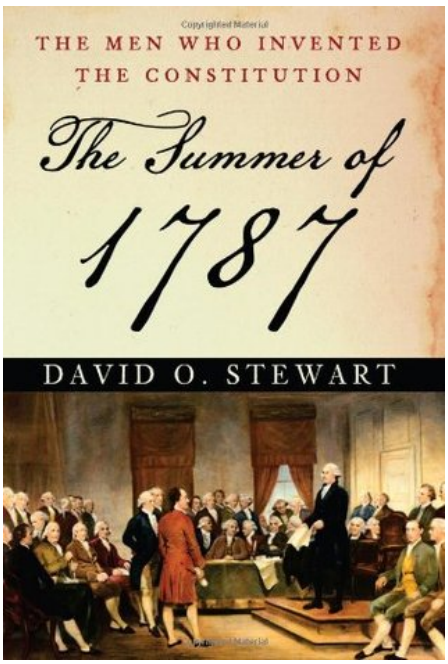

The Summer of 1787: The Men Who Invented the Constitution

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The successful creation of the Constitution is a suspense story. *The Summer of 1787* takes us into the sweltering room in which delegates struggled for four months to produce the flawed but enduring document that would define the nation -- then and now.

George Washington presided, James Madison kept the notes, Benjamin Franklin offered wisdom and humor at crucial times. *The Summer of 1787* traces the struggles within the Philadelphia Convention as the delegates hammered out the charter for the world's first constitutional democracy. Relying on the words of the delegates themselves to explore the Convention's sharp conflicts and hard bargaining, David O. Stewart lays out the passions and contradictions of the often painful process of writing the Constitution.

It was a desperate balancing act. Revolutionary principles required that the people have power, but could the people be trusted? Would a stronger central government leave room for the states? Would the small states accept a Congress in which seats were alloted according to population rather than to each sovereign state? And what of slavery? The supercharged debates over America's original sin led to the most creative and most disappointing political deals of the Convention.

The room was crowded with colorful and passionate characters, some known -- Alexander Hamilton, Gouverneur Morris, Edmund Randolph -- and others largely forgotten. At different points during that sultry summer, more than half of the delegates threatened to walk out, and some actually did, but Washington's quiet leadership and the delegates' inspired compromises held the Convention together.

In a country continually arguing over the document's original intent, it is fascinating to watch these powerful characters struggle toward consensus -- often reluctantly -- to write a flawed but living and breathing document that could evolve with the nation.

The Summer of 1787: The Men Who Invented the Constitution Details

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From Reader Review The Summer of 1787: The Men Who Invented the Constitution for online ebook

Louise says

Why did the US Revolution succeed when so many others have failed? Some credit must go to the strong central government designed in the summer of 1787. David Stewart brings this Constitutional Convention to life through the stories of its participants.

The Articles of Confederation were designed to give states power at the expense of a federal government. As a result, states printed their own money, negotiated with foreign governments, tried to push their boundaries into not just new territories, but other states and set their own trade policies. States, often controlled by financial interests, forced high taxes on many unable to pay. Stewart sees Shay's Rebellion as a turning point - a warning that without a strong central government, chaos could reign.

Delegates for 12 states (Rhode Island would not participate because it wanted to continue minting its own money) met in Philadelphia. The meetings were closed to the press, so what we know comes from James Madison's log of the proceedings and letters and later reports of the participants.

The general reader will not recognize many of the names of those who wrote this document. There is James Wilson from Scotland who took a major role in blending the small state-large state, slave state-free state debates. There is James Brearley of New Jersey who thought the country should be divided into states of equal size. South Carolina's delegates John Rutledge and Charles Pinckney were loathe to compromise and obtained a Senate with equal representatives from each state (favoring small/slave states) and a House with proportional representation inclusive of a 3/5 slave count which, again, inflated slave state representation.

The country's (perhaps) first lobbyist, Rev. Manaseh Cutler, lobbied the delegates to open the Northwest Territories (as promised) to veterans and keep them free of slavery. Other wins for the anti-slavery delegates were navigation (trade) policies and a ban on slave importation after 20 years.

The well-known founders take a back seat. Washington led the conference but said little. Octogenarian Ben Franklin also spoke little and would sometimes have James Wilson speak for him. Alexander Hamilton attended the opening sessions, spoke of distrusting the vote of the common man, went back to New York and returned in the last weeks of the meeting.

Steward sketches the how these men served on committees as well as how they traveled, where they stayed, the nature of their social life and recreation while in Philadelphia. Not many stayed for the duration.

When the work was complete, no delegate was happy but they sold it to the country and got the required ratification of 10 states. There is a great description of the celebration that followed: a parade, speeches and a full festival with 10 and 13 being themes.

The character portraits are not only well written, almost all have a sketch. Since you get to know them, you are particularly appreciative that Stewart tells of their post-convention lives. He also gives a synopsis of the issues surrounding the compromises and the later amendments. This is a well laid out and designed book. The Index worked for me.

I highly recommend this for anyone interested in Post-Revolutionary America or specifically the drafting of

the Constitution.

Ron says

i didn't realize slavery was so front and center in the constitutional discussions. politics (unity was more important than morality, it seems) won the day, and not only was slavery not abolished, but slave states were allowed to count their slaves for representation purposes, though only as 3/5ths of a person. yes, really.

david o. stewart seems to have a bit of a slant towards the virginians, whom he sees as the movers/shakers, and whose "virginia plan" he identifies as the blueprint for the constitution. the other big state, pennsylvania, has its own heavyweights, such as franklin and wilson, and colorful characters from the south and new england round out the roster of these important dead white men. the book is at its best when describing the concurrent events and the context -- sunday trips out to bartram's garden, entertainments at the morris house, intrigues at the rooming house where delegates stayed, the humid philadelphia summer weather. more of this would have made it more interesting. as it is, it gets dry/slow in parts.

the other revelation was the battle between big states and small states, which the small states seem to have won, with equal representation in the senate, and with the byzantine electoral college that baffles the world to this day.

Brian says

Extremely thorough and well-researched without being too dense. He does a great job giving voice to the accomplishments and the substantial roles played by names not known to history. Good, good stuff.

Enzo says

So after recent criticism thrown to the Founding Fathers made me think about what they were thinking when they left Slavery and the traffic of slaves in the Constitution. That I decided I needed to either read the Constitution and figure it out myself or get a one of the best historical writers to give me a tour of Independence Hall in Philadelphia. Give me the gossip and the possible thoughts behind the framers of the Constitution. The reasons why some things were placed in and the feeling at the time that pressed all the members of the Philadelphia Convention to agree on things that each felt should or should not be in the Constitution.
David O. Stewart frames his book starting with Madison's blueprint of the Constitution. Leading into the start of the Convention, the election of Washington as the President of the Convention, the secrecy rule, and the thoughts of many of the members.
Let me tell you I thought I knew a lot of the Founding Fathers, Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Franklin, Madison, and everyones late favorite Hamilton. But through this book I have come to know most of the real people who by force of speech, by eloquence and by threats wrote the Constitution. The Delegates arrived with orders, Yes, orders from their States to walk straight out if a particular item was even mentioned in the debates.
The small States would not allow themselves to lose power to the big States. The South would not give up

Slaves, the Eastern States would not allow taxation on their primary business. That and more was the backdrop that pushed the Delegates during the talks that made this almost sacred text.
How Washington by his undeniable force of presence kept the debates from becoming altercations. The friendships that got strained and the acquaintances that became alliances that powered ideas and positions into the job.
It is fascinating to read words left in diaries that describe for example Madison or Hamilton. Those that wrote the Federalist Papers under the pseudonym Publius were not exactly the most forceful within the Convention. To find out John Rutledge and James Wilson worked backdoor deals and formed an alliance that almost carried the Convention on its back.
How the economy forced the hand of this giants among men. How a document that while flawed still guides this land to greatness.
Why George Mason one of the most esteemed patriots of the time refused to sign the Constitution. How Gouverneur Morris not only wrote the Preamble to the Constitution but is the "Penman of the Constitution". His words universally praised and his changes to the final draft of the Constitution have made it one of the most admired texts in the world.
Is is easy to say I really enjoyed the book. While I won't read my next historical book of this times immediately I am filed with great expectation for when I return to the period and read on Madison.

Piker7977 says

An interesting and human tale of the men who wrote the Constitution of the United States of America. Stewart writes his narrative for everyone rather than the scholar or lawyer. This approach creates an insider's view of what the dynamics were in Philadelphia in 1787. And guess what? God did not pen the founding document. It's too flawed for that type of argument. An eclectic group of characters sat down for months to create a government that incorporated slavery into its founding, did not democratically empower all its citizens, and rushed some of the agreements due to fatigue and weariness after a long period of debate.

What we are left with is non-perfect foundation for a government that leaves us marveling and wondering about its meaning. Perhaps its the Constitution's riddles and unanswered questions that inspire its genius. Try to define federalism for instance. The legacy of allowing us to interpret, improve, and amend the document is one of its many gifts.

Andy Ober says

This is a well-written, well-organized and very human account of one of the most remarkable political events in American history. The book does not take a political angle in examining the creation of the Constitution, nor does it try to take on the impossible task of revealing what the founding fathers might think of today's United States. What it does do is turn the framers from paintings and historic sketches into human beings... some more likable than others, some more relevant than others. They were not just affected by the debates over representation and slavery... they were also dealing with very human issues, including the heat, extended time away from their families and professions and the cost of staying in Philadelphia for several months.

One of the more jarring sections of the book comes toward the very end, when we learn of the ultimate fate of many of the delegates. Several, as would be expected, go onto successful political careers. Others drown

in debt and depression. The stories serve as another reminder that the remarkable document was put together by normal, flawed human beings.

I'm not sure that this book will spark interest among those who aren't particularly fascinated by American history to begin with. But, most anyone with a general interest in the subject will likely enjoy this account that is remarkably well-researched, but not overwhelming, and detailed and informational, but not without humor.

Mamdouh Abdullah says

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http://wp.me/p28q6M-et

Alan Johnson says

This book is very well researched and very well written. The author neither glorifies the framers nor disparages them. Rather, he mostly lets the facts speak for themselves. Among those facts were the compromises over slavery, including the three-fifths compromise in which a slave (who could not vote) was to be counted as three-fifths of a white person for purposes of apportioning the numbers of Representatives allotted to each state in the House of Representatives. The effects of the three-fifths clause also carried over into the election of the President, since the number of electors for each state in the electoral college was based on the total number of that state's Representatives and Senators. Indeed, one of the reasons for the electoral college was that it would incorporate the three-fifths ratio. A direct popular vote for president, which was supported by James Wilson, James Madison, and a few other delegates, would not have given the South that extra boost in selecting the president.

David O. Stewart observes that some sort of compromise over slavery was necessary if a union of all the states was to be formed. However, in the last chapter of his book (pages 261-62), Stewart delineates some of the historical consequences of the compromises embedded in the original Constitution:

"Most obviously, preservation of the slave trade meant the continued importation of many thousands of Africans in chains. The Fugitive Slave Clause gave slave owners a critical tool for enforcing their dominion over the people they held in bondage.

"Though less obvious in its impact, the three-fifths ratio rankled for decades. By granting additional representation based on slaves, that clause enhanced southern power, as reflected in many measures:

"• Ten of the first fifteen presidents were slave owners.

"• John Adams would have won a second term as president but for twelve electoral votes cast for Jefferson (and Burr) that represented southern slaves (counted at three-fifths of their real number).

"• For twenty-seven of the nation’s first thirty-five years, southerners sat as Speaker of the House of Representatives.

"• Nineteen of the first thirty-four Supreme Court justices were slaveholders.

"Because of the three-fifths ratio, Virginia in the 1790s had six more congressmen than did Pennsylvania even though both states had roughly the same number of free inhabitants. The three-fifths ratio gave slave states fourteen extra seats in the House in 1793, twenty-seven additional seats in 1812, and twenty-five added seats in 1833.

"Those extra votes meant that when crises erupted over slavery in 1820, in 1850, and in 1856, slave owners in positions of power ensured that the political system did not challenge human bondage. House seats created by the three-fifths rule allowed Missouri to be admitted as a slave state in 1820, and ensured enactment of the 1840 gag rule that choked off antislavery petitions to Congress."

Stewart explains that "[h]istorians disagree over the terrible bargains that the Convention struck over slavery. Some insist that the delegates did the best they could under the circumstances." However, "[o]thers counter that the northern delegates caved in too easily to implausible southern threats to abandon the Union." Specifically, Georgia and South Carolina, the states that most demanded concessions to slavery, probably could not have survived outside the union as result of their respective dire circumstances. The author concludes that "[f]or all they have been celebrated, the delegates bear responsibility for having entrenched slavery ever deeper, for not even beginning to express disapproval of it." Ibid., 262-63.

But Stewart is careful in his examination of the history of the Constitutional Convention. He observes, in more than one place, that the New England states, which benefited economically from the slave trade due to their shipping interests, were more than willing to accommodate Georgia and South Carolina on slavery. Strangely, it was James Madison and George Mason, both slaveholding Virginians, who had the most compunctions about slavery. Although Thomas Jefferson, another slaveholding Virginian, was also on record against this practice, he did not attend the Convention because he was representing the United States in Paris at the time. But although Madison, Mason, and Jefferson were conflicted about slavery, they never (with a few exceptions) actually freed their own slaves. That was the legacy of another Virginian, George Washington, whose Will contained provisions that led to the emancipation of his slaves within two years after his death. Washington was the presiding officer of the Convention. Although he spoke little, he was respected by virtually all of the other delegates.

I strongly recommend this book.

Matt says

You may have been taught to respect the characters of the members of the late [Constitutional] Convention. You may have supposed that they were an assemblage of great men. There is nothing less true. From the Eastern states there were knaves and fools and from the states southward of Virginia they were a parcel of coxcombs and from the middle states office hunters not a few.
- George Mason, Virginia delegate to the Constitutional Convention, as quoted in a letter by Hugh Williamson to John Gray Blount, June 3, 1788

The United States Constitution is a remarkable document for many reasons, not the least of which is the certainty with which so many people interpret its provisions. And when I say certainty, I mean *certainty*. I wish I was half as certain as anything, as some people are of the meaning of the Constitution. Turn on a cable news show right now and you'll find two people who know the Constitution's exact object, even though their

views are directly opposed to each other.

The Constitution has gained an aura almost sacred. Which is fine, but not really. I'm not a Constitutional scholar (as my 1L Con Law grades will attest), but I do know this: the Constitution was the work of human hands. It began, at one point, as a blank piece of paper. Like any human project, it has flaws, some obvious, some hidden. As a lawyer, I've dealt with the Constitution in bits and pieces, with heavy focus on certain clauses, and near-ignorance of others. Despite the importance given to its birth, I'll admit that before now, I've never actually read a book devoted solely to the Constitution's creation in a sweltering room in Philadelphia's Independence Hall.

Typically, when I dive into a subject for the first time, I do so from the deep end. I like to find a big fat tome that will expedite the process of turning me into a barroom expert. (You know, the smartest person in a bar. That's the intellectual heights to which I always aspire). This time, I took a different route. David O. Stewart's *The Summer of 1787* is lean and mean, coming in at svelte 264 pages of text (284 pages if you read his 3 page critique of the Electoral College and the original Constitution, sans amendments, both of which are presented as appendices).

Stewart's writing style accentuates this book's slimness. This is popular history at its most digestible. In less than 30 pages, Stewart takes us through the shambles of the Articles of Confederation, the flurry caused by Daniel Shays and his rebellion, the decision to call a Constitutional Convention, and the assembling of the delegates. Stewart doesn't dwell on any one moment, but keeps the narrative moving swiftly along.

That is not to say *The Summer of 1787* is superficial. Rather, it is focused on high points and end results, rather than detailing every step of an arduous process of drafting and debate. The two major issues that run through the book – as they ran through the Convention itself – is the divide between slave states and free states, and between large states and small states. There were many moments when the whole project trembled and almost collapsed upon these fault lines. Stewart does an excellent job in clearly explaining the debate over slavery, representation, and how slavery affected representation, leading to one of the Constitution's more infamous compromises.

Stewart started his career as a Yale-educated lawyer who has argued cases before the U.S. Supreme Court. This experience shines through in this book's easy facility with the material. He writes with an understated confidence and assuredness.

Perhaps surprisingly, given the legal profession's (oft deserved) reputation for tangled, incomprehensible writing, *The Summer of 1787* is a pleasure to read. The story is well-paced, he does a very good job with thumbnail bios on all the principle delegates, and he enlivens the proceedings with well-placed details, such as poor Gouverneur Morris dying in an attempt to relieve a blocked urinary tracts with a piece of whalebone from his wife's underwear.

In these hyper-partisan times, it is worth noting that Stewart – with the exception of the Electoral College, which he finds outmoded and antidemocratic – has not written a polemic. (This was first published in 2007, meaning his Electoral College stance predates the latest election). He is not arguing for the Constitution to be interpreted one way or another.

One benefit of reading *The Summer of 1787* is that it inspired me to read the full text of the Constitution for the first time in ages. Having just seen how the various articles and sections were created, I found the actual text to be far more interesting than before. You can actually see the competing desires and frictions of the Convention written into the hallowed passages, which allow you to see them in a new light. When the

Constitution is changed, it is done by amendments that are added to the original script, rather than by interlineations. Thus, the original words are all there, plain to see, the good and bad and embarrassing alike.

Take, for instance, article I, section 2, clause 3:

> Representatives and direct Taxes shall be apportioned among the several States which may be included within this Union, according to their respective Numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole Number of free Persons, including those bound to Service for a Term of Years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three fifth of all other Persons.

This infamous provision has been rightly condemned for its casual racism. It is also a vivid demonstration of the conflict between smaller states and larger states worried about the number of representatives they'd get to send to Congress.

Or look at article IV, section 2, clause 3:

> No Person held to Service or Labour in one State, under the Laws thereof, escaping into another, shall, in Consequence of any Law or Regulation therein, be discharged from such Service or Labour but shall be delivered up on Claim of the party to whom such Service or Labour may be due.

This is the Fugitive Slave Clause, written indelibly on our founding document, the words still there, painfully so, despite the 13th amendment. The tortuously euphemistic language speaks to the uneasiness of so many delegates, who saw the contradictions between their notions of liberty, and the reality of their human chattels (nearly half the delegates were slave owners).

My point is not to emphasize the obvious hypocrisies imbedded in the Constitution, or to underscore the importance of slavery to the Constitutional debates. Rather, it is a reminder that this document did not come to us in some mystical fashion. It was not given to James Madison by God as Moses received the Commandments on the mount. It was instead created by imperfect human beings, with many faults and errors. Some of these "founders" owned human beings. One of them died while shoving a piece of whalebone in his urethra.

In defense of the newly-written Constitution, Ben Franklin wrote of his astonishment **"to find this system approaching so near to perfection as it does."** When I read the Three-Fifths Clause or the Fugitive Slave Clause, it becomes clear that my definition of "perfection" is miles from Franklin's definition.

At the same time, it is hard to argue with him when he concluded: **"I consent, sir, to this Constitution because I expect no better, and because I am not sure that it is not the best. The opinions I have had of its errors, I sacrifice to the public good."**

In attempting to sway dissident delegates to sign the finished product, Franklin asked the Convention members to **"doubt a little of his own infallibility."**

And maybe that should be the ultimate takeaway, from both the Constitution and our respective interpretations: to doubt the infallibility of both the Constitution, and ourselves.

Jason says

The Constitutional Convention is a subject I know something about, and have been drawn to for years.

It really started while I was an undergraduate student. We had something called "interim" which was a mini-semester between fall and spring. You took one intense month long course. My senior year, I took a course on the US Constitutional Convention. We went day-by-day through Madison's notes (and all the other notes that exist). It was one of the best and most memorable educational experiences of my life.

It is a subject that I occasionally revisit in my reading. I have read the classic "Miracle at Philadelphia" of course. But I was in the airport library and came across a signed copy of this narrative history. The author, David Stewart, is a local and must have been making the rounds at the Olsson's book stores.

The book is a nice read, and has a very definite point of view. Stewart is pretty convinced that there were only two major issues at the Convention -- slavery and state representation. He revisits these topics as often as the framers themselves did. Stewart also seems pretty convinced that Rutledge was the domineering figure of the convention. Of course, if you view the event as an elaborate dance to preserve slavery, that is the natural conclusion.

He has some interesting anecdotes that he weaves in from outside sources. He plays a bit with the activity in the Continental Congress and its successful effort to ban slavery from the territories covered by the Northwest Ordinace. This, of course, stands in contrast to the Convention's failure to event exclude the slave trade, which was already banned in an overwhelming number of states.

He also notes little interesting details about how states voted starting with New Hampshire -- when their delegation arrived -- and going South. He also talks about the hotels they were staying in, and dinners and outside events where the details are available. I particularly enjoyed the "post script" on several of the delegates post convention. The reasons why Wilson of PA, and Rutlege of NC are not among the pantheon of founders are pretty amazing.

The general thrust of the narrative stands in stark contrast to Bowen's Miracle at Philadelphia. Bowen, of course, focuses more on Madison. He is, after all, the "Father of the Constitution". Madison is an important figure in this book too, However, given his ambivalence on slavery, and his failure to prevail on the composition of the Senate, he has a supporting role in Stewart's telling.

The further reading section was a little disappointing to me. While the most obvious original sources are mentioned, Stewart points his readers to a lot of contemporary histories like Walter Issacson's Franklin and Gordon Ellis many books on the era. Its not that these are bad books. I have read several of them myself. Its that it makes me worry a little bit about the scholarship that went into this work.

The other gripe I have is that I miss some of the amusing "might have beens" of Bowens work. That book has a broader focus and covers many more elements of the discussion with detail. As I said, Stewart's book has a definite point of view. Its not myopic, but it does not tarry too long on any subject that does not fit the thrust of Stewart's story.

So, if you are interested in the subject broadly, read Miracle at Philadelphia. But, if you have a particular interest in the role slavery played in shaping the Constitution, this book will probably serve your purpose better.

David Eppenstein says

I have a great fondness for the history of our Revolution and the subsequent creation of our nation and its national government. I especially enjoy those histories which strip away the demigod veneers of our founders and reveal their true humanity with all its virtues and vices. Of several books about the writing of our Constitution that I have read this is the first that is truly a revelation. It identifies the prime movers at Philadelphia, what they contributed; what motivations they had; what deals they made and with whom; as well as the personalities of these founders. The book also explores the contributions and personalities of many minor delegates when appropriate. It also gives a real sense of what it had to be like to labor for a minimum of 5 hours a day 6 days a week during the Summer of 1787. Bear in mind that all the windows and doors were closed, there was nothing to relieve the heat and all of these men worked in full dress wool suits. Clearly, the experience had to be maddening for many reasons. That only a few delegates left never to return is astounding. It is also clear that anybody that has ever participated in any public gathering of any size will be able to identify universally annoying personalities as they appeared in Philadelphia as in all such public meetings. Philadelphia had more than its fair share of delegates in love with the sound of their own voices; nitpickers, the obtuse, the indecisive, etc. That a constitution was able to be achieved under such circumstances with such a diverse delegation and in such a brief period of time is indeed a miracle. An excellent history.

flagcomment · see review

Chris says

I am so glad I listened to Stewart's Virginia Historical Society's talk which convinced me to start reading his books.

They are awesome books about US history. This one is about the writing of Constitution. Stewart details the major movers and shakers, and gives drafting the drama of an adventure story. It's a really good look at the major document.

Russ says

Like the summer of 1787 itself, this book took a while to get warmed up. At first it was hard to tell whether it would proceed chronologically, topically, or as a series of mini-biographies. Eventually it became clear that it was mostly chronological with a focus on the topics and personalities that dominated the Convention during particular days and weeks of that summer.

The most striking thing about this book is how disproportionate the amount of discussion at the Convention

was to the actual provisions of the U.S. Constitution. A great deal of time was spent debating the Virginia Plan, the basis of Congressional representation, the powers of the Senate, and the method of selecting presidents. Strikingly little time was spent defining the overall powers of the central government, the powers of the president, and the nature of the judiciary, or the protections of the rights of the people.

On the issue of representation, the Convention quickly became bogged down: how would states and/or people be represented in the new Congress? The large states were adamant about basing representation on population. However, there were only three really big states, which wasn't enough to carry approval from a majority of states at the Convention, each of whom had one vote per delegation. James Wilson of Pennsylvania came up with an idea to persuade a few of the small states to join with the large states. He buddied up with John Rutledge of South Carolina. In exchange for certain guarantees, the slave states would join with the large states in supporting population-based representation.

But the small states pressed at it and kept debating until eventually persuading the Convention (in particular a Georgia delegate originally from Connecticut) to reconsider. Benjamin Franklin played a key role in inspiring the compromise of a House of Representatives based on population (with exclusive authority to originate money bills) and a Senate based on equal representation of states.

Turning their focus to the presidency, some wanted the person to be selected by Congress. Some wanted election by the people but that was seen as too democratic and the concept of electors was invented. That of course dragged them back to the issue of representation. All kinds of exotic formulae were proposed, but eventually the electoral college was pieced together, and it was the only protocol that could garner enough support from the Convention for passage. In other words, they did the best they could. Less time was spent debating what the president would actually do.

Many other topics were debated and settled by the convention, which were put into words by Rutledge in a Committee of Detail. Gouverneur Morris (who'd lost many of the Convention's floor debates) took the lengthy, disparate provisions of that committee's draft, rearranging and condensing them elegantly into the document we know today.

James Madison, "Father of the Constitution," was more like the secretary of the Convention, taking meticulous notes, failing to win support for his own specific proposals, but winning at his broader objective of creating a stronger central government than existed under the Articles of Confederation.

This book had a tendency to focus on issues which are more important to contemporary audiences and downplayed issues that were important to the framers. For example, the book treated the issuance of paper money as an insignificant matter. This deserved more attention because it was very important to the leaders of the time, and because it went straight to the powers of the states and central government. The book also seemed to take for granted that "everybody" wanted a new government. That there were men who wanted to preserve the Articles of Confederation was given little attention.

I wouldn't say that this book "put me there" in the Convention. I didn't feel like a fly on the wall. Sometimes I got confused about which delegates held which beliefs. Nevertheless, it was very illuminating about the key issues debated at the Convention and it provided a much needed play-by-play about how we settled on the framework of government that exists to this day. The Constitution probably shouldn't be read alone without reading a book like this.

Alan Tomkins-Raney says

This book is an excellent resource for viewing and understanding the Constitution through the lens of its creation. The beginning of the book, the descriptions and characterizations of the founding fathers, the politicking and argument that went on between them, and then at the end of the book what became of them in the years after the Constitutional Convention...these, along with evocative writing describing the ambiance of 1787 Philadelphia, are very interesting parts of the book that make for engaged reading. The middle of the book, however, contains an excess of detail bordering on a litany of minutiae detailing every single instance of all the back and forth arguing that went on and on and on. Yes, I know that made the convention very tedious and frustrating for the founders, but relating in detail every hour of every day of it also makes it very tedious for us, the readers. I believe a greatly shortened description of the nature of the disagreements would have sufficed and been a real improvement. Anyway, Stewart is a great scholar and historian, and I think the book was worth reading, but I am glad to be done with it too. Overall, I'd say it was around 50% enjoyable, interesting, engaging, and edifying reading, and around 50% slogging and trudging...thus, 3 of 5 stars.

Travis says

Interesting book about a fascinating topic, including many details I didn’t know much about. The attendance issues are amusing - Rhode Island never attended, New York and New Hampshire were unrepresented for large chunks of the Convention, and many individual delegates with strong opinions were absent for many of the debates. Washington wrote the final document was signed by “11 states and Colonel Hamilton,” as Hamilton signed even though Ny’s delegation wasn’t present. The focus on people who have been largely forgotten by history but played outsized roles at the Convention was interesting, as was the descriptions of the alliances between the big states and the slave states. The ability of small states (and later slave states) to overcome a lack of votes with explicit and implicit threats of leaving the convention was illuminating..

The book focused a lot on slavery, which seems justified, but the author’s moral judgments of slavery (and of those who defended it or caved to those who defended it) seemed unnecessary. Of course we all know what a human rights catastrophe slavery was - I prefer when a story is reported more factually, and let the readers make their own judgments. I do understand the desire to show how the decisions made at the Convention had a real life impact, but there were probably subtler ways to accomplish that.

The book is relatively short but there is a fair amount of filler (like - thing going on elsewhere in Philly at the time) that I found kind of boring and mostly skimmed through, but might be of interest to others.
