

Richard Beeman. 2009. *Plain, Honest Men: The Making of the American Constitution*. Random House, pp. 514.

Accounts of the Federal Convention are legion. Since the publication of Charles Beard's "economic interpretation" of the Constitution a century ago, a long list of historians, political scientists, legal scholars, and journalists have told the story of how the fifty-five men who gathered in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787 hammered out a "bundle of compromises" that became the U. S. Constitution. Scholarly and popular interest in the event predictably peaked during the Constitution's Bicentennial, but the stream of narratives (not to mention specialized studies) has continued apace: no fewer than four full-length accounts of the Convention have appeared in the last decade. These accounts, like most in the post-Beardean era, are generally straight-forward narratives with limited theoretical or revisionist ambitions. The aim of the authors, from Carl Van Doren and Catherine Drinker Bowen to Clinton Rossitor and Carol Berkin, is to retell this remarkable story in a manner at once accurate, compelling, and relevant.

Among the recent volumes on the Framers, Richard Beeman's *Plain, Honest Men* is by far the best. Beeman, a senior professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania, is a leading student of the Revolutionary Era, the author of seven books and a host of scholarly articles. In 2010 Beeman received the George Washington Book Prize for *Plain, Honest Men*. Interestingly, he begins his account not with the adoption of the doomed Articles of Confederation, the conclusion of the Revolutionary War, the Annapolis Convention, or Shays' Rebellion, but with the less well-known Newburgh Conspiracy of March 1783,

which he identifies as one of the “critical turning points in American history” (p. 6). The conspiracy, a plot hatched to use the military to force Congress to redress the grievances of unpaid soldiers, was nipped in the bud by General Washington. The incident, which required Washington to place his prestige on the line, underscored the “imbecility” of the Articles and fragility of the central government. Yet it would require four more years of embarrassments and failed efforts to strengthen the Articles before Congress authorized the states to convene in Philadelphia to “revise and amend” the moribund system. As an historical matter, Shays’ Rebellion, not the Newburgh Conspiracy, finally moved Congress to act.

The remainder of the book is a well-written, highly readable account of the proceedings of the Convention and the remarkable men who drafted the Constitution, arguably the best since Catherine Drinker Bowen’s *Miracle in Philadelphia* (1966). In addition to a lively narrative of the debates within the Convention, Beeman provides a number of vignettes and anecdotes of the delegates, Philadelphia, and the activities outside the State House. These, and the rich illustrations, greatly add to the book’s literary value. Yet for all its charm, polish, and careful scholarship, it is not without some flaws. Throughout the volume, Beeman somewhat inaccurately uses the terms “Founding Fathers” and “Framers” interchangeably. The former encompassed the leadership of the revolutionary generation, the latter were the men who drafted the Constitution. The familiar observation that John Adams and Thomas Jefferson were Founders but not Framers illustrates the potentially misleading nature of using these terms synonymously.

There is also some ambiguity in Beeman’s treatment of Washington, Franklin, and Madison, whom he identifies as the three “indispensable men” of the Convention. Undoubtedly Washington was indispensable by his mere presence, the most trusted and respected man in America, a fact of some importance in light of the conspicuously secret nature of the proceedings. Yet as Beeman notes, Washington, the presiding officer of the Convention, took no part in the debates, and only spoke on a substantive matter (the size of congressional districts) on one

occasion. Precisely what made Washington “indispensable” Beeman does not say, although he does suggest that his absence may well have resulted in a plural executive and a parliamentary system (p. 128). While there was a wide range of opinion on the make-up of the executive, there is little evidence in the Convention records that either of these arrangements was at all likely.

Franklin’s alleged indispensability is even more problematic. Franklin, the oldest delegate, had an international reputation that eclipsed even Washington’s, but his performance in Philadelphia was far from his best. Plagued by age and illness, the octogenarian was largely mute throughout the proceedings, and the few proposals he did make were either rejected or met with respectful silence. As Beeman acknowledges, “[m]any of Franklin’s contributions to the debate . . . were diffuse and off the point” (p. 138). Why then was he “indispensable”?

Madison’s contributions to the Convention’s proceedings are even more difficult to objectively evaluate. Hailed by subsequent generations as “the Father of the Constitution” (a title he rejected), Madison left the Convention deeply disappointed with the result. His pet schemes for a Council of Revision and a congressional veto of state laws, which he considered essential to the success of the new system, were both rejected in the end. Moreover, Madison vehemently opposed the Great Compromise, which gave the small states an equal voice in the upper house of the legislature. He even opposed the creation of the Grand Committee that worked out the agreement. Without the Great Compromise there would have been no Constitution, and Madison opposed it even after it was adopted. Prior to the Compromise he dismissed the idea of divided sovereignty, even “ridiculing the idea [that] state sovereignty was somehow sacred” (p. 182). Moreover, Madison was on the losing end of the majority of the proposals he introduced in the Convention, a documented fact Beeman fails to mention. Madison may have “changed his mind about many of [the Constitution’s] features during the course of the Philadelphia Convention (p. 421),” but Beeman does not reconcile Madison’s many

failures and disappointments with his reputed indispensability. Conversely, he adopts the “interest group” reading of Madison popularized by political scientists in the post-war era, the idea that the public good emerged out of the clash of societal interests as mediated by government. Madison’s subsequent emphasis on the need to elect “fit characters” who would discern the “permanent and aggregate interests” of the nation largely undercuts this “pluralist” reading.

Besides refuting the thesis that John Rutledge of South Carolina “high-jacked” the Convention as put forward by David O. Stewart in *The Summer of 1787* (2007), Beeman distinguishes his account of the Convention from others by focusing his narrative on the issue of slavery. To observe that the delegates’ decisions on slavery were “inconclusive and, in the end, unsatisfactory (p. xiii),” is hardly earth-shattering, but he does address the position of various delegates in an even-handed way. The adoption of the Slave Trade/Navigation Laws Compromise without debate is for Beeman “not merely puzzling, but deeply disturbing” (p. 333). The same may be said regarding “the near total absence of anything resembling a moral dimension to the debate” over the Three-Fifths Compromise (p. 213).

And yet at least a few delegates made principled stands on (or at least open objections to) the principle of slavery on the Convention floor. As Beeman himself notes, Gouverneur Morris of Pennsylvania launched a “full-scale attack on the immorality of slavery,” thundering that he “would sooner submit myself to a tax for paying for [the emancipation of] all the Negroes in the United States than saddle posterity with such a Constitution” (pp. 316, 317). John Dickinson, representing Delaware, shrewdly observed that the decision of the delegates to substitute the words “unfree persons” for “slaves” in the text of the Constitution “will be regarded as an endeavor to conceal a principle of which we are ashamed” (p. 215). George Mason of Virginia bitterly denounced “both the slave trade and the institution of slavery itself” (p. 320), although he never freed his own slaves. There may have been “no moral heroes” among the delegates on the issue of slavery, but to identify the “indifference of the Founding Fathers” as the

collective villain (pp. 333, 334) does not do justice to a number of northern delegates (including Franklin and Hamilton) who had worked for years to abolish slavery in their respective states. More to the point, had there been such “moral heroes” as Beeman envisions, there would likely have been no Constitution.

Beyond these matters of questionable interpretation or emphasis, Beeman’s account is largely accurate and faithful to the original sources, although there are a couple of factual slips as well.

He states that at the time of the Convention only Pennsylvania had a unicameral legislature (p. 110). In fact, Georgia also had a unicameral legislature until its Constitution of 1789 provided for a bicameral one. Elsewhere he notes that the number of presidential candidates eligible for election by Congress in the event none received a majority of the electoral vote was set at three in the final document. The number was actually set at five until the passage of the Twelfth Amendment (1804) reduced it to three. With regard to Hamilton, Beeman laments his “tragically short career as a public servant” after his death in a duel with Aaron Burr (p. 166). Aside from his five years as Washington’s aide-de-camp, Hamilton was in public office almost continuously from 1782 to 1796. Moreover, after his resignation as Secretary of the Treasury and the triumph of the Republicans his political career was effectively over. Beeman also reports that Tallyrand considered Hamilton “the greatest of the eighteen-century American statesman” (p. 166). This does not fully honor Tallyrand’s estimate. The wily Frenchman believed Hamilton was the greatest statesman of the age, placing him above William Pitt and Napoleon Bonaparte.

These, however, are minor missteps and do little to diminish the overall achievement of Professor Beeman’s impressive and thoroughly enjoyable study. Students of the American Founding will heartily welcome his forthcoming volume on the Declaration of Independence.

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