Spring Term, 2016: Statesmen and Rogues: The Founding Fathers, From Washington to Aaron Burr

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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: “New Perspectives on the American Revolution” We will start with a fresh look at the events of 1776. We will discuss how contemporary scholars view our country’s birth, and how these new positions differ from those we learned as youngsters.

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: "Washington and the Forgotten Americans" In this talk we will look at the heroic, if unsuccessful, attempts Washington made to bring the benefits of the new Republican ideology to two previously neglected constituencies: the Native Americans and the slaves. Alone of all the key founders, Washington freed his slaves, and made a sincere effort to treat the Indians with justice.

Week Four: "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 Five: "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 Six: “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 out these confusing identities in our final class.