

History Access Reading Group

Meet with Professor TRACY MCKENZIE

to discuss

Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation,
by Joseph Ellis

Thursday, May 24, 2007

1:30–3:30, Smith 306

This book is widely available at most bookstores and through Amazon.com.

The author, a master wordsmith, recreates the crucial era immediately after the achievement of American independence through intimate sketches of the relationship among eight leading figures from the early republic: Abigail and John Adams, Aaron Burr, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and George Washington. Each chapter focuses on a key historical moment, from a gripping recreation of the Hamilton- Burr duel and its significance for the nation to a deeply moving narrative of the reconciliation between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson in the twilight of their lives. Emphasizing the fragility of the infant republic, Ellis reminds us that the success of the American Revolution was far from inevitable.

Study Questions on Reverse

Please sign up for this group by contacting History Undergraduate Advising

543-5691, histadv@u.washington.edu

Or by visiting our website and clicking on the RSVP button:

<http://depts.washington.edu/history/studying/access/reading.html>

Study Questions

As you read, here are some questions you might consider. We'll use them as a guide for our conversation together, but I am sure that you will also come with questions and reactions that I have not anticipated, and those are assuredly welcome as well. I begin below with a couple of very broad questions, and then offer a few that are more focused.

1. One of the central themes of this book is that the new American nation did not have to survive its stormy early history. What particular divisive issues made the decade of the 1790s “the most crucial and consequential in American history” (p. 11)? To what extent are these issues still salient in 2007?
2. For Americans in 2007, one of the difficulties of capturing the larger meaning of the American Revolution for posterity is that Americans alive during the Revolution, including the most prominent patriots, did not agree at the time concerning its true significance. In what different (often contradictory) ways did the “founding brothers” understand the “true meaning” of the American Revolution? Is their debate still ongoing?
3. What does the Hamilton-Burr duel reveal about American political culture in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries?
4. How does Ellis explain the ultimate “silence” of revolutionary leaders with regard to slavery? Are you persuaded that silence was the only course available to them consistent with the survival of the republic?
5. What enormous issues did Washington’s “Farewell Address” confront? Are any of his recommendations still honored today?
6. Have any of the figures featured in *Founding Brothers* risen in your estimation after reading this book? Have any fallen? Why?