



# Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution

*Woody Holton*

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### Average Americans Were the True Framers of the Constitution

Woody Holton upends what we think we know of the Constitution's origins by telling the history of the average Americans who challenged the framers of the Constitution and forced on them the revisions that produced the document we now venerate. The framers who gathered in Philadelphia in 1787 were determined to reverse America's post-Revolutionary War slide into democracy. They believed too many middling Americans exercised too much influence over state and national policies. That the framers were only partially successful in curtailing citizen rights is due to the reaction, sometimes violent, of unruly average Americans.

If not to protect civil liberties and the freedom of the people, what motivated the framers? In *Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution*, Holton provides the startling discovery that the primary purpose of the Constitution was, simply put, to make America more attractive to investment. And the linchpin to that endeavor was taking power away from the states and ultimately away from the people. In an eye-opening interpretation of the Constitution, Holton captures how the same class of Americans that produced Shays's Rebellion in Massachusetts (and rebellions in damn near every other state) produced the Constitution we now revere.

*Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution* is a 2007 National Book Award Finalist for Nonfiction.

## Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution Details

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# From Reader Review *Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution* for online ebook

## Bryan says

Required reading.

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## Geoffrey Gordon says

The authors of the Constitution portrayed themselves in *The Federalist Papers* and elsewhere as disinterested citizens who sought to improve upon the poor performance of the Articles of Confederation regime that governed the American states in the decade following the Revolution. Holton shows that they were far from disinterested, arguing that the authors of the constitution were largely concerned with ensuring that states paid their creditors (many of the Constitution's authors and proponents were holders of public debt) and making America safe for foreign investment. He also shows how self-consciously elitist the institutional choices of the Founding Fathers were. Read alongside recent work on elite efforts to "game democracy" during democratic transitions in the 20th century 'third wave of democracy' (see Michael Albertus and Victor Menaldo's "Authoritarianism and the Elite Origins of Democracy"), we see that America's founding fathers weren't so different from oligarchs in other societies who sought to use constitutional design to "lock in" their preferred policies and preserve their privileged place in society. While this interpretation is not necessarily all that original -- Holton's thesis is clearly in the tradition of Charles Beard and others who viewed the constitution as an elitist project to defend the interests of property holders, even if he points out weaknesses of Beard's project at times -- this is an approachable work that I would recommend to readers who are interested in learning more about the origins of the constitution but who are not necessarily historians or political scientists. The book raises the following interesting question: could statesmen of the early American republic have found a way to create institutions that encouraged foreign investment without creating so many obstacles to popular voice in government?

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## Igor Faynshteyn says

Having read several books about the Constitutional Convention of 1787 and about the politics of the era prior to reading this book, including the impressive "Original Meanings" by J. Rakove, I was disappointed with this book. Stylistically, it is fast paced and readable. At times, it feels like a long essay, or someone thinking out loud. But while it succeeds in readability, it fails at careful and serious analysis and interpretation.

"Unruly Americans" sets out to disprove what it claims most scholars and historians erroneously claim: that the founding fathers designed the Constitution to empower ordinary Americans and protect their basic civil rights. Nay, says Woody Holton, the founding fathers' principal motivation in drafting the Constitution was to accomplish the opposite: take power away from ordinary Americans and consolidate it in the national gov't, because the founding fathers determined that ordinary Americans were incapable at self-governing and therefore needed to be guided by the elites who were better equipped at making economic and public policy decisions.

In fleshing out his thesis, Holton spends more than half of the book going over the financial and economic

issues that were plaguing the colonies. The primary issue Holton focuses on (in fact, nearly the only issue) is the financial and political chasm that existed between the creditors and debtors; bondholders and taxpayers. This is the first problem of Holton's analysis: the labels. Inevitably, this kind of dichotomy helps in explaining certain issues and makes them easier to follow and understand. However, it's overly simplistic. For one, not all creditors agreed with each other on policy issues, as neither did all debtors (which Holton, to his credit, does point out at times). Secondly, bondholders were not separate from taxpayers, as these are not mutually exclusive: bondholders were taxpayers too.

The biggest problem of Holton's interpretation is the almost total lack of a broader political and economic context of the times. This shows especially in the later part of the book which discusses the ratification debates and commentaries, as well as Holton's take on James Madison's intellectual and political conversions post the Constitutional Convention. The author provides no serious analysis of the ratification debates, except for some out of context quotations made by several Federalist and anti-Federalist essayists and commentators; and provides no context whatsoever to try to explain Madison's conversion. Indeed, the idea that Madison flipped his views 180 is itself simplistic, since while Madison's views certainly evolved through the years and readjusted, it's a stretch to suggest that he became a genuine intellectual and political convert.

While Holton attempts to distance himself from the Charles Beardian thinking and interpretive framework, he doesn't fully succeed at it. For while he concedes that the Beardian framework was too simplistic and therefore erroneous, Holton doesn't himself supply the alternative, more realistic framework, all the while casting doubt on the mainstream scholarship.

Nonetheless, Holton does make some interesting points and arguments, that if fleshed out and analyzed in a more consistent, serious and penetrating fashion, had some potential to become a competing and realistic alternative framework to the mainstream scholarship.

The book is also not very well organized. For one, much of the facts and quotations are redundant throughout the book, as if Holton deliberately distributed them in this way to remind the readers of the information provided in earlier parts of the book. In fact, due to this disorganization, some chapters truly seem indistinguishable from one another.

In sum, if you are an early entrant into the Constitutional reading materials, this book may provide some interesting information and points. However, if you are a seasoned veteran - skip it.

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## **Phrodric says**

TEDIOUS a few well argued/documented positions and too many pages!

Here is the first 1/2 of this book:

After only a few years under the Articles of Confederation, American leaders wrote the Constitution in secret, specifically to limit what we now call: State Rights.

The American Revolution was funded mostly by debt. Bonds had been issued and continued to be issued to cover everything from capital purchases, in lieu of salaries to the army, for on going operating expenses and even to pay for previous bond issues.

Individuals who had been given bonds in lieu of payments needed to sell these bonds to provide for their

expenses; creating a huge market in bond speculation. Those who had money could buy bonds at a fraction of the face value, effectively multiplying the percent return where bond interest was paid and further limiting general access to hard money (silver and gold).

This created or exaggerated the separation between those in debt, represented by the farmers and the bond speculators, (the 1 per centers of their day).

The state governments, being more democratic, that is closer to the more numerous farmers engaged in many efforts at debt relief. Often this was at the expense of the bond holders, but often having unintended negative consequences on the farmers. Ultimately people were faced with a multiple of the taxes they had paid under the just ejected British. Further American's credit, national and personal was diminished, and the inability to field an army left the 13 states exposed to enemies foreign (mostly the Indians) and domestic (mostly tax-payer rebellions).

The only thing more you will get by reading the first 170 to 200 pages is a huge number of specific examples, quotes and needlessly repeated arguments.

This book reads like a classic in academics. A well received, tightly written paper is padded out into a full length book.

Even on this basis, Dr Woody Holton, could have better served his readers. Much is made of the scarcity of hard currency. Where are the tables that would have document this scarcity? What was American production of raw or domestically minted gold and silver? Dr. Holton talks about the loss of hard currency to overseas markets that provided slaves, carriages and female fripperies. What was the balance of payments over these years?

For that matter: How much money in bonded debt existed? Was it primarily at the state or national level? How many people owned bonds? How many were original bond holders and how many were speculator? How much money did one have in bonds to be considered a speculator?

These questions are not intended to challenge his findings. Most likely the answers would strengthen Dr Holton's hypothesis. The point is, he could have left out about 30 pages of contemporary newspaper quotes, another 20 pages in repetitions and added in this specific data thereby producing a better book.

The last 100 pages are somewhat more readable. There is coverage of the Constitutional Convention, with emphasis on the need to make compromises. The purpose of the compromises was to make the loss of power at the state level less obvious and to make the debt collection aspects of the Constitution less manifest. The framers did not want to be too specific.

State level adoption of the Constitution is presented as a matter of very slick local work. This topic seems to be peripheral the purposes of this already too long book and is not very well addressed in these pages.

This book proposes some original thoughts. In recent years many politicians and political opinions are supposed to be based on the intent of those who wrote the constitution. If Dr. Holton is correct, the framers were against the notion of the states as "laboratories of Democracy".

Even if he is wrong, there remains a very important question: If the original intent was states rights, why did we dump the Confederation?

If you can survive his incredibly incrementally tediously built case; and his too often repeated arguments, you will be exposed to some important information and insights. Surviving this book will help you to better understand why America abandoned the Articles of Confederation. Otherwise this book is too much work.

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### **Mamdouh Abdullah says**

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### **Alan Mauerman says**

This was a great idea for a book, but I got the general theme within the first few chapters and got bored with it. I did not finish the book.

I did not know much about this part of our county's history and I was waiting for the "human drama" in the writing style to make it come alive.

It has many parallels to today's crushing financial debt.

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### **Khaled Esilini says**

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### **Joseph Stieb says**

Holton's book begins with a fascinating in-class exercise from his undergraduate teaching. He puts three columns on the board and asks students to shout out Constitutional principles and protections they admire. Once the columns are filled in, the students see that most of what they like about the constitution, especially the individual rights, did not come from the 1787 Constitution. Holton uses this story to illustrate a fundamental popular misunderstanding about the intent of the supporters of the 1787 Constitution. He argues that they saw the Constitution as creating a strong central government that would be controlled by elites and make the country more economically viable. He believes that a deep disdain and fear of "excessive democracy" in the state governments, including measures such as debt relief and the printing of paper money, drove elites at the Convention to create a federal government that was not very responsive to the people, whom they viewed as dangerous, irrational, and unable to see the public good. The only part of the federal government that would be elected directly by the people was the House. The Senate was elected by state legislatures, the President by the electoral college, and the Supreme Court by a combination of the President and . They left out a list of individual rights because they found it satisfactory to leave those rights

assumed rather than explicitly stated. Between 1787 and 1791, "unruly Americans" demanded that the people's rights had to be enumerated and protected in exchange for a strong federal government, leading to the Bill of Rights in 1791. Holton emphasizes that this strengthening of the federal government was significantly influenced by economic concerns, including the desire to repay federal bondholders, to restore faith in credit by mandating debt enforcement, to standardize currency by barring state governments from printing paper money, and to make the US more attractive to foreign investors.

Holton is right to point out the elitist basis of the Constitution, but he seriously overstates his argument and creates a simplistic hero-villain portrait of this period. While the elites were clearly elitist, there are far more roots to the Constitution than economics and class conflict. Brilliant founding writers like Madison also had complex ideas about how to design a government that would address a number of issues, including factionalism, separation of powers, and rights of the individual against the principle of majority rule. There's no reason why the founders can't be portrayed as having personal motivations, class interests, and genuine principles. Maybe by this point there are just so many books on this topic that you have to get a little outlandish to write something new.

By the end of the book, Holton gets pretty angry at the elites, saying that the Constitution is a "slur" against the faculties of the common man. At this point it becomes difficult to level a charge of Tea Party-ism against him. On one hand, this book would please a Tea Party type because of its near conspiratorial skepticism of elites and the federal government. However, Tea Partiers worship the Constitution like the Bible (ok close to the Bible), and Holton sees the Constitution as part of the problem. The biggest strike against his argument is that the Constitution more or less was and still is a success. He doesn't address the logic behind the system in anything but economic and elitist terms. He discusses how it contributed to an economic recovery and the prosperity and stability of the young nation, but that doesn't seem to register with his pronounced disdain for the document. The fact that the Constitution is 200+ years old, has only been amended 26 times, and still works pretty well is a testament to the skill and wisdom of the people who wrote it. Holton does a good job contextualizing this document and avoiding romanticization, but he ultimately takes his argument too far. As Tony Stark once said, "That's how Dad did, that's how America does it, and it has worked out pretty well so far." My view on the Constitution in a nutshell.

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## **Wayne White says**

Holton made some pretty controversial claims in this book, and I'm not convinced that the evidence fully backs up his thesis. His central claim--that the framers of the Constitution were interested in dampening the democratic impulses of the middling and lower sorts while simultaneously securing the economic interests of the elite--is a relatively old idea, promulgated by Charles Beard, among others. It is not really that controversial. Holton's claim, though, that the phrase "to establish justice" in the preamble to the Constitution referred to establishing justice for creditors and bond speculators was built on a paltry amount of primary evidence. Holton also contended that the phrase "to ensure domestic tranquility" alluded to the fact that the new national government would be able to maintain a large standing army to quell insurrections such as Shay's Rebellion. This simply doesn't square with other evidence, though. Overall, I thought Holton rehashed an old thesis, and then did a very poor job of defending it.

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## **Alec Gray says**

Most of us who remember our American history classes got a one paragraph summary of Articles of Confederation America-1782 to 1787. But to have any understanding of the Constitution and the founding of the U.S. You have to delve into this tumultuous post war period. With the war won, the peace was being lost-government was not working, the "economy" was a mess, protest and disillusion was setting in. Bond speculation, paper money and devalued currency, high taxes(sometimes 4-5 times the rate under the British) led many to believe the fruits of "liberty" would be lost unless something was done. The result was the constitutional convention. You can't understand what happened there without understanding what brought the founders there. This book is an excellent and detailed account of that time-essential reading and fascinating! (Spoiler alert conservatives-the "founders" wanted a strong central government!)

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## **Bob Williams says**

Lots of really good information from primary sources but the author gets a little bogged down in it.

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## **Socraticgadfly says**

### **Excellent demythologizing of Philadelphia 1787**

This is an excellent, well-needed revisionist history of the creation of the Constitution.

While author Woody Holton doesn't go as far as Charles Beard in 1913 and call the Founding Fathers "economic royalists," he does clearly state (and demonstrate with plenty of evidence) that economic issues, and for one class of people, were probably the ultimately concern that led to the Constitutional Convention.

You've maybe heard of Shays' Rebellion in 1786 Massachusetts? Just one of many, many actions in most colonies at the local and regional level. States jacked taxes so high they were four times as high, per capita, as at Revolution 1775. And, most states' legislatures wouldn't print enough cheap paper money to appease farmers and other debtors, who, if not actually marching on state capitals, worked overtime to prevent sheriff's and county courts from selling off properties at debtors' auctions.

In other words, Holton presents the 1780s as William Jennings Bryan's 1896 America writ even larger. And, the Federalist founders as anti-Democrats worried about a debtors' revolt.

Time after time, Holton states the founders saw Article I, Section 10, which prevents states from printing paper money, as a keystone of the new constitution.

As far as mechanisms of government, he re-presents words of numerous Founders indicating their fear of true democracy, in part because they were worried debtors would continue to press governments for cheap money. That's why they cut the actual number of members in the first House in half, to 65, from Madison's original proposal of 130. They thought that the well-to-do could better control politics the larger the population represented by each Congressman. That's also why they didn't mandate single-member districts (read the Constitution, it's not in there), allowing statewide elections.

"Insure democratic tranquility"? Against mob action.



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