

CREATING A NATION: THE UNLIKELY BIRTH OF THE UNITED STATES CONSTITUTION

Coordinator: Steven Cole

The armed struggle against British rule forged a united people. Achieving independence, the 13 colonies agreed on a weak confederacy which had no effective means to lead a united states. The 1783 peace treaty found America on the verge of bankruptcy, a central government about to evaporate and 13 separate entities fearful of any central power. We examine the practical problems and leading ideas which compelled the writing of a new constitution. We examine the great debate over ratification concentrating on the anti-federalists who, as “losers”, we know little about. Nationalists saw a country with a glorious future of growth, prosperity and liberty but anti-federalists saw commercial and plantation establishment elites protecting themselves against a majoritarian populist desire for state government. What do we see now?

Readings and other Materials:

The Quartet: Orchestrating the second American Revolution, 1783-1789 by Joseph J. Ellis, {Vintage Books (Random House), New York, 2016, ISBN 978-0-8041-7248-6}

Course Pack: approx. 150 pages, Selected edited chapters from scholarly books and articles. estimated cost - \$15.

Steven Cole is a retired professor of history from City University and has coordinated several courses in philosophy and history.

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We start with the general notion that the United States was the natural and inevitable result of the American revolution. We discover that the opposite was much more likely and the process was complex, full of ambiguity and class and political conflict which made the constitution an highly improbable achievement.

Participants will present brief reports on important figures and events that affected the constitutional process. Different viewpoints will be presented for debate.

Questions will be provided preceding each week to guide discussion.

Week 1: Introduction

Discussion: Did the revolution really result in national identity. Review of how the course topics relate to this question.

Reading: Text pp. XI-XX

John Murrin "A Roof without Walls: The Dilemma of American National Identity pp. 333-48 in Beeman et. al. (eds.) Beyond Confederation: Origins of the Constitution and National Identity

Week 2: From Stamp Act to Declaration of Independence 1763-76

A. Interaction of colonies and Great Britain

Simon Schama A history of Britain v. II pp.454-74

Week 3: Governing Ideas behind the decision for Independence

A. The radical Whig tradition

Bernard Bailyn The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution. pp.22-3,26-28, 33-34, 44-52, 282-285

B. Colonial debate about Sovereignty

Reading: Bailyn op. cit. pp.198-229 (to be edited)

Week 4: The Articles of Confederation

The chronic problem of Money supply, debt and Inflation 1776-1783

Week 5: "The chronic problem of Money supply, debt and Inflation 1776-1783"

Week 6: The Creation of the American Domain

A. The Western Territories

B. Creating State Constitutions

Week 7: The Confederation in Crisis 1783-87

A. The Failure of the Impost

B. The Impact of Shays Rebellion

Week 8: Creating a Constitution
A. Plotting for a constitutional convention
B. The Structure of Representation

Week 9: Creating a Constitution (continued)
C. Large vs. Small States
D. The shadow of slavery

Week 10: Getting the Constitution approved
A. Strategizing the ratification procedure
B. The Process
C. Conducting the debate

Week 11: The anti-federalist arguments

Week 12: The victory for central government
A. The socio-political nature of the constitution
B. The aftermath of the anti-federalist position.