

## BOOKS

## America's Battle for the General Welfare

If history is a battleground for ideas, and ideas are embodied in individual personalities—both of which propositions I believe to be true—then historian Joseph J. Ellis made an appropriate choice in deciding to present this book on America's Revolutionary period through vignettes of the interactions between the early United States' leading personalities. For the most part, Ellis chose the most significant actors—John Adams, Aaron Burr, Ben Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and George Washington. The major omission, on the positive side, was Mathew Carey, the Irish emigré recruited by Benjamin Franklin, whose story would provide the direct bridge into the next generation of true American patriots.

The problem with this book, in my view, lies in the level on which Ellis presents the ideas which were at war over the first crucial decade of our republic's existence. As he states in the preface, Ellis sees the American Revolution as a paradoxical development, shown in the tension between the republican ideals it represented in its revolt against the British Empire, on the one side, and the centrifugal forces against a unified republic, which were to defend local sovereignty against the central government. This tension, he says, was resolved for a period during the Civil War, but not permanently.

The paradox would be resolved, if Ellis had presented the Idea of the American Revolution in its true historical and philosophical nature, as a political implementation of the ideas of the General Welfare developed out of the Italian Renaissance, and embodied in the more than 65-year career of Benjamin Franklin. It is true that no other of the "founding brothers" had an understanding of the Revolutionary idea on the same level as Franklin, a circumstance which set the stage for the battles that eventually nearly tore the nation apart. But Franklin's is the

standard against which all the other ideas and personalities should be judged.

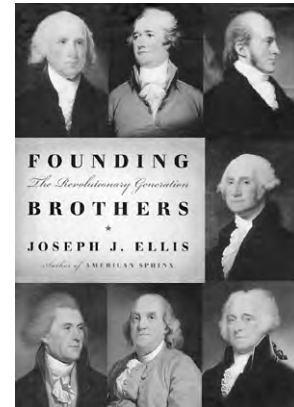
Ellis organizes his presentation around a series of six "turning point" events, four of which are indeed crucial to the subsequent history of the nation.

#### The Turning Points

The first turning point is "The Duel," an account of what went into the 1804 assassination of revolutionary hero and first Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton by Aaron Burr. This truly was a determining event, because it eliminated Hamilton, the genius who was continuing Franklin's fight to turn the United States into a great manufacturing republic, from the political scene. But Ellis's rendition is disturbing in its equivocation on Burr, who should be presented as the British traitor he was, but who appears instead as an arrogant genius with the same qualities as Hamilton.

The second vignette is called "The Dinner," and it depicts the fight over where the new nation's capital would be situated, and the negotiations between James Madison and Alexander Hamilton at a dinner party hosted by Jefferson, which would resolve the issue. The result of the 1790 negotiations, was that Madison agreed to Hamilton's plan for dealing with Revolutionary War debt, and the new national bank, while it was agreed that the nation's capital, at that point located in New York City, would be built up from scratch in a region adjacent to Virginia, now the District of Columbia.

The third, and most under-reported, issue taken up is called "The Silence," a review of the way slavery was dealt with in the Congress in 1790. Here we read about how petitions to end both the slave trade and slavery were introduced in 1790, including by Benjamin Franklin himself, and how they were dealt with. Ellis reports how the South's ultimate arguments in defense of slavery



**Founding Brothers:  
The Revolutionary Generation**  
by Joseph J. Ellis  
New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2000  
288 pages, hardcover, \$26.00

were aired on this occasion, leading to a satirical response from Franklin, on the rights of Muslims to enslave Christians. The result, we learn, was the passage of a resolution saying Congress had no right to interfere with slavery *per se*—a resolution which was not resolutely challenged again until the 1830's, by John Quincy Adams.

The fourth vignette, entitled "The Farewell," presents George Washington's concept of holding the nation together around its mission as the world's leading republic, as found in his Farewell Addresses to Congress and the nation. Ellis correctly points out that Washington's vision of a Federal government promoting manufactures, agricultural improvements, a national university, an expanded navy, and a national military academy, was the precursor to the program of internal improvements by President John Quincy Adams, to be followed by Henry Clay and Abraham Lincoln. And he notes the tragedy involved in the fact, that other leading Virginians were aligned *against* Washington's perspective.

The last two vignettes are much more trivial, involving the ups and downs of the personal and political rela-

tionship between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. Here the connection between the individuals and the historical process is much more muddled, with the result that the chapters are dominated more by personality than politics.

### A Lost Sense of History

In a sense, this lowering of the level of discussion reflects what happened “objectively” in American history, as the intellectual descendants of Franklin and Washington were kept out of power for

the bulk of the first half of the Nineteenth century. This is where the question of the Carey family, starting with Mathew, comes in. Mathew Carey, with his publication of Hamilton’s work, and his own seminal *The Olive Branch* in 1819, provides the link which leads, along with the work of John Quincy Adams, Henry Clay, and others, into the second American Revolution accomplished by Abraham Lincoln.

It is surely a good thing that *Founding Brothers* made it onto the Bestseller List

for many weeks, and was awarded a Pulitzer Prize. For an American population which has so obviously lost its sense of historical identity, this is a positive sign. But, to get the true picture of what the American Revolution represents, one is still required to read the works of the LaRouche movement on that history—not to mention original sources of the leading individuals themselves. One hopes that reading this book will provoke more individuals to do just that.

—Nancy B. Spannaus

## ‘Great Projects’ of the Golden Renaissance

Political scientist Roger Masters has developed an obsession: He must uncover all he can about one of the most fascinating collaborations in all history—the working relationship and apparent friendship between Leonardo da Vinci (at the time, the greatest artist and scientist in the world) and Niccolo Machiavelli, then the world’s leading political theorist. For Masters’ readers, at least, this obsession is a very useful one.

This is Masters’ second crack at the subject. In 1996, he produced *Machiavelli, Leonardo, and the Science of Power*, a book that began with a competent, if unacceptably broad, sketch of the Leonardo-Machiavelli collaboration, but then suddenly careened into a bizarre, “politically correct” disquisition on the relationship of political science to sociology.

One likes to think that Masters realized that his first book had done injustice to the subject. For whatever reason, he has clearly spent the next three-plus years widely reading in this area. The result is a solidly researched synopsis of much of the best literature on both Leonardo and Machiavelli. In fact, one could easily recommend Masters’ new book to a reader who wanted a short, undemanding dual biography of the two geniuses.

### The Arno River Project

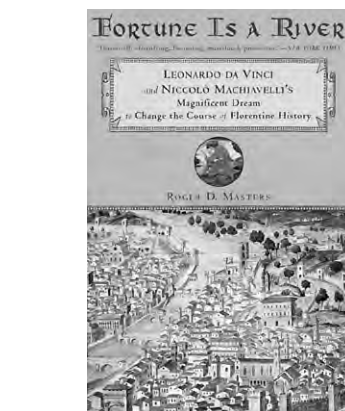
Masters pivots his study around Leonardo and Machiavelli’s plan to divert the course of the Arno, the river that con-

nects the great mercantile and manufacturing city of Florence to the Mediterranean Sea. Arno diversion was an old dream for Florence, for both economic and military-political reasons. In the 1440’s, a generation before Leonardo and Machiavelli, at the height of that flowering of human optimism which we would later call the Renaissance, people began to think that diversion was finally, technically possible, and the city’s best minds, including the genius architect Filippo Brunelleschi, began to plan in earnest.

Masters begins with an exciting proposition: “The history of public works that control rivers is . . . a good summary of the process of civilization.”

He then weaves an entertaining narrative that pieces together just about every scrap of what tragically little information we now know about the Arno project, starting with Leonardo’s early fascination with the river during his days at the court of Milan, and while training with the great geometer Luca Pacioli. This fascination fueled Leonardo’s map series of the Arno valley (whose uncanny detail and accuracy would satisfy a modern reconnaissance satellite interpreter), and also, as Masters rightly emphasizes, gave Leonardo the ability to include the famous “bird’s eye view” of an imaginary river valley in the background of the *Mona Lisa*.

Leonardo’s interest in Arno diversion was, thus, fully developed by the time he met Machiavelli, then the Secretary of the “Ten of War” (the top



**Fortune Is a River:  
Leonardo da Vinci and  
Niccolo Machiavelli's  
Magnificent Dream  
To Change the Course of  
Florentine History**  
by Roger D. Masters  
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diplomatic and intelligence post in the Florentine republic). On the face of it, as Masters amply documents, Machiavelli wanted Leonardo to divert the river for purely military reasons: to ensure the defeat of the neighboring city of Pisa, which also fronted the Arno. However, it seems clear, especially in the context of Machiavelli’s many later comments on the ability of man to use technology to correct the “deficiencies of nature,” that the politician shared the scientist’s understanding that river diversion (and concomitant irrigation and flood control schemes) could