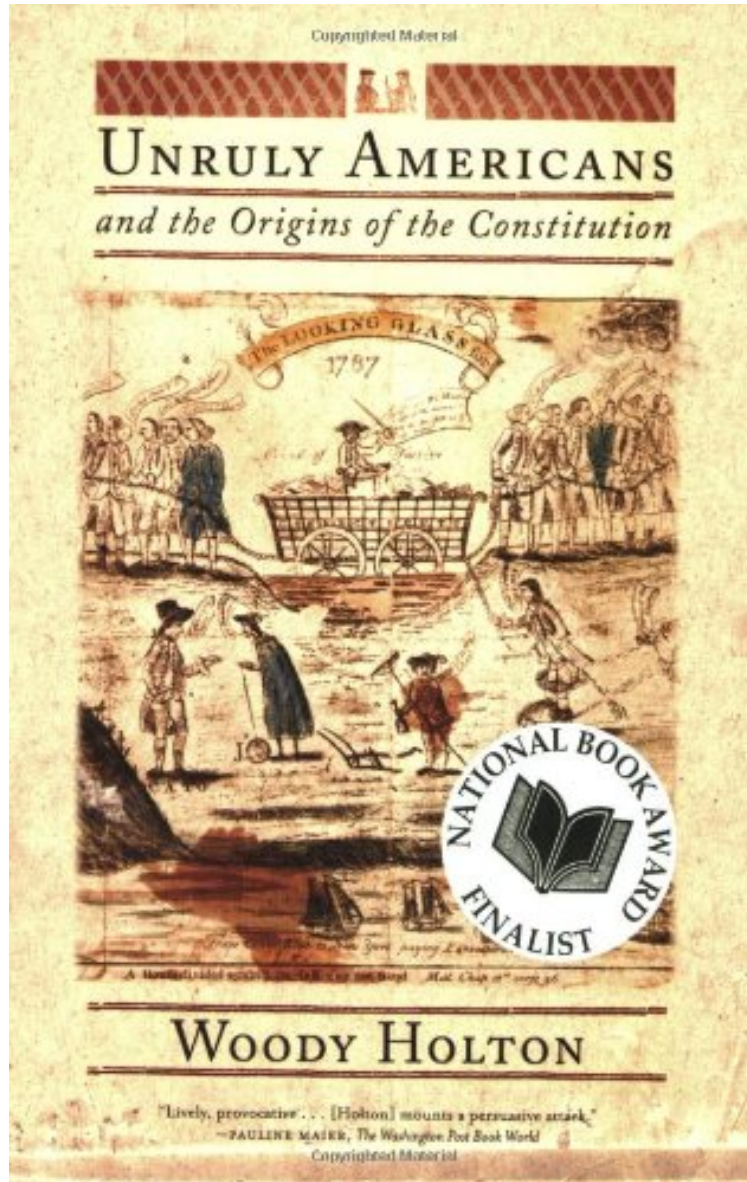


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Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution

Woody Holton

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#265934 in Books Woody Holton 2008-10-14 2008-10-14 Original language: English PDF # 1 8.34 x 1.00 x 5.761, .79 #File Name: 0809016435384 pages Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution | File size: 63.Mb

Woody Holton : Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Intriguing exploration of the Constitution's creation By gloine36 Why did the Founders create the Constitution? This has been an argument that stretches back to the days when the ink was

still drying on the document. Even the men who created it differed as to why they had done so which should surprise no one. They had created a new national government out of compromises and it was quite natural for them to disagree as each saw different reasons and opportunities arise from this governmental framework. In today's culture wars the argument has often been over whether it was a conservative or liberal document, but often that is a debate influenced by modern terms and interpretations, not necessarily the same the men of 1787 would have understood. Woody Holton was an associate professor of history at the University of Richmond. He has since moved to become the Peter and Bonnie McCausland Professor of History at the University of South Carolina. This is his second book. His first was the award winning *Forced Founders: Indian, Debtors, Slaves, and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia*. This latest literary work of his, *Unruly Americans*, continues in the vein of his earlier work in looking at the development of the United States. Other works have since followed and they too continue in the same vein. This also reflects a recent trend in the historiography of the American Revolution. Instead of looking at the events from the top down perspective, Holton and other historians look at it from the bottom up approach much like Howard Zinn advocated. In examining the creation of the Constitution, Holton looked at it with both lenses, that of the Founders and what it meant through the eyes of the lower classes. In this work, Holton proposes that the Founders were men of means who were terrified of the excess of democracy then going on in the various states. This is a view that has been expressed by many historians over the last fifty years including Gordon Wood. Yet, Holton goes deeper than Wood did in stating that the Constitution was made to create a strong central government and would have gone farther than it did, but stopped short because the delegates were concerned that it would not be ratified if they did. In short, they wanted to limit democracy but could not. It is ironic that their attempt to rein in democracy turned out to actually encourage it albeit in different ways. In many ways, the Constitution was created for economic reasons according to Holton which echoes Charles and Mary Beard. Holton demonstrates that the compromises in the Constitution were there because the delegates felt they could not eliminate the ability of the people to participate in the political process. They wanted to limit that participation and at no point did they think that what Wood called the middling sort should be representing the people. Yet, that is exactly what did happen. The personal liberties and freedoms that so many people today look at were not part of the Constitution nor were they ever meant to be by those delegates. Those points were added later through the Bill of Rights only because of the stringent objections of the people which threatened ratification causing the Federalist to promise to add a list of rights to the document. Holton's scholarship is outstanding throughout the book. I disliked the use of endnotes, but that is of course a publishing decision not left to the author. I thoroughly enjoyed reading the book as it made me do some investigation of my own on some points. Holton's thesis is correct in my opinion. Economic issues were indeed a major discussion point and the evidence of it is in the Constitution itself. It is plainly obvious that financial matters were prevalent from the published letters and notes of the delegates as well. Yet, they still had to deal with the issue of democracy and that could not be so easily removed which I think Holton points out clearly. All in all, this is a very good exploration of the Constitution from multiple perspectives. Some readers may be disappointed at the lack of patriotism in the Constitution's creation, but the reality of the past shows the pragmatism of the delegates at the convention. It also reflects the larger picture of this time period as the principles of the Revolution clashed radically with all kinds of realities. The creation of the Constitution reflected that clash which I think Holton illustrates vividly.

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Death? No, It's Always "Debt and Taxes" By GioDid the Federal Constitution of 1787 rescue or betray the Revolution? And in either case, which did the Framers intend? Both sides of those questions have been earnestly and intelligently advocated by scholars of our times, and both viewpoints were explicitly argued by the supporters and opponents of ratification in 1788-89. Woody Holton is not so foolish as to try to answer the questions conclusively in his study of "The Origins of the Constitution". Instead, he determinedly makes the case for both viewpoints as the case was made by contemporaries of the Founders; he does so by examining the financial/fiscal conditions of the years between the end of the Revolution and the framing of the new Constitution, as well as "listening" to the analyses of those conditions by people who experienced them in radically different ways. This was no easy task, the research that Holton put into the book "Unruly Americans". Don't expect any kind of lightweight popularizing if you decide to read this book or Holton's extremely significant earlier book "Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia." Holton, by the way, is a professor of history at the University of Richmond. One thing is virtually indisputable. Almost nobody was satisfied with the governance of the 13 liberated states under the structure called the Articles of Confederation. But the dissatisfaction wasn't only with the federal governance; it was more vociferously directed toward the governance of each of the states. It's hardly flagrant revisionism in 2010 CE to maintain that the Constitution of 1787 was a "conservative backlash" against runaway democracy unleashed by the Revolution itself. In fact, that's essentially the orthodoxy historical dogma since the work of Charles Beard early in the 20th C. Woody Holton acknowledges that position from the onset, but reveals that his research has led him to a more nuanced conclusion: that it was the perception of unbridled 'leveling' by the 13 states' governments which generated the desires of "leading men" to construct a stronger federal government. In other words, for Madison and the others who assembled to frame a new constitution, the chief goal was to restrain States' Rights! So... the greatest pertinence of Holton's analysis should be the light it sheds on the hot-button question of "original intent" that roils politics in the

USA today. In many ways, Holton reveals, the furious divisions over the balance of relations between the states and the federal government already existed in the 1780s. Of course, the side taken by anyone, ever, on the issue of States' Rights has always depended on "interests". The defense of slavery was the most obvious and inflammatory interest from the very start, but Holton discovers an economic dynamic -- in very simplified terms, the debtors versus the debt-holders -- that divided opinion internally in each of the 13 former colonies. There are quite a number of "amusing" ironies to be noted in the "States' Rights" arguments against a powerful federal government, even before that central government was established: * prior to 1787, it was generally the Rich who adamantly denounced "tax relief" by the various state governments. But it has to be understood that the tax relief of the 1780s was inherently at the expense of bond holders and speculators. * the States' Rights position was usually associated with a tolerance for inflation, for the issuance of paper money, as a means of equalizing wealth through a kind of indirect taxation. * the supporters of the state governments, and therefore opponents of the federal, generally favored "easy" immigration and feared that a tighter-money federal government would discourage immigration and disrupt the supply of labor as well as stifle development of new lands. * central to the political thinking of States' Rights advocates, those who wanted the state governments to be even more 'democratic', was the view that a "republican" government could only thrive in a climate of rough economic equality; thus the most articulate States' Rights spokesmen openly supported measures to "redistribute" property and to discourage "concentration" of wealth! And this objective of "redistribution" could, in their minds, be achieved most efficiently by state governments maximally answerable to the broad electorate. Thus, many strong states' rights proponents also advocated elimination of the state senates (i.e. unicameral legislatures), strict 51% majority rule on all legislation including tax proposals, and abolishment of gubernatorial/executive veto powers. For a tightly focused academic study, Holton's "Unruly Americans" manages to spare pages here and there for wide-ranging insights. One of the best chapters of the book treats the cultural paradigm of "sentiment" that both sides of the debate over debt and taxes invoked. Holton's reflections on Adam Smith are extremely enlightening; in fact, he has convinced this reader that Smith's economic thinking is incomplete and incomprehensible without taking account of Smith's other great book, "A Theory of Moral Sentiments". Holton also casts his net over the implications of the post-Revolution social turmoil for changes in expectations of equality -- of the poor, of slaves and freed slaves, and especially of women. The accounts and activities of Abigail Adams, an astute self-interested bond speculator, form a key resource for Holton's research. I recommend both of Woody Holton's books enthusiastically, for all readers interested in American history and the deep roots of the polarization that typifies American politics today, despite the seeming tweedle-dee/tweedle-dum nature of the two political parties.

10 of 12 people found the following review helpful. Disappointing, but it had potential. By Igor Faynshteyn Having read several books about the federal Constitutional Convention of 1787 and about the politics of the era prior to reading this book, including the impressive "Original Meanings" by J. Rakove, I was disappointed with this book. Stylistically, it is fast paced and readable. At times, it feels like a long essay, or someone thinking out loud. But where it succeeds in readability, it fails at careful and serious analysis and interpretation. "Unruly Americans" sets out to disprove what it claims most scholars and historians erroneously claim: that the founding fathers designed the Constitution to empower ordinary Americans and protect their basic civil rights. Nay, says Woody Holton, the founding fathers' principal motivation in drafting the Constitution was to accomplish the opposite: take power away from ordinary Americans and consolidate it in the national gov't, because the founding fathers determined that ordinary Americans were incapable at self-governing and therefore needed to be guided by the elites who were better equipped at making economic and public policy decisions. In fleshing out his thesis, Holton spends more than half of the book going over the financial and economic issues that were plaguing the colonies. The primary issue Holton focuses on (in fact, nearly the only issue) is the financial and political chasm that existed between the creditors and debtors; bondholders and taxpayers. This is the first problem of Holton's analysis: the labels. Inevitably, this kind of dichotomy helps in explaining certain issues and makes them easier to follow and understand. However, it's overly simplistic. For one, not all creditors agreed with each other on policy issues, as neither did all debtors (which Holton, to his credit, does point out at times). Secondly, bondholders were not separate from taxpayers, as these are not mutually exclusive: bondholders were taxpayers too. The biggest problem of Holton's interpretation is the almost total lack of a broader political and economic context of the times. This shows especially in the later part of the book which discusses the ratification debates and commentaries, as well as Holton's take on James Madison's intellectual and political conversions post the Constitutional Convention. The author provides no serious analysis of the ratification debates, except for some out of context quotations made by several Federalist and anti-Federalist essayists and commentators; and provides no context whatsoever to try to explain Madison's conversion. Indeed, the idea that Madison flipped his views 180 is itself simplistic, since while Madison's views certainly evolved through the years and readjusted, it's a stretch to suggest that he became a genuine intellectual and political convert. While Holton attempts to distance himself from the Charles Beardian thinking and interpretive framework, he doesn't fully succeed at it. For while he concedes that the Beardian framework was too simplistic and therefore erroneous, Holton doesn't himself supply the alternative, more realistic framework, all the while casting doubt on the mainstream scholarship. Nonetheless, Holton does make some interesting points and arguments, that if fleshed out and analyzed in a more consistent, serious and penetrating fashion, had some

potential to become a competing and realistic alternative framework to the mainstream scholarship. The book is also not very well organized. For one, much of the facts and quotations are redundant throughout the book, as if Holton deliberately distributed them in this way to remind the readers of the information provided in earlier parts of the book. In fact, due to this disorganization, some chapters truly seem indistinguishable from one another. In sum, if you are an early entrant into the Constitutional reading materials, this book may provide some interesting information and points. However, if you are a seasoned veteran - skip it.

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.

From Publishers Weekly Starred . Is the Constitution a democratic document? Yes, says University of Richmond historian Holton (*Forced Founders*), but not because the men who wrote it were especially democratically inclined. The framers, Holton says, distrusted the middling farmers who made up much of America's voting population, and believed governance should be left in large part to the elites. But the framers also knew that if the document they drafted did not address ordinary citizens' concerns, the states would not ratify it. Thus, the framers created a more radical document than underdogs' Constitution, Holton calls it than they otherwise would have done. Holton's book, which may be the most suggestive study of the politics of the Constitution and the early republic since Drew McCoy's 1980 *The Elusive Republic*, is full of surprising insights; for example, his discussion of newspaper writers' defense of a woman's right to purchase the occasional luxury item flies in the face of much scholarship on virtue, gender and fashion in post-revolutionary America. Holton concludes with an inspiring rallying cry for democracy, saying that Americans today seem to have abandoned ordinary late-18th-century citizens' intense... democratic aspiration, resigned, he says, to the power of global corporations and of wealth in American politics. (Oct.) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. From Booklist The motivation of the framers of our constitution is a constant and often hotly debated topic among historians. At one extreme are those who see the framers as brilliant, democratic politicians who did a masterful job of juggling competing interests while remaining true to the ideal of personal liberty. At the other extreme are the economic determinists who view the founders as members of the privileged classes, insistent upon protecting their interests from the encroachments of the masses. Holton certainly would be most comfortable in the latter camp, but his arguments here are free of dogmatism, and he offers some interesting twists on old assertions. He maintains that the delegates to the convention were attempting to limit the democratic tendencies of the individual state legislatures by curbing their powers to issue paper money and offer relief to debtors. Faced with vehement popular opposition to ratification, the Bill of Rights, Holton claims, was promised only to tip the balance in favor of ratification. Although he makes a credible case that some delegates feared the dangers of democracy, he glosses over the commitment many showed to protecting personal freedom as their top priority. Freeman, Jay Holton demonstrates a lucid and systematic dismantling of the myths surrounding the making of our national government. His succinct account persuasively revives the economic interpretation of the Constitution in terms well-suited for our times, and it will surely become the essential work for students of the founding era. The Constitution enabled the ascent of the United States to great political and economic power, Holton makes plain, but at a profound cost to democracy. If Americans today find our national politicians entrenched in office, out of touch with their constituents, and responsive to lobbyists for the rich, they will understand why after reading this compelling book. Robert A. Gross, James L. And Shirley A. Draper Professor of Early American History, University of Connecticut, and author of *The Minutemen and Their World* Woody Holton reframes the coming of the Constitution, revealing the rich debate Americans conducted over the cause of capital in the new land. In this account, real people--farmers, soldiers, taxpayers, speculators, creditors and entrepreneurs--replace images of the Founders, and intimate issues like tax fairness, economic effects, and electoral accountability matter far more than abstractions. The result is a new and compelling history. Christine Desan, Professor of Law, Harvard Law School Woody Holton invites us to revise most of what we think we know about the origins of the United States Constitution. In this account the Founding Fathers do not appear as selfless philosophers journeying to Philadelphia to explore competing theories of

republican government. Rather, Holton describes them as deeply anxious men, determined to contain a surge of popular democracy that seemed to threaten their financial interests. In this brilliantly researched study Holton thus revives an economic interpretation of the Constitution and in the process reminds us that ordinary American farmers after the Revolution imagined a strikingly different nation from the one that the Founders gave us. T.H. Breen, Director, Center for Historical Studies, Northwestern University Here is a book that helps answer the puzzle of how in 1787 the framers of the Constitution curbed what they considered the excess of democracy' in the states and at the same time accommodated democratic pressures. Using a vast array of little appreciated contemporary sources, Holton constructs a fresh, sinewy argument that unfolds with a mounting sense of excitement. The result is a tough, realistic way of thinking about the founders. Unruly Americans is a brilliant book, rich with insights into the American Revolution and the Constitution. Alfred Young, author of Liberty Tree: Ordinary People and the American Revolution Move over, Founding Fathers. It turns out that average Americans from the unruly mob' had more to do with insuring the personal liberties we Americans now hold dear than did the Framers we so revere. Woody Holton's fascinating and energetic new book makes us take a fresh look at the Constitution, especially the Bill of Rights. The populist underpinnings of our Republic are real, and this has clear implications for the role that citizens ought to play today in reforming American democracy. Holton's lesson: If the establishment won't change the system, the people can. They've done it from the beginning. Larry J. Sabato, Director, Center for Politics, University of Virginia