



# Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation

*Joseph J. Ellis*

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## **Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation** Joseph J. Ellis

An illuminating study of the intertwined lives of the founders of the American republic--John Adams, Aaron Burr, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and George Washington.

During the 1790s, which Ellis calls the most decisive decade in our nation's history, the greatest statesmen of their generation--and perhaps any--came together to define the new republic and direct its course for the coming centuries. Ellis focuses on six discrete moments that exemplify the most crucial issues facing the fragile new nation: Burr and Hamilton's deadly duel, and what may have really happened; Hamilton, Jefferson, and Madison's secret dinner, during which the seat of the permanent capital was determined in exchange for passage of Hamilton's financial plan; Franklin's petition to end the "peculiar institution" of slavery--his last public act--and Madison's efforts to quash it; Washington's precedent-setting Farewell Address, announcing his retirement from public office and offering his country some final advice; Adams's difficult term as Washington's successor and his alleged scheme to pass the presidency on to his son; and finally, Adams and Jefferson's renewed correspondence at the end of their lives, in which they compared their different views of the Revolution and its legacy.

In a lively and engaging narrative, Ellis recounts the sometimes collaborative, sometimes archly antagonistic interactions between these men, and shows us the private characters behind the public personas: Adams, the ever-combative iconoclast, whose closest political collaborator was his wife, Abigail; Burr, crafty, smooth, and one of the most despised public figures of his time; Hamilton, whose audacious manner and deep economic savvy masked his humble origins; Jefferson, renowned for his eloquence, but so reclusive and taciturn that he rarely spoke more than a few sentences in public; Madison, small, sickly, and paralyzingly shy, yet one of the most effective debaters of his generation; and the stiffly formal Washington, the ultimate realist, larger-than-life, and America's only truly indispensable figure.

Ellis argues that the checks and balances that permitted the infant American republic to endure were not primarily legal, constitutional, or institutional, but intensely personal, rooted in the dynamic interaction of leaders with quite different visions and values. Revisiting the old-fashioned idea that character matters, **Founding Brothers** informs our understanding of American politics--then and now--and gives us a new perspective on the unpredictable forces that shape history.

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