The Founding Fathers Reconsidered
by R.B. Bernstein

Here is a concise, scholarly, yet accessible overview of the brilliant, flawed, and quarrelsome group of lawyers, politicians, merchants, military men, and clergy known as the Founding Fathers—who got as close to the ideal of the Platonic philosopher-kings as American or world history has ever seen.

In The Founding Fathers Reconsidered, R. B. Bernstein reveals Washington, Franklin, Jefferson, Adams, Hamilton, and the other founders not as shining demigods but as imperfect human beings—people much like us—who nevertheless achieved political greatness. They emerge here as men who sought to transcend their intellectual world even as they were bound by its limits, men who strove to lead the new nation even as they had to defer to the great body of the people and learn with them the possibilities and limitations of politics. Bernstein deftly traces the dynamic forces that molded these men and their contemporaries as British colonists in North America and as intellectual citizens of the Atlantic civilizations Age of Enlightenment. He analyzes the American Revolution, the framing and adoption of state and federal constitutions, and the key concepts and problems—among them independence, federalism, equality, slavery, and the separation of church and state—that both shaped and circumscribed the founders achievements as the United States sought its place in the world. Finally, he charts the shifting reputations of the founders, both as a group and as individuals, and examining the specific uses to which interpreters of the Constitution have put the Founding Fathers, along with the problems besetting this jurisprudence of original intent.

A masterly blend of old and new scholarship, brimming with apt description and insightful analysis, this book offers a persuasive account of how the Founding Fathers were formed, what they did, and how generations of Americans have viewed them.

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My Personal Review:
This is a gem of a book. Weighing in at only 176 pages of text, Mr. Bernstein provides us with a nice overview of the Founding Fathers—the world they lived in, the country they created, the mistakes they made, the
success they enjoyed, and the legacy they left for future generations. This is not a hagiography nor is it a revisionist denunciation of a world created by a group of "white European men." Instead, Mr. Bernstein eschews the "false choice between unreflective praise and unreflective censure." He contends that we should recognize the founders "as human beings who dared greatly and achieved greatly, but who were beset by all the flaws and failings common to the rest of humanity." [p. 113]

When we study our history, there is a tendency to believe that the outcome of great events was foreordained. As the author Philip Roth once said: "History is where everything unexpected in its own time is chronicled on the page as inevitable." Bernstein demonstrates that Washington, Franklin, Jefferson et al. never thought of themselves as "Founding Fathers" and shared grave doubts about the outcome of their decisions. Indeed, the author notes that the term "Founding Fathers" did not appear in public discourse until 1916--Warren G. Harding was the first to utter this phrase (something to remember the next time you want to win a bar bet). While the Revolutionary War generation knew that they were embarking upon a remarkable experiment, they did so with an appreciation of the risks and uncertainties involved. As Benjamin Franklin famously observed after the signing of the Declaration of Independence: "Gentlemen, we must now hang together; otherwise, we shall hang separately." Also, they viewed this experiment in democracy through the prism of their experiences and circumstances without the benefit of hindsight. While they lived at the fringes of European civilization and embraced the Age of Enlightenment, they were separated by a vast ocean and constantly struggled to earn the respect of Mother England. Further, reconciling the internal differences between the thirteen colonies to form a cohesive union was a herculean task, one that many thought impossible.

If you want a nice introduction to the accomplishments and shortcomings of the Founding Fathers and a healthy perspective on the legacy they left us, pick up Mr. Bernstein's book.

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