

Greeks & Romans Bearing Gifts: How the Ancients Inspired the Founding Fathers. By CARL J. RICHARD. Lanham, MD and Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008. Pp. 248. Cloth, \$22.95. ISBN 978-0-7425-5623-2.

This book, intended for the general reader, gives a lively overview of Greek and Roman civilization as it was known and understood by the Founding Fathers of the United States, and highlights the ways in which the Greeks and Romans influenced the Founders' views on political matters.

Richard (R.) argues that the classical education the Founders experienced as young students inspired them to undertake the American Revolution and influenced their approach to a host of constitutional and practical issues crucial to the shaping of the new American republic. R. explores how the Founders learned the importance of individual rights from the absence of such rights in Sparta, the superiority of the republican form of government to monarchy from the Greek victory over the Persians, the perils of democracy from the instability of Athens, the need for a strong central government from the fall of Greece to Macedon and Rome, the importance of virtue in the success of a republic from early Rome, the need for vigilance against ambitious individuals from the fall of the Roman Republic, and the value of liberty from its destruction by Roman emperors.

In Chapter One ("The Storytellers and the Founders") R. acquaints the reader with the accomplishments and impact of the small, select group of classical historians and orators studied by the Founders in the 18th-century educational system. These "storytellers" were Herodotus, Thucydides, Demosthenes, Polybius, Cicero, Sallust, Livy, Plutarch, Tacitus and Suetonius. These authors tended to be—like the Founders themselves—learned, moralistic, aristocratic males who possessed some political and military experience. In his remaining seven chapters, R. summarizes what these storytellers said about the following topics: Sparta and individual rights, the Persian Wars and the superiority of republican government, Athens and the perils of democracy, the fall of Greece and the need for a strong central government, early Rome and republican virtue, the fall of the Roman Republic and the need for vigilance, and the Roman emperors and the preciousness of liberty.

In each chapter R. assumes no background in ancient history or classics on the part of the reader, but clearly and engagingly explains what the Founders were likely to have known as a result of their study of the classics in the educational system of the time. As R. presents this background, he suggests ways in which it influenced the Founders' thinking in the shaping of the United States. For instance, in Chapter Two, on Sparta and Individual Rights, R. explains the legend of Sparta, e.g., the Helots, Spartan colonization, the Spartan political system, the rearing of Spartan children, and the advantages and disadvantages of the Spartan social system. He summarizes problems with the account of Sparta the Founders had, and which was largely drawn from Plutarch's life of Lycurgus, whom most modern historians regard as a mythological figure. R. points to the difficulties and problems inherent in interpreting the ancient world solely from select and limited literary sources without the help of archaeology or written material not included in this canon of literary sources.

R. cites some of the lessons Founders derived from their story of Sparta. Samuel Adams, for instance, refers to Spartan frugality, selflessness, valor and patriotism. John Dickinson, author of *Letters from a Pennsylvania Farmer*, praised Spartan calm and courage and said that Americans ought to imitate this calm firmness in resisting unconstitutional taxation. In 1790 John Wilson applauded Spartan "emphasis on the training of youth. Benjamin Rush admired Spartan frugality and in 1798 wrote, The black broth of Sparta and the barley broth of Scotland have alike been celebrated for their beneficial effects on the minds of young people." In 1814 the economist John Taylor contrasted the virtues of the landed aristocracy of Sparta with the vices of the British commercial elite (p. 31). But the Founders' admiration for many of the traits of Sparta's intense military training was tempered by the realization that the Spartans suppressed individuality. Thomas Jefferson referred to the Spartans as "military monks." Alexander Hamilton in the *Federalist No. 6* noted that "Sparta was little better than a well regulated camp." John Adams agreed and called Sparta's communal ownership of goods "stark mad." The Founders sought the Spartans' numerous admirable qualities without the brutal system of socialization that produced

them (p. 32). According to R., the Founders were less individualistic than most modern Americans but less collectivist than the ancients. The Spartan model was not adopted for the new American republic.

R.'s treatment of Sparta is typical of the remainder of the book. He tells us clearly what the Founders knew about various aspects of the classical past, and then shows us particular instances of the influence of this knowledge. Rather than assuming that the reader knows something about the classical past, he explains it, according to him because the reception his earlier book *The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome and the American Enlightenment* (1994) showed him the need to assume nothing by way of background in classics and ancient history.

It was not Sparta or Athens that the Founders considered the greatest ancient model for the United States, but the early Roman Republic. Athens was viewed as too democratic and unstable. Sparta was too collectivist and militaristic. The Roman Republic, by contrast, gave the masses enough power, in the Founders' belief, to avoid a tyrannical oligarchy, without giving them so much control as to establish a chaotic ochlocracy. The Founders also admired the Romans not only as political models but as models of personal behavior, i.e., as heroes. R. argues that the Founder's preference for the Romans over the Greeks mirrored the educational system's traditional preference, reaching back to the Middle Ages, for Latin over Greek (p. 97).

R.'s book has many strengths. His clarity and sparkling style in providing background about the classical past will attract many readers. General reader and classicist alike will enjoy his accounts of such topics as the First and Second Triumvirates and the Roman Revolution among many others. The general reader will also get a good overview of classical antiquity, at least in so far as it can be gleaned from the literary sources known to the Founders.

R.'s account of how the Founders mined and used the ancients in their deliberations on the American republic will fascinate readers. He offers engrossing examples, telling us, for example, that Alexander Hamilton cited the failure of the Greeks to rally around a strong central government as the chief reason for the fall of Greece to Philip of Macedon. We learn that the Federalists, at the Constitutional Convention, at the state ratifying conventions and in published essays repeatedly cited ancient Greece as a civilization destroyed by decentralization (p. 92). R. also discusses the admiration of Jefferson for Tacitus, "the finest writer in the world without exception," whom he fondly quotes as saying that the more corrupt the commonwealth the more numerous its laws (p. 19). R. informs us that one of the Founders' greatest heroes was Cincinnatus. In 1776 John Adams expressed his desire to emulate the Roman hero by resigning his worldly powers and cares; George Washington took notice of the fact that people compared him with Cincinnatus and worked actively to promote the analogy; John Trumbull and Charles Wilson Peale painted Washington as Cincinnatus; even King George III grudgingly admired the Cincinnatan character of Washington's Farewell Address and handing over of power, though the king did not, as Richard points out, comprehend the enormous emotional power that classical republican ideals wielded over American minds (p. 126).

Finally, a few quibbles. References to Sparta as a Greek republic (pp. xi and 179) may upset some readers, given that Sparta retained a monarchy. The reference to Parthia as "a new Persian Empire" (p. 141) may rankle others. The expression "local small change" (p. 169) referring to money may also be confusing, and there is a typographical error in the spelling of Suetonius' name on p. 145.

I hope that *Greeks and Romans Bearing Gifts* will be widely circulated and read. My impression, born of my own curriculum development on the classical heritage in America, is that colleagues in the field of American history and civilization and political science, as well as general readers, need and will appreciate the solid grounding in our classical tradition and its impact on the Founders that this book provides. America's classical heritage and its *Nachleben* is a topic very much neglected in school and college curricula, and R's book should help remedy that neglect.

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