

Study/discussion questions for Joseph J. Ellis\* *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation*.

Can the success of the American experiment be adequately understood by merely studying the personalities and interpersonal relationships of the founding fathers?

Comment on Ellis\* assertion that "the shape and character of the political institutions were determined by a relatively small number of leaders who knew each other, who collaborated and collided with one another in patterns that replicated at the level of personality and ideology the principle of checks and balances imbedded structurally in the Constitution." (p. 13).

Does Ellis oversimplify history by reducing the great issues surrounding the nation\*s founding to instances of "sibling rivalry"? For example, Ellis frames the 1790 Congressional debate over slavery as a contest between the "abolitionist", Franklin, and the more moderate "non interventionist" position of Madison. However, it was Franklin, himself who at the Constitutional Convention, crafted the compromise relegating slaves to 3/5's a person for the purposes of Congressional representation.

What did Hamilton\*s debt assumption plan say about his vision of the national economy-about the direction in which he believed the national economy should develop? How does Hamilton\*s vision differ from Madison\*s and Jefferson\*s view? How were the different visions held by Hamilton and Jefferson and Madison concerning the nature of the new federal government played out in the debate about assumption and funding? (P.63, 64).

Did the country miss a realistic opportunity to end slavery and avoid a civil war in 1790 or did the compromise resulting from the 1790 Congressional debate give the nation the breathing room it needed to establish a sense of national self.

Was Jefferson correct in stating that any President who followed Washington was doomed to failure—that after Washington "the bubble would burst"?

What would have been the affect on the development of the Presidency if Jefferson had accepted Adam\*s offer to join his administration?

Was the failure of the Adam\*s Presidency the result of his own character flaws or rather was he overwhelmed by circumstances beyond his control? (p. 185, 187, 195). Was the Adam\*s Presidency an example of the truism that "history shapes presidents"? Was Adam\*s a prisoner of the policy decisions made by the Washington administration?

What are the differences between Madison\*s and Jefferson\*s view of the Constitution as they are expressed in the Virginia and Kentucky resolutions, respectively.

Comment on Washington\*s view that international relations are determined primarily by national interests—that there is no such thing as a permanent international alliance only permanent national interests. (p. 133).

In the iconography of American history Jefferson has held a cherished place, as the author of the Declaration of Independence. Washington, while revered as the "father of the country" has not been regarded as Jefferson\*s intellectual equal. Yet, under Eliss\* analysis, Washington appears to be the wiser and more prescient statesman of the two (particularly in the areas of slavery and international involvements). Comment.

1. Ellis admits in the preface of the book that a "budding historian" wishing to study political history would be considered "intellectually bankrupt?" Are we "intellectually bankrupt" students for studying a topic that solely focuses on an elite group of white males; can we study those living on the fringe of society in

order to completely understand the Ellis proposition (the uniqueness of the formation of our system of government formed wholly by white males)?

2. Present in Ellis' work are 5 themes that appear (according to Ellis) in each of the historical vignettes he presents to the reader: collective enterprise that succeeds because of the diversity of personality; each of the Founding Brothers knew each other personally; slavery was taken out of the playing field; the Founding Brothers were aware of their historical significance "actors in an historical drama"; chronology. Question: Ellis in the preface states that the Founding Brothers were "actors in an historical drama" demonstrating their cognizance of the history that they were making. Do you agree with this statement? Were the Founding Brothers acting out (for lack of a better word) for the historical record?

3. Are all the themes Ellis sets forth in the preface present in "The Duel?"

4. Ellis believes that the "fate of the American experiment" rested with virtuous leaders? Do you agree with this statement? Is Burr's killing of Hamilton (and his virtual disappearance from the American political landscape) indicative of the need for a leader in the new republic to be virtuous in order for the new republic to be successful?

5. Hamilton felt that he had to accept the Duel because Burr was threatening the Republic. Jefferson, Hamilton, and Madison all saw assumption and the Potomac situations as detrimental to the survival of the Republic. In hindsight would these issues actually have lead to the destruction of the Republic?

6. Are all the themes that Ellis mentions in the preface actualized in the vignette "the Dinner?"

Why is Aaron Burr referred to as the American Cataline?

2) Would you consider Burr a secessionist?

3) How come the United States has not followed Washington's farewell address pertaining to Foreign policy?

4) Do you believe the book to be accurate when it is discussing step by step the duel between Hamilton and Burr?

5) Is he accurate to entitle this book as Founding brothers, taking into consideration that most of them didn't like each other?

6) In Chapter 3, the Silence, a petition was presented by the Quakers to end

the African slave trade, which was backed by Benjamin Franklin. Do you think the issue of slavery might have been put to rest earlier in American history if Franklin didn't die when he did?

7) Who was really the President, John Adams or his wife Abigail?

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