

Sonoma State University OLLI Winter Term Mick Chantler, Instructor

Statesmen and Rogues: The Founding Fathers, From Washington to Aaron Burr

For nearly 250 years, Americans have stood in awe before the giants who strode the earth during our country's formative epoch. Bold military commanders, incisive political philosophers, brilliant economic thinkers, and spellbinding orators, the Founders provided the creative genius and practical wisdom necessary to forge a new Republic, "dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." But we must be careful not to think of these nation-builders as demi-gods; they were real flesh and blood men, confronted with difficult, real-world decisions. Many of their choices were masterful, and some were disastrous, saddling the American people with thorny problems that would resurface repeatedly in later years. In this class we will analyze the lives of vanguard members of the revolutionary generation, and assess their influence on the tumultuous events of the years 1763-1815.

Week One: "The Founding Fathers and the Enlightenment" In our opening session we will delve into the ideological background of the Revolutionary Era. Most of the key players in the Founding were steeped in the philosophical ferment of the Atlantic World Enlightenment. Our goal will be to trace the intellectual currents flowing out of London, Edinburgh, and Paris which had the greatest influence on our country's first leaders.

Week Two: "His Excellency, George Washington" In this session we will discuss Washington's role as both Revolutionary War leader and first President of the Republic. We will focus on defining the qualities which made him such a universally revered "father figure."

Week Three: "Alexander Hamilton and the Development of a Rational Economy" Week three will be devoted to the picaresque career of our first Secretary of the Treasury. Hamilton devised the blueprint for the financial infrastructure of the new nation, and was perhaps the first truly modern thinker in the revolutionary movement. He merits a full analysis.

Week Four: "Benjamin Franklin--The Quintessential American" Franklin's multifaceted career as a revolutionary, diplomat, and constitutional draftsman will be the theme of our fifth lecture. We will follow his path both in America and abroad during these crucial years.

Week Five: "The James Madison Problem" Many historians and biographers have had a hard time determining just what the junior member of the "Jefferson and Madison" firm really stood for. Was he the ardent nationalist of the 1780s or the States' Rights advocate of 1798? Pacifist of the early 1800s or war hawk of 1812? We will attempt to sort these confusing identities in week five.

Week Six: “Forgotten Founders: Thomas Paine, the Marquis de Lafayette, and Aaron Burr”
Paine was one of the very few outspoken democrats and probably the only supporter of an early version of the welfare state. He also offended many with his shocking (for the era) “infidelity” in matters of religion. But he was also the most effective propagandist for the Patriots during the Revolution. In this talk we will explore this ‘quasi-Founder’s’ contribution to the Revolution. We will also examine the enormously important but now largely forgotten role played by the 19 year old Frenchman Lafayette. Finally, we will look at one of the scoundrels of the period, the aristocratic Aaron Burr.