

SSU OLLI Week Six: Forgotten Founders: Thomas Paine, the Marquis de Lafayette, and Aaron Burr

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Thomas Paine was unquestionably the most “democratical” thinker of the American Revolutionary era. While Washington, Hamilton, Adams, and even Benjamin Franklin cast a wary eye on “The People,” and never quite fully trusted their unbridled energies, Paine was the foremost defender of the “Rights of Man.” A product of English working class society, Paine spends his entire career promoting the causes of the little man. While Hamilton clearly, and unashamedly, promulgated the interests of the wealthy financial and merchant classes—the one percent of the eighteenth century—Paine was the Bernie Sanders of his day. He is the only Founder who advocated something like a cradle-to-the-grave welfare state for America, calling for government aid to indigent children, and for something akin to social security for the elderly. He also believed in free public education, something only a handful of early Americans felt necessary. But, alas, America would not see the need for a vigorous government involvement in the lives of everyday Americans for well over a century after Paine’s death. Laissez Faire became the guiding principle of the American body politic until F.D.R.’s New Deal. People were, for the most part, on their own in the new Republic.

Interestingly enough, Paine would become good friends with his fellow Enlightenment *philosophe* and revolutionary, Benjamin Franklin. They agreed on most issues, from politics to religion. So close were they on the main issues of the day that Franklin would refer to Paine as his ‘adopted political son.’ Franklin reviewed all of the early Paine’s major writings, and insert comments or corrections where he thought necessary. (Their similarities caused many observers to conclude that the groundbreaking pamphlet *Common Sense* had been written by Franklin, when of course it was from the pen of Thomas Paine.) Both were confirmed deists, believing in a god of science and rationality, rather than in the Biblical Deity. They were both firm exponents of the power of human reason, although Franklin retained a healthy skepticism in all of mortal man’s powers, including that of rational reflection. Ever the realist, Franklin saw reason as just another human conceit, enabling us to rationalize all our foibles. Still, Franklin conceded, reason was a far firmer staff than “religious enthusiasm.” Both men came to a place of deep animosity for the institution of slavery, and worked tirelessly to eliminate the evil from the new nation they helped to create.

There were, however, key differences in style between the two freedom fighters. Franklin had developed an easy going, amicable persona which enabled him to negotiate the corridors of power in both America and Europe with ease. Paine, in contrast, remained irascible throughout his life; he was something of a loose cannon. He loved to drink hard, argue, shock and provoke.

Worst of all, he didn't know when to ratchet back on his criticisms: he made the fatal error of denouncing national icon George Washington. Along with his publication of "*The Age Reason*," a shocking work of religious infidelity, his impolitic attacks on our greatest national hero resulted in a harsh backlash against the once-honored propagandist of the revolution. Conservatives reviled him as an atheist and consigned his works to the trash heap. Only Jefferson stood by the old firebrand in his later years, as he sunk into a rather untidy, squalid, and malodorous old age.

It was unfortunate that Paine largely ruined his public legacy through his own intemperate manner. He was the prime carrier of radical values in the early years of America, and he could have made a better case for a more compassionate conception of the role of government, had he not acted in such a demanding, querulous, and self-pitying manner. Perhaps we could use some of Paine's 'outside-the-box' thinking today.

In our final class we will also examine the lives of two other important Revolutionary Era figures that often get lost in the shuffle. The Marquis de Lafayette and Aaron Burr played key roles during the early years of the Republic, yet they are frequently glossed over in the narrative of our country's birth. In Burr's case, this is somewhat understandable—after all, he is usually considered to be a traitor to the lofty moral principles of the revolutionary era. Most Americans prefer a more sanitized version of history, and tend to ignore anything that would stain the image of a pristine Founding. In dwelling too much on Burr's apparent treachery, his womanizing, and above all his killing of Alexander Hamilton, we have to confront the awkward fact that not all of the giants who strode across the stage of history in those first years were upright and ethical patriots. Better to leave him in the dustbin of the past than impugn the godlike aura surrounding the Founding.

Lafayette's relative obscurity is more puzzling. He was in the inner circle of Washington's officer corps, and performed yeoman service in keeping the money and supplies flowing from France to America during the darkest days of the war. Yet today, Lafayette is to most of us a *place*, not a heroic figure from the past. There is Lafayette Square, across the street from the White House. Over twenty five cities and counties in America are named after the Marquis, (three in Wisconsin alone) a college in Pennsylvania, and a major bridge in Minneapolis. Additionally there are countless streets parks, schools, and naval vessels bearing his name. Yet few Americans can say exactly what this dashing figure actually did to earn such honors. One might think this omission is because Lafayette was a foreigner, and thus not a true *American* hero. But Thomas Paine and Alexander Hamilton were foreigners, and yet we still remember them. Certainly Americans of the nineteenth century didn't hold his Gallic background against him: when Lafayette returned to help our country celebrate our fiftieth anniversary of freedom, over two-thirds of the population of New York City turned out to greet him upon his

arrival. By way of contrast, about 4,000 turned out to “Meet the Beatles” when the Fab Four first landed at JFK airport in 1964.

When U.S. forces entered World War I, Charles Stanton (nephew of Lincoln’s Secretary of War) famously proclaimed to the French people ‘Lafayette, we are here!’ Presumably the doughboys in the Paris parade knew who their commander was talking about. But today we could not make this assumption. Historical amnesia has set in; many Americans know little and care less about our past. The National Constitution Center in Philadelphia surveyed thousands of visitors in 2016 to determine the level of visitors’ knowledge about the Founding Era. Sadly, they discovered that one-third of Americans thought that the Civil War occurred *before* the Revolution. Little wonder that most people don’t really know the details of Lafayette’s mission to the United States.

A wealthy aristocrat, the nineteen year old Lafayette crossed the Atlantic in 1777 and offered his services to the struggling Continental Army. He did not ask to be paid—he only wanted the opportunity to serve “The Cause” and earn a chance to win military glory. Washington took a liking to the optimistic and idealistic young Frenchman, and took him under his wing. Eventually the commander in chief gave him a field command, and Lafayette went on to win his spurs in a number of bloody encounters. (He was wounded at the Battle of the Brandywine, but recovered in time to take part in the fight at Monmouth Courthouse. Always he was in the thick of the carnage—“he has a penchant for danger” remarked General Washington.) He would play a vital role in the war’s climactic Battle of Yorktown when his troops stormed key British outposts and penned the Redcoat garrison into an indefensible position. All this before the age of twenty four!

In this our final gathering we hope to make clear that Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Franklin, and Hamilton were not the only significant Founders. Many other lesser lights contributed to the rise of our republic; Paine, Lafayette and Burr were among that critical supporting cast.