

Book Review



Reviewed by Richard A. Forsten, Esquire

Why History Matters: *Greeks & Romans Bearing Gifts*

by Carl J. Richard (Rowman & Littlefield, 2008)

Modern educators spend little, if any, time teaching or discussing classical Greek and Roman history. Names such as Pericles, Cincinnatus, Cato, Cicero, Herodotus, and Thucydides enjoy virtually no recognition, and little is known even about more recognizable names such as Caesar, Augustus, and Marc Antony. Yet, the Founders knew their classical history and they knew it well. Moreover, they sought to learn from history and firmly believed in the old adage “those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it.”

It is easy today to take the Constitution for granted. It all seems so obvious, so intuitive. What is difficult to appreciate is just how new the Constitution was some 220 years ago. Nothing quite like it had ever been tried before. The Founders were seeking to unite thirteen different sovereign states in a union or league that would, on the one hand, preserve the autonomy of the states and the liberty of the people, while, on the other hand, provide for a common defense and a single country. The task was daunting, and it is no hyperbole to refer to the Constitutional Convention as the “miracle in Philadelphia.”

In creating a system of government meant to endure for the ages, the Founders drew upon classical history in a way that modern Americans often fail to appreciate because they know so little about classical history. In *Greeks & Romans Bearing Gifts, How The Ancients Inspired The Founding Fathers*, Professor Carl J. Richard shows us the connections between classical history and the Constitution, in a way that educates the reader about both the Constitution itself and the classical history that often inspired its provisions.

Following a brief introductory chapter describing the chief sources of classical history and the Founders’ knowledge of them, Richard focuses on seven periods of classical history and the lessons the Founders took from this history. He assumes no knowledge of classical history, and so his writing informs the reader not only on political theory underpinning aspects of the Constitution, but on classical history as well.

One aspect of the Constitution that is often criticized is the fact that it is a republic, and not a simple direct democracy. Practicalities aside, the Founders saw in the history of Athens dangers arising from simple democracy. For all of Athens’ many achievements, the Founders saw danger in an excess of direct democracy without checks and balances. The ever fickle Athenians banished (“ostracized”) successful leaders, they sentenced Socrates to death, and they were (or so it seems) easily swayed by gifted orators. The Delian League, a league of city-states originally organized by Athens for common defense, quickly degenerated into an Athenian empire. The Founders, biased perhaps by the views of the ancient sources, learned that an excess of democracy often resulted in an unstable and erratic state. As a result, in designing the Constitution (as well as the various state constitutions), they sought to temper the dangers of democracy with two houses in the legislative branch (a House and Senate), as well as a strong independent executive branch and judiciary.

Athens was not the only example which inspired the Founders to consider more than one house in the legislative branch. The Roman Republic, and its fall, also informed the Founders as they struggled

to create the new national government. Rome, of course, famously had a Senate comprised of the aristocratic families. But, the Roman Republic also had other popular assemblies as well. Rome had two consuls, each of whom served a one-year term, as well as a host of other lower offices. In theory, Rome had a “mixed” government, in which all of the people were represented in one way or another, and the various office holders’ and assemblies’ powers were balanced against each other. While the Founders’ views may have been somewhat romanticized, one can see the influence of such beliefs in a bicameral legislature, as well as the extensive checks and balances built into the Constitution. The fall of the Roman Republic was further proof to the Founders of the need for strong checks and balances in the government. The rise of men such as Sulla, Marius, and, ultimately, Julius Caesar, demonstrated the need to prevent an excess of power in any one man or office.

The need for a stronger central government was a lesson learned by the Founders not only as a practical lesson from the failure of the Articles of Confederation, but also as a lesson taught by the fall of the Greek city-states first to Macedon and later to Rome. Classical Greece was, of course, primarily a collection of independent city-states. There was no national government. The city-states came together and successfully repelled the Persian Empire, but ultimately, Greece fell. First, to King Phillip II of Macedon (the father of Alexander the Great), and later to Rome. During the Constitutional Convention, at state-ratifying conventions, and in published essays throughout the period, Federalists continually pointed to the fall

of the city-states in their argument for a strong federal government. In the absence of such a government, the independent states of America would fall to some foreign power, just as the Greek city-states fell. Although perhaps not mentioned as often during the constitutional debates, no doubt the Founders were just as concerned about conflict and warfare between the States in a manner similar to the near-constant warfare between Greek city-states.

The Founders drew many lessons from classical history, a history they knew

well. By understanding their knowledge of history, we can better understand the positions they took, the arguments they made, and the decisions they reached. Professor Richard has provided a short, wonderful, highly readable summary of Greek and Roman history and its impact on the Founders' thinking that should be read by anyone looking for greater insight into the Constitution or by anyone who relishes the adage about those who forget the past. ⚖️