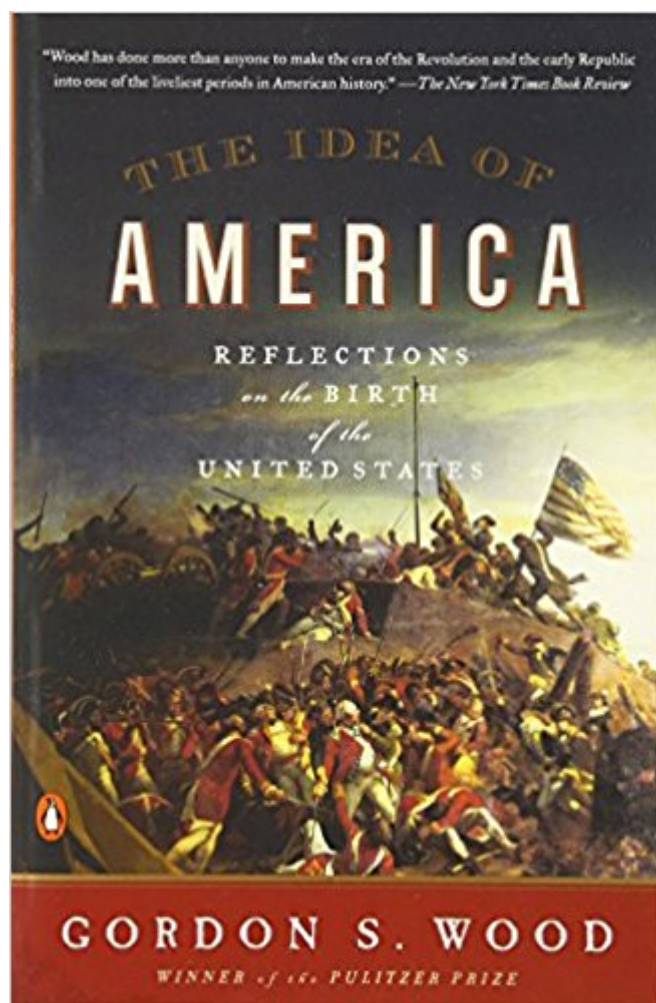


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# The Idea Of America: Reflections On The Birth Of The United States



## Synopsis

The preeminent historian of the Founding Era reflects on the birth of American nationhood and explains why the American Revolution remains so essential. For Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Gordon S. Wood, the American Revolution is the most important event in our history, bar none. Since American identity is so fluid, we have had to continually return to our nation's founding to understand who we are. In a series of illuminating essays, he explores the ideological origins of the Revolution "from Ancient Rome to the European Enlightenment" and the founders' attempts to forge a democracy. He reflects on the origins of American exceptionalism, the radicalism and failed hopes of the founding generation, and the "terrifying gap" between us and the men who created the democratic state we take for granted. This is a profoundly revealing look at the event that forged the United States and its enduring power to define us.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Wood challenges the popular view that the war for American independence was fought for practical and economic reasons, like unfair taxation. In this exceptional collection of essays (some previously published and others originating as lectures) he argues brilliantly to the contrary, that the Revolution was indeed fought over principles, such as liberty, republicanism, and equality. As he points out, Americans believed they alone had the virtues republicanism requires (such as simplicity and egalitarianism) and thus were supportive but skeptical of revolutions in France and Latin America. When joined to Protestant millennialism,

Americans grew to believe that they were God's chosen people, with a mission to lead the world toward liberty and republican government, a view that Wood uses to explain America's continued attempts to create republics in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. This is a remarkable study of the key chapter of American history and its ongoing influence on American character. (May) (c) Copyright PWxyz, LLC. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"Gordon S. Wood is more than an American historian. He is almost an American institution. Of all the many teachers and writers of history in this Republic, few are held in such high esteem. The strength of Wood's scholarship derives from qualities of caution, balance and restraint that are uniquely his own." — David Hackett Fischer, New York Times Book Review

"Mr. Wood is our premier student of the Founding Era. He has been writing history for about a half-century, roughly a fifth of the days since the origin of the republic. He has scrupulously avoided appropriating his subject for modern-day political purposes and instead tried to understand it on its own terms and as a whole. Historians will of course bring to their study certain questions and concerns of their own time — no one can or should avoid this — but the greatest historians are those, like Mr. Wood, who do not make our criteria of importance the main theme. It is Mr. Wood's most personal work, providing us, along with much fine history, glimpses into the thinker and the man." — The Wall Street Journal

"Exceptional. This is a remarkable study of the key chapter of American history and its ongoing influence on American character." — Publishers Weekly

"Wood has long been recognized as one of the preeminent historians of the era of the American Revolution. In this series of cogent, beautifully written essays, Wood repeats some of his familiar themes, but they are well worth revisiting." — Booklist

"[The Idea of America] represent[s] the incredible range of this eminent scholar's contributions to the historiography of the Revolutionary era. Intellectually expansive and elegantly woven, Wood's writings are the closest thing we have to an elegant mediation between today's readers and the founding generation. Required reading for Revolutionary War enthusiasts on all levels." — Library Journal

"A Pulitzer and Bancroft Prize-winning historian offers deeply contemplative essays from a career devoted to studying the Revolutionary Era. It's difficult to conjure another writer so at home in the period, so prepared to translate its brilliant strangeness for a modern audience. Sound, agenda-free analysis, gracefully presented." — Kirkus Reviews

"Nuanced, elegant essays — it's hard to imagine a historian better trained to write on this subject" — American Heritage

"Wood's lucid writing style and ability to take complex ideas and spell them out for the layman allows him to detail the fascinating story of how the emphasis of

historians treating the Revolution has shifted over time." â " The Providence Journal"His purpose is nothing less than to make sense of the United States and its place in the world...an intellectual autobiography of the most distinguished and influential early American historian of his generation."Â â " The Washington Independent Review of Books"[The Idea of America] give[s] broad insight into some of the most important moments in American history." â " The Daily"The insightful essays explore the ideological origins of the Revolution and the foundersâ™ attempts at forging an American democracy, and they provide food for thought on whether America has become the country our founders hoped it would be." â " Celebrated Living"Wood, one of our most eminent historians, has devoted his long career to illuminating how American government evolved and how the events of that period continue to define government and politics today-often in reliving the controversies that divided thinkers and politicians then."Â â " Louisville Courier-Journal

Gordon Wood is one of America's premier historians. Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, Wood has been studying and writing about the Revolution for over fifty years. He is the Alva O. Way University Professor Emeritus at Brown University. Together with Bernard Bailyn and many of Bailyn's graduate students at Harvard, he helped redefine our understanding of the Revolution. In this book, Wood has revisited many of his former speeches and essays on various subjects dealing with the Revolution. He explains how the concept of American Exceptionalism developed over time from its roots in the Revolution. He reiterates the understanding of the Revolution via radicalism which is so foreign to many today who consider the US to be a permanent fixture in the world and its history. As a community college professor I find it very difficult to get most students to understand the utter alien feeling we should have for this period of time. They've had it presented to them via polemic interpretations for years, and struggle when confronted by the raw facts about the Revolution because those facts conflict with their inherited beliefs. Wood explains via this book how so many of those interpretations are erroneous because of the way they have been constructed over time. He explains how the people of the Revolution saw the event and struggled with its meaning because most of them differed in what they wanted the Revolution to be. People today have difficulty with that idea, but they shouldn't because if they would bother to look around them they would see a multitude of differing ideas about events today. The book is broken into three parts. The first is *The American Revolution* and deals with the views of the various people of the time. People at that time saw the world around them in a very different lens than the people today. They also saw history differently which is what Wood explains in the second chapter of this section, *the Legacy of Rome in the American*

Revolution. This is followed by an essay on causality and deceit in that century. When used with the Five C's of history, one can easily see how Wood is explaining the context behind the people of the period. The second part of the book is *The Making of the Constitution and American Democracy*. I particularly liked the last chapter in this section on the radicalism of Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine. So many today want to refer to Jefferson to give their opinions credibility, but they often have no idea that Jefferson was seen as a radical figure in his time period who polarized the nation with his views. Wood explains that Jefferson was able to get political power because he kept most of his radical ideas under wraps whereas Paine was quite open about his. As a result Paine alienated many people who felt his ideas, which were compatible to Jefferson's, were too radical. I thought this was one of the best chapters of the book. The third and final section was about the Early Republic. Having read *Empire of Liberty*, a Pulitzer Prize finalist book written by Wood a few years earlier, I was not surprised by these chapters at all. Wood didn't disappoint me with his interpretation since I already had an idea of what he was going to say. The last chapter of this section dealt with the history of rights in the early American Republic stage of our nation. The meaning of the word and the definition of rights has changed over the years. That is pretty normal as historians see things, but most people struggle to understand that. Many today take rights for granted, but Wood explains how the people of the Revolution felt about rights and how they felt those rights were not to be taken for granted. We today see a list of rights. The people of the past saw their rights under attack and demanded that they be written down to avoid future challenges to them. Unfortunately for them, they failed to understand that the meaning of those rights would change over time as the world changed over time. Fortunately for everyone, the people of the past put together a very flexible system of government that was able to adapt to those changes while preserving those rights of the people. I was really interested in reading this book. Reading a book by Gordon Wood is not something to be done lightly. It takes a bit of time to digest what he says because it is profound. While he works with facts like any historian does, Wood has one of the greatest contextual understandings of the motives and feelings that the people of the 18th century had. His writing often requires some deep reflection because he challenges assumptions. He really explores the true radicalism of the Revolution and quite frankly, many of our political beliefs that have developed over the years. In many ways, Wood is one of the best historians for proving the saying that, "the past is a foreign country." With that said, I obviously enjoyed reading this book and recommend it to anyone interested in the Revolution. I stress the need to read it in bites as I have never read anything by Wood that speed reading works with. The style of writing is great. It is the depth of understanding behind that style that goes far

deeper than most historical monographs which must be realized when reading this book. I have yet to put down one of his books where I have not been going to primary sources to see just what Wood read so I can understand what he is saying. That is the hallmark of a great historian and Gordon S. Wood is one.

For those who have read preeminent historian Gordon S. Wood's most important books, that is, *THE CREATION OF THE AMERICAN REPUBLIC, 1776-1787*, the Pulitzer Prize winning *THE RADICALISM OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION*, and the more recent *EMPIRE OF LIBERTY*, there can be no doubt of his interest in the founding ideas of America. This collection of eleven essays written over a span of fifty years, though much revised, provides even more insight into various aspects of the thinking in the Revolutionary era and the meanings of the American experiment in democracy. His themes do not neatly break down on chapter boundaries, recurring across all of the essays. In the Introduction and the first chapter, "Rhetoric and Reality in the American Revolution," the author sorts through various explanations for the occurrence of the Revolution. Clearly, the colonists were not an oppressed people, which have led many to see the Revolution as driven mostly by political principles, with few changes to colonial life - a conservative view. Progressive historians in the early 20th century suggested that socio-economic forces, that is, class struggles, far more than ideas, were the basis of revolution. In fact, they contended that the ideas of the time were used to persuade - were, basically, propaganda. Others find the colonists' actions to be irrational, a form of paranoia. For example, they frequently resorted to conspiratorial imaginings - there must be an English cabal intent on enslaving them. However, in "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style" the author demonstrates that the colonists were not out of step with the new scientific age in trying to find causes for inimical social results. The author steers a middle course, recognizing that ideas, such as the nature of representation, were highly relevant, while acknowledging that fundamental social change had been underway for decades, setting Americans apart from Europeans and making revolution possible. Ideas, instead of directly causing actions, are most important in the author's view to "justify, legitimate, or explain our actions." In "The Legacy of Rome in the American Revolution," the author shows that "republican, antiroyalist" thinking permeated both English and American society. Individuals in a republican society are supposed to exhibit "integrity, virtue, and disinterestedness," with their highest calling being to serve in public office. This idealistic concept of society undoubtedly accentuated the disgust that the Americans had for the corruption that they claimed permeated British rule. The elites of the founding period clung to the notion, to the end of the 18th century, that they could establish and control a republican

order in America, an idea that fell apart with the ascendance of the common man with the election of Jefferson in 1800. Actually, it was in the 1780s that the republican ideal, so dear to founding elites, began to be shredded. An excess of democracy was the problem. They believed in a patrician-led classical democracy that would lead to a virtuous society. However, the Revolution had transformed American politics and the economy. Ordinary people were encouraged to become involved in the political process. "Acquisitive and commercial forces that no one had quite realized existed" were unleashed by the demands of the War. Credit, and thereby debt, was essential to the flow of goods. With the end of the War, came both an end to governmental buying and a freeze on obtaining credit, but with debts still due. Much to the dismay of Madison, democratically controlled state legislatures, empowered under new state constitutions, passed a series of laws to relieve the burden on debtors. To colonial elites these flagrant acts were examples of democracy run amok and had to be curbed. Although there were issues with a weak Articles of Confederation, those acts were the overriding reason for calling a constitutional convention in 1787. According to the author, the Constitution was a "grand and desperate effort" to curtail democratic excesses, by taking away powers from the states and creating a number of roadblocks in the Constitution to prevent direct democratic actions. Of course, it is known that the scrambling business society that the Federalists so abhorred prevailed, and in fact the pursuit of private interests came to be seen in America as the foremost expression of freedom. However, it is ironic that even today the ideals of the Founders have strong resonance - their honesty, disinterestedness, and willingness to accept the costs of serving the public. Perhaps the most significant ideological development of the Founding era is the manner in which sovereignty, power, and rights are conceived in America. While America has an English heritage, the US deviated sharply from British principles when conceiving of their government. England has the notion of mixed government where the king, the House of Lords, and the House of Commons represent various segments of society: the state, the aristocracy, and the common people. The people are said to have a contract with the king, recognizing his prerogatives to act in the best interests of the state, while retaining rights of petition and to be protected. All sovereignty resides with Parliament. Fundamental rights as well as legislation reside in and originate with Parliament. There is no written constitution and there is no bill of rights because by definition Parliament can only protect the people. In America, complete sovereignty rests with the people and is so stated in the US Constitution. Government is strictly defined by the Constitution and is subordinate to the people; those who serve in government are temporarily granted some of the people's power to do their job. A representative body, that is, Congress, absolutely does not supercede the People. The concept of a contract between the people and a governing official

makes no sense in America; the President serves at the will of the People. Furthermore, all government officials represent all of the people; there are no social demarcations explicitly or implicitly recognized by the US Constitution. Primaries, referendums, recall, etc that exist at state levels are extensions of the people's direct representation created at the Founding. Interestingly, while the public sphere is enlarged by constitutional authority, private rights are enhanced by the strict delineation of the reach of government. The author points out that America is in essence an ideology. There are no American people in the sense of, say, the German people. To be an American is to believe in something. And it is the founding to which people forever turn for those meanings. The Americans of 1776 were republicans, believing themselves to be a simple, austere, egalitarian, independent, and virtuous people. As the author notes, "when fused with Protestant millennialism, it gave Americans the sense that they were the chosen people of God." It is the Constitution, its structure, its granting of popular sovereignty, and its longevity, as the foundation of our rights and liberty, that completely convinces the American people that they are the very exemplar of democratic government to the entire world. The Founders were all quite familiar with the failings of the Roman republic. That is why they were obsessed with constructing a virtuous republic; the American people had to avoid the luxury and corruption that had destroyed ancient Rome. As pointed out, it was only a matter of years before the American society and state had changed dramatically from the time of the founding to a vibrant business culture, which has since hardly slowed down. It would be interesting to see an author of Wood's stature comment on the huge gulf between the current era and the founding era. For example, what is the significance of our incredible wealth and the huge private enterprises that dominate our lives? Are we the virtuous people that the founders insisted we must be to survive? Does nostalgia for the founding era prevent us from realistically assessing the exact nature of our government and society? Regardless, this book makes for very interesting reading.

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