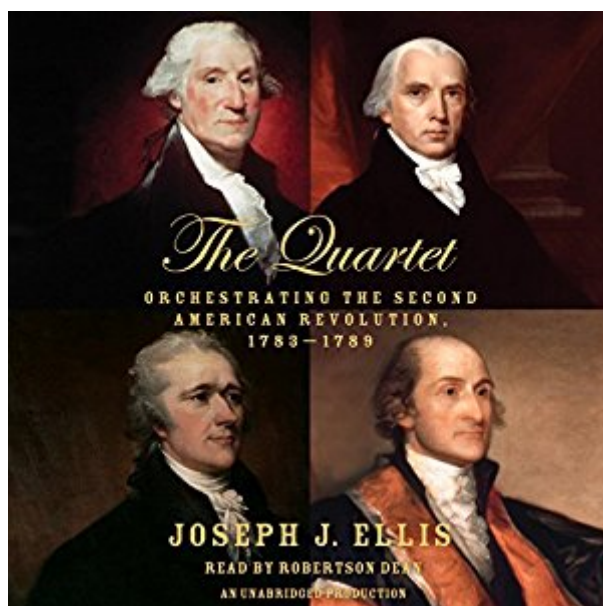


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The Quartet: Orchestrating The Second American Revolution, 1783-1789



Synopsis

From Pulitzer Prize-winning American historian Joseph J. Ellis, the unexpected story of why the 13 colonies, having just fought off the imposition of a distant centralized governing power, would decide to subordinate themselves anew. We all know the famous opening phrase of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address: "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this Continent a new Nation." The truth is different. In 1776, 13 American colonies declared themselves independent states that only temporarily joined forces in order to defeat the British. Once victorious, they planned to go their separate ways. The triumph of the American Revolution was neither an ideological nor a political guarantee that the colonies would relinquish their independence and accept the creation of a federal government with power over their autonomy as states. The Quartet is the story of this second American founding and of the men most responsible - George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison. These men, with the help of Robert Morris and Gouverneur Morris, shaped the contours of American history by diagnosing the systemic dysfunctions created by the Articles of Confederation, manipulating the political process to force the calling of the Constitutional Convention, conspiring to set the agenda in Philadelphia, orchestrating the debate in the state ratifying conventions, and, finally, drafting the Bill of Rights to assure state compliance with the constitutional settlement. Ellis has given us a gripping and dramatic portrait of one of the most crucial and misconstrued periods in American history: the years between the end of the Revolution and the formation of the federal government. The Quartet unmask a myth and in its place presents an even more compelling truth - one that lies at the heart of understanding the creation of the United States of America.

Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 8 hours and 25 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Random House Audio

Audible.com Release Date: May 12, 2015

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B00UKDY9E0

Best Sellers Rank: #61 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Politics & Current Events > Political

History & Theory #208 inÂ Books > History > Americas > United States > Revolution & Founding
#310 inÂ Books > Audible Audiobooks > History > United States & Canada

Customer Reviews

Joseph Ellis' new book, "The Quartet: Orchestrating the Second American Revolution, 1783 -- 1789" examines the United States' movement from independence to nationhood following the Revolutionary War. Ellis, retired as Ford Foundation Professor of History at Mount Holyoke College, has written many works about early American history and has received both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. Ellis' short but broad, thoughtful, and provocative book argues that the United States did not become a nation upon winning independence but became instead a group of loosely-connected separate states. Ellis maintains that most people at the time lacked even a concept of national identity beyond the provincial boundaries of their communities. They thought they had fought a hard war to free themselves from the distant centralizing government of Great Britain. With the ineffective Articles of Confederation, the thirteen states appeared headed for separation and quarrels, similar to the nations of Europe. Other parts of Ellis' book are more controversial. Ellis maintains that while the first American Revolution might be viewed from the ground up, the second worked "from the top down". He finds that four individuals, the "Quartet" of his title, were primarily responsible: George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay. The first three names are unsurprising. Ellis clearly regards Washington as the essential member of the group and as the leader of both the first and second American revolutions. He gives Washington more credit than he sometimes receives for his intellectual foresight in an early writing about the deficiency of the Articles of Confederation and the need for a central government. Ellis sees Madison more as a highly savvy politician and lawyer than as an original thinker. The partial surprise on Ellis' list is John Jay who tends to be less well-known than he deserves. Jay negotiated the treaty of Paris and worked early and diplomatically, including with opponents, for the cause of nationhood. Other leaders who play supporting roles in Ellis' account include financier Robert Morris, Thomas Jefferson, and Gouverneur Morris, the drafter of the Constitution. In another claim that will provoke controversy, Ellis' reading of the second American revolution is avowedly elitist. He argues that most people had no interest in nationhood because a broad national vision would be inconsistent in some ways with their limited goals such as avoiding taxation and living beyond their means. Ellis recognizes the controversial nature of his perspective. He writes in the book's Preface: "All democratic cultures find such explanations offensive because they violate the hallowed conviction that, at least in the long run, popular majorities can best decide the direction

that history should take. However true that conviction might be over the full span of American history, and the claim is contestable, it does not work for the 1780s, which just might be the most conspicuous and consequential example of the way in which small groups of prominent leaders, in disregard of popular opinion, carried the American story in a new direction."Ellis takes the reader through the Confederation years, the preliminaries to the Constitutional Convention, the Convention itself,, and the proceedings in the states for the ratification of the Constitution, including the writing and significance of "The Federalist Papers". The book concludes with the enactment of the Bill of Rights. Ellis does not attribute superhuman wisdom to the founders but he also avoids the current tendency to belittle their accomplishments through an anachronistic importation of today's values into the late 18th Century. Among other things, his book discusses briefly but well the dilemma the founders faced over slavery. The book stresses the value of ideas and thinking, compromise, practicality, commitment, and humility in the second American revolution and the founding of the national government and its shifting contours of Federalism. This book has a great deal to teach and provides ample material for reflection. It also made me want to learn more about George Washington, whose role throughout the Revolutionary Era amply comes through in this book, by reading the Library of America volume of his writings.Â George Washington : Writings (Library of America). Washington and his accomplishments cannot be over-emphasized. Robin Friedman

A fascinating work on the origins of the American Constitution. Ellis, who has authored other excellent historical analyses, contends that four people are critical to understanding why we have the Constitution that we now have: George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay. Two others contributed greatly as well: Gouverneur Morris and James Wilson. This book explores how the quartet, upset with the poor performance of the United States under the Articles of Confederation, labored to create a new government, with a more energetic national structure that would address the ills under the Articles. For instance, under the Articles, the national government could request--but not demand or enforce--fiscal support from the different states. Many states simply ignored this, meaning that the national government never had the funding needed. Many seem to think that George Washington was somewhat of a figurehead for others, such as Hamilton and Madison. This--and many other books--surely should end that canard. Washington has been depicted by many historians as an active player in the move toward a new national government system. The book does a nice job on a number of fronts. One, it highlights the active role of the quartet. Two, it gives a sense of the politics of the Constitution that is well done (well done by others, too). Three, it shows that the Founders were not demigods--but active and calculating

politicians. On the other hand, some cavils. At one point, the author dismisses the fear of one of the quartet that, under the rules, a vice presidential candidate might get more electoral votes than a presidential candidate (in this case--Washington versus John Adams). The election of 1800 shows that this was a well founded fear, as VP candidate Aaron Burr was in a tie with the presidential candidate--Thomas Jefferson. Second, limiting the key figures to just the quartet (and their allies) understates the relevance of others in the process, such as Roger Sherman and Robert Morris. Three, Ellis does a nice job of demolishing critics such as Charles Beard. But Beard's view was in a shambles by the 1960s. Others, such as Jackson Turner Main, had critiques of the economic background that probably warranted more consideration in this volume. Forrest McDonald, from a different perspective, probably should be acknowledged more as well. At any rate, this is a fine volume and warrants attention by readers. They will learn a great deal about the origins of the United States under the Constitution here.

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