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Book Reviews

Woody Holton. *Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2007.

In *Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution*, Woody Holton gives an account of the origins of the U.S. Constitution that differs from the traditional version. He argues that the Framers were unhappy with the excesses of democracy in Confederation America and convened the Constitutional Convention as a means to limit the control ordinary Americans exerted over the government. The Constitution was an effort to rein in democracy, take power from the states (and the people) and put it in the hands of the national government and not an effort to safeguard civil liberties. Holton rejects the ideological interpretation of the Constitution's beginnings; his view is that economics were the driving force behind the Constitutional Convention. Charles Beard noted that the members of the Convention were not “disinterested” as most of them had substantial economic interests, which a new government would affect. Holton, while acknowledging Beard’s argument, believes he goes too far and fails to explain why men such as James Madison and Alexander Hamilton, who were neither major creditors nor owners of government bonds, supported the Constitution.

Holton points out that textbooks and popular histories mostly ignore the Framers motivations for organizing the Convention, only mentioning the weaknesses of the federal government under the Articles of Confederation. This contrasts with the Framers’ own statements that, according to Holton, concentrate on difficulties surrounding “the internal administration of the States.” The weakness of the federal government was less of a concern than the problems with the state governments. The particular state actions that most concerned many of the participants at the Convention involved debt and tax relief. They believed that states were too willing

to cave in to pressure from constituents regarding these issues. At the time, many Americans agreed with the Founders that the country was on a road to economic ruin; however, while the Founders blamed the states for giving in to constituents who demanded debt and tax relief, many people blamed the national government for its excessive demands.

Holton makes an interesting point, which he should have explored further. When discussing the constitutional provisions designed to protect the national government from popular pressure, he notes that the Convention discussed and rejected many "antidemocratic" proposals because they lessened the chances that the states would ratify the Constitution. He stated, "Numerous explicitly elitist proposals, each of which would have obtained majority support if the delegates had had free rein, had to be abandoned-or at least replaced with more subtle devices-because they jeopardized ratification." A fuller discussion of these proposals, in particular, what they were, would have been interesting if not particularly relevant to Holton's argument.

Another issue that Holton glosses over is substantially more important. He argues that "unruly" farmers forced action and reform prior to the Constitutional Convention, but he takes little note of them after the Convention. If they did not fight against the proposed Constitution with its reduced level of democracy, then did they support the new Constitution? Holton acknowledged, "Some of the most avid supporters of the Constitution were not creditors but debtors." This would seem to somewhat undercut his argument and he does not adequately address it.

As Holton believes that economics played a deciding factor in the structure of the Constitution and the new government, there were plenty of details on the usage of paper money, debt assumption, bonds, and taxes. Much of this discussion requires careful

reading for a reader not well versed in the intricacies of eighteenth century finances; Holton seems to have provided a good overview of financial issues and the tax policy of the Confederation era.

Arguing that the point of view of the Founding Fathers has long been the dominant one, Holton said his book would focus on the alternate views of the Founders' contemporaries; however, it failed to do so. He only referred to Herman Husband on occasion and briefly mentioned Joseph Brant, Adonijah Mathews, and others, but the Framers, particularly Madison seemed to be the stars of the story. This is unfortunate since the Founders are usually the star of every story. While Holton gives the reader a glimpse of the "unruly," it is only a glimpse.

Holton repeatedly portrays the Framers as elitist and anti-democratic while portraying the common man as a victim. He often seemingly sides with the common people; perhaps a more balanced portrayal would have better served his arguments. Holton makes a strong argument and has done a good job utilizing a large number of sources; however, he has seemingly overstated his case. While there was more going on in Philadelphia than the traditional story explains, economic concerns were probably not the primary factor.

While Holton has provided an interesting alternative look at the origins of the Constitution and the nation by examining the class issue through his economic argument surrounding the framing, the topic does not seem to rate a book length treatment. Unfortunately, Holton is somewhat repetitive in driving home his main points and perhaps this would have worked better as a journal article.

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Notes

¹ Charles A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), 151.

² Woody Holton, *Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 4.

³ *Ibid*, 211.

⁴ *Ibid*, 230.