



Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation

By Joseph J. Ellis

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Ellis recounts the sometimes collaborative, sometimes archly antagonistic interactions between these men, and shows us the private characters behind the public personas: Adams, the ever-combative iconoclast, whose closest political collaborator was his wife, Abigail; Burr, crafty, smooth, and one of the most despised public figures of his time for killing in a duel Alexander Hamilton, whose audacious manner and deep economic savvy masked his humble origins; Jefferson, renowned for his eloquence, but so reclusive and taciturn that he rarely spoke more than a few sentences in public; Madison, small, sickly, and paralyzingly shy, yet one of the most effective debaters of his generation; and the stiffly formal Washington, the ultimate realist, larger-than-life, and America's only truly indispensable figure. Ellis argues that the checks and balances that permitted the infant American republic to endure were primarily intensely personal, rooted in the interaction of leaders with quite different values and gives us a new perspective on the unpredictable forces that shape history.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

In retrospect, it seems as if the American Revolution was inevitable. But was it? In *Founding Brothers*, Joseph J. Ellis reveals that many of those truths we hold to be self-evident were actually fiercely contested in the early days of the republic.

Ellis focuses on six crucial moments in the life of the new nation, including a secret dinner at which the seat of the nation's capital was determined--in exchange for support of Hamilton's financial plan; Washington's precedent-setting Farewell Address; and the Hamilton and Burr duel. Most interesting, perhaps, is the debate (still dividing scholars today) over the *meaning* of the Revolution. In a fascinating chapter on the renewed friendship between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson at the end of their lives, Ellis points out the fundamental differences between the Republicans, who saw the Revolution as a liberating act and hold the Declaration of Independence most sacred, and the Federalists, who saw the revolution as a step in the building of American nationhood and hold the Constitution most dear. Throughout the text, Ellis explains the personal, face-to-face nature of early American politics--and notes that the members of the revolutionary generation were conscious of the fact that they were establishing precedents on which future generations would rely.

In *Founding Brothers*, Ellis (whose *American Sphinx* won the National Book Award for nonfiction in 1997) has written an elegant and engaging narrative, sure to become a classic. Highly recommended. --*Sunny Delaney*

From Library Journal

Having considered Thomas Jefferson in his National Book Award winner, *American Sphinx*, Ellis expands his horizons to include Jefferson's "brothers," e.g., Washington, Madison, and Burr.

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From [Booklist](#)

An outstanding biographer of Jefferson (*American Sphinx*, 1997), Ellis takes up new lines in this exploration of the "gestative" 1790s. He tailors six stories about political episodes that highlight a founder's character, convictions, and actions. Ellis' purpose in this storytelling is to underscore how vulnerable to dissolution the founders felt their creation to be, thereby explaining the controversies (such as the compromises with slavery) that to this day excite not just scholarly but general debate about what the Declaration and Constitution achieved. For example, Ben Franklin's last public act, signing a ban-the-slave-trade petition to the First Congress in 1790, provoked a floor argument so fierce about abolition it raised the spectre of disunion; Washington expressed relief with Congress' resolution to do nothing and debate no more about the matter. Ellis recounts equally fluidly and astutely such episodes as Hamilton's death; the bargain that sited the capital on the Potomac; Washington's Farewell Address; and the germination of parties. Palpably steeped in a career's worth of immersion in the early republic, Ellis' essays are angled, fascinating, and perfect for general-interest readers. *Gilbert Taylor*

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Users Review

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