

PERIODICALS

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POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

The Elusive Founders

"The Creation of the Constitution: Scholarship at a Standstill" by James H. Hutson, in *Reviews in American History* (Dec. 1984), Johns Hopkins University Press, Whitehead Hall, 34th & Charles Sts., Baltimore, Md. 21218.

Nearly 200 years after the Founding Fathers gathered in Philadelphia for the Constitutional Convention, American historians still do not agree on what they were "really" up to.

Historians have spun conflicting theories about the founding of the Republic since the Constitution was ratified in 1789. Until recently, writes Hutson, a Library of Congress researcher, most such theories were strongly flavored by partisan politics.

Because the 55 delegates to the Constitutional Convention "scrupulously, even obsessively, observed that body's secrecy rule long after it adjourned," no early historian could easily decipher what was on their minds. As late as 1832, Noah Webster devoted only a sentence to the writing of the Constitution in his *History of the United States*.

Abolitionists put their own stamp on the founding after the landmark publication in 1840 of James Madison's notes on the Convention debates. William Lloyd Garrison used the notes to argue that the founders were evil men who had struck a "bloody compromise" with slavery. He and his followers were certain that the Constitution was "a pro-slavery compact." What began as abolitionist rhetoric quickly became conventional wisdom in history books. Horace Greeley, for example, wrote a history describing the making of the Constitution as a counter-revolution aimed at limiting the individual rights outlined in the Declaration of Independence.

The counter-revolution theory caught on with the Progressives of the late 19th century. Repeated Supreme Court decisions rejecting reforms (e.g., the income tax) had left the reformers contemptuous of the Consti-

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tution. Where the abolitionists had depicted the "counter-revolutionaries" as immoral slaveholders, the Progressives portrayed them as men of wealth, the ancestors of their own era's "robber barons." In *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* (1913), Charles Beard argued that the founders "immediately, directly, and personally" profited from the creation of a strong national government.

During the 1950s, both Beard's evidence and his approach were attacked. Douglass Adair, for example, chided Beard and his followers for overlooking the founders' commitment to democratic philosophy. But no fresh interpretation took over. The social-reform movements of the 1960s, helped more than hindered by Supreme Court interpretations of the Constitution, begat no new breed of revisionists. The field today belongs to scholars who, having discredited "the Beard thesis," now labor in "perplexity and muddle."

A Liberal Agenda

"The Politics of Moral Vision" by Michael Lerner, in *Commonweal* (Jan. 11, 1985), 232 Madison Ave., New York, N.Y. 10016.

Two decades ago, Governor Ronald Reagan rose to national prominence by cracking down on California's campus radicals. Last year, President Ronald Reagan won a landslide re-election, again making much of "traditional values."

In an odd way, argues Lerner, himself a one-time California student radical and a former editor of the now defunct New Left magazine *Ramparts*, the resurgent New Right is a child of the New Left. The 1960s radicals, he contends, introduced the "politics of moral vision" into contemporary American politics. They challenged "the relentless competition, elitism, bureaucratic control, racism, and sexism . . . pervading American society."

Yet, he says, the young radicals were arrogant; they mocked average Americans and dismissed traditional religious and social values. By *affirming* such values, conservatives gradually won public support.

The New Left's legacy of moral arrogance is now the property of radical feminists and a few other leftist sects, Lerner writes. But most liberal Democrats are simply indifferent to the politics of values. They believe that "economic issues are everything." During the 1984 presidential-election campaign, they hoped that enormous budget deficits "would scare the American people into the liberal camp."

Lerner believes that liberals and leftists should reject both New Deal materialism and the Democrats' emphasis on "fairness" and individual rights. Instead, he favors appealing to Americans' desire for "community and equality of respect." "Profamily" policies—expanded day care for children, support groups for troubled families, equality for women inside as well as outside the family—and "democratic planning" for the economy would top his agenda. Liberals, he contends, must commit themselves to a single, easily understood goal: creating "a society in which love prevails and moral values are predominant."