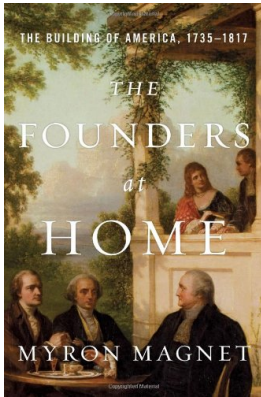


The Founders at Home

A review by Rebecca Bynum (July 2014)



The Founders at Home: the Building of America, 1735-1817

By Myron Magnet

W. W. Norton & Company; (November 11, 2013)

480 pp., 32 color plates, illustrations.

As Theodore Dalrymple often describes, there is something intangible about owning a book inscribed by the author which makes one feel closer to the writer. So too, walking through the home of a great man make us feel closer to him. Here is where he dined and laughed with friends, here is where he read and wrote. Here are his books, his pen, his desk. Here is where he slept and wakened and here bathed. Here is the garden he tended and the footpaths he walked as he pondered the great issues of his day. Come sit on the verandah and take in the view, breathe the air and smell the sweetness of honeysuckle, or of roses. It is good to ponder the past. It is safe here.

Reading Myron Magnet's new book mirrors such an illuminating, yet haunting experience. Using the Founder's own words as much as possible, Magnet takes us into their world and draws each man in rich, flesh and blood detail. Each biography is followed by a discussion on their homes, how they were built and the history of what happened to the properties in the years following the men's deaths. Hamilton's Grange, for example was built when Harlem was farmland and in the intervening years had been moved once and then been built around so closely that by 2008, it sat wedged in between a church and an apartment building with the street passing

along its side – looking like “a ninety-five-pound old lady meekly squeezed on a subway seat between two hulking football players.” To move it to a more suitable site, the Park Service had to jack it up over 10 feet to clear the church’s arcade and carefully slide it over a bridge of steel girders because the church refused to allow its building to be taken apart and reassembled for the project.

Magnet packs his book with numerous descriptions of riveting and little known biographical facts and historic episodes. This is especially true of his chapter on John Jay. Jay had descended from the persecuted Huguenots and, having come of age during the tumultuous years preceding our Revolutionary War with Britain, and even having run a spy ring in New York, he learned the lesson early on how to be gentle as a dove but wise as a serpent in his diplomatic dealings. The famous Treaty of Paris, which he negotiated at the end of the Revolutionary War, was a masterpiece of insight and strategy.

Congress had instructed him to reveal every aspect of his negotiations involving Britain and Spain with “the ministers of our generous ally the King of France; to undertake nothing in the negotiations for peace or truce without their knowledge or concurrence; and ultimately to govern yourself by their advice and consent.” Jay, however, divined that France was playing a double game and secretly conspiring with Spain to block American control of the Mississippi and to keep her weak, hemmed in by European powers, antagonistic to Britain and thus dependent on France. Taking his own initiative, Jay negotiated directly with Britain, obtaining for America everything she needed to block the French scheme and to make her a strong and independent trading partner with Britain – the very opposite of what Congress and especially Jefferson and Madison wanted at the time. He thereby set America on the course that would guide her up through WWII, as member of the Anglosphere and ally of Great Britain. At the age of fifty five, after a lifetime of struggle and accomplishment for the future of America, Jay declined Adams’ offer to rejoin the Supreme Court and returned to his modest farmhouse to “sit under his own vine and fig tree” in peace, just as did the Father of Our Country.

George Washington is especially finely drawn in Magnet’s book, and we see clearly the gradual development of his character as he came to trade the worldly ambition of youth for the spiritual ambition of maturity. This is not so much a chronicle of what he did, though his matchless accomplishments are well represented, as what he *thought*.

But with all his enthusiasm for the Constitution, Washington never saw it as a self-activating machine, sufficient on its own to ensure American freedom. Any constitution can be subverted, “if the spirit and letter of the expression is disregarded,” he knew. True, an unprecedented array of checks and balances made this one unlikely to

degenerate into a despotism, “so long as there shall remain any virtue in the body of the People.” But in future ages, if that virtue should give way to “corruption of morals, profligacy of manners, and listlessness for the preservation of the natural and unalienable rights of mankind,” then tyranny that no lawgiver’s prudence can prevent might sweep away liberty, for no “mound of parchmt can be so formed as to stand against the sweeping torrent of boundless ambition on the one side, aided by sapping current of corrupted morals on the other.”

As week after week we watch murders become more frequent and more gruesome, as greed becomes more rapacious, as children slaughter each other in schoolrooms for their own unfathomably selfish and utterly immoral reasons (one mass murderer’s complaint was that he wasn’t getting the sex to which he thought himself entitled), as human debasement and degradation become ever more commonplace in entertainment ... and so on and so forth, who can doubt we have reached the point of societal collapse that no government could possibly prevent or withstand? The sad fact is the American Constitution was created for a virtuous people – we are not that people any longer.

“Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports,” wrote Washington, and let no one, “indulge in the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion.” And of course, this is the very hubris of which our age is most guilty. For over a century, smart men have consistently informed us we could safely flush religion down the drain so long as we held fast to Reason. But reason is not the prime motivator of man and never has been. Morality has ever provided the basis of our motives and yet, without the root of religion, morality withers, and when morality dies, so too does civilization.

George Washington wouldn’t take a dime beyond being reimbursed for expenses through 23 years of honorable public service and heart-rending sacrifice. Roosevelt and Truman both considered it unseemly to profit personally in any way on their years in office and wouldn’t think of doing so; but our more recent Presidents and the office holders around them seemingly couldn’t wait to turn their public “sacrifice” into personal profit (see the Bushes and the Clintons and all those who served below them). What is the worth of honor and virtue now?

We come away from *The Founders at Home* with a greater appreciation of the humanity of the men who framed our government. The worshipful spirit which most Americans exhibit toward our Constitution would have astounded them, especially Thomas Jefferson, who maintained the Constitution was certainly not “too sacred to be touched” and that it must respond to the needs of the times and change with changing necessity. He would have looked with dismay on

Americans who so revere the freedom of worship clause as to allow the unfettered spread of a religion which disdains freedom of worship and seeks to establish absolute conformity of belief and practice in all areas of life through threats, coercion and the silencing and liquidation of opponents. If you listen, you will hear him intoning from the grave, "the earth belongs to the living, not to the dead."

When James Madison prepared to attend the Constitutional Convention in 1787, he zealously researched the "history of the most distinguished Confederacies" to discover "the principles, the reasons and the anticipations which prevailed in the formation of them" so as to avoid the mistakes made in the past which led to their failure and which might lead to the failure of the Constitution he contributed so much to form. He would have experienced immense sorrow to observe the current state of corruption in our government and society, but he wouldn't have been surprised. Wrote he,

If it be asked, what is to restrain the House of Representatives from making legal discriminations in favor of themselves and a particular class of the society? I answer: the genius of the whole system; the nature of just and constitutional laws; and above all, the vigilant and manly spirit which actuates the people of America – a spirit which nourishes freedom, and in return is nourished by it.

If this spirit shall ever be so far debased as to tolerate a law not obligatory on the legislature, as well as on the people, the people will be prepared to tolerate any thing but liberty.

And certainly this impasse, too, has been reached. The Congress chose to exempt itself from the strictures and requirements they have burdened the people with under the Obamacare legislation and other laws as well.

And yet, the people often confidently assert, "The Constitution will protect us from all forms of tyranny, come what may." The Founders would have disagreed.

Come visit *The Founders at Home*, let them speak again and explain.

Rebecca Bynum's latest book is