



That's Not What They Meant!: Reclaiming the Founding Fathers from America's Right Wing

Michael Austin, Ray Smock (Foreword)

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This book is essential reading for anyone seeking the accurate historical background to many of the today's hot-button political debates. In 2011, Glenn Beck released a "modern translation" of the Federalist Papers and a new biography of George Washington. In the same year, Rick Perry, the governor of Texas, published a book in which he argued that the Founding Fathers intended the individual states to be more powerful than the federal government. Each of these books, and many others published over the past few years, presents the Founding Fathers as a group of wise, philosophically indistinguishable statesmen who spoke about timeless issues with a unified voice. In the place of rigorous history, the authors substitute out-of-context proof texts; in the place of real analysis of the remarkable individuals who created America, they offer us a collective mythology of the founding era. This book examines dozens of books, articles, speeches, and radio broadcasts by such figures as Glenn Beck, Mark Levin, Sean Hannity, Larry Schweikart, and David Barton to expose the deep historical flaws in their use of America's founding history. In contrast to their misleading method of citing proof texts to serve a narrow agenda, Austin allows the Founding Fathers to speak for themselves, situating all quotations in the proper historical context. What emerges is a true historical picture of men who often disagreed with one another on such crucial issues as federal power, judicial review, and the separation of church and state. As Austin shows, the real legacy of the Founding Fathers to us is a political process: a system of disagreement, debate, and compromise that has kept democracy vibrant in America for more than two hundred years.

That's Not What They Meant!: Reclaiming the Founding Fathers from America's Right Wing Details

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From Reader Review That's Not What They Meant!: Reclaiming the Founding Fathers from America's Right Wing for online ebook

Dianna says

It's a great read and important whether your a tea party or a liberal. It opens your mind in a good way. Finally the TRUTH.

Sandie says

Loved this book! Subtitle is: Reclaiming the founding Fathers from America's right wing. The author includes selections of original writings from some of the Founding Fathers. Well written, explains historical setting well.

Did not finish, but would pick it up again.

Courtney says

This book is a hella good time. I've not seen any other books going after this topic, and it's about time someone did.

G. Branden says

This book explores the mythologization and homogenization of the U.S. Founders, and illustrates the popular use of proof-texting on their writings by contemporary political movements in the U.S.--predominantly by conservatives.

The author indulges in some hippie-punching, presumably in an attempt to come off as balanced, but this is a foolish choice since no amount of hippie-punching will, to those who most need to hear him, make acceptable his thesis--namely, that the Founders were not men of unanimous opinions which happen to be 100% congruent with those of Tea Party Republicans. As so often in our political discourse, we see a case of "both sides" not really "doing it", because today's left wing has little use for the Founders as authority figures--perhaps because they grasp that the Founders were a contentious bunch who agreed on little amongst themselves, and perhaps because, as Austin notes, leftists tend to regard the bewigged white men who founded the American Republic as, on average, as racist and sexist as their 18th-century contemporaries, and thus of attenuated moral example.

I'm not up to the chapter on gun control yet, which apparently separately available in a Kindle edition. [EDIT: This material is not actually in *That's Not What They Meant!* at all; it's a separate work.] So far I'm learning a lot about early U.S. history that they didn't teach me in school, such as how the meaning of the word "federalist" changed in just a few short years, very much contemporaneously with the development of the Articles of Confederation and the Constitutional-Convention-That-Wasn't-Supposed-to-Be.

(Another fun factoid: the pantheon of "Founding Fathers" as such was not in our rhetoric until a speech made by President Warren G. Harding less than a hundred years ago. So, to be a good conservative, be sure and put that idea beside the happy slaves and Christmas trees in your visions of antebellum Virginia.)

My other gripe with the author is that he is breathless about how wonderfully enduring and amazing the U.S. political system is. He falls short of calling it perfect, though he comes close to implying that it is perfectly adaptable, a difficult claim to verify or refute in a prospective sense.

Again, if that attitude isn't just a sop to flag-waving conservatives who have inhaled Cleon Skousen via Glenn Beck (whom Austin grants much coverage), then it seems naïve to me.

Then, too, Austin is tedious when he describes himself as "neither liberal nor conservative", and "economically conservative" but "socially liberal". Yeah, whatever. Yawn. He sounds like another Nolan Chart glibertarian. How bold and original.

All that aside, where Austin is good, he's great. He's a scholar of 18th-century English political literature, which makes him practically an ideal fit for his topic. He juxtaposes passages by (for example) Mark Levin and Glenn Beck, who make broad claims about what "the Founders" thought, with their very own sources, contradicting them using full versions of the paragraphs that the conservatives quote only in part.

Furthermore, Austin includes the full text of several original sources as a set of appendices, so that one can read famous bumper-sticker quotations sloganized in recent decades in their original textual contexts. This sort of "nothing up my sleeve" openness is exactly what the subject requires.

And of course, it's precisely not what one gets from popular conservative screeds, wherein one demonstrates the independence of one's thought by happening to agree with some right-wing authority figure in every detail.

I've finished the main matter, and despite my near-constant annoyance with the author for his googly-eyed reverence toward the U.S. Founders and the Constitution--and his repeated ham-fisted attempts at "balancing" his castigation with references to phantom liberal distortions of the Founders' words that don't appear to actually exist in this otherwise scrupulously-documented book--I'm awarding it five stars.

So much of what he says is so important, and so desperately in need of being heard, that these flaws are unimportant. A tract that debunks flat-earth theories is valuable even if it occasionally takes time, in the name of even-handedness, to harp on "round-earthers" for not acknowledging that the planet is an irregular oblate spheroid as opposed to a perfect sphere (when, in fact, they do acknowledge this fact).

Austin does have a gift for ridicule, which he keeps under control but occasionally deploys to good effect. He's not iconoclastic or artful enough to be another Hitchens, which is bad news for me but likely good news for the friends to whom I recommend this book.

And he's no hypocrite--he has no problem with the *stridency* of right wing talk radio. He points out that the Founders carried on every bit as hysterically, and cites numerous examples. Austin's thesis is that vigorous, no-holds-barred contention is an essential element of our democratic republic.

What Austin laments is that moderates and leftists have largely ceded the ideological history of the American

Revolution and framing of its Constitution to the right wing, thereby permitting conservatives to gleefully mythologize, distort, and downright lie directly in the face of the written historical record.

I was disappointed that there was no chapter on gun control after all. Apparently that's a separate document by the same author available on Kindle or something. Oh well.

Joe Bob says check it out.

[Postscript: it took me a few months to finish up the primary source material at the end. Let me just add that Alexander Hamilton is one heck of a boring writer. While I found both his and Jefferson's arguments regarding a federal bank somewhat slippery, Hamilton droned on at much greater length and to my view, with more hand-waving...somewhat like a *National Review* piece.]

DeLys says

I don't follow politics closely, and I might not have read this book if Austin's wife weren't a friend of mine. I would categorize it as a fair assessment of misrepresentations of the beliefs of the Founding Fathers. I know several people who I think should read it.

Micah says

Will read this again. Amazing!

Sorenconard says

This was an excellent book to read right after I read the Tea Party Patriots book. This book showed the Tea Party and the far rights play book clear as day and I was a bit embarrassed for how much weight I had given parts of the TPP book because of some of the tactics I fell for. And while this book does choose to focus mostly on the right, it is more then willing to take shots from time to time at the left too.

The book has 3 major ideas that play throughout:

1. The idea that people of today can pick one founder's idea and then claim that idea as ALL the founder's idea is an often used but miss-leading trick.
2. The idea that many modern day political commentators use "proof-texting" which is cherry picking comments made by a founder to back up one's own can make almost anyone sound like the founders would agree with them
3. The idea that the politics of today are different then when the country was founded so people like Jefferson and Hamilton, are often quoted on one subject by a certain group, then that group will ignore that person's opinion on another topic if they disagree with it.

These ideas are explored with wonderful examples and a clear voice. Austin takes a lot of statements from far right commentators Glenn Beck, and Mark Levin but front actual politicians like Rick Perry and Newt

Gingrich and tips their hand to the reader.

This all leads to the argument that the constitution was made by many different men, with many different views and should be read as it is written, not on what we feel is the founding fathers "original intent."

Pros:

The book is mostly written in an even handed style even though the name suggests it not.

"Argument books" books that take quotes from others and rips them apart can become very tedious. See "the God Delusion" for an example of what I mean. This book never dwells to long on a single argument and to me, while short, is just the right length

Cons:

Sensational. Sensational sells books in America these days, and even though this book isn't heavy with sensational quotes and comments, things like the sub-title, reclaiming the founding fathers from America's right wing, chapter names like Courting Disaster: The Dumb right-wing attack on the Federal Judiciary, and zingers at the expense of the far right discredit this well researched and thought out book.

Not a pro or con:

This book focuses heavily on Jefferson and Hamilton, I would guess it's because they held such different beliefs.

There is a lot of quoting of others in this book that I will never be able to research all of it to verify so I hope Austin isn't "proof texting" me.

Overall I would recommend this book to everyone and anyone in America. That's the first recommend I have every given to a whole country. I would understand if someone who identifies with the far right wouldn't want to read it. Which is sad since they would benefit greatly from it.

Barbara says

I have relished books that are charged with the energy of the Founding Fathers and their ideals. This book is charged with energy and gave me a greater appreciation of the Founding Fathers and the compromises reached by these diverse men. I do not think that I have cognitive dissonance when it comes to politics as I am willing to listen to varied points of view. However, I will often shut down if a person seems to be "building straw men" or just using propaganda whether the person is on the Left or Right or moderate. This book is very logical in its progression and very thorough in the history presented. I liked the wit of the author. The author invites people to disagree and believes that is important for our political process that people who disagree reach compromises. He has a lot of belief in the checks and balances in place in the Constitution. I have never read such a fine analysis of interpreting the constitution using the actual body of work rather than "telepathy of what we think the founding father's meant." In fact, he points out that the founding fathers didn't even want their debates of the convention published so it was not their intent for us to

go outside the text to consider what they meant. Some of his ideas were so simple and yet made so much sense such as when he said that looking at an early version of a bill tells you what didn't make law so that when should not use it to divine what is meant in the actual law. I have studied the Founding Fathers through the years and agree with the author that the actual men are so much more interesting than the myth.

Michael Austin says

I am a really bad source for information on this book, being the author and all. But I will try to suspend my financial interest in its success (very limited, as it turns out) and try to be an objective reviewer: I laughed, I cried, I found myself wanting more and hoping that Johnny Depp will agree to play a non-sequiter (or maybe even a confirmation bias) in the movie. You should definitely buy two copies of this book, one to loan to friends and one to keep at home because your friends will probably like it so much they will not give it back.

Bill Armstrong says

An excellent debunking of the intentional or unintentional attempt by such far right ideologues as Glenn Beck, Mark Levin, and Newt Gingrich to co-opt the Founding Fathers for their own political agendas. This is not liberal screed or harangue but a level-headed assessment of several statements by right-wing apologists concerning the supposed approval of the Founders for contemporary political stances.

This is a must-read for anyone who wants to try to understand what the real intentions of the Founding Father might have been.

Book says

That's Not What They Meant! Reclaiming the Founding Fathers From America's Right Wing by Michael Austin

"That's Not What They Meant!" is a very solid book that makes light of the extreme positions held by a faction of conservatives. It's a book that exposes those who distort America's Founding history in order to support a very narrow political agenda. Academician and author Michael Austin a self-proclaimed moderate takes the reader on a historical journey that focuses on debunking the myth that the Founding Fathers were always on the same page on important issues of their own day. This enlightening 259-page book includes the following nine chapters: 1. How I Learned to Stop Worrying about Glenn Beck and Write This Book, 2. Founderstein: How to Turn Six Dead White Guys into One Political Monster, 3. The Fallacy of "Original Intent", 4. The Founders on Religion and Liberty Chapter, 5. States' Rights/States' Wrongs: How the Right Hijacked Federalism, 6. The Jeffersonian Myth and the Hamiltonian Bogeyman, 7. Grover Norquist and the Tax Pledge versus Alexander Hamilton and Good Government, 8. Courting Disaster: The Dumb Right-Wing Attack on the Federal Judiciary, and 9. Why America, the Constitution, and God Will (Probably) Survive.

Positives:

1. A well-researched, well-written book.
2. Even-handed and accessible prose. Mr. Austin writes in a clear manner without resorting to hyperbole.
3. Fascinating topic in the hands of an author who values integrity in research.

4. The disingenuous practice of "Founderstein". Many examples of such deceitful tactics throughout the book.
5. A recurring theme that resonates throughout this interesting book, "It is simply wrong to meld the thoughts of a group of independent individuals from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, who were frequently at odds with one another over major constitutional issues, into a single all-purpose abstraction to fit a particular agenda of twenty-first-century zealots."
6. Thought-provoking. "The problems of this nation and of the world are now ours to solve. We can still find great inspiration from the Founders, but it is our world now, not theirs." My sentiments exactly.
7. How the far right has established a monopoly on American patriotism.
8. Religion and politics. "From all this religious diversity emerged a fairly coherent Founding compromise: America would be an officially secular nation that would vigorously protect everybody's freedom of worship and belief."
9. Find out where the inception of the term "Founding Fathers" came from.
10. Mark Levin and Glenn Beck get the bulk of shots in this book. "Figures such as Mark Levin, Sean Hannity, and Glenn Beck have taken a conspicuously modern mixture of economic libertarianism and religious authoritarianism, combined it with an aggressively simplistic view of America's Founding history, and produced a cohort of mythical heroes whose opinions did not deviate in any significant way from their own." Here is another great point. "The real question here is, how can someone who claims to revere the Founding Fathers justify such utter disregard for the integrity of their words?"
11. A lot of meaningful history in this book. Enlightening. The four main political factions between 1777 and 1800.
12. Find out what Tea Party conservatives cherry pick from the Founding Fathers. Many of their myths debunked. Great stuff.
13. Solid conclusions. "Their real legacy to us is a political system—a system of disagreement, debate, and compromise—that has kept democracy vibrant in America for more than two hundred years."
14. The problem with proof texting. "Proof texting sometimes looks like scholarship, but it is a fundamentally different operation. Scholars draw conclusions from their research; proof texters draw research from their conclusions."
15. An excellent discussion on original intent. "One of my primary assertions in this book is that original intent, while a reasonable strategy for understanding the meaning of literature, is a spectacularly bad standard for interpreting the law of the land."
16. The issue of slavery and how it relates to state rights or wrongs. "More than any other issue in American history, slavery demonstrates the validity of Madison's most important contribution to political theory: that small political bodies, such as states, pose a greater risk to freedom than large nations."
17. A great discussion on the three most important controversies involving Hamilton and Jefferson.
18. The dangers of the Grover Norquist's tax pledge. Just the facts please and Austin delivers. "Economists and analysts from across the political spectrum believe the debt crisis can only be solved with both entitlement reforms and tax increases, and, by a margin of almost two to one, the American people agree."
19. The senseless war on the federal judiciary. "The Supreme Court has a great deal of power today, but only because the other branches of government—and the majority of the American people—recognize it as the legitimate final authority on what the Constitution means."
20. Find out what mattered most to the Founders...something they can all on agree on.
21. Excellent supporting appendices.
22. Notes included.

Negatives:

1. The kindle version loses something in formatting. Charts didn't translate as well.
2. A bit repetitive.

In summary, I really enjoyed reading this book. It's refreshing to read an even-handed and a book with

integrity on this important topic. Austin deserves credit for his exhaustive research and for debunking many of the myths advocated by the extreme right. As the author so eloquently stated, "The purpose of this book is to call out the incoherence of the right wing's historical narrative. To do this, I will examine some of the most significant debates that the Founders themselves participated in—debates that conservative extremists almost always ignore because they contradict the golden-age myth their rhetoric requires." Mission accomplished, get this book!

Further recommendations: "That's Not What They Meant About Guns!" by the same author, "Wrapped in the Flag" by Claire Conner, "Birth Control, Insurance Coverage, & the Religious Right" by A.F. Alexander, "The Conservative Assault on the Constitution" by Erwin Chemerinsky, "Congress Shall Make No Law" by Robert Boston, "The Oath" by Jeffrey Toobin, "My Beloved World" by Sonia Sotomayor, "Rights From Wrongs" by Alan Dershowitz, "Constitution" by shmoop Civics Series, and "America's Constitution: A Biography" and "The Bill of Rights" by Akhil Reed Amar.

Marisa says

That's Not What They Meant! is the necessary and proper answer to the legions of far-right political personalities that go beyond historical inaccuracy to subvert and distort the legacy of the Founding Fathers. Glenn Beck, Marc Levin, Grover Norquist, Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity (and by extension, their several co-writers and contributors) have twisted the words of the Founders for far too long, and Michael Austin calls them out in this succinct rebuttal.

AS the author acknowledges, cherry-picking quotes from notable figures is a time honored tradition. All factions have been guilty of it. But the current crop of right-wing pundits have taken this way too far. By denying the role of compromise in the founding of the United States and ignoring the very real differences of opinions among our Founders, the right-wing has hijacked and revised the actual history of the nation to support their intellectually dishonest and highly questionable agenda. Unfortunately, possibly because the truth is nuanced and complex, these arguments so often go unchallenged. This text gives readers a good place to begin to reclaim the Constitution and those who framed it from the fringe. It includes six appendices of pertinent material from some important and very famous figures. It also reminds us that many of the original writings of the Founders are now available online.

The chapters deal individually with such hot-button issues as taxation, religious freedom, states' rights, and the role of the judiciary. I particularly enjoyed the chapter regarding the Founders' view of the role of government in protecting religious liberty. Although society has made remarkable changes since the inception of America, the arguments still remain valid today. Appendix C contains the correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and the Danbury Baptist Organization, which is just damn good reading, if you're into that sort of thing.

The only flaw I see in this book is that the people who most need to read it probably won't.

Kristine Sprunger says

well written, easily read and understood. and it made me think. It also made me want to go out and read the Constitution, Bill of Rights and the Amendments. Which, if you happen to be a U.S. Citizen, is something you should read.

Karen says

Can you win a political argument today by citing the Founding Fathers as a way to shut down dialogue? Well, many people attempt to do this. However, if you take the time to read the original documents, you will learn that politicians of the late 18th century, early 19th century did not hold one opinion on every issue of national importance. No, they wrestled over their ideas before moving forward into action. All you have to do to see this complexity is to actually read primary texts from this era. Reading quote books will only distort the issues as they existed then and how they are unfolding now.

Using both wit and wisdom, Austin does readers a great favor by delving into documents and doing close readings, often by taking contemporary readers back through a lot of detail in support of his book. It's actually more of a history book than an opinion piece. However, he does frame his history lessons inside an introduction and a conclusion that bemoans the way the Founding Fathers are contorted for the convenience of contemporary political pundits.

No, these two dozen or so politicians were not of the same mind on the issues they addressed in their era. By looking at their letters, their political pamphlets, their voting records and their participation in creating key political documents, these men clearly disagreed with each other a lot. They also held complex and dynamic positions that shifted as they responded to each other and to unfolding events.

But don't despair, dear readers. We still have a rich heritage--not in the political positions they held but in the process they embraced. In observing the complexity of the history--clearly explained--these early American political leaders did agree on the value of dialogue, debate, and discussion.

Chapter Titles:

1. How I Learned to Stop Worrying about Glenn Beck and Write This Book
2. Founderstein: How to Turn Six Dead White Guys into One Political Monster
3. The Fallacy of "Original Intent"
4. The Founders on Religion and Liberty
5. States' Rights/States' Wrongs: How the Right Hijacked Federalism
6. The Jeffersoninan Myth and the Hamiltonian Bogeyman
7. Grover Norquist and the Tax Pledge verses Alexander Hamilton and Good Government
8. Courting Disaster: The Dumb Right-Wing Attack on the Federal Judiciary
9. Why America, the Constitution, and God Will (Probably) Survive

Appendices:

- A. An Act for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia
- B. Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessment
- C. Correspondence between the Danbury Baptist Association and Thomas Jefferson
- D. Federalist no. 10
- E. Federalist no. 78
- F. The National Bank Debate

Barbara says

Required reading! History buffs will especially like this book as it paints the historical context for many political issues that have evolved but not gone away in the almost 250 years since the framers. It is especially helpful in presenting and helping the reader appreciate contemporary political conflicts and discussions about issues as they were in the 1700's and how each of our Founding Fathers thought about those issues. As astute citizens understand, the issues we face are anything but simple and much of what you hear about them is inaccurately presented for self serving agendas. I especially appreciate the indictment of this author for readers to read critically and not accept these gross and inaccurate generalizations presented in our political culture as truth and wisdom. He uses original documents to debunk and illustrate how we MUST be critical information consumers.
