

Free book review about the idea of america: reflections on the birth of the unite...

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The popular belief that American independence was fought for economic reasons, such as unfair taxation without representation, has sometimes been challenged by historians. In his book, *The Idea of America: Reflections on the Birth of the United States*, Gordon S. Wood defies this view and proposes that the revolution was based on principles such as freedom, republicanism and equality.

According to philosopher Isaiah Berlin, writers can be divided into two categories, those who know about many things, and those who decide to fixate on a single subject. Gordon S. Wood says he belongs to the second kind as his studies on history focus on what he calls "the most important event in American history, bar none".

Gordon conveys a powerful message about how historians might have overlooked a very important period in American history. The years between 1789 and 1820, marked with the adoption of the constitution and the arrival of democracy under the guidance of Andrew Jackson, are often seen as a period of historical insignificance. He writes "Colonial-Revolutionary historians knew the period only as an epilogue; early national historians knew it only as a prologue. Neither group saw it in its own right".

The book is a collection of essays that try to reveal that, in the United States, history has been used as an "ideological weapon in contemporary politics". He asserts that it is precisely his field of specialization, the period of the early republic, where he finds this use has become more patent. An article written by Harvard historian Bernard Bailyn, Wood's mentor, the author expresses that pamphlets written by revolutionaries revealed reasons why some positions were taken during this period. Bailyn said that there is an

abstract system of ideas rooted in the English past that were the cause of human action. Wood's book attempts to respond to those assertions by denying that ideas can cause human action. For Wood, it is passions that drive human actions, not reason. " To be an American is not to be someone, but to believe in something" .

For example, progressives might find Thomas Jefferson's ideas appealing because of his aversion towards capitalism and finances, but then they attack him by highlighting his comments on gender or race. Gordon says " much as most historians continue to dislike businessmen and the commercial classes, they dislike slaveholders and racists more" . This kind of ideological manipulation has been used by historians who sought justifications for current problems. He says that " the partiality that plagued their histories, a partiality that was prompted by the need to find antecedents for the divisions of their own time" . Wood preferred to understand the problems as seen by the people living in that period, by analyzing the language and thoughts of Americans during the eighteenth century. He discovered that " we created a state before we created a nation" by rejecting ancient and medieval forms of government and conceived a new and revolutionary way of doing politics. The ideas and principles, according to the author, did not derive from intellectual treatises, but was the product of a fundamentally democratic society.

This is a very good title that provides extensive information about this period in history, while giving a distinct reading that is not focused on approaches. Throughout the book, Wood insists that " the United States has always been to ourselves and to the world primarily an idea" . Contrary to what most

people would believe about democracy, Wood holds that “ it is not suffrage that gives life to democracy; it is our democratic society that gives life to suffrage” . It might be supported by the fact that Tocqueville described the democracy in America not as a system supported by elections but by the people´s republican ideas and beliefs .

Bibliography

Wood, Gordon. *The Idea of America: Reflections on the Birth of the United States*. New York: Penguin Press, 2012.