

Plain, Honest Men: The Making of the American Constitution

Lorah Gleason

Thomas Jefferson once observed, “Some men look at constitutions with sanctimonious reverence... they ascribe to the men of the preceding age a wisdom more than human, suppose what they did to be beyond amendment” (Beeman 422). In his historical narrative outlining the creation of the Constitution of the United States, Richard Beeman depicts the men responsible for its conception in a candid manner that makes this vital moment in America’s past personal for readers. He sketches these leaders as knowledgeable, intelligent, loyal, and ingenious – yet he does not brush over the moments where the fallibility, selfishness, and greed of imperfect men surfaced and influenced the process. In doing so, this historian recognizes that the “Constitution was certainly no divinely inspired text delivered directly from heaven” (423) while simultaneously offering a respect and reverence for this carefully-crafted document which propelled the nation into a revolutionary system of government.

Currently a professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania and a past professor of American history at Oxford, Richard Beeman had decades of study, research, and discussion to draw from in constructing *Plain, Honest Men*. He begins by describing the cultural mood of financial crisis and rebellions in which the fifty-five delegates met, with the goal of revising the original constitutional document – the Articles of the Confederation. Using personal accounts written by various members of the convention or people who knew them, the author brings the founding fathers to life through details of their personalities and activities. He begins by describing George Washington, who presided over the convention’s proceedings with “prestige, dignity, and even handedness” (xviii). Throughout the following chapters, the quirks and characteristics of many of the other participants in the convention are revealed; men such as

James Madison, Charles Pinckney, and Benjamin Franklin become real people rather than simply history. As the story unfolds, one unavoidable reality about the members' values and intentions becomes clear: they were incredibly varied. In discussing the delegates' positions on central vs. state sovereignty, slavery, the powers of congress, the role of an executive, and other facets of the convention, Beeman discloses how the various articles of the Constitution were forged in the fires of tension, conviction, and compromise.

The delegates were originally gathered to expand and correct the Articles of the confederation, which was effectively a treaty between thirteen self-governing, separate states (Beeman 8). James Madison, a key figure in driving the convention and ultimately the country towards a federalist approach to government, introduced a new idea through Edmund Randolph early in the convention's progress. The Articles of the Confederation had failed on several counts: it prevented the continental government from collecting taxes; it required unanimous approval of the states before it could be amended, and it did not put an executive in place to drive and direct the country (9). The Virginia plan that was now put before the founders proposed that the Articles should be forsaken and a national system put in place, uniting the separate states under a common and sovereign central government (88). This proposal, which succeeded in moving the delegates to create a new document instead of simply revising a former one, was greeted with skepticism by many. The issue of representation that would recur throughout the convention arose: how would the states, with their diverging interests, be considered and heard in this new "supreme" government? The clear intention behind the Virginia plan "was to represent the people of the nation at large, not the states as separate and sovereign entities" (90).

The New Jersey plan was eventually put forth by William Paterson in response to the shocking proposal shared by Randolph. It countered that the delegates should simply expand the

original Articles, correcting their weaknesses while still allowing the states ultimate self-governance. In the month following the presentation of these two opposing ideas, ‘the Convention would find itself nearly paralyzed by the deadlock between the large-state nationalist and the defenders of small-state interests’ (162). Here Beeman aptly shows that, not surprisingly, discord was prominent as patriotic yet self-interested humans wrestled through vital issues of power and authority.

The antagonism was at last resolved in the Connecticut compromise, which recognized that both the people as well as the states needed representation in government, thus ensuring a separation of powers. First suggested by Roger Sherman, this Great compromise was critically significant in the formation of a radical “hybrid” government (244). Articles I, II, and III of the finished Constitution articulate the end product of the delegates’ zealous deliberations over the placement and division of government power. The executive, legislative, and judicial branches form a government with internal checks and balances, preventing the concentrated power in central government that the American people remembered distastefully from the British monarchy.

One subject that Beeman refuses to gloss over is the role of the slave issue in the Constitutional convention. He states frankly: “There are no moral heroes to be found in the story of the making of the American Constitution” (333). In all their fervor for protecting the liberty and rights of the people and states, the founding fathers chose to let the great paradox remain: enslaving fellow humans in a land where freedom was of ultimate worth. Though a few delegates, such as George Mason, spoke out against it, any resistance was ultimately self-interested and focused on the distribution of power and representation, rather than ethics (Beeman 330). As a result, the three-fifths compromise was placed in the Constitution as the

measure of black slaves for representation. Also, the protection of the slave trade at least for the following twenty years was ensured, with little resistance from the men of the convention. The account of this aspect of the proceedings in *Plain, Honest Men* strongly demonstrates how distorted ideologies and a Lockian mindset trumped resistance to slavery for so many of the delegates. “Most Northerners,” writes Beeman, “whatever their modest moral qualms about slavery, were as concerned as Southerners about the need to preserve the principle of the sanctity of private property” – even if human beings fell under that heading (324).

In all their fallibility, the founding fathers still managed over those long summer months of 1787 to produce a document that outlined a government with a balance of power between different branches as well as state and national divisions. Amending it was difficult but not virtually impossible, and so slavery, women’s rights, and other areas of weakness were eventually corrected. After its ratification – largely thanks to *The Federalist* writings of Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay – the practical test came in the form of the 1800 election. As Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr received equal votes, the decision went to the House of Representatives, in the newly created Congress. The transfer of power was peacefully decided, and “both sides were inclined to label Jefferson’s election as “the revolution of 1800,” an event in many ways as momentous as the throwing off of British rule in 1776” (418). It proved that the new Constitution was effective.

Plain, Honest Men: The Making of the American Constitution is in many ways itself a plain, honest recounting of history. Yet the book is infused with details, descriptions, and stories that draw readers into the past. Beeman connects his audience with the diverse group of men who labored and discussed for months to produce the document that shaped this country’s system of government to embody a newly-defined republicanism. Indeed, “the United States

Constitution was the instrument that not only held a political entity – the union – together, but also that which helped define Americans as one people” (420). Richard Beeman’s book is both realistic and fascinating, producing esteem alongside understanding in his study of this definitive American text.