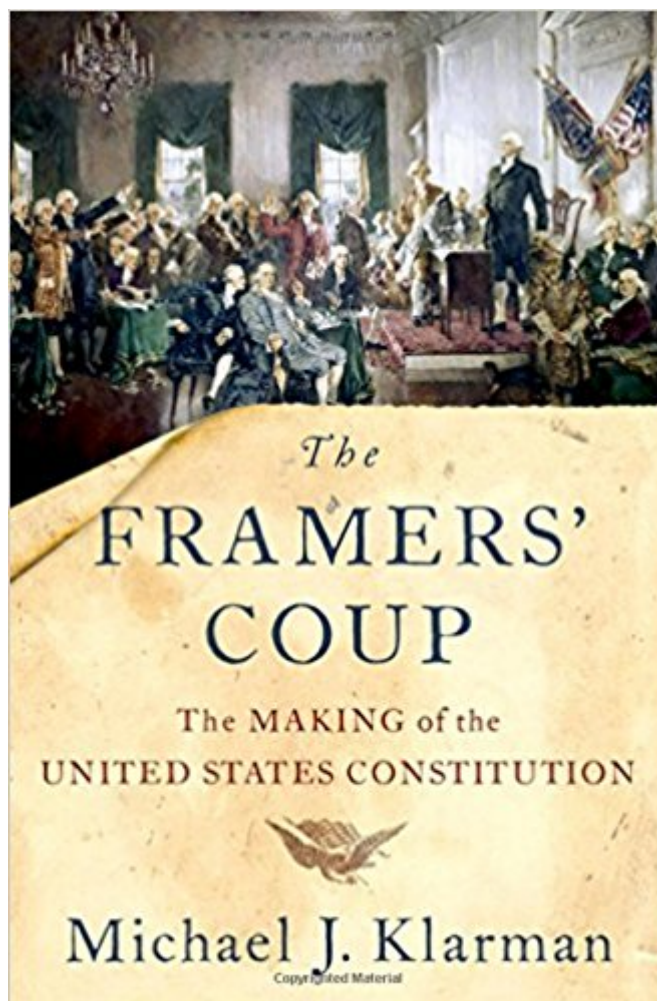


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The Framers' Coup: The Making Of The United States Constitution



Synopsis

Americans revere their Constitution. However, most of us are unaware how tumultuous and improbable the drafting and ratification processes were. As Benjamin Franklin keenly observed, any assembly of men bring with them "all their prejudices, their passions, their errors of opinion, their local interests and their selfish views." One need not deny that the Framers had good intentions in order to believe that they also had interests. Based on prodigious research and told largely through the voices of the participants, Michael Klarman's *The Framers' Coup* narrates how the Framers' clashing interests shaped the Constitution--and American history itself. The Philadelphia convention could easily have been a failure, and the risk of collapse was always present. Had the convention dissolved, any number of adverse outcomes could have resulted, including civil war or a reversion to monarchy. Not only does Klarman capture the knife's-edge atmosphere of the convention, he populates his narrative with riveting and colorful stories: the rebellion of debtor farmers in Massachusetts; George Washington's uncertainty about whether to attend; Gunning Bedford's threat to turn to a European prince if the small states were denied equal representation in the Senate; slave states' threats to take their marbles and go home if denied representation for their slaves; Hamilton's quasi-monarchist speech to the convention; and Patrick Henry's herculean efforts to defeat the Constitution in Virginia through demagoguery and conspiracy theories. *The Framers' Coup* is more than a compendium of great stories, however, and the powerful arguments that feature throughout will reshape our understanding of the nation's founding. Simply put, the Constitutional Convention almost didn't happen, and once it happened, it almost failed. And, even after the convention succeeded, the Constitution it produced almost failed to be ratified. Just as importantly, the Constitution was hardly the product of philosophical reflections by brilliant, disinterested statesmen, but rather ordinary interest group politics. Multiple conflicting interests had a say, from creditors and debtors to city dwellers and backwoodsmen. The upper class overwhelmingly supported the Constitution; many working class colonists were more dubious. Slave states and nonslave states had different perspectives on how well the Constitution served their interests. Ultimately, both the Constitution's content and its ratification process raise troubling questions about democratic legitimacy. The Federalists were eager to avoid full-fledged democratic deliberation over the Constitution, and the document that was ratified was stacked in favor of their preferences. And in terms of substance, the Constitution was a significant departure from the more democratic state constitutions of the 1770s. Definitive and authoritative, *The Framers' Coup* explains why the Framers preferred such a constitution and how they managed to persuade the country to adopt it. We have lived with the consequences, both positive and negative, ever since.

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Customer Reviews

"A magisterial history of the creation of the United States Constitution... In crisp, precise style, and without undue reverence for the framers or their handiwork, Klarman explores in great depth, with ample illustrative quotations, the varying proposals and the heated arguments for and against them... A monumental project carried off to a high degree of excellence... Constitutional scholars will find this thorough and authoritative work indispensable reading."--Kirkus, Starred Review "Michael Klarman has written the best single-volume analysis of the flaws in the Articles of Confederation that led to the Constitutional Convention, the debate in that Convention, the ratification of the proposed Constitution, and the drafting and adoption of the Bill of Rights. With great insight, Klarman explains the complexities of America's postwar economic, political, and constitutional struggles, showing how a people who fought a long war for their rights could then approve a democracy-limiting Constitution that greatly restricted those rights. Klarman commands the documentary sources like no other historian. His page-turning narrative is equal to the epic story he unveils. Every serious scholar of the period must read this masterful work."--John Kaminski, Director, Center for the Study of the American Constitution, University of Wisconsin-Madison "The Framers' Coup is the first comprehensive account of the entire struggle for the United States Constitution, from the inception of the amalgamating impulse in the early 1780s all the way through to the ratification of the Bill of Rights in 1791. A lot of us who write books about the Constitution are about to see our royalties trail off, because Michael Klarman, in a brisk narrative, deftly summarizes all the major interpretations in developing his own provocative and persuasive take. I for one will take my lumps, because this

book is a beaut."-Woody Holton, Bancroft Prize winner and author of *Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution* "At last, we have a definitive account of the entire Framing period. Klarman has brought to the task the narrative skill and situation sense of a historian, the attention to detail and language of a lawyer, and the wisdom and insight of the great scholar that he is."-Louis Michael Seidman, Carmack Waterhouse Professor of Constitutional Law, Georgetown University Law Center "The fullest explanation of the origins of the Constitution that we are ever likely to get in a single volume. Klarman ably shows how an interest-ridden Constitutional Convention that was fearful of democracy nevertheless created a document that transcended those interests and became the basis for a democracy that has survived for over two centuries."-Gordon S. Wood, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* "This remarkable book tells a gripping story of how the Constitution, often lauded as principled and visionary, was the work of intensely political individuals who were preoccupied with the issues of their day but were still able to accomplish something the nation needed. If you are interested in the Constitution and you do not read this book, you are making a big mistake."-David A. Strauss, Gerald Ratner Distinguished Service Professor of Law, University of Chicago Law School "In this thoroughly researched volume, Michael Klarman gives us a book that has strangely gone unwritten: a comprehensive account of the adoption of the Constitution, from the reform initiatives of the 1780s through the ratification of the first amendments in 1791. Anyone who wants to understand the origins and character of the American constitutional project will need to wrestle with Klarman's incisive and balanced judgments."-Jack Rakove, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Original Meanings* "Impressive... [Michael Klarman] digs deeper into the primary sources than any of his predecessors.. no one has so carefully sifted the constitutional debates of the entire decade of the 1780's and brought them into a single cohesive interpretation focused on economics."--New Republic "Magisterial... The Framers' Coup might well be the best book ever written on the founders and their handiwork. With impressive, even loving detail, and mostly emphasizing historical facts rather than his own opinions, Klarman conjures up the framers' whole world... riveting."--Cass Sunstein, *The New Rambler* "This boldly themed and fast-paced book is both comprehensive and corrective."--The Harvard Law Bulletin "The book has the authority and elegance of a reference work written for the ages... Rich with voices and insights... often revelatory."--Harvard Magazine

Michael J. Klarman is Kirkland & Ellis Professor of Law at Harvard Law School and author of the Bancroft Prize-winning *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights* (OUP).

Klarman's use of name-repetition, rather than using pronouns, allows the reader to easily follow the most complicated of political schemes - which were abundant if not relentless! I found it to be a primer for many current governance issues - seeing how political masters needed to be creative in order to overcome stubborn true-to-life obstacles. (Skip the 190 ending pages of notes and citations - I trust him.) Fascinating, informative and wondrous. A great and thought provoking read.

This gives a lot of information I didn't know. Could be definitive; certainly a must-read.

good and fast shipping

Great and timely book that should be by all Americans who wish to be informed about the origins of our country.

This book is not for the casual reader or faint at heart. Nevertheless, it is an exhaustive and detailed account of how the U.S. Constitution came to be, starting with the failed Confederation and through the ratification process. No stone is left unturned in terms of the debates throughout this entire period. The greatest fault of the book is that, in the author's desire to be thorough, the excerpts from the debates are overly repetitive. However, if one wants an authoritative history of the Constitution's formation, this is it. After reading this book, one understands, more than has been generally understood before, how many, if not most, of the provisions of the Constitution were the result of compromise that often ended ambiguously in exhaustion after interminable debate. It unintentionally make a mockery of "original intent." With a few exceptions, such as where the trade-off was clear, as in two Senate seats for each state, the end result was reached primarily to avoid a breakdown and to move on to the next subject, leaving implementation and interpretation for future generations.

This book is a masterpiece and a must read for anyone seriously interested in American Constitutional government. In a BookTV interview the great historian Gordon Wood was once asked why Americans are so interested in the founding period and the Founders. He responded that it is a matter of knowing our identity as a nation. Unlike many countries, Americans do not have royalty who serve as figureheads for the nation. Our presidents and most of our political leaders are elected for a comparatively short time. Knowledge of the founding period gives us a sense of what it means to be an American by telling us what the first Americans considered citizenship to be. The author of this book, Michael Klarman, a professor of law, has done a great service by thoroughly researching

the Articles of Confederation, Constitutional Convention, ratifying debates and conventions, and the Bill of Rights, and writing a book that is the first unified, in depth summary of these Constitutional moments. His research in the sources is deep. His summary of the main events and players is comprehensive and insightful. This book will be a classic in law schools and history classes for many years. Americans are constantly referring to the Constitution and the Bill of Rights because it is the source of their freedoms down to the present day. This book tells how those rights originated and developed, and provides background for much disputed political opinions on what individual rights mean today. I've been reading on the founding period for decades, and yet I learned many new things from the author's comprehensive treatment. Key historical works on the founding such as those of Bernard Bailyn, Gordon Wood, Jack Rakove, and Pauline Meyer, will still be necessary reading to understand this period. But Michael Klarman's new book is likely to become the one indispensable classic history of the period.

A strong positive recommendation. The title of the book summarizes the narrative: the Constitution was written at an extra-legal meeting to counter the weakness of the Articles of Confederation manifest in the impotence of congress and the excess of democracy in the states that threatened to combine in the new United States and challenge the sacredness of property. In other words, the Constitution is an attempt to quell the fears in the question "what do we do if they vote to take away our money?" What makes this book especially useful is its scope: it covers in a single volume the whole sweep from the attempts to govern while the War for Independence was going on, through Philadelphia, the conflicts of ratification, and the Bill of Rights. It is long and it is dense. The chapters each stand alone so the book is useful as a reference. The references are many and reflect the current state of scholarship. The end notes are interesting and useful.

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