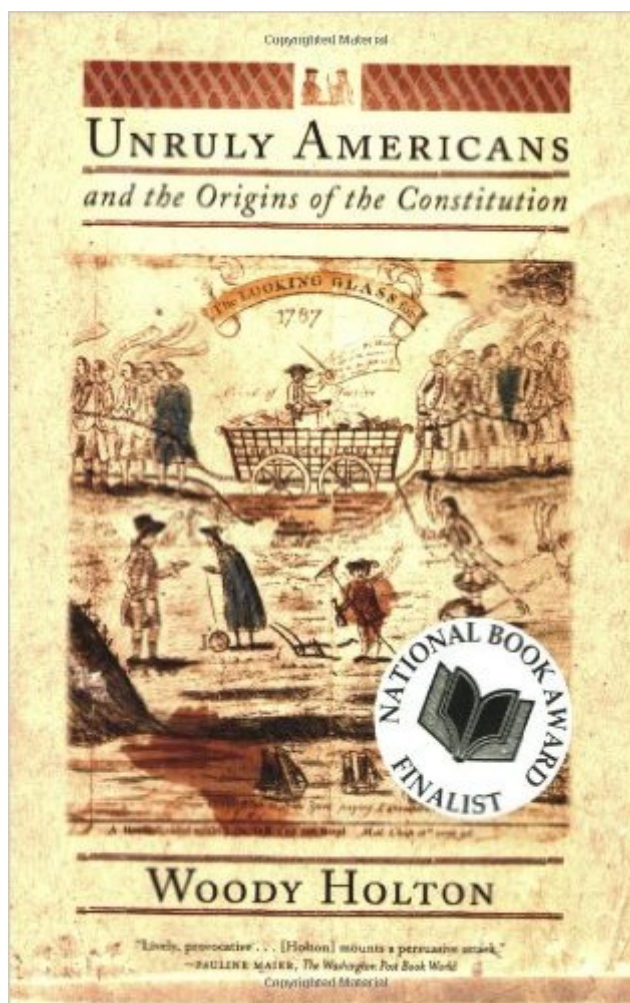


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Unruly Americans And The Origins Of The Constitution



Synopsis

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.

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Customer Reviews

This history, told mostly from the vantage point of the average colonial American, rather than from the traditional vantage point of the landed gentry, has a lot to offer in untwisting the mythology of

how our Constitution came about. It is basically a story about the chaos that ensued when all the contending forces -- from the grassroots upwards are thrown into the mix; and all side's views and interests are taken into account. What ensued in 1787 was not a pretty picture. That the author was able to capture this unruliness is a tribute to his skill, and in the end is a much fuller, much more honest and thus a more believable history than the sugarcoated version we have come to accept and revere as the true national story. Woody Holton is not the first, the only, nor will he be the last historian to note that our founding fathers were an aristocratic and very much anti-democratic bunch, who were as careful and skillful at protecting their own economic interests as they were concerned about shaping a "people's democracy" through the details of the Constitution. And while this book does not go so far as to suggest that the overlapping interests of the landed gentry amounted to a silent reactionary conspiracy, as Charles Beard does in his "An Economic Interpretation of the U.S. Constitution," or as Howard Zinn leaves hanging in the air in his "A People's History of the United States," it does leave plenty of room for the careful reader to draw his own speculative conclusions. The crux of the matter (and of the book) is that due to the rebellious attitudes and actions of the average colonial citizen, the framers (representing the interests mostly of the landed gentry) were worried about the post-revolutionary slide into "a real people's democracy."

Imagine this conundrum; governments, both state and national, pay their debts and bills with bonds, scrip, and promissory notes instead of hard currency or gold and silver coin. And then these same governments turn around and demand tax payments to themselves in hard currency or gold ONLY. (And very HIGH tax payments to boot!) As one might intuit, this scenario is a prescription for financial distress if not outright rebellion and this is precisely what occurred in the thirteen states during the period when the Articles of Confederation were in effect. Mobs of ex-soldiers and foreclosed upon taxpayers laid siege to state legislatures demanding relief [p.148], closed courts to prevent foreclosures, and otherwise engaged in massive grass root resistance to tax collection efforts [p.153]. The worst of it being the Shay's Rebellion in western Massachusetts in 1786 [p.11]. Holton's thesis is that the economic elites of the new American state were terrified by all this and set out to take the people's hands off the levers of power to the greatest extent possible. It sure didn't hurt that many, many of the constitution's proponents (and their families and friends) were bondholders, creditors, and land speculators either, notes Holton, who follows in the "Cui Bono" school of economic history and is solidly in the tradition of An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of The United States by Charles A. Beard (1913) and

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