

Founding brothers review

[History](#), [American History](#)



In the book *Founding Brothers* by Joseph Ellis, the author relates the stories of six crucial historic events that manage to capture the flavor and fervor of the revolutionary generation and its great leaders. While each chapter or story can be read separately and completely understood, they do relate to a broader common theme. One of Ellis' main purposes in writing the book was to illustrate the early stages and tribulations of the American government and its system through his use of well blended stories. The idea that a republican government of this nature was completely unprecedented is emphasized through out the book. Ellis discusses the unique problems that the revolutionary generation experienced as a result of governing under the new concept of a democracy. These problems included- the interpretation of constitutional powers, the regulation of governmental power through checks and balances, the first presidential elections, the surprising emergence of political parties, states rights vs. federal authority, and the issue of slavery in a otherwise free society. Ellis dives even deeper into the subject by exposing the readers to true insight of the major players of the founding generation. The book attempts to capture the ideals of the early revolutionary generation leaders and their conflicting political viewpoints. The personalities of Hamilton, Burr, Adams, Washington, Madison, and Jefferson are presented in great detail. Ellis exposes the reality of the internal and partisan conflict endured by each of these figures in relation to each other. Ellis emphasizes that despite these difficult hurdles, the young American nation survived its early stages because of its great collection of charismatic leaders and their ability to settle their disputes through compromise. *Founding Brothers* is divided into six different chapters, each with a distinctly different stories. The

chapters are titled " The Generation", " The Duel", " The Dinner", " The Silence", " The Farewell", " The Collaborators" and " The Friendship". In " The Duel", the story of the legendary duel between Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr is related in its entirety. It was by far the most prominent deadly standoff between two men in history. Ellis relates the background and brief biographies of the two men involved in the duel. He also reveals the context for the duel, a culmination of political and personal jabs at Burrs character by Hamilton. In fact these jabs held a good deal of truth, and finally resulted in Burr challenging Hamilton. Both Hamilton and Burr went to the plains in Weehawken to conduct the duel in defense of their honor and characters. Historically, Hamilton is seen as a martyr in the duel and Burr seen as a treacherous murderer. This Hamiltonian viewpoint is dominant among historians because it is widely believed that Hamilton went into the duel not intending to fire a shot and that Burr fired the first shot. Ellis believes this version of the story to be wrong. He believes that Hamilton honored his bargain of not firing on Burr, wasting his first shot by firing it into the trees. Burr, thinking that Hamilton fired at him, shot and killed Hamilton with his shot. The second chapter, " The Dinner", relates a secret compromise between Hamilton and Madison in the venue of a dinner party hosted by Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson, Madison and Hamilton arrived at the dinner with radically different agendas. Hamilton, heavily influenced by the fact that the Articles of Confederation failed, was a staunch advocate of a strong central government. Hamilton's goal was to negotiate with Madison who was blocking the passing of his fiscal program. Hamilton was convinced that his economic plan would fix the economy and restore public credit. Hamilton

was baffled by Madison's position on the fiscal plan, since Madison was once a staunch advocate of similar ideas. Madison was opposed to Hamilton's plan because he thought it disenfranchised veterans by repaying spectators instead. His more hidden motive was that Madison's native state of Virginia had already paid their state's war debt. Madison's opposition to the plan preempted a switch in alliances by Madison to the Jeffersonian camp. The negotiations eventually ended up in a compromise which Madison would not speak out against Hamilton's fiscal plan and in turn the capital would be moved to a spot near Madison's native Virginia on the Potomac. Ellis states that the secret compromise ranks as one of the most defining in American history. Chapter three, " The Silence", deals with the issue of a possible end to the slave trade brought up by two Quaker delegations and the prominent statesman Benjamin Franklin. Franklin claimed that the values of slavery were contradictory to the values that had been fought for in the American Revolution. Franklin wanted gradual emancipation; it was a final piece of advice by Franklin before he went to the grave. Under the Constitution, the Federal Government was not allowed to tamper with the slave trade until 1808. Ultimately, it was decided that the slavery issue was taboo on the Congressional floor partially because Madison wanted to take it off the agenda. Chapter four, " The Farewell", deals with Washington's retirement and his final address. In Washington's final address, he spoke of his distrust of partisan politics and disapproval of political parties, American independence from other nations and American neutrality. The address was taken to be in relation to the recent Jay's Treaty, a compromise with the English. This treaty was unfavorable to Republicans and especially with

Jefferson. Jefferson critiqued Washington's farewell address and Washington's policies in his later years. Chapter five, "The Collaborators", discusses with the presidency of John Adams and its failure. It fails because of the collaborating efforts of Madison and Jefferson to foil the presidency of a rival Federalist and former friend. During the presidency, Adams was burdened with a multitude of different factions within cabinet and as his vice president that was his rival. Adams became isolated, confiding only in his wife Abigail, the one person he trusted. Through carefully planned personal and political attacks on Adams, Jefferson and Madison were able to destroy Adam's presidency and seize the reigns of power. Chapter six, "The Friendship", reviews the reopening of communications between Jefferson and Adams after a twelve year silence. The silence was finally broken in a series of correspondence letters exchanged between the two, and a genuine friendship was reestablished. The letters help to shape our view of the revolutionary generation, in some light hearted but deep arguments between Jefferson and Adams, who were writing to a candid world. In Ellis's view, the founding brothers that he writes about both founded the republic and held it together through its precarious early years. Ellis explores each personality in detail, and also does an outstanding job of painting each intertwined political and personal relationship existing between the brothers. Ellis examines a number of conflicts that arise between the revolutionary leaders, but contests that with one notable exception (the duel), the founding brothers were able to resolve most of their differences and keep each other relatively in check. Through the vehicle of the six stories, Ellis proves his thesis through a wealth of evidence. Ellis gives good background to each of the

stories related in his six chapters. The relevant information and context of each event is carefully laid out. If one did not have much knowledge about the Revolutionary Generation or history in general prior to reading the book, one would still come away with a firm grasp of the subject as well as an understanding of Ellis's viewpoints. Ellis retains a scholarly tone and has a subjective take on the events that transpire throughout his book. He makes it a point to present all sides of the story before emphasizing what he personally considers the most credible views. Ellis does not take sides; he does not favor one founding brother over another. The book's sources seem to come from a wide variety of both primary documents and critical literature. Great quotations from each of the founding brothers are adequately and properly dispersed to create an illusion that the major players in the book are arguing their respective points. The quotations are so effective because they come directly from the American leaders themselves and are seamlessly blended with Ellis's additional commentary.

Unfortunately, by choosing to focus on only a few events, Ellis's book fails in that it lacks somewhat of a scope. The book also focuses on some of the founding brothers in much greater detail than others. While I come away with a wealth of knowledge about both Adams and Jefferson, I have less knowledge of Ben Franklin and Aaron Burr, as Ellis's focus is significantly less on them.