

PROLOGUE

【 The Founding 】

DURING THE LAST QUARTER of the eighteenth century a former colony of Great Britain, generally regarded as a provincial and wholly peripheral outpost of Western Civilization, somehow managed to establish a set of ideas and institutions that, over the stretch of time, became the blueprint for political and economic success for the nation-state in the modern world. Over the course of the next two centuries these ideas and institutions—labeled “democracy” or “liberalism,” though neither term would have been recognizable to the founding generation—replaced the monarchical dynasties of Europe in the nineteenth century, then defeated the totalitarian despotisms of Germany, Japan, and the Soviet Union in the twentieth.

Before we embark on the stories that follow, we need at least to glimpse the contours of the larger story, which is about the triumph of representative government bottomed on the principle of popular sovereignty, a market economy fueled by the energies of unfettered citizens, a secular state unaffiliated with any official religion, and the rule of law that presumed the equality of all citizens. What seemed so brazen and improbable at the time has become the accepted global formula for national success. The only alternative, apart from North Korea’s and Cuba’s last-stand versions of communism, is Islamic fundamentalism. And its essentially medieval values appear to be fighting a desperate rearguard action against modernity itself. The first enduring version of political moder-

nity made its initial appearance in the United States during the revolutionary era.¹

The most prominent revolutionary of all, George Washington, offered the first comprehensive explanation for this stunning achievement, and rather interestingly, he chose to emphasize the fortuitous conjunction of large-scale historical forces beyond human control rather than the actions or decisions of men. In Washington's formulation, written in 1783, even before the full story had played out, the American Revolution enjoyed two incalculable advantages: time—or perhaps timing—and space.

"The foundation of our Empire was not laid in the gloomy age of Ignorance and Suspicion," he wrote, "but at an Epoch when the rights of mankind were better understood and more clearly defined, than at any former period." Over the preceding two centuries, a number of English, Scottish, and French thinkers had generated a veritable treasure trove of political knowledge that undermined the medieval worldview about government, society, and even human nature itself. The American people were the beneficiaries of this accumulated wisdom—it had yet to be called the Enlightenment—which had its origins in Europe but was now destined to enjoy its fullest implementation in America. In effect, history had handed the American revolutionaries a blueprint for a new kind of political architecture that did not need to be discovered or invented, only applied. "At this auspicious period," Washington intoned, "the United States came into existence as a Nation, and if their Citizens should not be completely free and happy, the fault will be intirely their own."

The second providential advantage was space. Washington was not referring to the distance from predatory European powers provided by the Atlantic Ocean, though on other occasions he did describe that geographic fact as a priceless asset. He was referring, instead, to the almost limitless resources of the North American continent: "The Citizens of America, placed in the most enviable condition, as the sole Lords and Proprietors of a vast Tract of Continent, comprehending all the various soils and climates of the World, and abounding with all the necessaries and conveniences of life, are now by the late satisfactory pacification,

acknowledged to be possessed of absolute freedom and Independency; They are, from this period, to be considered as the Actors on a most conspicuous Theatre, which seems to be peculiarly designated by Providence for the display of human greatness and felicity."²

It was a dazzlingly prophetic statement, especially since the western border at the time was the Mississippi, not the Pacific, and no one really knew what natural resources lay out there for future development and cultivation. But the key insight was that the American republic began with physical and economic assets as well as a rich intellectual legacy of enlightened ideas. It could afford to make mistakes, as it inevitably would, because the sheer potential of the continent would rescue and redeem blunders that would have proved fatal in a more constricted European context. (For example, the sale of western lands would bolster federal revenues sufficiently to make taxes unnecessary for the foreseeable future.) Though republican values were inherently opposed to all aristocratic legacies, the United States began with the largest trust fund of any emerging nation in recorded history.

Even Washington's explanation of the historical prerequisites for American political success acknowledged that the achievement, no matter how handsomely endowed, would depend on the adroit management of the advantages bestowed by history and geography. No matter how strong a hand had been dealt the revolutionary generation, it had to be played deftly. And if misplayed, all the advantages would collapse into a pile of humiliation and failure. This is what Abraham Lincoln meant eighty years later at Gettysburg when he said that no one was quite sure whether, in the absence of imaginative leadership, a government "so conceived and so dedicated can long endure."³

One of Washington's most distinguished contemporaries warned, however, that any shift in focus—from emphasizing the historical conditions underlying the American achievement to insisting on the decisive role of prominent personalities—ran major risks of distortion. John Adams sensed this shift happening in the first decade of the nineteenth century as he looked back at the history he had lived from his retirement perch at Quincy and compared his own memories with the histories already beginning to appear. In a characteristically candid and extraordi-

narily colorful correspondence with Benjamin Rush, his longtime friend and fellow revolutionary—a correspondence that even featured reports on their respective dreams—Adams warned that the emphasis on personalities and what historians now call “agency” was all wrong.⁴

Rush actually put it most succinctly: “I shall continue to believe that ‘great men’ are a lie,” he observed, “and that there is very little difference in that superstition which leads us to believe in what the world calls ‘great men’ and in that which leads us to believe in witches and conjurers.” Adams heartily concurred: “The feasts and funerals in honor of Washington is as corrupt a system as that by which saints were canonized and cardinals, popes, and whole hierarchical systems created.” Adams had known and worked alongside Washington for twenty-five years, and could testify that His Excellency himself would object to “the pilgrimages to Mount Vernon as the new Mecca or Jerusalem.” In an effort to display his own modesty—not a natural act for Adams—he made a point of objecting to his own sanctification: “It is become fashionable to call me ‘The Venerable.’ It makes me think of the venerable Bede . . . or the venerable Savannarola. . . . Don’t call me ‘Godlike Adams,’ ‘The Father of His Country,’ ‘The Founder of the American Republic,’ or ‘The Founder of the American Empire.’ These titles belong to no man, but to the American people in general.”⁵

Adams believed that the deification of the revolutionary leaders was transforming the true story of the American Revolution into a melodramatic romance: “It is a common observation in Europe that nothing is so false as modern history,” Adams noted. “I should add that nothing is so false as modern history . . . except modern American history.” In the Adams formulation, the true history was about chance, contingency, unintended consequences, about political leaders who were often improvising on the edge of catastrophe. Events, not men, were in the saddle, and all the founders were imperfect men rather than gods come down from Mount Olympus. “It was patched and piebald then,” he wrote, “as it is now, ever was, and ever will be, world without end.”⁶

When one young man tried to congratulate him for belonging to a truly heroic generation, Adams felt obliged to correct him: “I ought not to object to your reverence for your fathers, meaning those concerned

with the direction of public affairs,” he cautioned, “but to tell you a very great secret, as far as I am capable of comparing the merit of different periods, I have no reason to believe that we were better than you are.” This was the note that Adams’s grandson, Charles Francis Adams, chose to strike in the 1850s after editing his grandfather’s papers: “We are beginning to forget that the patriots of former days were men like ourselves . . . and we are almost irresistibly led to ascribe to them in our imaginations certain gigantic proportions and superhuman qualities, without reflecting that this at once robs their character of consistency and their virtues of all merit.”⁷

It is only fair to note that John Adams was particularly sensitive about the creation of a mythical American story line with a cast of demigods in part because he feared that he would not be given one of the starring roles. His critical assessments of Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin, and even more his devastating denunciations of Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Paine, betrayed a throbbing obsession with his own place in the history books. In his old age he made himself into a one-man wrecking ball aimed at all the statues in the American temple, presumably concluding that if he was too palpably irreverent and too conspicuously imperfect to become an American icon, none of the other statues should be allowed to remain intact.⁸

Whatever his motives, Adams’s prediction came true. The history of the American founding has become a conversation about the American founders, who have been mythologized and capitalized as Founding Fathers just as he feared they would. And until recently, Adams’s fear that his own reputation would be eclipsed by Washington, Franklin, and Jefferson also proved prophetic. The operative question when discussing the American founding has become not “How did it happen?” but “How did they do it?”

BEFORE WE ENTER the electromagnetic field that continues to envelop both of those questions, a place where wildly extravagant claims and equally hyperbolic counterclaims seem to flourish more robustly than in any other area of American history, save perhaps the Civil War,

we would be well advised to pause, get our historical bearings, and pose what is, at least on the face of it, a factual question: What, specifically, did the founding generation achieve? Why are they accorded such iconic status? What, in short, is all the fuss about? My own answer, offered with as much historical detachment as I can muster, is that there were five core achievements.

First, the revolutionary generation won the first successful war for colonial independence in the modern era, against all odds defeating the most powerful army and navy in the world. Washington liked to call the American victory "a standing miracle," a phrase that suggests some kind of supernatural intervention on America's side. As we shall see, the French were more important than the gods, and the strategic decisions that made victory possible also made miracles unnecessary. Nevertheless, Washington's phrase correctly captures the improbable character of the outcome as perceived by most informed observers at the outset of the war and the all-or-nothing gamble that the most prominent revolutionary leaders were prepared to take.⁹

Second, they established the first nation-sized republic. Until then it was presumed that republican governments based on the principle of popular consent could function only in small areas like Greek city-states or Swiss cantons, because the inherent weakness of republican government made it incapable of decisiveness or the management of a far-flung population. This presumption was proven wrong, and in the process the very definition of what it meant to govern a people was transformed forever in ways that put all coercive forms of political authority on the permanent defensive.

Third, they created the first wholly secular state. Before the American Revolution it was broadly assumed that shared religious convictions were the primary basis for the common values that linked together the people of any political community, indeed the ideological glue that made any sense of community possible. By insisting on the complete separation of church and state, the founders successfully overturned this long-standing presumption.

Fourth, they rejected the conventional wisdom, agreed upon since

Aristotle, that political sovereignty must reside in one agreed-upon location, that sovereignty was by definition singular and indivisible. The Constitution defied this assumption by creating multiple and overlapping sources of authority in which the blurring of jurisdiction between federal and state power became an asset rather than a liability, thereby making the very idea of sovereignty itself problematic and its rhetorical depository, "the people," an elusive and ever-shifting location.

Fifth, they created political parties as institutionalized channels for ongoing debate, which eventually permitted dissent to be regarded not as a treasonable act, but as a legitimate voice in an endless argument. Although British political parties foreshadowed the American party system, and although the founders themselves found it difficult to embrace the notion of a legitimate opposition, the framework they created allowed ongoing dialogue to become a hallmark of the modern liberal state.

Though not a separate achievement per se, a corollary triumph that merits mention is the ability to reconcile two competing and, in several respects, contradictory political impulses. There were really two founding moments: the first in 1776, which declared American independence, and the second in 1787-88, which declared American nationhood. The Declaration of Independence is the seminal document in the first instance, the Constitution in the second. The former is a radical document that locates sovereignty in the individual and depicts government as an alien force, making rebellion against it a natural act. The latter is a conservative document that locates sovereignty in that collective called "the people," makes government an essential protector of liberty rather than its enemy, and values social balance over personal liberation. It is extremely rare for the same political elite to straddle both occasions. Or, to put it differently, it is uncommon for the same men who make a revolution also to secure it.

These are considerable achievements that continue to glow even brighter with the passage of time, most especially as we witness the extreme difficulty many countries in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East experience in trying to re-create them. But while basking in the reflected

glory of their glow, we also need to notice the shadows cast by the two most conspicuous failures of the revolutionary generation. In addition to asking "What did they do?," we need to ask "What did they fail to do?"

The darkest shadow is unquestionably slavery, the failure to end it, or at least to adopt a gradual emancipation scheme that put it on the road to extinction. Virtually all the most prominent founders recognized that slavery was an embarrassing contradiction that violated all the principles the American Revolution claimed to stand for. And virtually every American historian who has studied the matter has concluded that the persistence and eventual expansion of slavery made the Civil War almost inevitable. While there is plenty of room for honest disagreement over the viability of any emancipation policy in the revolutionary era, slavery remains a permanent stain on the legacy of the founders, as most of them knew it would.

The other shadow, almost as dark, was the failure to implement a just and generous settlement with the Native Americans. Again, what such a settlement might have looked like must remain an open question. (One of the stories that follows suggests an answer that was tried and found wanting.) But all the principal founders acknowledged that the indigenous people of North America had a legitimate claim to the soil and a moral claim on the conscience of the infant republic. This is another problem, like slavery, that either failed to engage the creative energies of the founders in their fullest form or was inherently insoluble.¹⁰

If this admittedly over-succinct summary is essentially correct, then the story of the founding is, at least at one level, an extraordinary tale of monumental achievement. The British philosopher and essayist Alfred North Whitehead was probably right to observe that there have been only two instances in the history of Western Civilization when the political leaders of an emerging nation behaved as well as anyone could reasonably expect. The first was Rome under Caesar Augustus and the second was America's revolutionary generation. The American historian Samuel Eliot Morison also thought the political creativity of the founders ranked at or near the top of any all-time list, though he cited the political ideas unleashed during the English Civil War as the only

worthy competitor. Whatever the proper international comparison, there can be little doubt that the late eighteenth century was the most politically creative era in American history.¹¹

But the triumph was also a tragedy of monumental proportions. For the founding left slavery intact south of the Potomac, a protected base from which it spread like a cancer into the territories of the southwest, thereby rendering any peaceful solution impossible as the slave population increased eightfold between 1776 and 1860. And the seeds of Indian extinction east of the Mississippi were indisputably sown in the late eighteenth century.

Taken together, these triumphal and tragic elements should constitute the ingredients for an epic historical narrative that defies all moralistic categories, a story line rooted in the coexistence of grace and sin, grandeur and failure, brilliance and blindness. No aspiring historian, or novelist, could wish for more. But that is not the way the story has been told. Instead, we have been asked to choose between two simplistic narratives of the founding, one featuring the founders as demigods who were permitted to glimpse the eternal truths, or, as Ralph Waldo Emerson once put it, "to see God face to face," the other crowded with a cast of villains who collectively comprise the deadeast, whitest males in American history.¹²

It is an interpretive syndrome that Henry Adams once described as "infantile," but that might more accurately be labeled "adolescent." In the same way that teenagers display wild mood swings toward their parents—we go from omniscient seers to despicable idiots in the twinkling of an adolescent eye—the reputation of the founders over the past two centuries has oscillated in the same kind of swoonish arc between idolization and evisceration. The mindlessly celebratory and the naively judgmental responses to the founders are in fact complementary cartoons, the front and back sides of the same distorted picture that we periodically rotate, like a child fluctuating between the emotional imperatives of unconditional love and Oedipal hate.

Although the larger contours of this hyperbolic pattern continue to hold, over the last forty years most academic historians have essentially abandoned the founding and founders altogether in order to focus

their scholarly attention on the inarticulate, peripheral, dispossessed Americans—women, slaves, and Indians. Ironically, this shift in focus, rooted in a conviction that mainstream politics is overworked terrain, has coincided with the publication of comprehensive editions of the papers of the most prominent founders that, taken together, constitute the most complete documentation of human endeavor by any political elite in recorded history.

But the currently hegemonic narrative within the groves of academe—race, class, and gender are the privileged categories of analysis—customarily labels (and libels) the founders as racists, classists, and sexists, a kind of rogues' gallery rather than a gallery of greats. Within this cloistered climate, in short, the Oedipal side of the adolescent interpretation holds sway, so that it is possible, in all seriousness, to argue that the American Revolution was an unmitigated calamity and the founding itself an abject failure because, as one historian put it, it “failed to free the slaves, failed to offer full political equality to women, failed to grant citizenship to Indians, failed to create an economic world in which all could compete on equal terms.”¹³

Whether the founders are studiously ignored or condescendingly reviled within the academy, the effect on the larger public has been negligible, since the scholarly debates are in-house affairs, the books and articles written in language that the uninitiated find inaccessible and often incomprehensible. For whatever the reasons, historians dedicated to a recovery of the experience of ordinary Americans in the past have chosen to abandon ordinary readers in the present, preferring to communicate only with each other. This voluntary abdication by the academy, coupled with the availability of unprecedented documentary sources for all the major founders, has created a huge gap between what we actually know about the founding in all its messy splendor and what is known by most literate and educated Americans.

Starting about a dozen years ago, however, this gap began to be filled by writers, many not professional historians, who plundered the massive new collections of correspondence and documentation on the founding era to produce a flurry of books, mostly biographies, that became a publishing sensation because of their unforeseen popularity. Books on John

Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, and George Washington, in addition to books about the drafting of the Declaration of Independence, Washington's crossing of the Delaware on Christmas night in 1776, and the founders as a self-conscious “band of brothers,” enjoyed unprecedented commercial and critical success.

The source of this founders surge need not concern us here, though clearly there is an audience for serious history about our origins that the academy has largely ignored. The major point is that the founders and the founding are back, in a big way, as serious topics of public conversation. The long latent interest in our origins—the old “How did it happen?” question—has become relevant again. And, most importantly, the electromagnetic shield is breaking down. For one of the hallmarks of the recent founders surge is the emphasis on flawed greatness, the coexistence of intellectual depth and personal shallowness, the role of contingency and sheer accident instead of divine providence. The founding has at least begun to become the topic in an adult conversation rather than a juvenile melodrama populated only by heroes or villains. In a sense, we have reached the realistic place that John Adams wished us to occupy two hundred years ago.¹⁴

ALTHOUGH MOST professional historians of the revolutionary era have opted to avoid mainstream politics altogether in favor of less articulate and more marginalized groups—a rather bizarre choice as I see it, somewhat akin to showing up at Fenway Park with a lacrosse stick—there have been several attempts to answer the “How did they do it?” question in ways that carry us beyond the conventional cartoon. These attempts are not mutually exclusive but, quite the opposite, overlapping efforts at an explanation for the creative outburst of the founding era that carry us past vague suggestions that there was something special in the water back then.

The earliest of the recent efforts came from Douglass Adair, who focused attention on “the lust for fame” as a conspicuous thread that runs through the letters of all the founders. Fame as they understood it was not just popular recognition during their lifetimes; fame was for-

ever. It meant living on in the memories of subsequent generations yet unborn. The only election result that counted for them, Adair argued, was posterity's judgment, and the only way to win that vote and achieve secular immortality was to conduct themselves according to a classical code that linked their personal ambitions, which were gargantuan, to the long-term interest of the nation-in-making. Only if the United States succeeded would cities, states, and mountains be named after them. (Washington's decision to free the slaves he owned in his will, for example, was in great part motivated by his realization that failure to do so would forever stain his reputation.) They were, in effect, always on their best behavior because they knew we would be watching, an idea we should find endearing because it makes us complicitous in their greatness.

The Adair argument certainly explains why any library of the founders' writings must bulge at the seams. They were compulsively fastidious about preserving every scrap of paper, Washington even requesting (and receiving) a team of secretaries to transcribe his wartime correspondence from a Continental Congress then unable even to clothe and feed his army. The obsession with posterity's judgment also explains why, in their old age, they often chose to retrospectively airbrush their youthful blunders out of the picture, as when Jefferson edited out his confident claim that the French Revolution would be a bloodless triumph. Especially toward the end, posing for posterity became an instinctive act, because posterity was the only afterlife of which most of them were certain. (Adams, colorfully irreverent to the end, declared that he was not sure if there was life after death, but "if it should be revealed or demonstrated that there is no future state, my advice to every man, woman, and child would be . . . to take opium.") The Adair interpretation does not attempt to offer a comprehensive explanation for the creative explosion at the founding, but it does help to explain why the founders came down to us as otherworldly icons.¹⁵

An altogether different explanation for the distinctive character of the founders' achievement comes from Gordon Wood, whose argument echoes the earliest observation by Washington that timing was crucial. As we have seen, Washington was referring to the availability of political

ideas generated by the Enlightenment, which were abstract theories in Europe that became living ideas in the American laboratory. Wood endorses this explanation, but expands it considerably by describing the revolutionary era as a truly special moment that provided opportunities for political leadership and creativity never possible before and never achievable since.

It was simultaneously, Wood observes, a post-aristocratic and a pre-democratic age. The first condition meant that politics in America was open to a whole class of talented men—women were still unimaginable as public figures—who would have languished in obscurity throughout Europe because they lacked the proper bloodlines. Washington, for example, would have never risen beyond the rank of major in the British army. Adams would have become a mere country lawyer. Hamilton, who was literally a bastard, would have never enjoyed the opportunity to display his natural brilliance. To be sure, there was still a discernible social hierarchy in revolutionary America, but there was also unprecedented opportunity for movement from bottom to top (and vice versa). When the revolutionary crisis arrived, it could draw upon the latent talent of a segment of the population never before permitted access.

The pre-democratic side of the story, which Wood emphasizes, describes the founders as a self-conscious and unembarrassed political elite, what Jefferson called "a natural aristocracy," altogether contemptuous of being described as democrats. All of them regarded the act of campaigning for office as a formal confession that they were unworthy to serve, a statement that they were not statesmen but demagogues. While popular opinion was hardly irrelevant, it was regarded as flighty, undependable, shortsighted, and easily manipulated. The ultimate allegiance of the founders was not to "the people" but to "the public," which was the long-term interest of the citizenry that they, the founders, had been chosen to divine.

The founding generation, then, had the advantage of occupying a place in time that enjoyed the benefit of post-aristocratic access to latent talent without the liabilities of a fully egalitarian society in which an elitist sense of superiority was forbidden. Living between two worlds, without belonging completely to either, the founders maximized the

advantages of both. In a sense, they were America's first and only Lost Generation, for, as Wood is at pains to show, they can never happen again. Or, as Mark Twain pronounced upon arriving at the Holy Land: "Christ been here once. Will never come again."¹⁶

A third explanation comes from Bernard Bailyn, who offers the disarmingly counterintuitive argument that the prescience of the founders was a function of their provincialism. Bailyn poses, more clearly than anyone else, the core question: How did this backwoods population of three to five million farmers, mechanics, and minor gentry, huddled on the distant edge of the British Empire, far removed from the epicenters of learning and culture in London and Paris, somehow produce thinkers and ideas that fundamentally transformed the landscape of modern politics?

His answer, at least as I read it, is that less was more. The American political conversation, in effect, could afford to range more widely because it was not weighed down by encrusted traditions, embedded institutions, and socially sanctioned inhibitions. Being on the periphery rather than at the cosmopolitan center carried a cultural stigma, to be sure, in which Britons described their American cousins as awkward bumpkins only one step removed from primitive savagery. (Proudly and slyly donning his coonskin hat in Paris, Franklin embraced the stigma and made it into a badge of honor.) But being far removed from the cultural metropolis, which was laden with what Jefferson liked to call "the dead hand of the past," the revolutionary generation was freer to question the old self-evident truths and invent their own without fear of offending established sources of power and authority because, in fact, there were none.¹⁷

Finally, and I hope not awkwardly, I have argued that the success of the founders was partially attributable to their ideological and even temperamental diversity. Although George Washington was *primus inter pares*, first among equals within the leadership class of the revolutionary generation, we speak of the founders in the plural for a reason. The American founding was a collective enterprise with multiple players who harbored fundamentally different beliefs about what the American Revolution meant. Adams and Jefferson went to their graves arguing

with each other about what they had actually founded and how they had somehow done it. Unlike the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions, or the scores of Third World revolutions in the twentieth century, the American Revolution never devolved into a one-man despotism—Napoleon, Lenin/Stalin, Mao—that became the sole face of the revolutionary project. The American founding was, and still is, a group portrait.

Political and personal diversity enhanced creativity by generating a dynamic chemistry that surfaced routinely in the form of competing convictions whenever a major crisis materialized. Every major decision—the ratification of the Constitution, the creation of the National Bank, the response to the French Revolution, the Jay Treaty—produced a bracing argument among founders of different persuasions about revolutionary principles. This not only enriched the intellectual ferment, but also replicated the checks and balances of the Constitution with a human version of the same principle.¹⁸

Despite their different points of emphasis, all four of these interpretations are welcome contributions, because they move us beyond the infamous electromagnetic field inhabited only by heroes and villains. And like the best of the recent entries in the founders sweepstakes, they contribute to a discernibly adult conversation about the sources and causes of the American founding as a significant political triumph. The stories that follow represent my effort to continue that conversation, and extend it so as to include the tragic dimension as well.

THE STORIES do not claim to offer either an exhaustive or a wholly comprehensive account of the founding era, here defined as the twenty-eight-year period between the start of the War for Independence (1775) and the Louisiana Purchase (1803). The repertory company of players has been assembled according to the Casablanca Principle, which is to say that I have rounded up the usual suspects, who have starring roles in some stories and make only cameo appearances in others. If four of the founders must be listed at the top of the bill, they would be, in alphabetical order, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and George

Washington. Although each of the stories has been designed to stand on its own as a narrative of one significant moment of creative achievement or failure, taken together they feature several recurrent themes.

First, Adams was essentially correct in insisting that the major political decisions that shaped the founding were usually improvisational occasions. While there were a few cerebral epiphanies based on intense thinking, most creative choices were pragmatic responses to rapidly moving events beyond human control, on-the-run adaptations of classical texts to shifting contexts. The founders were, in fact, making it up as they went along, and any historical interpretation that emphasizes their otherworldly serenity or uncommon prescience in grasping how it would all turn out is a fundamental distortion of the way history happened.

Second, Washington was also correct in claiming that space was a priceless American asset. While that asset was an unsolicited geographic gift for which the founders could take no credit, recognizing its advantages provided the occasion for several of the most creative moments in the founding era. The scale of the American theater was unprecedented, especially when compared to tidier European spaces, and the most original political contributions made by the founders were offered in response to that unique condition.

Third, in terms of creativity, the control of pace was almost as impressive as the control of space. The founders opted for an evolutionary rather than revolutionary version of political and social change, preferring to delay delivery on the full promise of the American Revolution rather than risk implosion in the mode of the French Revolution. Although it is difficult for many modern-day critics to acknowledge the point, this deferral strategy, far from being a moral failure, was in fact a profound insight rooted in a realistic appraisal of how enduring social change best happens. But the exception to this rule, removing slavery from the political agenda on the grounds that it would die a natural death, proved a massive miscalculation.

Fourth, the successful management of space and pace was not matched when it came to race, which proved impervious to any imaginative response whatsoever. In the end, it was psychologically impossible for the founders to imagine the peaceful coexistence of whites and

free African Americans in the same nation-state. (The same was not true for Native Americans.) Without any historical precedents to guide them, the founders could imagine a secular state and a large-scale republic, but they could not imagine a biracial society. As a result, whenever race entered the founding conversation, tragedy prevailed.

The sheer act of listing these themes suggests that an orderly set of conclusions resides inherently in the following stories, that generalizations can be neatly teased out of the separate tales, which then can levitate above the ground like distilled clouds of truth. But that is not really the way that stories work, or the way that historical truth, if there is such a thing, ought to be approached. Rather than float above the ground, we need to dive into the messy moments and do our best to listen as a finite number of long-dead men struggle to understand the historical currents of their rather propitious time. It is the spring of 1775, the War for Independence has just begun, but no one is quite sure what to do . . .