

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the
Founding Fathers by Brian McClanahan
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Chapter One



THE MYTHS

Just as Parson Weems wrote about Washington chopping down the cherry tree, liberal historians today have taken their axes to the Founding Fathers themselves, highlighting what they think will discredit them in modern eyes, exposing some of them as slaveholders or as philanderers or as spawning illegitimate children. Some of what these historians write is true, but much of it is not—it is gossip, often ill-founded gossip at that, instead of history. If Parson Weems's famous story was a myth, liberal historians have been propagating many more myths of their own—and they're much more harmful than Parson Weems's illustrative tale of Washington's moral probity. Here are some of the more common myths liberal historians propound about the Founding era.

Myth: The Founding generation created a democracy

Please repeat: the United States is not a democracy and was never intended to be a democracy. The United States is a republic, and a great number in the Founding generation, if not the majority, classified themselves as republicans (not to be confused with the modern Republican Party). Most of the Founding Fathers considered democracy a dangerous extreme to be avoided.

Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts said at the Constitutional Convention that “the evils we experience flow from the excess of democracy. The people do not want virtue, but are the dupes of pretended patriots.” George Mason guarded against being both “too democratic” and running “incautiously” to the “other extreme” (monarchy). Mason equated the United States House of Representatives with the British House of Commons, and suggested, as did James Madison, that the other branches of government should have some check on rampant democracy. In the words of Madison, “Where a majority are united by a common sentiment, and have an opportunity, the rights of the minor party become insecure”—in other words; the Founders wanted checks against the tyranny of the majority. That was why the Founders wanted a republic of separated powers. While the government was to “be derived from the great body of society, not from an inconsiderable portion or a favored class of it,” the Constitution included a system of indirect appointments, including the Supreme Court, the Electoral College System, and, originally, the United States Senate, whose members were appointed by their respective state legislatures:

The only level of government that was to be directly responsive to the people was the House of Representatives. It was granted the most constitutional power, but was to be checked by the executive branch, the upper house of the Senate, and the judicial branch.

Madison warned against a “pure democracy” in *Federalist Essay No. 10*. Pure democracies, he surmised, could not protect the people from the evils of faction, which he defined as a group whose interests were alien and counteractive to the good of society. Madison believed that in a pure democracy, factions could easily

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“A democracy [is] the only pure republic, but impracticable beyond the limits of a town.”

—Thomas Jefferson, 1816

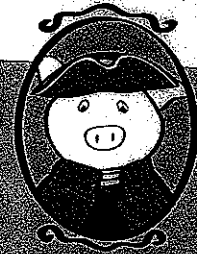


take control of the government through alliances (or dishonesty) and subject the minority to perpetual legislative abuse. A representative or federal republic, such as the United States, offered a check against destructive factionalism. Madison thought the states would help control factionalism by rendering a small group from one geographic or political region ineffective against the aggregate remaining states.

During the New York ratification debates, Alexander Hamilton also disputed the observation that "pure democracy, would be the most perfect government." He said, "Experience has proved that no position in politics is more false than this. The ancient democracies . . . never possessed one feature of good government. Their very character was tyranny; their figure, deformity." The Constitution created a system far superior, in his estimation, to a pure democracy. John Adams echoed this sentiment and once wrote that "there was never a democracy yet that did not commit suicide."

Edmund Randolph of Virginia saw the Senate, with its members elected by their respective state legislatures, as a "cure for the evils under which the United States labored . . . the turbulence and follies of democracy." United States senators were not elected directly until the Seventeenth Amendment to the Constitution (1913)—a change that destroyed the Framers' original intentions for the upper house. No longer would it be the bastion of state's rights and an aristocratic check on both the House of Representatives and the executive branch; no longer would it be what it was meant to be: a guardian against demagoguery, an evil the Framers associated with unbridled democracy. As Samuel Huntington, who was not only a signer of the Declaration of Independence but president of the

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Give all the power to the many, they will oppress the few. Give all the power to the few, they will oppress the many. Both, therefore, ought to have the power that each may defend itself against the other.

—Alexander Hamilton, 1787

Continental Congress (and governor of Connecticut), said in 1788: "It is difficult for the people at large to know when the supreme power is verging towards abuse, and to apply the proper remedy. But if the government be properly balanced, it will possess a renovating principle, by which it will be able to right itself." That balance was to be provided by the indirectly elected Senate; if the federal government has become more demagogic since World War I, the Seventeenth Amendment might be to blame.

Myth: The Founding Fathers really believed everyone was equal

The most famous line in the Declaration of Independence is "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal. . . ." But the Founders meant something very different by that phrase than most of us have been taught to believe.

It was written, of course, by a slaveholder—by Thomas Jefferson—and politically correct historians mock him, for that very reason, as a hypocrite. But they do so by ignoring what he meant.

When the Founders talked about liberty and equality, they used definitions that came to them from their heritage within an English culture. Liberty was one of the most commonly used terms in the Founding generation. When Patrick Henry thundered, "Give me liberty, or give me death!" in 1775, no one asked Henry to define liberty following his speech. Similarly, when the Founders talked about equality, they thought in terms of all men being equal under God and of *freemen* being equal under the law. But the distinction of freemen was important. The founders believed in a natural hierarchy of talents, and they believed that citizenship and suffrage required civic and moral virtue. Jefferson wrote, "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and what never will be." To that end, *restricting* the status of freemen was essential, in the Founders' view, to the liberty

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of the republic, which is why some states initially had property qualifications for voting, and why equality did not extend to slaves (or for that matter to women or children). Most of the Founding generation favored a "natural aristocracy" consisting of men of talent and virtue. They believed that these men would be, and should be, the leaders of a free society.

The Founders were not at all egalitarian in their sentiments, as might be clearer if we quote Jefferson at greater length:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights,



Why the Framers Created the Electoral College

At the Constitutional convention most of the Framers initially favored Congress appointing the president. It was only after much deliberation that the Electoral College was established (only a few argued for the direct election of the president). The Framers wanted an executive who was independent, and they wanted the states to have a direct role in his election. The Framers assumed that the state legislatures would choose the electors and the people would vote for an elector who would then vote for president. The whole system was designed to *prevent* direct democracy and its attendant evil of demagoguery, including the corruption of money and patronage, and to preserve the power of the states. It is telling that no one even bothered to count the popular votes for president until 1824, the first election without a member of the Founding generation as a candidate. Modern "reformers" who think the Electoral College is dispensable want to jettison what the Founders considered a necessary check against the possible tyranny of the majority.

that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed”

Jefferson declares the equality of men under God, but then is quite clearly referring to freemen—they are the men who consent to granting power to the government, because they are the men who elect representatives. Jefferson was not, in this instance at least, being hypocritical; he was thinking in terms that his fellow Founders, raised in the same English tradition, completely understood. He begins with every man being equal under God, but does not end in the idea that all men are equal in their talents, rights, and duties.

STOP

Myth: Slavery was a sin of the Southern founders

The importance of this myth is that it is used to divide the country into progressive and enlightened (the North) and reactionary and racist (the South), and allows historians to portray all of American history through that divide, dismissing the Southern founders and Southern arguments about limited government and states' rights while praising ever-expanding powers for the Federal government in its long war to ensure racial and social equality.

But slavery was not a purely regional sin, largely because it was northern ships that conducted the slave trade.

It is true that most New England states had abolished slavery by 1789, and the importation of slaves was abolished in 1808 by an act of Congress, but most Northern states retained anti-black laws, northern shipping interests continued to participate in the slave trade, and small numbers of slaves remained in the North. For example, slaves were still found in Connecticut as late as 1848 and in New Jersey until 1865. In 1790, there were more than 21,000 slaves in New York, more than 11,000 in New Jersey, more than 3,700 in Pennsylvania, more than 2,700 in Con-