Beeman, Richard. Plain, Honest Men: The Making of the American Constitution

Garrett Nagaishi
Brigham Young University

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In Twenty-First Century America, it is nearly impossible to open a newspaper or turn on the television without hearing talk of “Constitutional rights.” But what did the Founding Fathers think about rights? What would Thomas Jefferson or James Madison say about the state of American political affairs today? Beeman’s exhaustive analysis of the 1787 Constitutional Convention attempts to answer these questions. Beeman asks the reader to set aside long-held preconceptions of the founding of the United States and journey through the four-month assembly that constructed a nation from the rubble of the American Revolution. This book marks not only a significant change in the history of the study of the Convention and the Founding Fathers, but it also questions the very foundations of American history and political philosophy, asking the reader to consider: to what end was this “political experiment” undertaken? Plain, Honest Men raises provocative questions about America’s past—questions whose answers are still important to consider today.

The Constitution has survived the test of time, but it has received a wide variety of interpretations over the past 227 years. This book goes beyond the year 1787 to explore the ways Americans have perceived the role of the Constitution in our nation, and questions whether or not we are meant to interpret it strictly (looking at the ‘plain meaning’ of the text), or broadly (as a ‘living constitution’ which is meant to be interpreted in a contemporary context). While there has been much disagreement on this point, Beeman argues that the Founding Fathers intended for our timeless Constitution to be subject to both interpretations, depending on which of them you asked. Going one step further, Plain, Honest Men challenges the prudence of attempting to interpret the minds of the Founders and the “intent” of the Constitution. Is it wise to ask ourselves, “What would Madison do?” Beeman refrains from stating definitively
his opinion on this matter, though he admits that attempting to interpret the Constitution’s text as it “would have been understood by eighteenth-century Americans” would surely “prove more difficult to uphold” (270).

In attempting to explain how such disparate statesmen ever managed to come to an agreement, Beeman actually makes the formation of the Constitution seem all the more unlikely by exposing the difficulties that constantly manifested themselves to the Framers. The issue of states’ rights and congressional representation, which drew a clear division between the more populated states and those with fewer inhabitants, nearly paralyzed the Convention irrecoverably. From political scheming to backbiting to slavery (“the paradox at the nation’s core,” p. 314), one will come away from this book with a greater appreciation of Franklin’s aphorism that the new government was “a republic, if you can keep it” (412). Yet despite the fragility of the nascent nation, this book underscores an important point: the Constitution was “the best that any group of men at any time could have achieved” (423).

What puts Plain, Honest Men on a level above its predecessors is the meticulous detail with which Beeman re-visions one of the most important summers in the history of Western civilization. Indeed, readers may find themselves referring back to the title page to make sure they are reading a monograph, rather than an edited edition of Madison’s own papers. Whether such a raw representation of primary source materials benefits the reader, or simply deters one from opening the book, can only be determined on an individual basis. Weaved throughout the detailed minutes of the Convention are in-depth treatments of the personalities who presented, negotiated, and contended behind the closed doors of Independence Hall. Prefixed and appended to the study are mini-biographies, chronologies, and the Constitution in its finished form. Where previous accounts of how the Framers voted are typically presented in the simplest way possible, this book enumerates individual votes and speculates on how the nation would have looked had votes gone in the other direction. Though these particulars may seem gratuitous and dispensable at first, they are essential in supporting one of the author’s main claims: that there are valuable lessons to be learned from the “humility” and “audacity” (xiv) of the men who were able to boldly argue their stance, debate the text of the Constitution, and reach compromise to form the “world’s most durable written frame of government” (xiii).

While it is a scholarly work that draws heavily on archival source material, Plain, Honest Men nevertheless appeals to a popular audience. Beeman’s reliance on notes and correspondence from the Convention (in particular, those
of Madison) and newspaper reports from the various colonies supplements the dry, lifeless history of the textbook with the vivid, contentious (and much more entertaining) popular history that so many premodern interpretations lack. With an unadulterated passion for detail and a wit that would have rivaled that of Gouverneur Morris, Beeman has created not only a new history, but also an entirely new meaning for America's birth. Beeman's achievement should be added to the repertoire of the university American history classroom and considered a welcomed addition to the historiography of this exceptional nation.

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