



The Jefferson Rule: How the Founding Fathers Became Infallible and Our Politics Inflexible

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In *The Jefferson Rule*, historian David Sehat describes how everyone from liberals to conservatives, secessionists to unionists have sought out the Founding Fathers to defend their policies.

Beginning with the debate between Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton over the future of the nation, and continuing through the Civil War, the New Deal, the Reagan Revolution, and Obama and the Tea Party, many pols have asked, “What would the Founders do?” instead of “What is the common good today?” Recently both the Right and the Left have used the Founders to sort through such issues as voting rights, campaign finance, free speech, gun control, taxes, and war and peace. They have used an outdated context to make sense of contemporary concerns.

This oversimplification obscures our real issues. From Jefferson to this very day we have looked to the eighteenth century to solve our problems, even though the Fathers themselves were a querulous and divided group who rarely agreed. Coming to terms with the past, Sehat suggests, would be the start of a productive debate. And in this account, which is by turns informative, colorful, and witty, he shows us why.

The Jefferson Rule: How the Founding Fathers Became Infallible and Our Politics Inflexible Details


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Jason says

While I did not necessarily agree with all the points of view in the book, I greatly appreciated the path he drew from the Founders to today and the political rhetoric associated with protecting the constitution and the ideals as appropriated by whichever group is pushing it's propaganda at that moment. Any call to civil, sane and useful discourse in our political environment today is a good one and I think the author does that well in this book.

David says

I collect the best books on each US President, and as such purchased The Jefferson Rule to add to my other 10 Jefferson books. But the book is not about Jefferson, and certainly not about any rules. The subtitle more correctly identifies what the book deals with "How the Founding Fathers Became Infallible and Our Politics Inflexible" The first few pages gave the impression the book was about how the argument of Hamilton (big government) and Jefferson (smaller government) repeated itself through our nations history. That sounded very interesting to me. But the author was unable to provide a balanced description of each side through our history. His liberal bias started bubbling to the surface and by the end of the book was a liberal geyser. On page 214 he explains what the Tea Party beliefs were in 8 lines, and then for the next 16 pages castigates them as out of touch radicals. The stated purpose of the book was to show how both sides or all sides use the words of the founding fathers to justify whatever ideology they support. They make the founding fathers in their own image. That would be useful if it was not a pretext for a platform promoting the idea that the constitution is a "living" document and we should abandon the actual words of the constitution and any idea of original intent. Any student of history knows the founding fathers had different views, were often in opposition to one another, and had differing views of what this country should become. But, they did figure out a way to come together, argue out their differences and agree on a constitution that was approved by the individual colonial states. This book promotes the idea that the constitution was written years ago, by ignorant immigrants who couldn't agree and is therefore out of touch with modern day problems. The liberal solution is to just adapt our government to whatever is needed to meet modern problems.

The fallacy is this country was started with a constitution which all congressmen swear to uphold. If people want a different government they should go somewhere else and start their own government. If anyone can decide what the how the government should be run then Where are we, and what do we have? In short this is a book of liberal propaganda. If I could have given it negative stars it would get a minus five rating. The one star I gave it was because it is a good example of liberal propaganda pretending to be what it is not. A typical ploy of liberalism.

Jimmacc says

Excellent review of the use of "Founding Fathers" as arguments for political movements. Starts with how Jefferson took control of the founding image, and then how that image gets invoked throughout our history. Goes up to President Obama's mid second term. From slavery, through new deal, Reagan, and then ending with Tea party, the uses of the founding image are detailed, and the incoherencies (on all sides) reviewed.

Dale says

A Review of the Audiobook

Published by Tantor Audio in May of 2015

Read by Tom Perkins

Duration: 8 hours, 16 minutes

If you are a person that likes to debate on the internet than you have undoubtedly experienced Godwin's Law. Godwin's Law states that if you debate long enough on the internet, someone will inevitably make a comparison to Nazism, Hitler, the Holocaust ("You don't like Donald Trump's hair? What are you the hairdo Nazi?!?").

A similar rule exists when discussing American politics - eventually someone will refer back to the Founding Fathers. It is especially easy to quote Thomas Jefferson - he was so prolific and well-written that it is easy to break out a quote to support your point of view. In the case of Jefferson, it is often too easy because he was extremely inconsistent in his political views. To start easy, he did write "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." And, he also owned a whole lot of people and certainly did not allow them liberty or the pursuit of happiness. He was also advocated strictly following the letter of the Constitution...until it suited him not to when he became President, like with the Louisiana Purchase.

So, Jefferson is quoted all of the time because, likely as not, he has written or uttered a very lofty-sounding quote that supports your point of view, no matter what it is. In short, the man was so inconsistent that he was, at one point or another, or your side and and at a different point he was also against it.

Sehat uses this as a jumping off point to look at two general phenomena. The first is ...

Read more at: <http://dwdsreviews.blogspot.com/2015/...>

Lee Button says

I suppose that this book has been waiting in the wings of some author's study for many years. At least one like it. The premise is that no politician or political party can call on the Founding Fathers to end any debate. The Founding Father's often disagreed with each other and changed their own positions. Simply channeling the spirit of Jefferson does not mean that Jefferson would say the same thing now. To prove his point David Sehat reviews 275 years of political messaging, chiefly from presidents and presidential candidates. He weaves colonial history with ensuing historical periods to resolve the paradox- how can opposing politicians both use the Founding Fathers (a phrase apparently coined by Warren Harding) to prove the rightness of their position? There are plenty of stories here but the arguments are not all anecdotal. I was very enlightened and entertained by Professor Sehat's presentation. I find many ideas agreeable. I do revere the Constitution as the supreme law of the land am maintain a constructionist position in its application. I am not sure Sehat's aim is to bolster the support for that position but he has ample evidence that we must be committed to establishing the Constitution as America's Founding Document and quote its outline for government. I highly recommend this book for anyone who wants to understand presidential intrigue and behind the scenes gerrymandering,

for those interested in expanding their knowledge of national politics. You must not be afraid, however, to admit that your favorite presidents made some egregious errors.

Sarah - All The Book Blog Names Are Taken says

My book blog -----> <http://allthebookblognamesaretaken.bl...>

Man, this guy knows how to make the Founding Fathers boring.

I wanted to like this book, because it should have been right up my alley. I find it interesting seeing how these men - not politicians by trade, but regular, everyday men who were forced into these roles with their successful revolution - are regarded today and how our Constitution is time and again re-purposed for whoever needs to invoke them to make a point. Unfortunately, it was not written in an interesting or an engaging way and I had to force myself to even finish it. Pass.

Taylor Ramirez says

TBR Jar Challenge: A New To You Author

Overall this was a really interesting book, not the best book I ever read for school but it certainly was kind of fun. It's interesting to see how presidents ran the country and how they used the constitution or thought of it.

It's funny that we think that back in the old days when the government was just founded that it was all high class and sophisticated when in reality everyone was still really petty and couldn't compromise to save their lives.

So Hamilton would anonymously write articles in papers about how much Jefferson sucked. Damn, he was the first online troll.

"He believed, the Tallmadge proposal strained the affection of the southern states for the Union. Looking into the future, though, it was clear that the entire debate lit, 'a fire which all waters of the ocean could not extinguish.' It would be put out 'only in blood.'"—William Cobb, page 42.

We always speculate how the founders would react to our modern politics. But it's funny to think about this second generation of politicians being like "Well the founders like this and that. They disapproved of this." And them being really old and saying like "What the fuck are you talking about? I'd never say that you asshat! Stop putting words in the mouth!"

victor harris says

Although modern ideologues and demagogues have hijacked the "Founders" for their own less than honorable designs, Sehat goes to great pains to show that there was no monolithic thought among those Founders, and hardly any consistency in their thinking. They were very much pragmatists and this was

particularly true of Jefferson. Though philosophically opposed to Hamilton and the Federalists, he would eventually adopt various parts of their agenda as the occasion required.

The author goes on to explain how mythologizing the Founders has been to our detriment. They were flawed men, Jefferson included, and were of divided mind on many issues. Unfortunately they are now invoked in virtually every political speech, and the falsehood of citing "Original Intent" has spilled into the judicial sphere where again ideologues abuse their power in the courts to justify abominable decisions.

While Jefferson should certainly be hailed for his intellect and indisputable contributions to much that has a positive legacy, immortal lines in the Declaration of Independence foremost among them, Sehat gives countless examples showing how calculating and duplicitous he could be. His private correspondence with unflattering commentary about Washington is just one of many examples. Although he abhorred politics and political parties, among others he was responsible for the establishment of a political party. And he could maneuver the political landscape with the best of them, ultimately winning the bitter 1800 election, then using the presidency to annihilate his rival Federalists ; ultimately dispatching their party to oblivion. He often did so by incorporating some of their policies.

Jefferson no doubt would be horrified to see what has become of his legacy, then again, he might feel right at home in the ugly give and take of the modern political arena. Either way, the book is an excellent commentary on how we should be wary of such modernists who seek to build political capital at his expense.

Ron says

“What Would Jefferson Do?”

"I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail," Abraham Maslow is purported to have said. The same might be said for Dr. Sehat's *a priori* thesis that the American political system is whatever we make of it; hang the Founders. I started writing a multi-page analysis of what's wrong with this book, but will settle for a shorter critique.

It's entirely fair to reinterpret history in light of one's own prejudices, but one should respect ones readers enough to realize that they understand what you're doing. The cool analytical façade is a false mask. Calling Obama an example of "political moderation" is revealing enough, but the book is full of such name calling and subjectivity.

I learned long ago that one should never believe what any politician says his opponent says, believes or does. Because it will be a self-serving lie. That what politicians do; all politicians; all parties. In deconstructing the politics of the past, however Sehat transparently justifies ignoring not only the Founders but the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, reducing them all to stage props for whatever snake oil each politician is peddling at the moment.

The value of this book, and how it earned a two-stars, is in Sehat's analysis of those he approves, most notably FDR. World War Two and the Cold War never happened; in fact, foreign policy is not mentioned. He barely mentions the administrations of Eisenhower, Clinton and Obama, he's so focused on deconstructing Reagan and the Tea Party. Why? Perhaps because they dared to question whether Washington was not the solution, but the problem. To Sehat that is anathema.

The Jefferson Rule seems to be: whatever works works. Disregard principles or history. Use them, but don't believe them.

John Kaufmann says

Thomas Jefferson challenged the federalist policy of a strong national government with one based on individual liberty and states' rights. He rested his political vision not just on his interpretation of the Constitution, but, for purposes of this book, on his interpretation of what the Founding Fathers meant. This book then traces how various politicians and movements in American history tried to justify their policies as consistent with what the Founders intended. Good history, fairly big picture America.

(view spoiler)

Laura says

The Jefferson Rule, simply stated, is, "When in doubt, say you are standing on the shoulders of the Founding Fathers." David Sehat argues that, from the country's beginnings, the Founding Fathers have had credibility, and that politicians of all stripes have used strengthened their positions by tying themselves to the Founding Fathers, who are presented as a unified cadre of wise and infallible political philosophers. Trouble is, they weren't. Washington and Hamilton favored a strong central government, and Jefferson, Madison and Monroe were states' rights and liberty kinds of guys. Sehat moves through American history citing examples of arguments crafted based on their agreement with the Founders - from Jackson, Lincoln, and others. The early 20th century - the Progressive era and the New Deal - saw a turn away from the use of the Founders as the source of all wisdom, but now -from Reagan forward, they're back, and as infallible as ever with certain segments of the body politic. Actually, I think E. J. Dionne (Were the Right Went Wrong) handles the contemporary era better and more cogently. (Sehat gets a little scattered and strident discussing Reagan and the Tea Party, but his argument and conclusions are consistent with Dionne's.) This was an interesting but not terribly profound read for this political season.

Fraser Sherman says

3.5 stars. Sehat looks at how politicians have for most of our history used "the Founding Fathers" much as some people use God, an excuse for what they want to do anyway. The book argues this started with Jefferson, who defended his own policies by identifying the Federalist opposition as heretics who strayed from the supposed consensus views of the Founders. The Founders have since been invoked by John Quincy Adams, Andrew Jackson, Lincoln, both Roosevelts, Reagan ... well, you get the picture. Sehat's position is that not only were the Founders not a monolithic block (which reading about the ratification debates confirms) but that focusing on what they might think ignores the pros and cons of any particular policy. Good—if I wasn't so familiar with politics from Reagan onward, I'd give it a higher rating.

Vince Darcangelo says

<http://ensuingchapters.com/2015/05/19...>

Cue the broken record. From now until November of next year, we're going to hear a lot about the Founding Fathers, the Constitution and its authors' intentions. You can be sure that Thomas Jefferson will be cited a time or two million. But be they coming from the right or the left, the middle or the fringe, all appeals to

Revolutionary politics will have two things in common: they will be accurate and they will contradict each other.

The notion of the Founding Fathers as a single intellectual entity is post hoc myth-making, according to historian David Sehat. Though we have attached a unified set of principles onto the architects of our government, Sehat writes, “The founding era was, in reality, one of the most partisan periods of American history.”

In fact, it would be quite recognizable to the cable news generation. The Constitution was not a consensus of guiding principles, but rather a compromise, much like today’s Congress in which legislation that does manage to get passed is mutilated beyond recognition.

Likewise, there was dispute over the intention of the Constitution before the ink had dried on Rufus King’s signature.

“The Founders had agreed on the wording but did not necessarily agree on what it meant or even its purpose,” Sehat writes.

This was evidenced by the feud between Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton, the former believing its intent was to limit federal power, the latter believing it emboldened a national government.

Jefferson won that battle, and with his presidential victory, “he rhetorically turned the founding era into one of political purity that he himself had channeled.” (Ironically, Jefferson eventually incorporated many of Hamilton’s ideas, and his Louisiana Purchase, which doubled the size of the country, was viewed by many at the time as unconstitutional.)

Though the myth was complete, the debate was not. The struggle between states’ rights and federal power festered until it went septic in the antebellum era.

The slavery issue was the litmus test for the Constitution. The Dred Scott ruling confirmed that the protections of the Constitution did not extend to slaves, who were considered property. A constructionist reading of the document would render the federal government powerless to intervene on slavery, and in addition to advocating for states’ rights, Jefferson himself had owned slaves, creating a challenge for Lincoln in his debates with Stephen Douglas.

With the outbreak of the Civil War, Sehat writes, the litmus test was failed. “Constitutions are supposed to keep citizens from killing one another,” he writes. “But Americans killed Americans on a spectacular scale in the Civil War. And the Founders had left little guidance on what to do about it.”

The framers lost relevance for a time after the war, but like a pop group that invents a revolutionary sound, then falls out of favor, the Founding Fathers made a comeback in the 20th century. They have since become sacred cows — they are referenced on the campaign trail and their words wielded as weapons, but they are never questioned.

That’s an issue worth raising, Sehat writes. “Because the Founders do not offer a stable reference to make sense of the present, their presence in American political debate has long been problematic.”

The Jefferson Rule is a stellar work of historical research and narrative storytelling. Sehat’s prose flows with an uncommon ease, at times reminiscent of Nathaniel Philbrick. But he also digs into the philosophical ramifications of his subject. It’s not simply a revisitation of historical events, but a work that drops us into the Revolutionary era to see that the Founding Fathers were not a like-minded council of sages with all the answers.

The words of the Constitution were not etched on stone tablets from on high, but rather drafted by a group of headstrong men who clashed with one another, varied greatly in their viewpoints and were capable of the same grandstanding, short-sightedness and pettiness as today's politicians.

This book brought to mind the timeless essay by Stephen Jay Gould, "The Creation Myths of Cooperstown," which studies the psychological need for origin stories. It's an issue worth exploring, both in Gould's classic essay and in Sehat's book.

If you're at all interested in political debate or American history, *The Jefferson Rule* is required reading.

Justin Powell says

A fantastic and easily accessible book! It takes little effort in showing the nearly endless, but very contradictory ways the "Founding Fathers" have been used in order to defend one's political ideology. Historical figures have always been torn away from any true historical setting, but just as with the supposed historical figure of Jesus, the "Founding Fathers" are often set up as one coherent mind. Almost as if all of the writers agreed with one another at the time. Just as it goes with the conflicting religious positions, settings, and overall beliefs of the writers with the Gospels, so it goes with the men who constructed the Constitution. There is no one coherent political ideology you can come away with from the Constitution. Absolutism gets you nowhere. In fact, it makes little sense because there's no evidence that even the very founders read it in such a way. It's always been a flexible and "living" document.

It is only an acknowledgement of the limitations with founding one's political ideologies and philosophy in the "Founding Fathers" and the Constitution that we will see progress. Progress in political debates in this country. First, everyone will need to read it....and that sadly will be the biggest hurdle of all.

Peter Mcloughlin says

On occasion I meet a young person who thinks the 1980s were great and is sometimes even in awe of me for living through them. I am often puzzled by this. I thought the 1980s kind of sucked and having some extra birthdays doesn't make me particularly remarkable. I think the same fixation applies to the founding fathers in our politics. Yes the founders had some good ideas but they put their pantaloons on one leg at a time like us. Our preoccupation with what was on the founders' minds especially by right wingers is not healthy to our political discourse. It consists of a weird form of ancestor worship. Our constitution is a pretty solid device but it isn't holy writ. We live under very different circumstances than the founders. They would have a hard time fathoming our present worship of them. It is about time we took them off their pedestal.
