 4.

⁴ JAMES MADISON, *JOURNAL OF THE FEDERAL CONVENTION* (1893), *reprinted in* NOTES OF DEBATES IN THE FEDERAL CONVENTION OF 1787 REPORTED BY JAMES MADISON vii (Bicentennial ed., W. W. Norton Co. 1987).

⁵ WOOD, *supra* note 1, at 10.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *See id.* at 23.

⁸ *Id.* at 11.

⁹ *See id.* at 28.

¹⁰ *See id.* at 276–301.

¹¹ *See id.* at 10.

¹² *See id.* at 23.

¹³ *Id.*

focuses on “disinterestedness” in examining their characters.¹⁴ “*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.”¹⁵ This description points more to the modern definition of character than it does the eighteenth century definition, and the author actually supports his points with examples of both types of character.

As the author cautioned, character in the eighteenth century is different from the modern view.¹⁶ It is difficult to examine the founders’ character in the modern sense because “[I]f life was theater, and impressions one made on spectators were what counted. Public leaders had to become actors or characters, masters of masquerade.”¹⁷ These masks force us to look to their writings and the writings of others to determine their inner character. Unfortunately, “[i]t is often difficult to distinguish between the private correspondence and the public writings of the revolutionaries, so alike are they.”¹⁸ An examination of the essay on George Washington provides a perfect example.

George Washington’s disinterestedness, although it preserved a fledgling nation, served to further his personal interest in protecting his fame.¹⁹ The author refers to the “greatness of George Washington,” and rightfully so.²⁰ Professor Wood considers him to be the most important of the founders.²¹ George Washington held the nation together because he was able to effectively control hostilities between the two political parties and “use his immense prestige and good judgment to restrain fears, limit intrigues, and stymie opposition that otherwise might have escalated into serious violence.”²² Although, the author supports his position with descriptions of Washington’s disinterested acts, his descriptions lead the reader to surmise that Washington’s disinterestedness may have actually been self-interest.

Convinced that Washington did not act out of self-interest, Professor Wood calls George Washington “the only truly classical hero we have ever had.”²³ The author states “Washington’s genius, Washington’s greatness, lay in his character.”²⁴ But here, Professor Wood describes what more resembles the modern view of character. In describing Washington, Wood writes “He had character and was truly a man of virtue.”²⁵ “It was his moral character that set him off from other men.”²⁶ He considers Washington’s greatest act to be his resignation in 1783 from his position as the Commander-in-Chief of the American forces.²⁷ The irony lies in the fact that this disinterested act established Washington as a great man and brought him greater power and fame. “[Washington] was well aware of his reputation and his fame earned as the commander in chief of the American revolutionary forces. That awareness of his heroic stature was crucial to Washington. It affected nearly everything he did for the rest of his life.”²⁸ This awareness of his famed status, coupled with his concern for preserving it, makes the reader question the true disinterestedness of his actions. Professor Wood lends support to this theory by acknowledging “Washington was not naive. He was well aware of the effect his resignation would have.”²⁹ The recognition that one would become known as a “modern Cincinnatus” clashes with the idea of being driven by altruistic motives.³⁰

¹⁴ See *id.* at 16.

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ See *id.* at 23.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 24.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 250.

¹⁹ See *id.* at 32–33.

²⁰ *Id.* at 29.

²¹ *Revolutionary Characters* (Book TV on C-SPAN 2 television broadcast Aug. 26, 2006). This episode was recorded on 30 May 2006, at the Politics and Prose Bookstore in Washington, D.C. where Professor Wood gave a speech followed by a question and answer period. *Id.*

²² WOOD, *supra* note 1, at 56.

²³ *Id.* at 32.

²⁴ *Id.* at 34.

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ See *id.* at 41.

²⁸ *Id.* at 32–33.

²⁹ *Id.* at 42.

³⁰ *Id.*

Finally, the author lends further commentary to the nature of his disinterestedness and character by stating “[d]espite his outward modesty, Washington realized he was an extraordinary man, and he was not ashamed of it.”³¹ “He spent the rest of his life guarding and protecting his reputation and worrying about it.”³²

The essay on Aaron Burr also raises issues regarding these two types of character: outward character (eighteenth century view) and inner character (modern view).³³ Aaron Burr’s character and disinterestedness, in the modern senses, led to his fame and ultimately his demise.³⁴ Professor Wood starts his essay on Burr stating, “[b]y examining Burr’s eccentric and extraordinary career, we can begin to understand better the character of the major founders.”³⁵ Which type of character is the author seeking to understand? For Burr, it was his inner character that caused him problems with the other founders.³⁶ Wood then describes Burr as a man of little character and full of self-interest.³⁷ “Beyond what politics could do for his friends, his family, and him personally, it had little emotional significance for him. Politics, as he once put it, was ‘fun and honor & profit.’”³⁸ Professor Wood goes on to state “no political leader of his prominence in the period ever spent so much time and energy so blatantly scheming for his own personal and political advantage.”³⁹ Yet, this lack of inner character did not prevent Aaron Burr from achieving political success, and nearly achieving the presidency.⁴⁰ However, Professor Wood describes Burr’s self-interested politics as the cause of his downfall.⁴¹ “There was ‘no doubt’ in Hamilton’s mind that ‘upon every virtuous and prudent calculation’ Jefferson was to be preferred to Burr. It was a matter of character, he said: Burr had none, and Jefferson at least had ‘pretensions of character.’”⁴² Thus, despite the author suggesting that the reader should look to the external character to examine the founders, the support for the difference between Burr and the other founders is based solely on a comparison of his inner character with the inner character of the others.

The founders had flaws which they shielded from the nation by hiding behind their characters.⁴³ They were common men with common flaws who were perfect for the government they created: a “government of the people.”⁴⁴ Their creation did not just protect them from the common people, but also protected the government from themselves: the so-called elite. The importance does not lie within the founders’ external character as the author states, but within these men’s understanding of their own internal character flaws. James Madison understood this and discussed the need to take precautions against a self-governing body.⁴⁵ “Ambition must be made to counteract ambition. The interest of man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the people. It may be a reflection on human nature, that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government.”⁴⁶ Madison continued with his point regarding the need to take precautions against the character of man. “If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary.”⁴⁷ The truly disinterested acts took place when these men created a form of government that accounted for their own character flaws.

³¹ *Id.*

³² *Id.* at 43.

³³ *See id.* at 225–42.

³⁴ *See id.* at 241.

³⁵ *Id.* at 225.

³⁶ *See id.* at 226–28.

³⁷ *See id.* at 234.

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ *Id.* at 234–35.

⁴⁰ *See id.* at 241.

⁴¹ *See id.* at 239.

⁴² *Id.* at 241.

⁴³ *See id.* at 8.

⁴⁴ President Abraham Lincoln, The Gettysburg Address (Nov. 19, 1863).

⁴⁵ *See THE FEDERALIST NO. 51*, at 267–72 (James Madison) (George W. Carey & James McClellan eds., 2001).

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 268–69.

⁴⁷ *Id.* at 269.

Secondly, Professor Wood stresses the point that the founders contributed to their own demise.⁴⁸ “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.”⁴⁹ However, the founders did not destroy the sources of their greatness; their actions actually created and preserved their greatness. The system of government they created remains in place today, and the founders’ fame remains. Professor Wood’s individual essays repeatedly suggest that the desire for fame for the generations was a driving factor behind many of their actions.⁵⁰ The founders were tasked with creating a new system of government to deal with their current situation, and in accomplishing this task they (with the exception of Burr) were overly concerned with their reputations and how they would be remembered.⁵¹ George Washington weighed every action very carefully to preserve his fame.⁵² Thomas Jefferson understood the public audience for his correspondence and took great care in preparing his writings.⁵³ James Madison valued the publication of his personal notes enough to include the following requirement in his will:

Considering the peculiarity and magnitude of the occasion which produced the convention at Philadelphia in 1787, the Characters who composed it, the Constitution which resulted from their deliberation, it’s effects during a trial of so many years on the prosperity of the people living under it, and the interest it has inspired among the friends of free Government, it is not an unreasonable inference that a careful and extended report of the proceedings and discussions of that body, which were closed doors, by a member who was constant in his attendance, will be particularly gratifying to the people of the United States, and to all who take an interest in the progress of political science and the cause of true liberty.⁵⁴

These men did not meet their demise at the hands of their own creation because the goal was much greater than the author concludes. These men achieved lasting fame.

Finally, Professor Wood states these great leaders cannot be recreated.⁵⁵ The leadership of the founders created an enduring system that has not required the need for revolutionaries, but leaders of equal or greater capacity will always be recreated. Leaders respond to the situations they face. The founders possessed a desire to prosper independently of the King and they responded to that situation. The leaders understood that the “critical point was self rule.”⁵⁶ The founders did not all share the same views. “Jefferson’s belief in the common man led him to believe in weak government, unenergetic legislatures, low taxes, no debt, and government as close to the people as possible.”⁵⁷ In contrast, “Hamilton’s lack of faith in the common man led him to believe in a strong national government, a social and economic aristocracy, an industrial state, taxes, debt, and, of course, judicial review.”⁵⁸ George Washington’s leadership held both sides together.⁵⁹ The founders were men of vision and intelligence, but they were also flawed.⁶⁰ “[T]he 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.’”⁶¹ They were not perfect but their achievements were incredible. Similar men have always existed and will continue to exist. The author states “[t]he founders had succeeded only too well in promoting democracy and equality among ordinary people; indeed, they succeeded in preventing any duplication of themselves.”⁶² This

⁴⁸ See WOOD, *supra* note 1, at 11.

⁴⁹ *Id.*

⁵⁰ See *id.* at 43, 228, 230.

⁵¹ See *id.* at 228.

⁵² See *id.* at 43.

⁵³ See *id.* at 230.

⁵⁴ MADISON, *supra* note 4, at ix.

⁵⁵ See WOOD, *supra* note 1, at 28.

⁵⁶ WILLIAM J. QUIRK & R. RANDALL BRIDWELL, JUDICIAL DICTATORSHIP 129 (1996).

⁵⁷ *Id.*

⁵⁸ *Id.*

⁵⁹ See WOOD, *supra* note 1, at 49–50.

⁶⁰ See *id.* at 9.

⁶¹ *Id.*

⁶² *Id.* at 28.

conclusion goes too far. Their character is perfectly capable of duplication and improvement; the system of government they created has prevented the need to duplicate their caliber of revolutionaries in the United States.

In conclusion, Professor Wood's individual essays on the eight founders provide excellent insight into their characters, but not in the manner in which the author intended. The author unwittingly provides support for the theory that men of ordinary character accomplished the extraordinary and preserved the ability of the common man to self-govern within the United States. Regardless, the book conveys a positive message. Readers should be proud of the accomplishments of these Revolutionary Characters, and marvel that common men can establish and maintain an effective system of self-government, despite their faults.