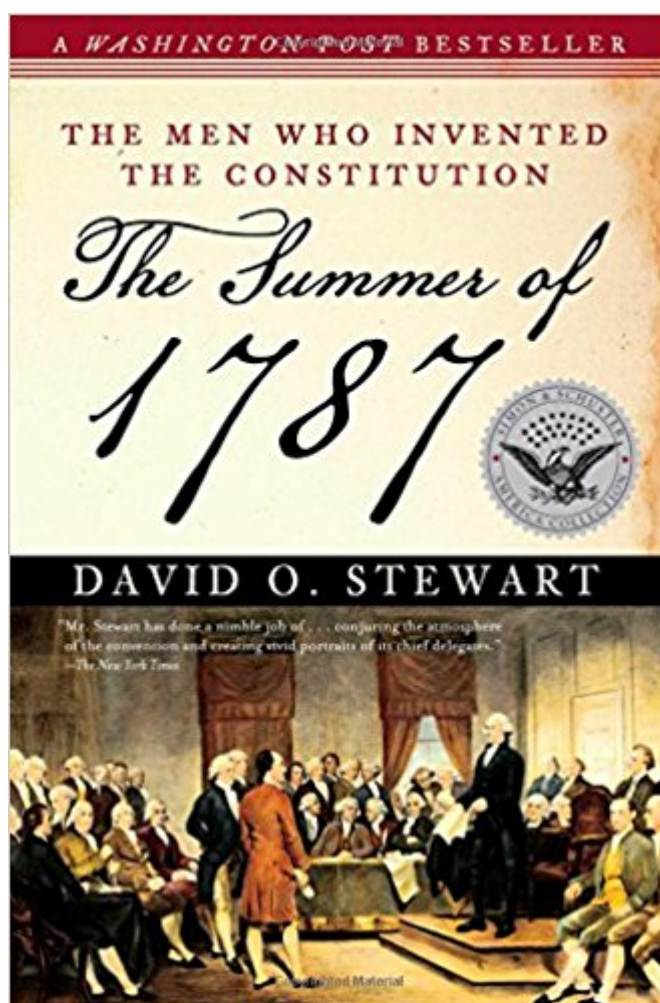


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The Summer Of 1787: The Men Who Invented The Constitution (The Simon & Schuster America Collection)



Synopsis

The Summer of 1787 takes us into the sweltering room in which the founding fathers struggled for four months to produce the Constitution: the flawed but enduring document that would define the nation—then and now. George Washington presided, James Madison kept the notes, Benjamin Franklin offered wisdom and humor at crucial times. The Summer of 1787 traces the struggles within the Philadelphia Convention as the delegates hammered out the charter for the world's first constitutional democracy. Relying on the words of the delegates themselves to explore the Convention's sharp conflicts and hard bargaining, David O. Stewart lays out the passions and contradictions of the, often, painful process of writing the Constitution. It was a desperate balancing act. Revolutionary principles required that the people have power, but could the people be trusted? Would a stronger central government leave room for the states? Would the small states accept a Congress in which seats were allotted according to population rather than to each sovereign state? And what of slavery? The supercharged debates over America's original sin led to the most creative and most disappointing political deals of the Convention. The room was crowded with colorful and passionate characters, some known—Alexander Hamilton, Gouverneur Morris, Edmund Randolph—and others largely forgotten. At different points during that sultry summer, more than half of the delegates threatened to walk out, and some actually did, but Washington's quiet leadership and the delegates' inspired compromises held the Convention together. In a country continually arguing over the document's original intent, it is fascinating to watch these powerful characters struggle toward consensus—often reluctantly—to write a flawed but living and breathing document that could evolve with the nation.

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Since Catherine Drinker Bowen's *Miracle at Philadelphia* appeared in 1966, no work has challenged its classic status. Now, Stewart's work does. Briskly written, full of deft characterizations and drama, grounded firmly in the records of the Constitutional Convention and its members' letters, this is a splendid rendering of the document's creation. All the debates are here, as are all the convention's personalities. It detracts nothing from Stewart's lively story to point out that it's just thatâ "a taleâ "and not an interpretation. Stewart, a constitutional lawyer in Washington, D.C., ignores the recent decades' penetrating scholarship about the Constitution's creation in favor of a fast-paced narrative of a long, hot summer's work. Only one choice mars the book. Stewart, like Bowen, wants us to see the four summer months as the only period when the Constitution was created. But as James Madison and others acknowledged soon afterward, the state ratifying conventions and the First Federal Congress, which added the Bill of Rights, also contributed to the Constitution as we know it. Stewart's excellent book will appeal to those looking for descriptive history at its best, not for a fresh take on the subject. B&w illus. (Apr.) Copyright Â© Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This is, of course, a story that has been told before. But like most great stories, it is worth retelling, especially when told exceedingly well. Stewart, a former law clerk for Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell, is a fine writer whose narrative unfolds like a well-structured novel. He begins with a description of the unsettled period just before the convention, as states quarreled with each other and a group of indebted farmers burned courthouses in Massachusetts. He describes the halting moves toward a Constitutional Convention that essentially were launched at a sparsely attended conference at George Washington's home at Mount Vernon. The narrative gathers steam as the convention begins in the sweltering heat of Philadelphia. Here Stewart artfully shows the roles played by the key players as they grappled with issues as varied as the rights of states and the future of slavery. In Stewart's view, the true genius of these founders was their understanding that free, popular government must be based upon compromise. General readers will find this work stimulating. Jay Freeman Copyright Â© American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text

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This book tells the story of the intrigue, the maneuvering and the compromises that took place in the summer of 1787 resulting in the Constitution: the flawed but enduring document that would define the nation—then and now. The book reads like a novel. I especially enjoyed the portraits that the author drew of the giants of the era; George Washington, James Madison, Benjamin Franklin. However, lesser known, but equally important figures such as Wilson, Sherman and Rutledge are also presented. The narrative takes the reader inside the Philadelphia Convention as the delegates hammered out the charter for the world's first constitutional democracy. The author explains the conflicts and hard bargaining, the passions and contradictions of the process of writing the Constitution. It was a desperate balancing act that required extensive compromises, a fact that appears to be forgotten in today's highly polarized political climate. The requirement that the people have power, needed to be balanced with the order that a stronger central government could provide. The protection of minority rights, the balancing between central and state governments and of course, the disposition of slavery were all issues that were grappled with by the delegates. All this is brought to life through the prose of a masterful author, presented with balance, context and perspective. The result is a highly informative and thoughtful book.

This book is very well researched and very well written. The author neither glorifies the framers nor disparages them. Rather, he mostly lets the facts speak for themselves. Among those facts were the compromises over slavery, including the three-fifths compromise in which a slave (who could not vote) was to be counted as three-fifths of a white person for purposes of apportioning the numbers of Representatives allotted to each state in the House of Representatives. The effects of the three-fifths clause also carried over into the election of the President, since the number of electors for each state in the electoral college was based on the total number of that state's Representatives and Senators. Indeed, one of the reasons for the electoral college was that it would incorporate the three-fifths ratio. A direct popular vote for president, which was supported by James Wilson, James Madison, and a few other delegates, would not have given the South that extra boost in selecting the president. David O. Stewart observes that some sort of compromise over slavery was necessary if a union of all the states was to be formed. However, in the last chapter of his book (pages 261-62), Stewart delineates some of the historical consequences of the compromises embedded in the original Constitution: "Most obviously, preservation of the slave trade meant the continued importation of many thousands of Africans in chains. The Fugitive Slave Clause gave slave owners

a critical tool for enforcing their dominion over the people they held in bondage."Though less obvious in its impact, the three-fifths ratio rankled for decades. By granting additional representation based on slaves, that clause enhanced southern power, as reflected in many measures:"
Ten of the first fifteen presidents were slave owners."
John Adams would have won a second term as president but for twelve electoral votes cast for Jefferson (and Burr) that represented southern slaves (counted at three-fifths of their real number)."
For twenty-seven of the nation's first thirty-five years, southerners sat as Speaker of the House of Representatives."
Nineteen of the first thirty-four Supreme Court justices were slaveholders."Because of the three-fifths ratio, Virginia in the 1790s had six more congressmen than did Pennsylvania even though both states had roughly the same number of free inhabitants. The three-fifths ratio gave slave states fourteen extra seats in the House in 1793, twenty-seven additional seats in 1812, and twenty-five added seats in 1833."Those extra votes meant that when crises erupted over slavery in 1820, in 1850, and in 1856, slave owners in positions of power ensured that the political system did not challenge human bondage. House seats created by the three-fifths rule allowed Missouri to be admitted as a slave state in 1820, and ensured enactment of the 1840 gag rule that choked off antislavery petitions to Congress."Stewart explains that "[h]istorians disagree over the terrible bargains that the Convention struck over slavery. Some insist that the delegates did the best they could under the circumstances." However, "[o]thers counter that the northern delegates caved in too easily to implausible southern threats to abandon the Union." Specifically, Georgia and South Carolina, the states that most demanded concessions to slavery, probably could not have survived outside the union as result of their respective dire circumstances. The author concludes that "[f]or all they have been celebrated, the delegates bear responsibility for having entrenched slavery ever deeper, for not even beginning to express disapproval of it." Ibid., 262-63. But Stewart is careful in his examination of the history of the Constitutional Convention. He observes, in more than one place, that the New England states, which benefited economically from the slave trade due to their shipping interests, were more than willing to accommodate Georgia and South Carolina on slavery. Strangely, it was James Madison and George Mason, both slaveholding Virginians, who had the most compunctions about slavery. Although Thomas Jefferson, another slaveholding Virginian, was also on record against this practice, he did not attend the Convention because he was representing the United States in Paris at the time. But although Madison, Mason, and Jefferson were conflicted about slavery, they never (with a few exceptions) actually freed their own slaves. That was the legacy of another Virginian, George Washington, whose Will contained provisions that led to the emancipation of his slaves within two years after his death. Washington

was the presiding officer of the Convention. Although he spoke little, he was respected by virtually all of the other delegates. I strongly recommend this book.

I love it when a really intelligent historian turns one of those events complete with dates and lists of names that were sometimes bound to appear on a test into REAL PEOPLE, hot with passions, full of fear, doubts, stubbornness, greed, etc. I find the birth of that miraculous document that is the Constitution is one of the grand moments of history. This book does turn those leaders into people we can understand and helps us understand how wonderful and stunning it is that we have that document. We all need to refresh our understanding of the circumstances that resulted in our Constitution; it may need our protection more than ever in the next 4 years.

The author Philip Roth once said: "History is where everything unexpected in its own time is chronicled on the page as inevitable." There is a tendency among many Americans to approach the founding of the United States with this attitude. If Washington had not led the Continental Army to victory, then someone else could just as easily have done it. And if James Madison and his colleagues had not provided the impetus for the Constitutional Convention, we somehow would have still ended up with the government we have today. Those who read Mr. Stewart's fine recounting of the events of 1787 will quickly become disabused of that notion. There was nothing inevitable about the creation of our central government. Mr. Stewart tells a great story and he relates it succinctly and eloquently. Though his is certainly not the first telling of these events, he does a remarkable job of explaining the sectional differences among the delegates. Perhaps most illuminating are his descriptions of the personality quirks, prejudices and idiosyncrasies of the participants, all of which profoundly influenced the end product: our Constitution. And even though you know the outcome of the story, Mr. Stewart creates considerable suspense. More than once, you will remark to yourself: "How on earth did they ever agree on ANYTHING let alone a document that has served as the foundation for the greatest democratic experiment in history"? Highly recommended.

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