



The Grouchy Historian: An Old-Time Lefty Defends Our Constitution Against Right-Wing Hypocrites and Nutjobs

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In the tradition of Michael Moore, Ed Asner—a.k.a. Lou Grant from *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*—reclaims the Constitution from the right-wingers who think that they and only they know how to interpret it.

Ed Asner, a self-proclaimed dauntless Democrat from the old days, figured that if the right-wing wackos are wrong about voter fraud, Obama's death panels, and climate change, they are probably just as wrong about what the Constitution says. There's no way that two hundred-plus years later, the right-wing ideologues know how to interpret the Constitution. On their way home from Philadelphia the people who wrote it couldn't agree on what it meant. What was the president's job? Who knew? All they knew was that the president was going to be George Washington and as long as he was in charge, that was good enough. When Hamilton wanted to start a national bank, Madison told him that it was unconstitutional. Both men had been in the room when the Constitution was written. And now today there are politicians and judges who claim that *they* know the original meaning of the Constitution. Are you kidding?

In *The Grouchy Historian*, Ed Asner leads the charge for liberals to reclaim the Constitution from the right-wingers who use it as their justification for doing whatever terrible thing they want to do, which is usually to comfort the comfortable and afflict the afflicted. It's about time someone gave them hell and explained that progressives can read, too.

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From Reader Review The Grouchy Historian: An Old-Time Lefty Defends Our Constitution Against Right-Wing Hypocrites and Nutjobs for online ebook

Phrodrick says

I came to Ed Asner's The Grouchy Historian as a Grouchy Liberal very much wanting to read the words of a fellow lefty tired of what passes for conservative thinking. There is much to admire in Mr. Asner's book but I finished it frustrated.

The obvious market for this book are like thinking liberals, tired of the hate speech from the worst of the political right. The people who will never read this book or be influenced by it are the ones towards which he has aimed his barbs. The best goal for a book like this is to provide answers, in the preferred package, sound bites. Unfortunately Mr. Asner straddles too many of the lines between these choices.

The key to a book like this is to keep sufficient distance between the facts and the entertainment. A sympathetic reader must be clear on what is factual and what is not. This is not a matter of getting quotations correct. Something Mr. Asner claims to have done it is also matter of not cluttering historic events with non-historic events. The reader must have confidence that information from this book is correct information and not a mis-located aside, editorial comment or fictional.

If facts are to regain primacy in public debate, the presentation of the facts need to be reliable. This leaves room for comedy and grouchy asides, but such commentary cannot be freely commingled with the facts.

For example one of the best points made by Mr. Asner flies directly at the claim that the writers of the Constitution wanted a weak central government and low taxes. The pre-existing Articles of Confederation guaranteed that exact model of government. If that was what the Framers wanted then there was no need for a Constitution. Mr. Asner makes this clear in the very first pages of the book.

However when he gets to the 'problem' of the first ten amendments, he would have us believe that because they are amendments and not in the body of the constitution, they have less standing in the law. In short the Bill of Rights was necessary because the voters, that is the minority with the original enfranchisement could not have been entrusted to accept the new constitution without the amendments.

Mr. Asner quotes the Constitution correctly when he points to Section 8 and reads: Section 8 - Powers of Congress. To make all Laws which shall be necessary and proper for carrying into Execution the foregoing Powers, and all other Powers vested by this Constitution in the Government of the United States, or in any Department or Officer thereof. But he is less forthright in pointing to the 10th Amendment: "The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the states, are reserved to the states respectively, or to the people." That these two statements suggest conflicting thinking is for me another proof that the Courts need to be free to read as well as interpret the Constitution.

In taking direct aim at the false presumption of the religious right that the writers were some variation of Christian fundamentalists, and therefore had a manifest intent ours would be a Christian nation is mostly well written. But either Jefferson's deistic beliefs were important, or he was not there to direct the writers and therefore not important. Better would have been a more complete reporting of which signers held what beliefs. Asner has a bio of each. A religious accounting would have taken very little more space.

Too much of the Left Right Divide has depended on the right making some short, often outrageous remark

and then leaving it to the left to engage in long detailed, too often boreings explanation of why the easy to repeat statement was wrong. What would have helped me was if this book had more things like the original question: why a Constitution given the Articles?

As for the humor. Asner can be funny. Not funny enough and not far enough away from his recounting of the history.

Dee Halzack says

I picked this, thinking that although it was preaching to the choir, it would be a good counter to the rhetoric coming from those who think passing a tax bill that takes from everyone else to give to those who need more money. And it was that. But it also provided some food for thought.

E.g., the preamble to the Constitution lays clear the Founders' thought that government is about the public welfare. Which includes the health care that some say is not the business of government.

The ends with a positive vision for the country, which I definitely appreciated seeing in writing.

A considerable amount of scholarly effort went into it, though I would characterize it as a scholarly book. And all presented with humor, which kept it from being dry and boring. It was also VERY easy reading.

I love history. Presenting Constitutional history with humor was a surprising gift. I recommend to all my liberal friends who care about the Constitution.

Courtney says

This book is fun and worth the price of admission if only because "At a Screen Actors Guild meeting, the late Ricardo Montalban told me to go fuck myself" is one of the best sentences I have ever had the pleasure of reading.

Linda Brunner says

Informative and funny. They do a good job of putting in context the archaic language of the framer's time. And comparing their world to our's. Does that mean that the documents they wrote are irrelevant? Or just badly needing reinterpretation and application for our times. I'm personally sure that that's the case and they having been astute and intelligent men.... for the most part, would agree.

Here a pithy tidbit from the book: "I am as inconsistent as they were: slave owners with a passion for liberty. Religiously tolerant yet racially bigoted. Visionaries while at the same time practical men of the world. Patriots devoted to good government while motivated by their own self-interests."

Should be required reading for those that have little understanding of what the "common good" might mean.

ALLEN says

The full title of this book is The Grouchy Historian: An Old-Time Lefty Defends Our Constitution Against Right-Wing Hypocrites and Nutjobs (Hardcover). You'll notice the publishing house did not call it "The Wit and Wisdom of Ed Asner." They were right not to do so. What Mr. Asner says is forceful, but usually humorless and lacking in originality. I gave this book three stars to honor his career as a versatile and outspoken actor, but I do not think he qualifies as an historian in the customary definition of the word. AYOR.

Dolly says

This book offers an enlightened look at the Constitution and the hypocritical way in which it is yielded today. It also serves as a counterpoint to much of the alt-right assertions about our founding fathers and the intent of their work with the Constitution and Bill of Rights.

I really enjoyed listening to him narrate the book aloud. I remember watching him occasionally on television when I was a child and I had no idea how funny and erudite he is! I also liked that John Amos contributed the narration for the fictional diary entries for Billy, James Madison's slave who accompanied him to the Constitutional Convention.

Where Mr. Asner has used creative license, he lets the reader know in advance. Otherwise, the material is very well researched and his arguments are solid.

interesting quotes (page numbers from edition with ISBN13):

"Nobody spends his August in Philadelphia unless he's up to something." (p.)

"" (p.)

"" (p.)

"" (p.)

"" (p.)

Cory says

Picture in your mind a grumpy old man with nothing to do but talk about politics. He goes on and on but is funny and backs up his claims with evidence to prove his point of view. I typically stay away from books that are far left or far right for sanity sakes but this one was worth reading.

Joan says

This is more of 3.5 stars but I rounded up. Most people of my generation, growing up on Mary Tyler Moore,

would recognize the name of this author, who, in likely his most famous role, played the grouchy but lovable Lou Grant on the TV series. He also has an extensive number of roles and honors, including the most Emmy Awards (seven). He has always maintained his political views got Lou Grant, the successor hour long drama to MTM, cancelled which might make sense since the show had high ratings when abruptly cancelled. In this book, he argues against the "right wing...nutjobs" and using their sources, shows how the Founding Fathers usually meant things completely the opposite of what the Conservatives claim. The most famous point of contention is the Second Amendment, and Asner spends a lot of time on this and convincingly makes his point clear that the Second Amendment was talking about militias, not that John and Jane Doe should be able to pack a gun. I also took the time to read the copy of the Constitution and amendments that he included, and to finally memorize the Preamble to the Constitution which has been a goal of mine. I found this very useful for additional points in several ongoing debates. Sometimes his arguments are rather weak. I found most of the fictionalized parts...always clearly marked as fiction...to be on the weak side. However, the nonfiction writing was generally quite good. Recommended if only to annoy the Right! Suggest hiding from older visitors who will recognize Asner's name and start sputtering a diatribe against him.

Book says

The Grouchy Historian: An Old-Time Lefty Defends Our Constitution Against Right-Wing Hypocrites and Nutjobs by Ed Asner and Ed. Weinberger

“The Grouchy Historian” pushes back against the irresponsible hijacking of our Constitution by right-wing zealots. With a crusty sense of humor with a charm of its own, Ed Asner provides readers with an informative and provocative book on the Constitution and what it really means. This enlightening 353-page book includes 24 chapters and includes the Constitution.

Positives:

1. A well-written, well-researched book with a large and welcomed dose of Mr. Asner’s sense of humor.
2. Mr. Asner may not be a Constitutional scholar but he has a very good command of the topic and through his wisdom and humor may in fact connect better with the general public.
3. I like the format. It’s not your traditional straightforward narrative. Asner breaks up the topic by providing lists, dialogues, even comebacks and of course his great sense of humor.
4. Each chapter begins with chapter-related quotes. “The Convention is really an assembly of demigods.” – Thomas Jefferson.
5. The introduction provides an excellent preview. “Most of the Founders and Framers were Deists.”
6. Provides a synopsis of all the important Founders. “Historians can find no hint that Madison held any belief in Christian theology. On the contrary, like his fellow Virginian and good friend Thomas Jefferson, he firmly believed in “separation of Church and State.” “They were all men of the Enlightenment who valued reason over dogma, tolerance over bigotry, and science over faith.”
7. A fun chapter on heckling the right wing. “Them: The Framers were opposed to taxation. Me: The first day in office, Washington (as President) and Hamilton (as his secretary of Treasury) taxed carriages and whiskey, then opened a bank to put the money in.”
8. Really does a number on the hypocrisy of the Christian Right. “In 1863, the Christian Right met at two conventions to blame the Civil War on the godless Constitution. Their solution: another Christian preamble. In other words, that war and the millions of deaths that would follow were the fault of the “heathen” Framers and not the slaveholders trying to preserve a cruel and evil system of oppression.”
9. A look at God and the Constitution. “In 1820, an editorial defending slavery argued that Africans were descendants of Ham and “their slavery an accomplishment of Noah’s prediction” which was “divinely inspired” [*italics mine*], thus “the present condition of the African is inevitable; all efforts to extinguish black slavery are idle . . .”

10. An interesting look at Charles Beard's economic interpretation of the Constitution. "The members of the Philadelphia Convention, which drafted the Constitution were, with a few exceptions, immediately, directly, and personally interested in, and derived economic advantages from, the establishment of the new system."
11. Provides a list of all fifty-five delegates and a blurb on each one. "Robert Morris FINANCIER, PENNSYLVANIA Of all the delegates, Robert Morris had the most widely diverse economic interests: his land speculation ran into the millions of acres. He owned every kind of Continental security and traded stocks in the tens of thousands. According to Beard, "No man of his time . . . [was more] involved in the personal affairs of so many eminent men . . . all closely identified with the new system of government.""
12. Facts and trivia throughout. "In 1791, the first Senate suggested that the president of the United States be addressed as "His Highness the President of the United States of America and Protector of their Liberties.""
13. Has fun with Ted Cruz and Ben Carson. "On Evolution: Carson has stated that the Theory of Evolution was "encouraged by the Adversary" (i.e., Satan) and that only God can make a man. He also claims that Natural Selection, carbon dating, and the Big Bang Theory are all "fairy tales.""
14. Absolute fun dealing with Coulter's hateful anti-immigrant comments. "Mexicans just do not clean up after themselves. It is as if they have never thrown a piece of trash away in their lives . . ."
15. Fascinating historical facts. "The Passing of the Great Race became the first book in English to be translated by the Nazis when they came to power in 1933. XVIII And later, it was none other than Adolf Hitler who wrote a personal note to Madison Grant, thanking him for writing the book, calling it "my Bible.""
16. An interesting look at how the Bill of Rights came to be. "So it came as a shock to find out that the Bill of Rights was, in fact, a reluctant afterthought—a political and cynical ploy by the Federalists led by Washington, Hamilton, and Madison."
17. A review of some of the worst examples of where the Bill of Rights did not live up to expectations. "In 1922, Laughlin drafted his model law for compulsory sterilization. It targeted the following subjects: the feeble-minded, criminals, the insane, epileptics, the blind, alcoholics, deaf persons, deformed persons, and the indigent."
18. Scalia and Citizens United. "To see exactly how he did this, let's consider the famous case of Citizens United v. The Federal Election Commission (2010), in which the Supreme Court, by a 5–4 decision, ruled that billionaire donors can legally give unlimited and anonymous amounts of money to political candidates under the protection of "free speech.""
19. Clarifying some abused terms. "A strict constructionist can be defined as one who interprets the Constitution by determining what the original text is as written by the Framers." "There's no way around this: the Framers endorsed slavery. They counted every slave as three-fifths of a person for the purposes of representation. They also extended the slave trade for twenty years."
20. A look at 2nd Amendment, guns and the NRA. "But even here it's worth noting the built-in regulations that allowed disarmament in cases of "real danger of public injury from individuals." Again, as always, our American forefathers limited any and all freedoms when they clashed with public safety."

Negatives:

1. Asner is not a Constitutional scholar so don't expect an in depth analysis of the U.S. Constitution but do expect an informative and entertaining read.
2. I don't agree with one of Asner's six Amendments: "Asner Article I. The Senate. No state shall be awarded two senators from states that do not have populations equal to that of the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens."
3. I would have liked to have seen more references to source notes.
4. I would have added more visual material.
5. No formal bibliography.

In summary, this was an informative and entertaining way to learn about the U.S. Constitution. Ed Asner brings his passion, wisdom and humor to such an important topic and he delivers. it doesn't have the depth of books from scholars but you didn't read this book to be bored out of your mind either. I recommend it!

Further recommendations: "America's Constitution: A Biography" by Akhil Reed Amar, "The U.S. Constitution For Dummies" by Michael Amheim, "The Constitution: Understanding America's Founding Document" by Michael S. Greve, "Know Your Bill of Rights" by Sean Patrick, "Supreme Court Decisions: 20 Landmark Cases Summarized and Explained" by U.S. Department of State, "The U.S. Constitution: A Reader" by Hillsdale College Politics Faculty, and "The Federalist Papers" by Alexander Hamilton.

Diane S ? says

3.5 Of course I know who Asner is, though I have never been a big television watcher, well except for sports. Therefore, I never saw him in his tell shows, though I know of them. There was something about the title, The grouchy Historian that appealed, and learning more about the Constitution was an added bonus. Has been many years since my school days, and it seems that understanding our rights is very important with the political climate of today being as it is.

Asner did a great deal of research, there are pages and pages of sources and credits. He explains the lives of the founding fathers, showing how the Constitution has been used and misconstrued by some. Anything to sway the people, for political advantage or used by lobbyists to maintain their control. He goes through the Constitution, the meaning based on his understanding of the lives of the signers, and the times. He even goes through the articles, and very few of these I remembered. He uses often an ironic, sarcastic tone to mock the current use of not only the founding fathers, but also how so much has been taken incorrectly.

Do I believe everything he said? I'm not sure, but I did find this informative and interesting. I felt I had a short history refresher. It was occasionally amusing, but also sometimes repetitive.

Jeff says

Saturday night in the 70s meant a few things: Frozen TV Dinners (I can still taste the tangy cranberry from the dessert; the only actual edible thing in the aluminum tin), Babysitters as my parents went on Date Night, and some of the best TV in the history of television: All in the Family, Carol Burnett, Mary Tyler Moore, and the Bob Newhart Show. (These were pre-Love Boat/Fantasy Island days).

Ed Asner, portrayed "Lou Grant" the loveable, but curmudgeonly boss on "The Mary Tyler Moore Show". Lou, while having to adjust to "the times" was a mentor, tough, and flawed, but in ways that given today's news cycle would seem quaint. Mr. Asner actually pulled off something that almost no actor that I can recall has accomplished. He took a character from an ensemble comedy and evolved Lou into a major dramatic role following the end of the "Mary Tyler Moore Show" as he became a top Manager of the Los Angeles Tribune in the spin-off "Lou Grant".

Mr. Asner spent two terms as the President of the Screen Actors Guild.

Throughout his career, Mr. Asner has been vocal and active in liberal politics, so it is not a surprise that he, along with long-time friend and comedy writer, Ed Weinberger, has written a liberal manifesto/responsa to the world of Hannity, Coulter, and M. Levin.

Let me start off by saying that I am not a history buff. I get bored by the parade of names, dates, and places; and yet, I enjoyed reading this book. Perhaps it is in part because of the nostalgia of "hearing" Lou Grant ranting about today's political spectrum and lecturing with conviction and facts why the extreme right is not only skewed beyond reason in their thinking.

Mr. Asner and Mr. Weinberger use some interesting and effective writing techniques to get their points across. In describing the events of the Constitutional Convention and attempting to show James Madison's line of thinking, Mr. Asner creates an historical fictional diary of the slave Billey, who really did accompany Mr. Madison to the Philadelphia, a city which we learn over and over and over again had a pretty major big fly problem. While use of this technique kept me engaged and was effective, it did also make me question how much was accurate fact and how much was a bit of poetic license.

Additionally, I did enjoy the intermittent chapters with throw away facts, some funny, some sad about the Founders, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the hypocrisy of many political leaders and pundits.

I consider myself to be fairly independent politically. For entertainment value alone, and let me stress, it really is just for the entertainment factor, I'll occasionally listen to Mark Levin on the drive home. So I had to laugh when Mr. Asner went point for point with Mr. Levin's proposed amendments to the Constitution and then proposed some pointed ones himself.

Overall, I learned quite a bit, was entertained, and it gave me a new perspective on the founding of our nation. Now if Lou had somehow integrated Sue Ann Nivens into the story...

I recommend reading this book. You will learn that our Founding Fathers did not believe the Constitution to be a divine document; that they were flawed individuals who looked out for their self interest as a priority over the country's (sound familiar?) and that the current far right cry of originalism has very little basis in fact or intent of America's founders.

Nicole Overmoyer says

This book is amazing. And depressing. Also eye-opening. Very informative, like... I majored in history and took a LOT of American history classes and I learned more here than I did in them. I think I annoyed people telling everything I learned from this book, reading passages from it. I annotated it with sticky tabs. I never do that. I need to read this book again for all the things I'm sure I missed.

Carmen Bollinger says

He makes some good points. Absolutely DO NOT read this if you've ever been impressed by anything by Bill O'Reilly, Newt Gingrich, Mark Levin, or Ann Coulter.

Leann Moore says

I listened to this and Asner is hysterical! He gives an in-depth look at the Constitution, its history, and it's any interpretations (or intentions), all the while speaking to today's elite, Christian, right-wing, one-percenters in a satirical, sarcastic fashion. The Constitution is the anchor to all of Asner's arguments and the

novel as a whole, but he also touches on all the hot-button issues of today, even if they aren't explicitly named in the Constitution. From immigration to religion, this book delves into the roots of the right-wing views and seeks to dismantle the "logic" behind them. As a liberal, this spoke to me in so many ways and made me laugh along the way; however, no matter your political leanings, there's no denying the facts and history he presents.

Sara Goldenberg says

It was "Lou Grant". But it wasn't "good Lou Grant".

Disappointing.
