

**Michael J. Klarman.** *The Framers' Coup: The Making of the United States Constitution*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 880 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-994203-9.

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Humans wrote the United States Constitution. They were normal, in most respects. All were white and male. Many were landowners, and were prominent and influential among their colonial citizenry. They were not demigods. No divine being handed the organization of the new government to the founders, blazoned on stone tablets. Michael J. Klarman goes out of his way to demonstrate this in the introduction of his grand work *The Framers' Coup: The Making of the United States Constitution*. Early supporters often treated the document as if it were inspired by a god, however. But in reality, nothing about the drafting and ratification of the US Constitution was guaranteed. The men who met in that sweltering Philadelphia summer of 1787 had no idea where they wanted to go from there: should they modify the shaky confederation already in place, or create a new republic form of government, against the odds of every legal scholar at the time? Conventional wisdom held that in no way would a republican work over such a large area, controlling such a large group of people.

The Constitution thus represented a "coup against public opinion" according to Klarman (p. xi). The founders created a constitution that included a balance of participatory government with a government where the "whims" of the people could adequately be controlled, and it did this

by establishing a republic that, he argues, many might consider aristocratic. The creation of a patrician plan for government makes sense considering the hodgepodge of individuals gathered in Philadelphia during that sweltering summer. For a young nation that barely survived revolution under a plan of confederation, the founders realized that the only thing that would keep the states in line would be a more powerful national government.

Regardless of what type of government was going to come out of that meeting, many doubted that the nation would be able to move past its confederation mentality. The Articles of Confederation served well enough to get the nation through a revolution, but after that, no one knew what would happen. Would they create a strong national government? Would they create a small federal system where states maintained much of the control over their citizenry? Klarman presents a vast work that "demythifies" the US Constitution. He tells the story of a document written by men who were "extremely impressive" but "were not demigods; they had interests, prejudices, and moral blind spots. They could not foresee the future, and they made mistakes" (p. 5). If ever one wanted a single monograph to best teach the concepts, themes, and contingency of the creation of our nation's constitution, this might be the one.

Surprisingly, *The Framers' Coup* is the first work that attempts to tackle and synthesize the complete story of the creation of the Constitution. However, Klarman's genius in writing this book lies in its utility. Each chapter presents an important stage in the narrative of the Constitution's drafting. Klarman also vividly presents the collage of personalities that often clashed and eventually cooperated to form a new constitutional government. The narrative is detailed like a documentary, with an emphasis on the drafters' biographies along with the day-to-day convention business. The biographical strand that travels parallel with the narrative helps one navigate this massive tome the best.

As for topical coverage of the creation of the Constitution, Klarman leaves no stone unturned in this complex and multifaceted story. His book covers areas that historians are quite aware of: the faults of the Articles of Confederation, the constitutional convention itself, and the ratification of the final document comprise a few of these well-worn topics. The real beauty of this work comes with the focus on the ancillary issues that one might not consider to be so crucial to the creation of a constitution. Of course, most historians are aware of the severe postwar recession that struck the new nation, but Klarman goes into great detail as to how individual states tried to tackle economic issues on their own. For one, amendment of the Articles of Confederation required unanimous approval. It did not require much effort for the largest or the smallest state to make it nearly impossible to amend. Rhode Island, a state that contained only one-sixtieth of the nation's population, successfully prevented the passage of an impost amendment, one badly needed for the young, growing republic to tackle its revenue crisis. Chattel slavery also presented the founders with a difficult issue that did not seem ripe for compromise. Most know that slavery was an issue that many of the founders thought would bring the creation of a new form of government to a screeching halt. The author speaks of the delegates in Philadelphia

being well aware that they were drafting "two separate constitutions" (p. 264). However, Klarman digs deeper, not only questioning the compromise aspect of the convention but also highlighting the power balance that forced northerners to consider southern desires to maintain slavery: listen to the southerners, or they would leave the convention. Klarman also tells the story of ratification and the eventual inclusion of the Bill of Rights. When the reader gets to the point of the book where enough states finally ratify the constitution, one can appreciate the long and arduous journey taken by all who played a part in the creation of the document.

Almost two hundred pages of notes and bibliography accompany Klarman's masterful work. Not only does he use those tried and true primary sources of the revolutionary and constitutional period, such as James Madison's convention notes, but he also dives into the correspondence between the founders in ways few have before. The interactions between those men help reinforce Klarman's argument. These men were but men, mere mortals who had flaws and prejudices. As for secondary sources, the author includes the historiographical background for a topic that, while covered so extensively in the past, creates a foundation for the continued exploration of themes and arguments from this most important point in American history.

Klarman begins his tome with a quote from Benjamin Franklin, who expressed surprise that, after considering the diverse interests of the founders, the system of government established in the Constitution "approach[ed] so near to perfection" (p. 1). As the book aptly proves, many Americans promoted the document as a nearly perfect form of government that deserved the respect of scripture. After taking the journey the author provides in *The Framers' Coup*, however, the reader feels more like Thomas Jefferson—a convention outsider—as he considered the final document: the "sanctimonious reverence" the

Founders placed on the Constitution was often used to defend what it contained, "like the ark of the covenant, too sacred to be touched" (p. 631). In my opinion, the defense of the Constitution certainly constituted a coup.

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