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Why do Americans care so much about the Founding Fathers? After all, the French don't ask themselves, "What would Napoleon do?" But Washington, Franklin, Jefferson, Hamilton, Madison, and Adams built our country, wrote our user's manuals--the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution--and ran the nation while it was still under warranty and could be returned to the manufacturer. If anyone knows how the U.S.A. should work, they did and they still do. Richard Brookhiser has been writing, talking, and thinking about the Founders for years. Now he channels them. What would Hamilton think about free trade? What would Franklin make of the national obsession with values? What would Washington say about gays in the military? Examining a host of issues from terrorism to women's rights to gun control, Brookhiser reveals why we still turn to the Founders in moments of struggle, farce, or disaster--just as Lincoln, FDR, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Bill Clinton have done before us. Written with Brookhiser's trademark eloquence--and a good dose of wit--while drawing on his deep knowledge of American history, *What Would the Founders Do?* sheds new light on the disagreements and debates that have shaped our country from the beginning. Brookhiser challenges us to think and act with the clarity that the Founders brought to the task of making a democratic country. Now, more than ever, we need these creators of America--argumentative, expansive, funny know-it-alls--to help us solve the issues that threaten to divide us.

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Gary says

This is a book I'll be using in my BYU Honors American Heritage class next semester. It's an interesting concept. Brookhiser (senior editor at the National review) takes contemporary political questions and based on historical research speculates about what the Founders may have thought about this issue. The book is sure to spur some controversy and discussion, which is one reason I like it for the class. No one is going to agree with Brookhiser's take on all these questions. And his entries are somewhat uneven. For example, would the Founder's have favored gay rights? Instead of looking at their attitudes toward marriage or equality, he speculates about which of the Founders may have been gay. (Not a lot of conclusive evidence on anyone.) And the section at the end about what blogs the Founders might have is a little silly.

Brookhiser respects the Founders without deifying them. In fact, the most enjoyable parts of the book are little anecdotes about the quarrels, disagreements, feuds, and intrigues among the Founders. They may have been inspired, but they were inspired in different directions. Some of them hated each other's guts. They possessed collective wisdom, but as individuals they had some pretty wild ideas.

Brookhiser particularly likes talking about those Founders he has written about in his other books: Alexander Hamilton, Gouverneur Morris, George Washington, and John Adams.

Joann says

Having a hard time knowing whether this should go on the history or the historical fiction shelf. The writing was equal to the immature ramblings of a jr. high kid with Attention Deficit Disorder. Citations and actual evidence was few and far between. Claims were weak and the support was even weaker. This was a waste of time (fortunately I got it for .25cents so it was not too much of a waste of money). Even when legitimate documents were quoted (ex the Federalist papers) they were often quoted out of context or the author totally misinterpreted the meanings of the statements he quoted. Bottom line, the author definitely wants to put forward his own agenda and tries to use random stories and weak arguments to prove his own ideas. The only good from this book is getting some interesting, lesser known stories about the founders- although the author's citation system is so weak I would not rely on his tellings.

Dale says

A fun read. Not real deep, but fun. Good vacation read for history buffs.

Richard Brookhiser got the idea for What Would the Founders Do?: Our Questions, Their Answers from the questions from his audiences when he would give a public lecture on the founders. "Richard, what would the founding fathers have said about...(illegal immigration, marijuana, the war in Iraq, etc.)? So, he collected a number of those questions, did a little research and wrote this fun little book.

Richard Brookhiser is the writer of the best overall biography of George Washington that I have read, Founding Father: Rediscovering George Washington. This one is not the same quality, although I am giving

them both the same score: 4 stars...

Read more at: <http://dwdsreviews.blogspot.com/2011/...>

Steven Coulter says

Since politicians so frequently invoke the names of the Founding Fathers in supporting their pronouncements this was an amusing read on what those 18th century politicians might think about current issues. This is listed as non-fiction because of the historical references although no one can really know for sure. And the author is a senior editor at National Review, so there is a conservative interpretation. Still, it is enlightening when our issues and the context of the founder's time are examined. Who knew Benjamin Franklin had an illegitimate child? Or just how ugly, sometime brutish the politics between some of those extraordinary gentlemen? When the author asks what the founders might think of Social Security, he gives the views of several on helping the poor and quotes the Last Will and Testament of George Washington written in 1799: "After freeing all his slaves, he acknowledged that 'among those who will receive freedom...there may be some, who from old age or bodily infirmities...will be unable to support themselves.' He directed that these former slaves 'be comfortably clothed and fed by my heirs while they live,' and he required his executors to establish 'a regular and permanent fund...for their Support.'" How about journalists protecting their sources? Probably not. They didn't much care for journalists either although a few wrote nasty essays under pseudonyms. Ouch.

John says

In brief: Our questions, a historian's best effort to get sort of close to an honest answer.

I began this book excited to finally know what the Founders would think of gun control, abortion, bailouts, et cetera. Brookhiser writes a fascinating introduction exploring why people like myself even care about the Founders. It's not like Europeans ask 'what would Charlemagne do?' This, along with a detailed view of the Founders' world, helps frame the rest of the book.

However, after finishing the section on gun control, I realized the author was not willing to stamp out clear answers to this question, or any others.

BRIEF SPOILER: Brookhiser concludes the Founders would never take away firearms, would subject them to laws, but broke their own laws anyways. So what kind of an answer is that?

Though I was disappointed at first, I found this to be the author's best merit. He doesn't give the answer we're looking for. Hell, he doesn't even provide an answer, but each point is cited with historical events and personal writings between the Founders. Some conclusions will make patriotic readers like myself, those guilty of romanticizing the Founders into divine champions of a grand and just government, quite uncomfortable; but facts are facts, and these men were FAR from perfect.

It gets dry at times, but this is the closest the casual history enthusiast will get to these answers. Readers will learn plenty, especially about the Founders we tend to forget about. I would recommend this to open minded political junkies and American history enthusiasts, however, I would warn them of the lack of solid answers beforehand.

Paul says

This book provides a lot of great information dealing with contemporary issues, and looks back to see how the founders of our nation would address these issues--certainly a fascinating set-up for a book. (Personal note: I began this book on an airplane waiting to leave SFO on June 30, 2007, and finished it on June 6, 2009.)

Michael says

This is a fun and interesting book. The Founding Fathers have certainly become the objects of increased interest over the past few years. From David McCoullough to the Tea Party, Americans seem to be looking at our nation's founding generation like no other time in recent memory. Much of this book is speculative: can we really parse the Founder's letters and other writings to know what they'd think about stem cell research, or drilling in ANWR? Other parts are dead on target: the Founders did have much to say about things like federalism, debts, war, religion, and the proper role of government. I found several quotes that I really liked and had not seen before. Overall, though, this is pretty light reading with a definite political slant toward modern-day GOP conservatism. George Washington and John Adams continue to be my favorite Founders, while I *want* to like Jefferson, but can't ever seem to quite manage it.

Meg says

This was a fun read for me as a US history teacher. I loved the anecdotes. I do have to say that standing on its own I don't think it was a great book, because I think he only partially completed the task he set out to accomplish with this book. He rarely got beyond the surface concerning how founders would address issues of our time, and while to his credit he did address several times the issue of treating the founders as one group, he didn't do any systematic analysis to prove it. For example, he spent about 1-2 pages on most questions, and usually only presented one to two founders as proof of his point, which is misleading at best. There was no real discourse concerning the very different responses founders would have - I have the feeling he just chose the founder who happened to agree with his own response to current issues. A fun read, and some anecdotal gems, but not a serious piece of analysis (which, of course, I don't really think he intended it to be).

Brad Hart says

DUMB, DUMB, DUMB, DUMB, DUMB BOOK!

Michael Redmond says

And now, a word from our Founders: Brookhiser projects their solutions to contemporary problems

By Michael Redmond
The Princeton Packet
June 2006

Richard Brookhiser has been spending his time in some pretty distinguished company lately — namely, with those dead white guys once known as the Founding Founders, now generally known as the Founders, thanks to a gender-neutral imperative which they surely would have thought quite peculiar.

Theirs is familiar company for Mr. Brookhiser, a New York Observer columnist and National Review contributor who has written a number of books about that greatest of all American generations, and who is a particular authority on Alexander Hamilton, the nation's first secretary of the Treasury, whose principal monument is the \$10 bill.

Mr. Brookhiser's latest book is the compulsively readable "What Would the Founders Do? Our Questions, Their Answers" (Basic Books, \$26), a survey of founding viewpoints on all manner of social and political issues, all of them relevant to us today. The book's delightfully cheeky cover portrays the luminaries assembled in a neighborhood bar, hoisting a few. A lot of serious business got done in 18th-century taverns, you know.

"I've been giving talks on one founder or another for the past 10 years or so, and I would always get a question about what a founder would think of a current issue or public figure," says Mr. Brookhiser, who will be appearing Thursday (June 8) at Barnes & Noble in MarketFair.

In "What Would the Founders Do?," the author points out that we Americans, thanks to the youth of our nation and the stability of our institutions, retain an unusually close relationship with the founders.

"It is a short walk from the Revolution to this page," Mr. Brookhiser writes, " — five degrees of historical separation." Americans find themselves, "in moments of struggle, farce, or disaster," looking to the founders "for slogans, cheap shots, inspiration and instruction. We seize on them for sleazy advantage and for moral guidance. We ransack what they said and did for clues to what they would, and what we should, do."

One of the most admirable qualities of "What Would the Founders Do?" is that the author, a man of impeccable conservative credentials, does not use the founders thus. He lets them speak for themselves, argue among themselves.

"The founders are recognizably politicians as we know politicians today. They all put their ideas out there and tried to persuade one another and the public," Mr. Brookhiser says. "It's recognizably the same game."

There's plenty in this book to make both sides of the political aisle squirm — better yet, to make them think. The religious right will find scant evidence that the founders conceived of the new republic as "a Christian nation," for instance, while liberals will be less than thrilled by the founders' rather dim view of "pure democracy."

Out of the broad range of topics this book probes, the most surprising to Mr. Brookhiser was the founders' take on America's future empire. Yes — America's empire.

"I was surprised when I put my mind to it, but I had inklings — I was surprised by the extent to which the founders assumed that America would become a great empire — and they weren't afraid of using the word," he says.

Even though the founders, to a man, loathed monarchy and scorned the British empire, "they thought there could be an empire of liberty, with republican institutions. This is striking, because a recurrent theme in U.S.

politics, on the left and right alike, is that we've lost or are losing our republican innocence, our republican purity — but we've never had it."

Here are the founders on some hot-button issues, as Mr. Brookhiser replied to specific questions.

- Immigration: "I cannot see the founders approving lawbreaking, so long as the laws are just, and justly passed. They did know, as a matter of economy, that high barriers encourage the smuggling of goods; perhaps they would have extended that insight to the smuggling of people, as well.

"Many of the founders were quite stern when it came to aliens. The Alien Act, passed under John Adams, allowed the president to deport legal aliens, without a judicial hearing. The act was passed as a reaction to the arrival of several thousand French and Irish refugees, fleeing their countries' turmoil — it was feared that they would bring their turmoil with them. Jefferson made this one of the issues of his campaign in 1800, which he won, in part, by courting Irish- and German-American voters. This is another one of those issues that is rather old."

- Hurricane Katrina's aftermath: "One founder actually lived through a ferocious hurricane — Hamilton, as a boy in St. Croix, 15 or 16 years old. He wrote an account at the time that ended up praising the governor general for the measures he took. Hamilton seemed to believe that a man proved his manliness by taking decisive action. He also believed that an energetic executive was important for the country. I think that Hamilton would have taken a look at everybody involved (in dealing with Katrina), at all levels of government, and he would have said, 'What the hell do you think you're doing? Fix this thing, take charge, handle this.'"

- Iraq: "Well, there you might see the same kind of division we see now in this country. The founders whose experience of the Revolution was military would probably have differed from those who had more civilian roles, and who tended to be suspicious of the military, in varying degrees. But they had the capacity to surprise, and to surprise themselves. Jefferson was more pacific than most, but when he had had it with the Barbary pirates, he sent the Navy to the Mediterranean. There were certainly no pacifists among the founders."

Concerning voting rights: New Jersey readers will be amused to read Mr. Brookhiser's account of how the state's first constitution, which was thrown together in a few days, gave the franchise not to "freemen" as other states had, but to "inhabitants." By sheer inadvertence, women had been given the right to vote. And those who qualified did so until 1807, when voting rights were, well, reformed. It seems that a special election in Essex County had tallied up some 1,800 votes in a township with 300 voters, among other remarkable results throughout Essex, so Trenton decided it might be a good idea to revisit the enabling legislation.

John II says

This is a very interesting book, regarding how the Founders, based on what they actually said and did, would handle today's issues. Quick read and interesting.

Jeremy Perron says

Often when one turns on the television to any political talk show, regardless of the station, it is not unusual to

find someone on program invoking men from centuries past. The person will claim that founders of the United States would support position A (their position) and be against position B (their opponent's position). Often the person will even argue that their opponent's position is an outright betrayal of the founders' vision. These 'talking heads*' often make quite a few assumptions with their statements. The biggest and most popular of these assumptions is that all the founders thought the same way. They did not, there were several founders and they all thought differently about different things. Therefore, for every idea you have, you probably could find a founder who would support that particular idea.

I have always wondered when people ask what Jefferson, Washington, or any other founder would want: do they consider biographical time lines? For example, if someone asks what Thomas Jefferson would feel about Obama's health care plan, I always wonder which Tom Jefferson the person asking means.

- Is this person referring to the Thomas Jefferson who wrote the Declaration of Independence in 1776?
- Is the person referring to President Thomas Jefferson in 1805?
- Is the person thinking of Jefferson as if he woke up from his really long nap he started on July 4th, 1826, and the first thing he does now that he has woken up is to pick up a newspaper and read about the new health care law?

That last one is important to me. After all, a great leader is not someone who believes in the same thing on Wednesday that he or she believed on Monday regardless what happened on Tuesday. I have often thought, through my own study of the Founding Fathers that, if given all the information, they would quite pleased with the country's progress.

However, in his book, Brookhiser creates an interesting way of tying modern events to the founding era. He takes questions that modern Americans have and uses it to provide history lessons into how the founders handled similar situations in their time-period. One of the questions posed was: 'were the founders were as poll driven as the politicians of today?'

"No one in the founding era was interrupted at dinner by some stranger asking his opinion of current events. Yet public opinion could be gauged, by demonstrations, by memorials---letters to politicians from citizen groups---and by newspapers. (Some founders thought measuring public opinion was all a newspaper was good for: 'Like a thermometer,' wrote Fisher Ames, 'it will show what the weather is, but will not make it better') The founding fathers disagreed, however, about how public opinion should be expressed, and what weight to give it." p. 198-9

He then goes on to explain that George Washington hated lobbyists** and thought they were constitutional usurpers, while James Madison both liked and used them.

What Would the Founders Do?, is a fun book and great teaching tool. Those who read this book it will enjoy the fun in comparing the world of the founders to our own.

* "Talking heads" is an old phrase for news anchors and others who appear on T.V. news programs. It has nothing to do with the old rock band.

**To use a modern term.

Eric says

A fun and entertaining read that doesn't live up to its premise. Brookhiser poses a series of contemporary questions, and then explains how some of the founders would answer them. In many cases, the explanation doesn't answer the question at all. For example, when asking about tax credits for private schools, Brookhiser goes through the thoughts of some founders on private colleges.

Even though many, if not most, of the questions are not answered, the explanations do provide interesting information on some founder's views on issues that aren't usually discussed in general histories of the American founding. The Founder Blogs section at the end was great.

Brian Eshleman says

Ecclesiastes is right, there really is nothing new under the sun. I expected the author to have to get into a lot of conjecture to justify how the Founders would have dealt with particular issues, but they really dealt with similar things. The author's encyclopedic knowledge of his subject is clear in the easy way he can communicate where the Founders stood without a lot of jargon or stilted language. Definitely a good book.

suz says

A review from Steve on Amazon ...

"This book is not what I expected. I was ready to find easy answers to complex questions that would satisfy my preconceived ideas of what I thought the founders believed instead I got complex answers to easy questions which many times were just the opposite of what I believe. As I read, I found myself disappointed and intrigued with the founders at the same time, they weren't the perfect examples of pure libertarian wisdom I envisioned however I could see how they would struggle with implementing their idealist values while they had to consider political and practice realities. I found it an entertaining exercise to reconcile 17th century issues with modern day ones. It was very elucidating to recognize that in many instances the deliberation and politics of that era are similar to the debates of modern liberals and conservatives today."

Let me add that those who are very knowledgeable about this period in history will find know its limits. To understand more about the book, read the HARDBACK customer reviews on Amazon. I use the section on education to raise questions for my students to answer today.
