

Charles Beard's *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* was a pivotal work written to counter the idealistic foundation of the United States in a time of progressive politics. For over forty years Beard's contention that a distinct class of property and security holders had conspired to create the Constitution to protect their wealth went largely unchallenged. Then in 1958 Forrest McDonald's *We the People: The Economic Origins of the Constitution* challenged Beard's monopoly on Constitutional foundation and ultimately served as the death knell of the Beardian interpretation. McDonald warns that the Constitution's foundation cannot be interpreted by any single system or factor.<sup>1</sup> Yet by the end of *We the People*, did he contradict himself and fall into the same trap as Beard?

McDonald begins his work with a sometimes pompous Introduction to the Transaction Edition that might be expected from professional historians. McDonald points out the acclaim his work has received from all ideologies with the exception of his friend Jackson Turner Main.<sup>2</sup> However, once past the introduction and preface, McDonald quickly sets to his task of making Beard's thesis clear, then refuting it with data. McDonald breaks his analysis into two parts covering the Philadelphia Convention and the ratification process. At the Philadelphia Convention he convincingly shows that there was no distinct class of "personality interests" in attendance, but a wide and varied group of various interests. McDonald contends there was no cleavage of propertied interests and that in fact of the five delegates that walked out or refused to

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<sup>1</sup> Forrest McDonald, *We the People: The Economic Origins of the Constitution* (Transaction Publishers, 2009), 401.

<sup>2</sup> Main's critical review and McDonald's rebuttal in *The William and Mary Quarterly* are excellent examples of the conflict that professional historians often create to generate more print to publish. The two articles are also wonderful drama and can be found on JSTOR.

sign the Constitution, they were some of the largest security holders.<sup>3</sup> For the ratification process, McDonald breaks down the process for each state and believes that each state's desire to ratify the Constitution depended more heavily on how successful they were as independent states and not property interests.<sup>4</sup>

McDonald concludes *We the People* by evaluating the significance of the data. He finds the Beard interpretation is "entirely incompatible with the facts."<sup>5</sup> McDonald tries to then use the data to see if there were distinct categories of interests beyond Beard's two groups of "personalty" interests and those without. He concludes that there is no discernable evidence that the Framers were principally motivated by economics.<sup>6</sup> However, he does note that economic interests were present and the Founding Fathers likely were motivated by their varied economic interests that transcended occupation and geography.

McDonald ends the book with a very apt and powerful observation that no single system of interpretation can explain all of history. He continues that one complex event might require several systems of interpretation and that some of these systems might even be contradictory.<sup>7</sup> Yet McDonald ultimately believes that the decision to ratify for each individual state depended on the state's confidence in sovereign existence and how much the state believed they needed federal independence. Is this a single interpretation that heaves the debate into a simple cleavage that he criticizes Beard for? McDonald is not being hypocritical because the ratification process

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 356.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 398.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 413.

was complex and he showed through the evidence that the participants could not be cast into simple economic classes. His evidence is clear that the states that ratified quickly could not be broken into any of the more popular dichotomies of classical conflict like geography, class, or even stance on slavery. Beard tried to simplify these ratification debates into simple class conflict, but McDonald shows the participants were much more complex in their lives and reasoning.

McDonald's *We the People* establishes a new foundation for study of the Constitutional era. His well reasoned and through study laid the cornerstone for the expanded interpretations of the nation's founding. Although McDonald was not the first to question Beard's *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*, *We The People* opened the floodgates and paved the way for future scholars to question Beard's stranglehold on the Founding Fathers. Bernard Bailyn, Gordon Wood, Robert McGuire, and David Waldstreicher are historians who have all refuted and reshaped Beard in their own individual ways using a variety of interpretations and lenses. It is clear that *We the People* paved the way for these different interpretations that McDonald believed would give a clearer understanding of the complexity of the founding era.

## Bibliography

McDonald, Forrest. *We the People: The Economic Origins of the Constitution*. Transaction Publishers, 2009.