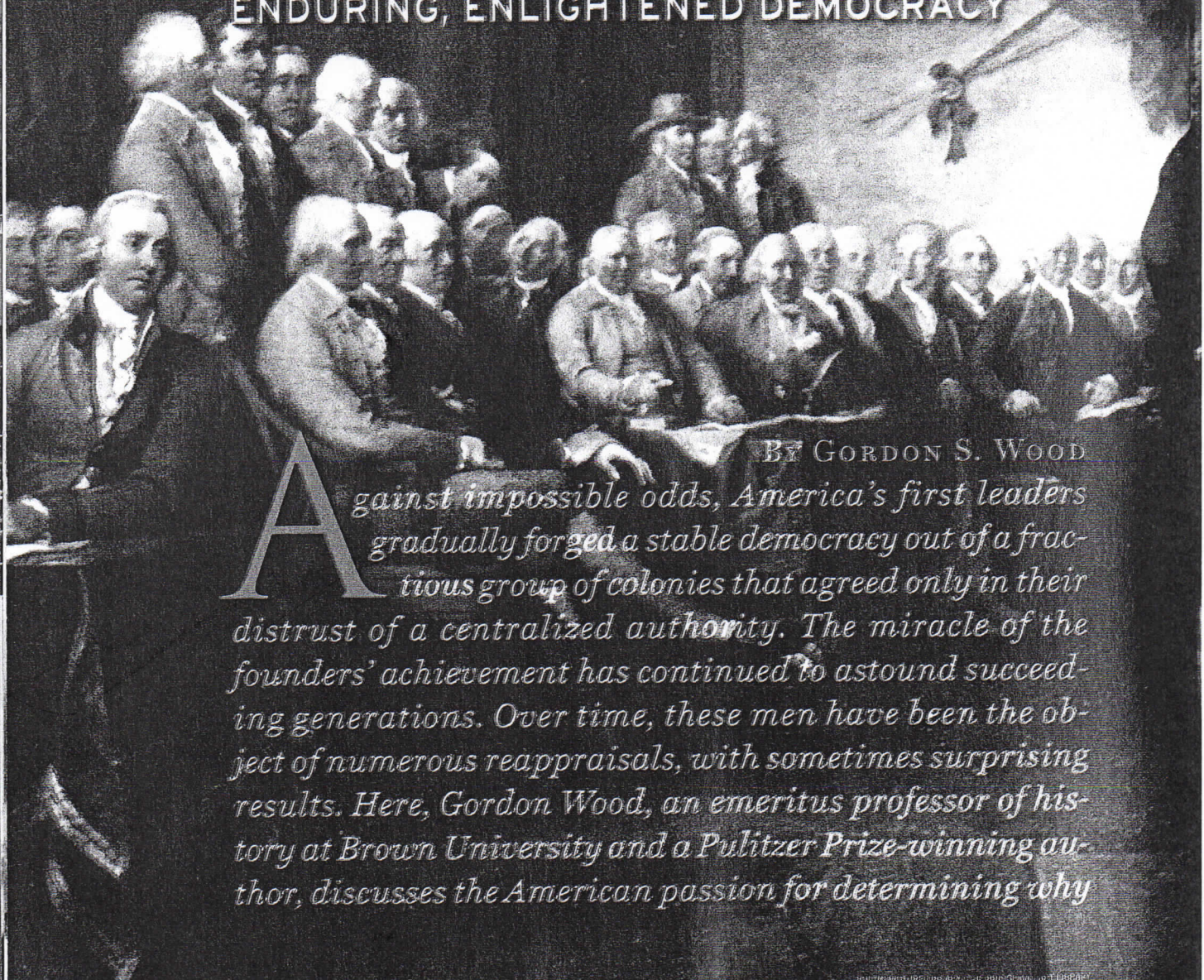


THE GREATEST GENERATION



THEY HAD THE COURAGE TO FIGHT AGAINST TYRANNY AND THE VISION TO CREATE AN ENDURING, ENLIGHTENED DEMOCRACY

BY GORDON S. WOOD

Against impossible odds, America's first leaders gradually forged a stable democracy out of a fractious group of colonies that agreed only in their distrust of a centralized authority. The miracle of the founders' achievement has continued to astound succeeding generations. Over time, these men have been the object of numerous reappraisals, with sometimes surprising results. Here, Gordon Wood, an emeritus professor of history at Brown University and a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, discusses the American passion for determining why

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BIRTH OF A NATION.
Early American leaders sign the Declaration of Independence.

**AUTHORS.**

Franklin, Jefferson, and Adams helped draft the Declaration of Independence.

our earliest leaders were uniquely suited to a particular historical moment—enabling them to persevere in an ultimately triumphant national experiment.

America's founders have a special significance for Americans. Celebrating in the way we do this generation that fought the Revolution and created the Constitution is peculiar to us. No other major nation honors its past historical characters, especially those who existed two centuries ago, in quite the manner we Americans do. The British don't have to check in periodically with, say, either of the two William Pitts the way we seem to have to check in with Thomas Jefferson or George Washington. We Americans seem to have a special need for these authentic historical figures in the here and now. Why should this be so?

Scholars have a variety of answers. Some suggest that our continual concern with constitutional jurisprudence and original intent accounts for our fascination with the founding and the making of the Constitution. Still others think that we use these 18th-century figures in order to recover what was wise and valuable in America's past. They believe that the founders of 200 years ago have become standards against which we measure our current political leaders.

Others quite sensibly think that the interest in the Revolutionary generation has to do with an American sense of identity. The identities of other nations, say, being French or German, are lost in the mists of time and usually taken for granted. But Americans became a nation in 1776, and thus, in

order to know who we are, we need to know who our founders are. The United States was founded on a set of beliefs and not, as were other nations, on a common ethnicity, language, or religion. Since we are not a nation in any traditional sense of the term, in order to establish our nationhood, we have to reaffirm and reinforce periodically the values of the men who declared independence from Great Britain and framed the Constitution. As long as the republic endures, in other words, Americans are destined to look back to its founding.

By the time Thomas Jefferson and John Adams died on the same day, July 4, 1826, exactly 50 years following the adoption of the Declaration of Independence, an aura of divinity had come to surround the founding generation. The succeeding generations of Americans were unable to look back at the Revolutionary leaders and Constitution makers without being overawed by the brilliance of their thought, the creativity of their politics, and the sheer magnitude of their achievement. The founders always seemed larger than life, "a forest of giant oaks," as Abraham Lincoln called them, possessing intellectual and political capacities well beyond those who followed them.

But this view would not hold, unchanging, over time. Lincoln warned that the founders' achievements "must fade upon the memory of the world, and grow more and more dim by the lapse of time." In fact, by the end of the 19th century, this awe for the founders and their mythical reputation was being questioned, and historians began puncturing

the aura of divinity surrounding them. In 1896, a popular historian of the period, John Bach McMaster, wrote an essay, entitled "The Political Depravity of the Founding Fathers," in which he contended that "in all the frauds and tricks that go to make up the worst form of practical politics, the men who founded our State and national governments were always our equals, and often our masters." According to McMaster, the founding generation was not above the worst kinds of political shenanigans, including the silencing of newspapers, the manipulation and destruction of votes, and the creation of partisan gerrymandering.

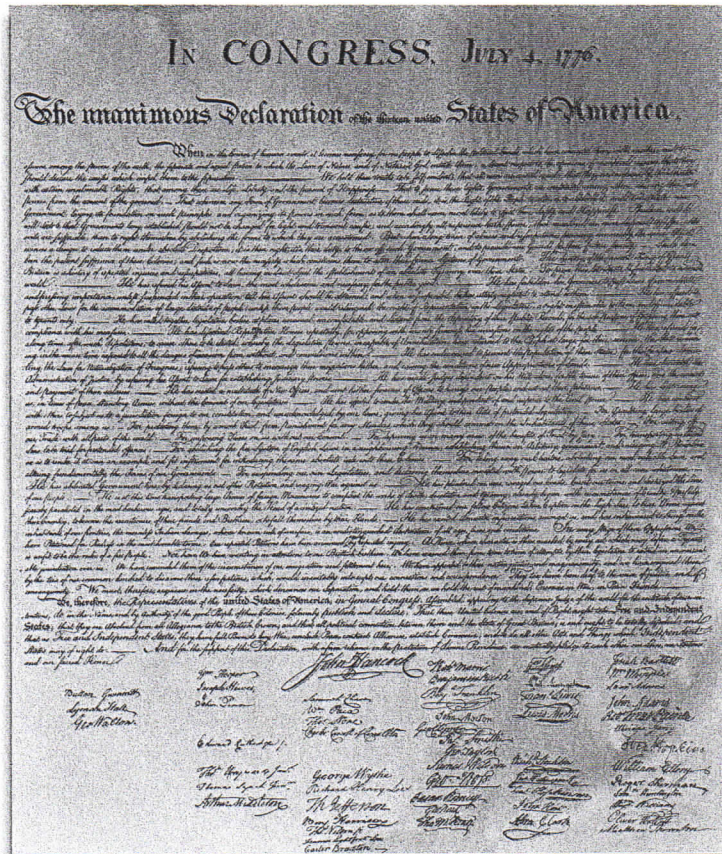
McMaster's muckraking of the Revolutionary leaders was only the beginning of what soon became a full-scale campaign. In 1897, Sydney George Fisher attempted to refute William Gladstone's view that the American Constitution was "the most wonderful work ever struck off at a given time by the brain and purpose of man." Fisher thought that the reputation of the founders was so inflated with myths and fables that he devoted his entire career to bringing the events of the American Revolution and its leaders down to earth. In a paper, "The Legendary and Myth-Making Process in Histories of the American Revolution," delivered before the American Philosophical Society in 1912, Fisher called for the substitution of "truth and actuality for the mawkish sentimentality and nonsense with which we have been so long nauseated." As his contribution, he wrote books with such titles as *The True Benjamin Franklin* (1900) and *The True History of the American Revolution* (1902).

Notwithstanding all the criticism and debunking of these founders, they still seem to remain for most Americans, if not for most academic historians, an extraordinary elite, their achievements scarcely matched by those of any other generation in American history. Most Americans appear to believe that these Revolutionary leaders constituted an incomparable generation of men who had a powerful and permanent impact on America's subsequent history. The founders appear even more marvelous than those they emulated, the great legislators of classical antiquity, precisely because they are more real. They are not mythical characters but authentic historical figures about whom there exists a remarkable amount of historical evidence. For our knowledge of the founders, unlike that of many of the classical heroes, we do not have to rely on hazy legends or poetic tales. We have not only everything the Revolutionary leaders ever published but also an incredible amount of their private correspondence and their most intimate thoughts, made available with a degree of editorial completeness and expertness rarely achieved in the Western world's recovery of its documentary past.

Despite the extent and meticulousness of this his-

torical recovery, to most Americans the founders still seem larger than life, possessing political and intellectual capacities well beyond our own. The awe that most of us feel when we look back at them is thus mingled with an acute sense of loss. Somehow for a brief moment, ideas and power, intellectualism and politics, came together—indeed were one with each other—in a way never again duplicated in American history.

There is no doubt that the founders were men of ideas, were, in fact, the leading intellectuals of their day. But they were as well the political leaders of their day, politicians who competed for power, lost



and won elections, served in their colonial and state legislatures or in the Congress, became governors, judges, and even presidents. They were intellectuals without being alienated and political leaders without being obsessed with votes. They lived mutually in the world of ideas and the world of politics and shared equally in both in a happy combination that fills us with envy and wonder. We know that something happened then in American history that can never happen again.

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SACRED TEXT. All told, 56 men signed the document, including two future presidents.