

More about: [RSS](#) | [Wireless](#) | [Search](#)  Site  Web  Yellow Pages  Archive  [Web Search powered by YAHOO! SEARCH](#) [Member Center](#) | [Log Out](#) Welcome, **Stayton**

[NEWS](#) | [BUSINESS](#) | [SPORTS](#) | [LIFE](#) | [OPINION](#) | [WEATHER](#) | [BLOGS](#) | [MULTIMEDIA](#) | [CUSTOMER SERVICE](#) | [ADVERTISE](#)



LIFE

[Life](#) | [Books](#) | [Gardening](#) | [Consumer](#) | [Health & Fitness](#) | [Living Green](#) | [Travel](#) | [Style](#)

[E-mail this page](#)   [Print this page](#)   [Most E-mailed / Most printed](#)

BOOK REVIEW

# U.S. founders were flying by the seat of their breeches



By **Stayton Bonner**  
SPECIAL TO THE AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Sunday, December 09, 2007

"It is a common observation in Europe that nothing is so false as modern history," John Adams wrote in 1820. "I should add that nothing is so false as modern history ... except modern American history." Adams knew America's Founding Fathers would be elevated to the realm of deified cherry tree-chopping myth. He also knew that the back-stabbing, ego-driven, serendipitous and occasionally brilliant truth behind America's founding was much more interesting. As Joseph Ellis writes in "American Creation: Triumphs and Tragedies at the Founding of the Republic," "the true history was about chance, contingency, unintended consequences (and) political leaders who were often improvising on the edge of catastrophe."

Like Stephen Ambrose and David McCullough, Ellis is a superstar historian. A Pulitzer Prize-winning author, he makes the Revolutionary era's convoluted story move like a historical thriller. In "American Creation," Ellis focuses on six key events during the founding era as defined between the start of the War for Independence (1775) and the Louisiana Purchase (1803). During this time, the Founding Fathers failed on some accounts (their handling of the slaves and Indians), while triumphing in others, (the creation of an enduring new form of government and the Louisiana Purchase). "The founders were, in fact, making it up as they went along," Ellis writes, "and any historical interpretation that emphasizes their otherworldly serenity or uncommon prescience in grasping how it would all turn out is a fundamental distortion of the way history happened."

In an early chapter titled "The Winter," Ellis peels away the storybook gloss covering George Washington and the Continental Army's brutal winter of 1777-78. "A place enshrined in mythology ever since as a kind of American Gethsemane," Ellis writes of Valley Forge, "where Washington, the American Christ, kneels in prayer amidst blood-stained snow beseeching the Lord for deliverance." Instead of an idealistic group of freedom fighters, however, Washington's army was an ever-shifting collection of men who desperately needed employment. "They were ... indentured servants, recently arrived immigrants from Ireland or Scotland, emancipated slaves, landless sons from New England, mechanics from Philadelphia," Ellis writes. "They represented the poorest strata of American society, there because, truth be known, they had no brighter prospects."

As opposed to a glorious stand, Washington realized that to defeat the British he merely had to hold out. "Recent American experience in Iraq, and our earlier experience in Southeast Asia, should help ... us to grasp the strategic dilemma confronting British policy-makers in London and Whitehall more empathetically than was previously possible," Ellis writes. "The key insight, which went against all of Washington's personal instincts, was that both space and time were on the American side, so that the only way to lose the war was to try and win it."

In a chapter titled "The Argument," Ellis examines how America's unique governmental system was created in a series of messy and muddled compromises rather than the result of a singular vision. "It

is essential to remember that the term 'United States' began as a plural rather than singular noun," Ellis writes, "more like the modern-day European Union than a latter-day Roman Empire." After escaping a

### MOST POPULAR STORIES

- ▶ [Earl Campbell, an old, hurting man at 52, remember his runs](#)
- ▶ [Longhorns roll past Rice](#)
- ▶ [Pedernales board chairman has made \\$1 million since 2001, but doesn't remember much.](#)
- ▶ [Cool front's arrival tonight should lower temperatures](#)
- ▶ [Suburban Sex Parties Draw Complaints](#)

### SHARE THIS STORY

- |                             |                              |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| <a href="#">del.icio.us</a> | <a href="#">digg</a>         |
| <a href="#">Newsvine</a>    | <a href="#">reddit</a>       |
| <a href="#">Yahoo!</a>      | <a href="#">Facebook</a>     |
|                             | <a href="#">What's this?</a> |

Advertisement

### Top Ads

monarchy, the American states had no desire to live under a centralized government. However, practicality demanded some form of it. The key moment of the 1787 Constitutional Convention occurred when James Madison realized that a people's best interests could be served in a system in which argument between many varied interests was encouraged. As Ellis writes, the Constitution created a "political framework in which state versus federal sovereignty was an ongoing negotiation to be resolved on a case-by-case basis."

Although both state and federal sovereignty advocates would walk away disgruntled with its ambiguities, the Constitution would ultimately become the world's blueprint for effective government. As Ellis notes, "it was an idea so far ahead of its time that no one could fully appreciate its originality."

The never-ending dispute between state and federal government embedded in the Constitution also led to the two-party system. When Alexander Hamilton created the federal bank in New York, Virginians like Madison and Thomas Jefferson became alarmed. "These developments forced the planter class of Virginia to realize, for the first time, that their days as America's premier political elite were numbered," Ellis writes, "soon to be replaced by the commercial and financial elite of New York and New England." Resentful of New England's rise as a commercial superpower and worried about the federal government's power to outlaw slavery, Madison and Thomas Jefferson launched the Republican Party for states' rights. The fact that Madison and Jefferson flip-flopped from creating a centralized government to immediately undermining it reinforces how America's formulation was a series of reactions rather than a singular creation. "While there were a few cerebral epiphanies based on intense thinking," Ellis writes, "most creative choices were pragmatic responses to rapidly moving events beyond human control, on-the-run adaptations of classical texts to shifting contexts."

Many aspects of the political state in America are much the same today as they were during the Revolutionary era. Bill O' Reilly and Sean Hannity seem downright cordial when compared with the Republican and Federalist parties' partisan newspapers. The Republican's National Gazette claimed George Washington had been a would-be Benedict Arnold during the War for Independence, while the Federalist rags printed rumors of Jefferson's putative affair with his slave Sally Hemings. From our country's founding, politics has been a dirty deal.

A chapter titled "The Treaty," covering a doomed 1789 agreement with the Creek Nation, introduces one of the era's most colorful characters in Alexander McGillivray. A Scotch-French-Creek Indian chief, McGillivray was classically trained, well-read in history and fluent in English, Spanish and Creek. As a negotiator over American Indian land rights, he could more than hold his own with Washington. In his own convoluted heritage and practices, McGillivray was the physical embodiment of the era's complex mixture of cultures.

The complexity of America's founding is also exemplified in the Louisiana Purchase. When his overextended army became mired in the slavery uprising of Santo Domingo, Napoleon sold France's North American claim to the U.S. for \$15 million — the rough equivalent of \$260 million today. In one fell swoop, the U.S. doubled its size. Although Jefferson's decision met little disagreement, his executive action represented a complete turnaround from the states' rights platform his party promoted.

Undoubtedly one of the most important achievements in American history, the Louisiana Purchase also highlights the Founding Fathers' inaction to secure permanent land for the Indians or end slavery. Indians east of the Appalachians were forced to move westward, while slavery was not outlawed in the newly acquired territories. Fearing that abolition would tear the country apart, as proved true 50 years later, Jefferson and the founders never gave the issue the full brunt of their considerable intellects. "To be sure, it would have required an act of incredible leadership to have raised the forbidden question of slavery, leadership on par with that demonstrated by Jefferson and the other founders in 1776 and 1787," Ellis writes. "...(T)he evidence that has survived suggests that Jefferson never gave the matter any thought."

Although fact-laden and plodding at times, "American Creation" is an exciting tale told with wit and reasoned intelligence. The founding fathers are a complex lot, rendered very humanely in Ellis' book. "Washington's decision to free the slaves he owned in his will ... was in great part motivated by his realization that failure to do so would forever stain his reputation," Ellis writes. "(The founders) were, in effect, always on their best behavior because they knew we would be watching, an idea we should find endearing because it makes us complicitous in their greatness."

In this burgeoning season of vicious campaign ads and squabbling YouTube debates, don't fool yourself by looking back for some golden era in politics. As with today's politicians, the Founding Fathers faced complex questions and often made selfish mistakes. "I also come away with a more chastened sense of celebration, periodically wishing that the founders had been demigods who could perform miracles," Ellis writes. "Then I catch myself and realize that, if flawless, they would have nothing to teach us. And they do."

## More on statesman.com

- ▶ [Rivero Santos: Venezuela is on the right track](#)
- ▶ [U.S. Navy battling pirates off Somalia](#)
- ▶ [Sabato: Rewrite the Constitution](#)
- ▶ [Two books debate brilliance and disasters of the Constitution](#)
- ▶ [Doctor reappointed to medical board; motorcyclist killed in wreck](#)

## Gardening Corner

ATEX FAMILY FUN CENTER    FOOT SOLUTIONS  
TREE MASTERS  
MANAGEMENT LTD

## Top Ads

### Life & Style

A BEAUTIFUL YOU	ALL ABOUT DIAMONDS
BABY COCO	HANNAH D'S
JAMES AVERY CRAFTSMAN INC	OLD MILL STORE
REWARDS	POSITIVE IMAGES
RUSSELL KORMAN JEWELERS	REWARDS
RUSSELL KORMAN JEWELERS	RUSSELL KORMAN JEWELERS
RUSSELL KORMAN JEWELERS	SANTA FE OPTICAL
WISEMAN, RICHARD MD	

## Top Ads

### Food Matters

AA APPLIANCE	BREED & CO
CLEAR CHOICE	EDIBLE ARRANGEMENTS
FARA CAFE	LE RAGGE RUGGS
TOTAL RELIEF FOOTWEAR	WHEATSVILLE FOOD COOP

## Top Ads

### Healthy Living

AESTHETICA MEDSPA	AUSTIN PLASTIC SURGERY INST
AUSTIN SPORTS MEDICINE	AUSTIN THYROID & ENDOCRINOLO
AUSTIN WELLNESS INSTITUTE	AZIZ SALON & DAY SPA
CENTER FOR WEIGHT LOSS	COVERMAN, MICHAEL H MD
CREATIVE MARKETING CONSULTAN	DEER CREEK OF WIMBERLEY HARPER, DR RUTHIE
LASER & SKIN CARE CTR AUSTIN	PROFESSIONAL CARETAKERS ROBY INSTITUTE, THE
SNYDERMA	TOTAL RELIEF FOOTWEAR
TX ORTHOPEDICS	

**[Delicious and Easy Holiday Gift Guide](#)**

Choose from our delicious array of meats, cheese, snacks and sweets.

[www.hickoryfarms.com/giftguide](http://www.hickoryfarms.com/giftguide)

**[Pillsbury® Holiday Recipe](#)**

Very Impressive. Very Easy.

[www.Pillsbury.com](http://www.Pillsbury.com)

**[Napa or Sonoma, Limousine or Bus Tours](#)**

Private Napa & Sonoma wine-tasting tours via luxury limousine or bus.

[www.californiawinetours.com](http://www.californiawinetours.com)

**[House Payments Fall Again](#)**

\$180,000 Mortgage for \$999/mo. See Rates - No Credit Check Required.

[www.LowerMyBills.com](http://www.LowerMyBills.com)

Ads by Yahoo!

Advertise [Online](#) or [in Print](#) | [Subscribe to the Newspaper](#) | [Make us your Homepage](#)  
Presented by The Austin American-Statesman. [Contact us](#). [Careers](#). [Corrections](#). [Site Requirements](#).  
Please read our [Privacy Policy](#). By using this site, you accept the terms of our [Visitor Agreement](#).  
Copyright 2007 The Austin American-Statesman. All rights reserved.

