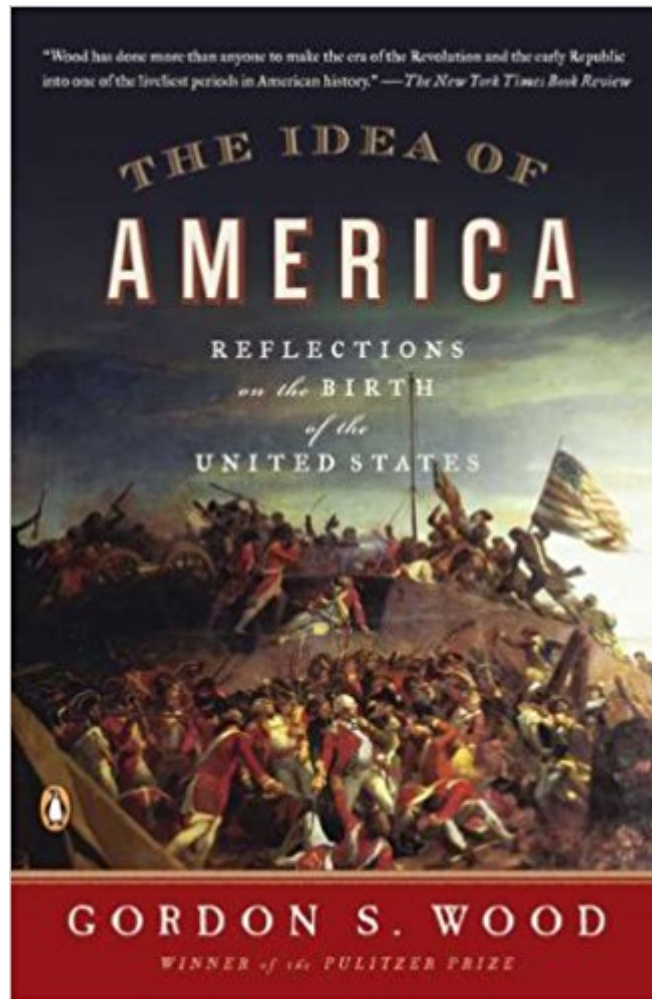


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# The Idea Of America: Reflections On The Birth Of The United States



## Synopsis

The preeminent historian of the Founding Era reflects on the birth of American nationhood and explains why the American Revolution remains so essential. For Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Gordon S. Wood, the American Revolution is the most important event in our history, bar none. Since American identity is so fluid, we have had to continually return to our nation's founding to understand who we are. In a series of illuminating essays, he explores the ideological origins of the Revolution "from Ancient Rome to the European Enlightenment" and the founders' attempts to forge a democracy. He reflects on the origins of American exceptionalism, the radicalism and failed hopes of the founding generation, and the "terrifying gap" between us and the men who created the democratic state we take for granted. This is a profoundly revealing look at the event that forged the United States and its enduring power to define us.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

First of all I must say that, quite simply put, Pulitzer prize winner Dr Gordon Wood has crafted yet another masterpiece. "The Idea of America " is a phenomenal selection of essays regarding the American Revolution and Early Republic with a smorgasbord of topics ranging from trends in historiography, Conspiracy in pre Revolutionary thought, the depth of Thomas Jefferson's republican radicalism, and fears in the early republic of a connection between federalism and a reestablishment of monarchy. This work is a series of essays written by Woods over the course of his impressive career in colonial/early Republic writing spanning nearly six decades! Although

primarily a work of analysis, this work is an absolute page turner after the initial chapter on historiography. Never before have I found a work of analysis to be so absolutely satisfying to read. The above-mentioned first chapter is primarily a discussion of the development of revolutionary history writing from the Progressive movement to the later Neo Whig/idealistic interpretations to Woods' own synthesis of both styles. He argues quite convincingly that although ideas cannot by themselves lead to actions they play a significant role in forming of the motives that did lead to action. Most fascinating for myself was the chapter on 'Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style...'. So engrossing was his description and analysis of the origins of conspiracy theories in pre Revolutionary 18th century America and Europe that I completely forgot my normal note taking for pages at a time. His argument is that rather than widespread conspiracy theories and a "paranoid style" being somehow unique to Americans as Richard Hofstadter wrote decades ago, they were themselves a logical outgrowth of the enlightenment belief in natural law. In compelling fashion Woods analyzes this phenomenon. Indeed, I found myself through this chapter now searching for further, more thorough development of the topic. Also gripping in its own right is the chapter on 'Disinterestedness' in politics of the early Republic. This is particularly interesting to those biography nuts out there as it gets right to the heart of the issue of the profiles of honorably disinterested public figures and what this actually meant for the revolutionary generation. As hard as it is to believe in time when nearly all public 'servants' are up to their necks in some corruption scandal or another, Woods does justice in describing a time when there actually were some (John Adams and George Washington for example) who believed in doing the right things for the nation and the citizens living within its borders. Really one could go on and on about the phenomenal scholarship and analysis contained within this collection of essays, as well as Dr. Woods gripping writing style. All in all this is a book which should be included in any college survey of the pre-revolution/early republic period. 'The Idea of America' is a six star book that I can unfortunately only rate with five.

With his erudition, even-handedness, and thoughtfulness, Gordon Wood is among the best of American historians. Wood's most recent book, "The Idea of America: Reflections on the Birth of the United States" (2011) collects eleven essays written and revisited over a period of nearly 50 years. Wood's lengthy introductory essay and a concluding essay, "The American Revolutionary Tradition, or Why America Wants to Spread Democracy around the World", frame and give focus to this collection of Wood's writing about the American Revolution and its continued significance. The book functions both as a history and as a meditation on writing history. The major theme of the book is that the American Revolution is "the most important event in American history, bar none". The

Revolution legally created the United States, and infused into it "all our highest aspirations and noblest values", including our beliefs in liberty, equality, constitutional government, and the dignity of ordinary people. The Revolution also created for Americans their perceived mission to "lead the world toward liberty and democracy." (pp. 2-3) Wood's essays develop this theme in a variety of contexts. The second theme of the book involves the role of ideas in the American Revolution and, more broadly, in history. In the early 20th Century, historians of the progressive school discounted the importance of ideas and argued that the Revolution had an economic base. The progressives thought that the leaders of the Revolutionary Era acted from motives of economic self-interest with their professed ideals a thin epiphenomenon. The most famous work of the progressive school was Charles Beard's "An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States".

An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States

In the 1960s, Bernard Bailyn wrote his still-famous study "The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution".

The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution

which took issue with the progressives and made a strong case that the Revolution was based on the Founders' understanding and adoption of liberal British thought. Wood tries to take a nuanced position between the progressives and the writers he terms the idealists. He acknowledges that passion and necessity are ordinarily much larger sources of human conduct than are ideas. Yet, he sees ideas as of critical importance in that they occur within the context of life and passion and help shape them. Wood endeavors to explore ideas and their significance in a way that supports rather than contradicts the insights of the progressive school. Wood tries to give the progressives more credit than they currently receive, but his account to me is still idea-driven.

A third theme of the book involves the question of "presentism" in historical writing -- the tendency to explore historical questions solely by focusing on contemporary preoccupations. Presentism results in polemics and in historical misinterpretation, Wood argues. It ignores the complexity of the past and changes in human thought over time. Wood makes an effort to understand the Revolutionary Era and its participants on their own terms without forcing them into a mold created by current questions. Wood tries to show how people in the Eighteenth Century viewed issues differently than people today view issues. He undertakes the difficult task of explaining the Founders and the Revolution in terms of the culture of their day which is not necessarily the same as early Twenty-first century culture. Wood also tries to the extent possible to avoid taking sides as, for example, between Federalists such as Hamilton and democrats such as Jefferson and to understand and explain each position within its historical context. The essays are dense, richly textured, and formidably documented. The three essays in Part 1 of the book, titled "The American Revolution", consider the relationship between ideas and economics in the

Revolutionary era and thus continue the exploration of the progressive-idealist schools of thought that Wood describes in his introductory essay. The second essay considers the influence of classical Roman thought on the Founders. The third essay, titled "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century" is both a historical and a philosophical discussion of the nature of conspiracy theories and of the reasons for the appeal of such theories in the 18th Century. Wood offers insight into the continued contemporary appeal of various types of conspiracy theories of events. The second part of the book consists of four essays on "The Making of the Constitution and American Democracy". These essays focus on the role of disinterestedness in the generation of the Founders. Wood argues that the Founders were indeed exceptional in our history in their commitment to a disinterested politics. Wood's essays explain the Founders' understanding of disinterestedness. He suggests that the Founders outlived their own vision -- in other words, the Founders' vision of disinterested politics was soon dashed even in their own lifetimes. The essays compare British ideas of constitutionalism with those developed in the fledgling and rapidly democratizing United States. The final essay in this part offers a comparison of the thought of Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine. Wood admires both Paine and Jefferson and finds they share much in common in their belief that "at bottom, every single individual, men and women, black and white, had a common moral or social sense that tied him or her to other individuals." (p.228) The four essays in the third part of the book, "The Early Republic", begin with a consideration of monarchy, its continued appeal to some of the Founders, and its relationship to American constitutionalism in the figure of the president. The Federalists in the early days of the United States were accused by their democratic opponents of having monarchical tendencies. Wood explores the extent to which this accusation may have been justified. In an essay titled "Illusions of Power in the Awkward Age of Federalism", Wood discusses how both Federalists and their democratic opponents considerably misjudged contemporary developments that in hindsight appear obvious. Wood tries to show how Federalist thought as represented by Hamilton was anachronistic in its own time but has received something of a resurgence in contemporary America. Wood's essay on "The American Enlightenment" is probably the finest work in this collection as a result of its insight in understanding the source and continuing vitality of American ideals. The final essay "A History of Rights in Early America" is a scholarly account of the development of the judiciary and the doctrine of judicial review, which creates an often tense relationship between the courts and the political branches of government. In his concluding essay, Wood reiterates even more strongly than he does in his introductory essay the "ideological" character of the American Revolution. He argues that ideas are important in understanding the United States. In partial opposition to pragmatic, practical

views of the Revolution and of American thinking, Wood maintains that "the American Revolution was as ideological as any revolution in modern Western history, and as a consequence, we Americans have been as ideological-minded as any people in Western culture". (p. 321) Wood argues that Revolutionary ideals continue to challenge Americans in our present difficult times. Wood's learned book has helped me think about the American Revolution and American history. It is also helped me think about the complex nature of historical understanding. Robin Friedman

In *The Idea of America*, Professor Wood presents a series of eleven different essays he authored over a period of approximately forty-five years. These essays, which provide the headings for eleven separate chapters, discuss the American Revolution (Part I), The Making of the Constitution and American Democracy (Part II), and The Early Republic (Part III). Also included is an exceptionally cogent and remarkably insightful conclusion recently authored by Wood. Essentially, the book considers and examines historical scholarship concerning the Revolution, the Constitution, and the Early Republic. Professor Wood provides succinct summaries of the various theories historians have ascribed to the American Revolution, the Making of the Constitution, and growth of the Early American Republic. While scholarly and seemingly written for academics, the essays are generally accessible for the lay reader; although some may be a bit technical and overly analytical. All of the essays, notwithstanding, are extraordinarily interesting, thoughtful, and intellectually stimulating. In addition, Professor Wood's conclusion is simply outstanding. In the conclusion, he gives a wonderful description of what the American Revolution meant and then narratively traces its evolution from inception through modern events. This book provides an amazing glimpse into the thoughts and ideas of the Revolutionary generation. It also compares the United States' republican experience with that of the rest of the World. An outstanding, remarkable, and intellectual look at the ideas which make the America Republic uniquely great. Without question, this is precisely the kind of work that has made Professor Wood a legendary academic!

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