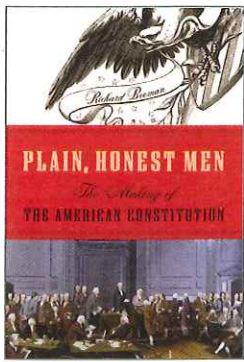


Plain, Honest Men



Plain, Honest Men: The Making of the American Constitution
by Richard Beeman
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In the wake of the American Revolution, most Americans believed that a strong central government posed the greatest threat to the liberty they had just obtained. The Confederation government was formed in that vein, allowing the states to retain their sovereignty and creating a government with little authority, no power to tax, and no chief executive. As a result, the government was in a state of collapse less than 10 years after the new nation won its independence.

The failure of the Confederation became unmistakable during an insurgency in

Massachusetts in 1786. Farmers took to arms after being threatened with foreclosure of their property. Unable to find any assistance from the Continental Congress, the Massachusetts governor was forced to turn to private donors to raise the funds to form a private militia to quell the revolt because the Continental Congress found itself with no money to pay federal troops to stop the farmers. The fledgling nation was unable to secure the peace at home.

In *Plain, Honest Men: The Making of the American Constitution*, Richard Beeman tells how a small group of men caused a peaceful revolution in America in the summer of 1787 and formed a new, stronger, more lasting government. Charged with the task of amending the Articles of Confederation to render the Confederation “adequate to the exigencies of the Union,” they instead created a new government. Choosing not to deify the drafters of our Constitution, Beeman takes his title from a statement that Constitutional Convention delegate Gouverneur Morris made. Reflecting upon the Constitution, Morris noted, “While some have boasted it as a work from Heaven, others have given it a less righteous origin. I have many reasons to believe that it is the work of plain, honest men.”

Through *Plain, Honest Men*, we come to understand that even a happenstance delay of the commencement of the convention would have a profound effect on the course of the proceedings. George Washington and James Madison, along with only a few other delegates, were the only delegates to appear at the Pennsylvania State House on May 14, 1787, the day the convention was scheduled to begin. The delay that ensued allowed Madison to build support among his fellow Virginia delegates, Edmund Randolph and George Mason. Madison’s framework, later known as the Virginia Plan, would establish a new, centralized, national government.

During this interim the Virginia delegates met at Benjamin Franklin’s house for dinner with Pennsylvania delegates Robert

Morris, Gouverneur Morris, and James Wilson on several evenings before the other delegates arrived. The delegates from Virginia and Pennsylvania took the opportunity in this informal setting to discuss how they might form a stronger central government. Mason wrote to his son that the dinners allowed the delegates to “form a proper correspondence of sentiments.”

As Beeman explains, the delegates who did arrive at the convention were not all party elders; many of the more revered political leaders of the day believed that the scope of the convention would be limited to amending the Articles of Confederation. For example, the young

The delegates needed to form a government with the power to tax and to execute the laws it passed.

James Madison from Virginia attended in place of the more senior Patrick Henry. Those who did attend were generally wealthy individuals, well educated, and students of the law. Significantly, 24 of the 55 delegates were also slave owners.

As the convention opened, Virginia Governor Edmund Randolph introduced Madison’s Virginia Plan as a resolution for a strong national government. The plan called for a national legislature with two houses, an executive to be elected by the Congress, and a judiciary. It also proposed a Counsel of Revision, composed of the executive and some of the judiciary, that would have the authority to veto laws enacted by Congress or the state legislatures.

Beeman explains that the convention “rejected the principle of Federalism in which the American republic had been founded and endorsed in its place the notion of a supreme national government.” The delegates endorsed this principle because of the collapse of the Confederation government. Foreign debts were overdue, Confederation paper money was worthless, and the Confederation was unable to raise revenue. Madison describes the urgency in the preamble to the Virginia roster of delegates—“the crisis is arrived.” Prominent Americans who did not attend the convention—such as Thomas Jefferson, Samuel Adams, and Patrick Henry, who were advocates of state sovereignty—did not learn of the true extent of this revolutionary document until it was put into final form. The convention might have ended early and in failure if it had not operated under a strict rule of secrecy.

In *Plain, Honest Men*, the reader learns of the internal struggle of many of the delegates. They had a rational understanding of the imminent collapse of the Confederation. Yet, they also had a visceral fear

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