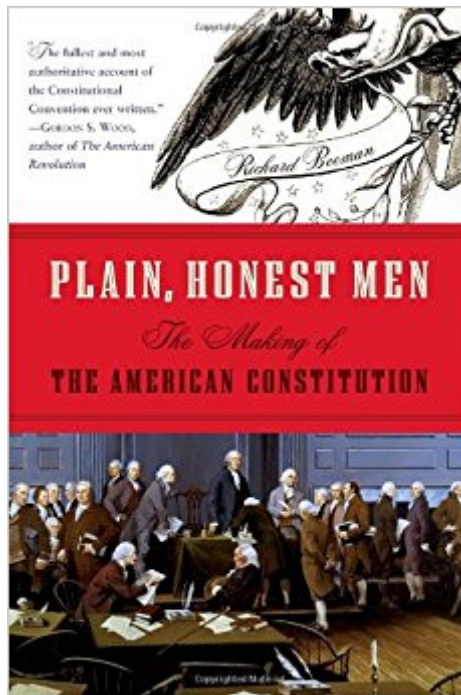




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Plain, Honest Men: The Making Of The American Constitution



Synopsis

In May 1787, in an atmosphere of crisis, delegates met in Philadelphia to design a radically new form of government. Distinguished historian Richard Beeman captures as never before the dynamic of the debate and the characters of the men who labored that historic summer. Virtually all of the issues in dispute—the extent of presidential power, the nature of federalism, and, most explosive of all, the role of slavery—have continued to provoke conflict throughout our nation's history. This unprecedented book takes readers behind the scenes to show how the world's most enduring constitution was forged through conflict, compromise, and fragile consensus. As Gouverneur Morris, delegate of Pennsylvania, noted: "While some have boasted it as a work from Heaven, others have given it a less righteous origin. I have many reasons to believe that it is the work of plain, honest men."

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review. A day-by-day account of the Constitutional Convention of 1787 in Philadelphia can't yield up much drama or fireworks, or even much sparkling talk, at least as recorded by a few participants, especially James Madison. But in this masterful account, Beeman (Patrick Henry), a noted historian of the late 18th century, does his best to dramatize the writing of the American Constitution. As the convention's hot summer weeks rolled on, tensions built, agreements were reached and compromises (especially, alas, about slavery) were made. Beeman gives each decision, each vote, the weight it deserves and, in brief sketches, brings the delegates alive. The

result may not be an exciting story, but, after all, it concerns the writing of the world's longest-lived written national constitution. It's also a story freighted with world-historical significance and one as well told here as can be imagined. This account is now the most authoritative, up-to-date treatment of the Constitutional Convention since Catherine Drinker Bowen's *Miracle at Philadelphia* over 40 years ago. It's unlikely to be surpassed. Illus., map. (Mar. 17) Copyright © 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.

The challenge of writing an account of the Constitutional Convention is that so many accounts already exist. "Do we need another narrative history of the Constitutional Convention of 1787?" asks the *Washington Post*. While Beeman's book does not revolutionize the genre, it garners praise for examining the "the nuances and complexities of the compromises that the framers made" (*New York Times*) and for its detailed recreation of the Philadelphia debates. The most pointed complaint comes from Walter Isaacson in his otherwise positive *New York Times* review. He writes of Beeman's hesitancy to include too much of his own interpretation in the book: "[S]ince he is in a far better position to make an assessment than we are, it would be nice to know what he believes." Copyright 2009 Bookmarks Publishing LLC --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Richard Beeman has crafted a fascinating story of the summer of 1787 in Philadelphia when a group of, in his description, 'plain and honest men', got together to draft a new document to govern the fledgling United States of America and, without meaning to, wrote for the ages. Beeman tells how the delegates met with divergent ideas on what needed to be done, from minor revisions to the Articles of Confederation to a totally new plan of governing. He writes about the backgrounds and careers of most of the principal actors and details the bumpy path they traveled together to produce the final Constitution of the United States. Beeman tells his tale with skill and care to show that some fifty delegates although disagreeing violently at times were able to compromise and reason their way together.

The most momentous event in the history of the early American republic is the drafting of the United States Constitution in Philadelphia from May to September 17, 1787. Dr. Richard Beeman a distinguished professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania and an expert on the Constitution has written the best popular account of the event in this generation of scholars. The

president of the Constitutional drafting meeting was General George Washington who would later become the first POTUS. Delegates from twelve of the thirteen states (Rhode Island did not send delegates) met in the Pennsylvania State House for long hours during the spring, summer and fall of that distant year. Philadelphia had a population of 40,000 in 1787. The fifty-five delegates were housed in private homes, inns and boardinghouses. Among the distinguished members of the constitution drafting convention were James Madison the writer of the best of the future Federalist Papers and fourth POTUS: Benjamin Franklin of Philadelphia, the Pickneys of South Carolina, Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts and Luther Martin of Maryland. Delegate G. Morris of Pennsylvania came up with the idea of dividing the federal government into three branches: legislative, judicial and executive. Slavery was the elephant in the room! Twenty-five of the fifty five delegates were slave owners George Mason of Virginia owned over three hundred African-American slaves. Many of the battles raged over the large states wanting proportional representation in Congress. It was decided that one member would represent 30,000 persons in congressional districts in the United States House of Representatives while two senators would represent each of the states. One of the most interesting parts of the book concerns the executive branch. Many compromises were required and the state conventions between the Federalist and Anti-Federalists supports was fierce. In 1789 The US Constitution at last became operable. The document ended the weak continental congress governed by the Articles of Confederation. Shays rebellion and the inability of the continental congress to tax or wield military power evinced a dire need for a Constitution. Beeman writes with fluidity and interest on the complex topic of the Constitution. His descriptions of the leading participants and the major issues facing the delegates makes for fascinating reading. This book could be used with efficacy in a college course on the US Constitution. Excellent and essential for students of American government!

This book is the most impressive and enthralling reading experience I have had for years. The story of the creation and ratification of the Constitution is given a very human face. The author peppers his chronicle with colorful vignettes and capsule biographies of the principle players. But, much more to the point, he tells the story of "plain, honest, men," struggling with their parochial and innate prejudices, their ambitions, and their notions of what the new country was to be. Strangely, the book had many of the qualities of a cliffhanger, even though I knew how it ended. In reading this book, I came to gain, simultaneously, an incredible respect for those men and their creation ... and a much healthier regard for the Constitution as a product of politics, compromise, and intrigue ... and see it even more as a living creature today. If you ever entertained the notion that the US Constitution was

somehow either handed down from on high, intact and perfect, or is the sacrosanct product of our saintly, infallible founding fathers, it is imperative that you read this book...now!

Beeman's history of the Constitutional Convention is beautifully written and expertly researched. "Plain, Honest Men" tears down the mythological representations of our founding fathers that have often overshadowed their perhaps less extraordinary selves, but that still manage to invoke a sense of awe as to what they were able to collectively achieve. Beeman's book allows us to witness the regional struggles that threatened to undermine the Convention while also helping us to understand the "characters" that would be instrumental to the development of the new Constitution. Whether following Madison's near "obsessive compulsive disorder" or the rather lax approach to the Convention of his late-arriving colleagues, "Plain, Honest Men" is anything but a "plain" representation of this dramatic period of our nation's history.

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