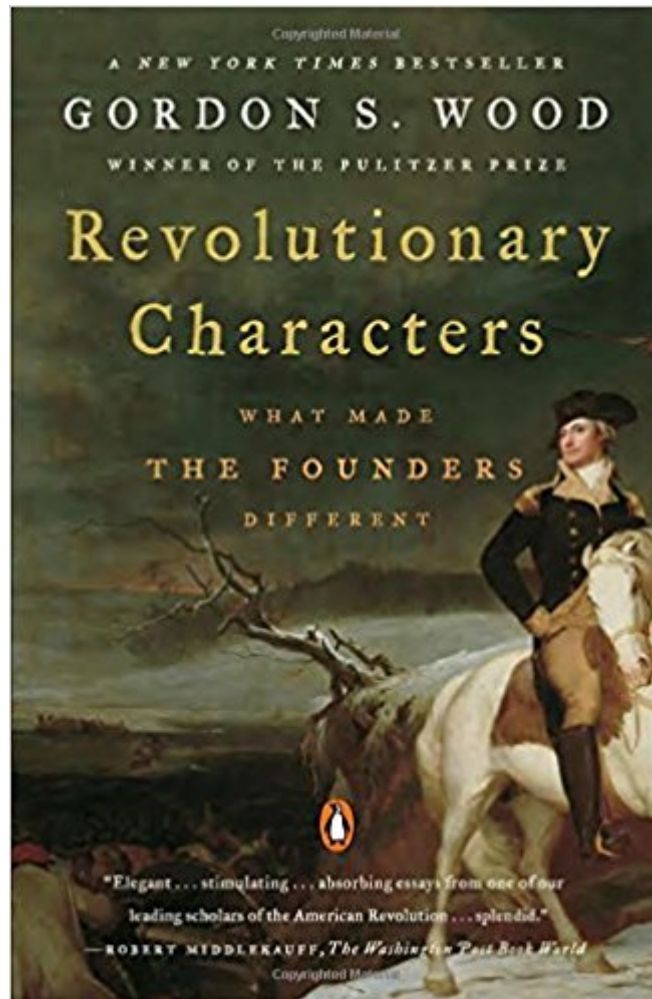


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Revolutionary Characters: What Made The Founders Different



Synopsis

In this brilliantly illuminating group portrait of the men who came to be known as the Founding Fathers, the incomparable Gordon Wood has written a book that seriously asks, "What made these men great?" and shows us, among many other things, just how much character did in fact matter. The life of each—Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Franklin, Hamilton, Madison, Paine—is presented individually as well as collectively, but the thread that binds these portraits together is the idea of character as a lived reality. They were members of the first generation in history that was self-consciously self-made men who understood that the arc of lives, as of nations, is one of moral progress.

Book Information

Paperback: 336 pages

Publisher: Penguin Books; Reprint edition (May 29, 2007)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0143112082

ISBN-13: 978-0143112082

Product Dimensions: 5.4 x 0.7 x 8.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 10.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars— See all reviews (88 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #29,564 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #45 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > United States > American Revolution #70 in Books > History > Americas > United States > Revolution & Founding #192 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Leaders & Notable People > Political

Customer Reviews

Gordon Wood has distilled a large body of knowledge into cogent chapters on the founding fathers, bookended by essays that put their legacy into perspective. What he tries to do is peel away the layers of mythmaking and revisionist history that have taken place over the last two centuries and get to the heart of what made these "revolutionary characters" tick. What he reveals is that it was their strong sense of public character and duty that separated them from not only the mainstream of their time but the mainstream thought that prevails today. Wood argues that you cannot separate the Founding Fathers from their era, they lived under a very different set of circumstances, and responded to these circumstances in their own unique ways. Since so much of their writings and journals have survived down through the ages, it makes these early statesmen prime subjects for

psycho-analysis, but what Wood tries to do is take the position of an observer, looking into their conduct as one would in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. While a ranking of their conduct can more or less be inferred by the order of the chapters and the way Wood assesses their individual characters, the author stresses the pivotal roles each had in shaping the United States. Washington is paramount in the way he was able to balance all these competing forces in his presidential administration. He was a leader, if not necessarily a "decider," capable of weighing the opinions of his administration and reaching what he regarded as a just and due course for the nation. He may have lacked the intellectual abilities of Jefferson and Hamilton, or the judicial acumen of Adams, but he didn't seem to second guess his decisions, sticking by them and accepting the consequences like the gentleman he saw himself as.

For much of our history, the leaders of the American Revolution and the framers of the Declaration of Independence and Constitution enjoyed iconic, mythic status. But they have also been subjected to criticism and debunking, based on their alleged elitism, racism, and sexism in our increasingly cynical, skeptical age. In his recent collection of essays, "Revolutionary Characters: What Made the Founders Different" (2006), Gordon Wood offers thoughtful meditations on the Founders. Gordon Wood is Professor of History at Brown University. He is deservedly esteemed for his studies of the Revolutionary era. In his book, Wood offers succinct discussions of the Founders, their backgrounds, what they did, and, most importantly, what they thought. He sets the Founders within their time but shows, paradoxically, how the success of the Founders made their achievements and characters impossible to replicate in subsequent generations. Wood's book consists of individual essays on eight founders, Washington, Franklin, Jefferson, Hamilton, Madison, Adams, Paine, and Burr. His Introduction and concluding Epilogue attempt to bring coherence to the story. For Wood, what sets the Founders apart from subsequent leaders was their ability to combine high intellectual achievement in politics with the life of affairs and leadership. In much of the subsequent history of the United States, intellectuals and thinkers have been separated from active political life and, in fact, alienated from it. (Thus, the cynicism that I mentioned at the outset of this review.

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