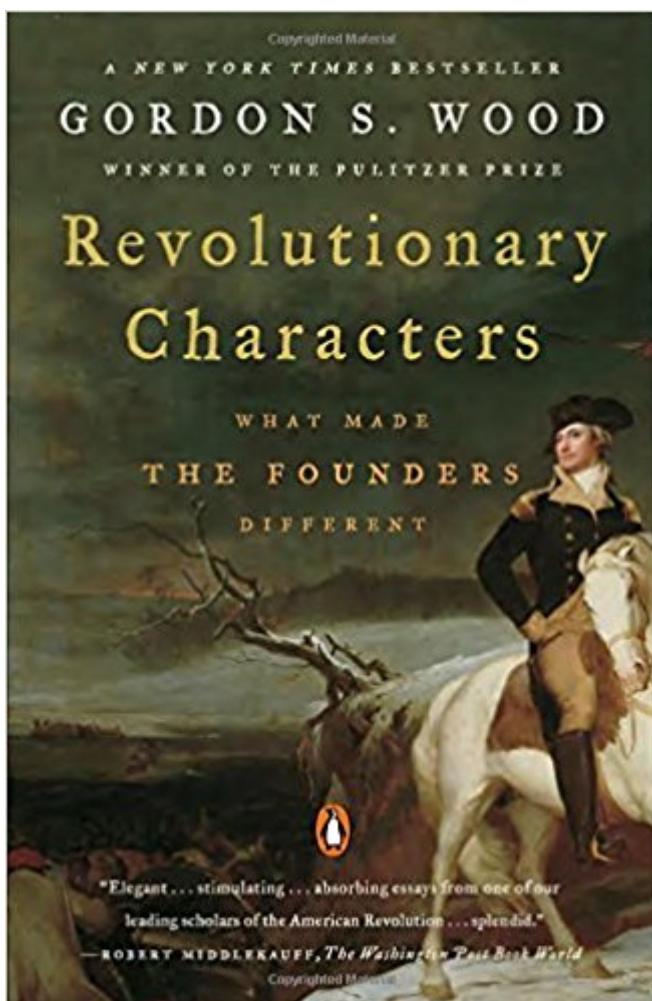


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Revolutionary Characters: What Made The Founders Different



Synopsis

In this brilliantly illuminating group portrait of the men who came to be known as the Founding Fathers, the incomparable Gordon Wood has written a book that seriously asks, "What made these men great?" and shows us, among many other things, just how much character did in fact matter. The life of each—Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Franklin, Hamilton, Madison, Paine—is presented individually as well as collectively, but the thread that binds these portraits together is the idea of character as a lived reality. They were members of the first generation in history that was self-consciously self-made men who understood that the arc of lives, as of nations, is one of moral progress.

Book Information

Paperback: 336 pages

Publisher: Penguin Books; Reprint edition (May 29, 2007)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0143112082

ISBN-13: 978-0143112082

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.7 x 8.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 10.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars 91 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #37,025 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #55 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > United States > American Revolution #95 in Books > History > Americas > United States > Revolution & Founding #121 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > United States > US Presidents

Customer Reviews

Bancroft and Pulitzer Prize winner Wood suggests that behind America's current romance with the founding fathers is a critique of our own leaders, a desire for such capable and disinterested leadership as was offered by George Washington and Thomas Jefferson.

Provocatively, Wood argues that the very egalitarian democracy Washington and Co. created all but guarantees that we will "never again replicate the extraordinary generation of the founders." In 10 essays, most culled from the New York Review of Books and the New Republic, Wood offers miniature portraits of James Madison, Aaron Burr, Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Paine. The most stimulating chapter is devoted to John Adams, who died thinking he would never get his due in historians' accounts of the Revolution; for the most part, he was right. This piece is an important

corrective; Adams, says Wood, was not only pessimistic about the greed and scrambling he saw in his fellow Americans, he was downright prophetic— and his countrymen, then and now, have never wanted to reckon with his critiques. Wood is an elegant writer who has devoted decades to the men about whom he is writing, and taken together, these pieces add perspective to the founding fathers cottage industry. (May 22) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Adult/High School—
There is no shortage of new titles assessing the character and contributions of America's founders, but this excellent book is particularly well suited to high school students. Wood has selected eight remarkable men to profile: George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, John Adams, Thomas Paine, and Aaron Burr. After describing how their reputations have undergone changes through the years, sometimes honored, sometimes reviled, the author discusses the men in terms of their own times. A chapter is devoted to each one, but these essays are not simple biographical sketches. Wood establishes his subjects' social and economic backgrounds, but then focuses on their personalities and philosophies, revealed through their correspondence. Trying to establish a meritocracy during an age of aristocracy was a daunting process, and the founders often became one another's adversaries. Their shrewd and sometimes caustic observations showed the difficulties involved in coming to a consensus on vital issues. Insecurities, humor, brilliance, and bewilderment abounded, all described in a flowing, lively style. Readers will gain a new understanding and appreciation of these men, and may even be inspired to read some of the comprehensive biographies recommended by the author.—
Kathy Tewell, Chantilly Regional Library, Fairfax County, VA
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"Revolutionary Characters" is more of a teacher than a book, highlighting in the most balanced manner the common streak of excellence that characterized the Founding Fathers. It was their character that outshone all others accomplishments. The beauty is that all those larger-than-life characters were humans like us, most of them not born with a silver spoon in their mouths, carrying the kind of dreams and desires shining like stars in our eyes, but what took them to the ultimate heights was their sincerity, honesty, linkage with the people and steadfastness of purpose. It is a book that must be on the shelf of those who are honest seekers of improvement, betterment and growth, in themselves as well as in those that surround them. Thank you Mr. Gordon S. Wood, for

writing such a readable book.

Gordon Wood has distilled a large body of knowledge into cogent chapters on the founding fathers, bookended by essays that put their legacy into perspective. What he tries to do is peel away the layers of mythmaking and revisionist history that have taken place over the last two centuries and get to the heart of what made these "revolutionary characters" tick. What he reveals is that it was their strong sense of public character and duty that separated them from not only the mainstream of their time but the mainstream thought that prevails today. Wood argues that you cannot separate the Founding Fathers from their era, they lived under a very different set of circumstances, and responded to these circumstances in their own unique ways. Since so much of their writings and journals have survived down through the ages, it makes these early statesmen prime subjects for psycho-analysis, but what Wood tries to do is take the position of an observer, looking into their conduct as one would in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. While a ranking of their conduct can more or less be inferred by the order of the chapters and the way Wood assesses their individual characters, the author stresses the pivotal roles each had in shaping the United States. Washington is paramount in the way he was able to balance all these competing forces in his presidential administration. He was a leader, if not necessarily a "decider," capable of weighing the opinions of his administration and reaching what he regarded as a just and due course for the nation. He may have lacked the intellectual abilities of Jefferson and Hamilton, or the judicial acumen of Adams, but he didn't seem to second guess his decisions, sticking by them and accepting the consequences like the gentleman he saw himself as. While this may have lent him a stiff air he was so respected in his day that the deification of his role in the American Revolution had already begun by the time of the Constitutional assemblies. If he was reluctant to assume the role of President, Wood argues it was because he did not wish to become king, which was the way many leading figures were projecting him at the time. Franklin and Adams were less concerned with how they were viewed by others, but they too cultivated public characters that served them well throughout the revolution. Both saw politics as a form of theatre, and as such perception was as important as the reality of their actions. Franklin seemed to be the more optimistic of the two, whereas Adams was deeply worried about the balance of government, something which Wood says gave Adams no rest throughout his lifetime. This could also be said of James Madison, which Wood devotes an excellent chapter to, showing how he was misinterpreted both in his time by his fellow statesmen, and later by historians. It is largely viewed that Madison underwent a major change of heart in the 1790's from that of an ardent Federalist to an anti-Federalist over the role the federal government should play in

the United States. But, Wood argues Madison never saw the federal government as anything more than an adjudicator, resolving state disputes, not governing over them. Here is where Madison differed sharply from Hamilton, who believed strenuously in a strong federal government, to the point of being an authoritarian regime, which in many ways the early Federal government was. Wood even devotes a chapter to Thomas Paine, the most democratic-minded of all the early statesmen, and perhaps the most "revolutionary." Paine's role in the revolution is often overlooked because he did not serve in the federal government. However, his pamphlet "The Rights of Man," was one of the key documents of the revolution and perhaps the most far-reaching. In a time when many persons, both historians and politicians, are reassessing the Founding Fathers, it is refreshing to have a book like this, which strips away all the attempts to make these "revolutionary characters" into mythological figures and views them within their 18th century context.

Gordon Wood is one of the finest historians who writes scholarly works which are readable and catch the tone and essence of the American Revolutionary period. I purchased a copy based on the recommendation of Zareed Zakaria on CNN. He strongly suggested this read for those interested in the period and the "founders". I enjoyed the comparisons and in-depth research. A must read for the follower of this period of US history. A good length, not too long! Captures the key focal points of each founder.

I am going to be brief in reviewing this book as I am no historian or expert on the Founding fathers. Here is what you would want to consider (personality-wise) when buying this book. Buy it if you:
-Like to know about the founding fathers as they truly were (not all the sugar coated garbage fed to children in their youth)
-Have a Social studies paper to write as this would be a highly reliable source
-Want to analyze the events and people that made America a symbol of democracy with hypocritical motives here or there

After a detailed discussion of the culture, beliefs, and ideals of 18th century British America, provides a brief discussion of the life of each principal leader of the American Revolution, and in each case it measures the individual against the culture his personal aspirations, successes and failures, and for each his contributions to the cause of our independence. Recommended for anyone seriously interested in our War for Independence. The first chapter is of enormous value to readers with a limited background in American History. My only criticism: The title, in my view, tends to trivialize a book that makes a significant contribution to the literature of the American Revolution.

Interesting book.

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