

Book review of Woody Holton, *Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution*, (Hill and Wang, 2007)

Holton argued that what precipitated the Constitution was a struggle between the haves and have-nots which spiraled from a nation of excess democracy to one of less. He views the haves as creditors, framers, speculators, and bond holders. The have-nots were the debtors, farmers, and Indians. He divided the book into five parts that dealt with the motivations and grievances surrounding the individual state constitutions, rebellions, formation of the national government, and ratification. Holton stated the book would focus on "A host of the Framers' contemporaries" who "were firmly convinced that the recession that followed the Revolutionary War could have been ended without making the United States a less democratic country" (p. 17). The haves were most often (85 cites) represented by Madison; the have-nots' representation was most often (24 cites) from Husband.

The framers felt that common people were having too much influence, that states were reactive, and that state legislatures lacked virtue without which the "credit valve" would remain closed; therefore, it was necessary to establish a virtuous national government (p.23). Holton presented the complexity of these issues through opposing paradigms of, for example, justice, distribution of property, currency, taxes, creditors, debtors, speculators, and bond holders. Too much democracy was a recurring theme. Thus Massachusetts' Shay's rebellion, Connecticut's refusal to obey the 1785 requisition order, rebellion in New Hampshire and Rhode Island, burning courthouses in New Jersey and Virginia, and widespread agrarian insurrections were either "excessive democracy" or the path to "a truly democratic election" (159). Holton asserts that "The need to rein in the states weighed far more heavily upon the convention than the motive that has received the most attention from later generations of American, strengthening the Confederation" (182).

The convention crafted the Constitution after ridding itself of the rules in Articles of Confederation; an act that Holton said was unconstitutional (180). Holton focused on the debates and economic concerns of the Framers. The writings of Madison, Hamilton, Morris, and Jefferson showed their desire to establish a republic that was respected, secure, and just. Their

paradigms were nation centered. The have-nots' issues included taxes, debt relief, paper money and land ownership. Nine out of ten free Americans were farmers and it was farmers who were most concerned with paying taxes and reducing their debts (181). They had united to gain political influence within their states which resulted in excessive democracy. This caused a ripple effect that led to tax leniency which led to issues with the bond holders and ultimately to lack of investment. The states had failed to solve key issues and the resulting chaos caused economic instability not only for the states but for the nation.

Ratification necessitated the Bill of Rights. Holden stated that its omission provided Federalists with a "fallback position" and that "Americans owe their most cherished rights...not to the authors of the Constitution but to its inveterate enemies" (p. 253). Madison wanted to include suggestions from state ratifying conventions in the Constitution. The Bill of Rights resulted from twelve-articles proposed by Congress as amendments (p. 257). It was Madison who championed the Bill Of Rights "to conciliate the minds of the people" (p. 257).

Background details covering judicial review, the Electoral College, term limits, 3/5 rule, election of Senators and Representatives, minority protections, and veto and override powers were fascinating and provided insight which is relevant in understanding the Constitution (182-198). Holton repetitively portrayed the framers as underhanded and elitist and the common man as an unruly victim. He used a variety of newspapers and pamphlets to show the economic impact and conflicts farmers faced as they dealt with new state taxes handed down from Congress. He acknowledged that farmers as well as framers were not all of one mind on all the issues; each had subgroups (119-120). While Holton said the book would focus on the framers' contemporaries, it failed to do so. He referred to Husband on occasion and mentioned Brant briefly, but they were lost in his repetitive references to Madison and the Framers. He acknowledged that it was not only the speculators and creditors who supported Constitution but that "Some of the most avid supporters of the Constitution were not creditors but debtors" (p. 230). "It is certainly true that bond speculators were among the Constitution's most enthusiastic supporters, but it is also clear that thousands of Americans ...supported federal taxation not because they owned bonds-many did not-but for other, more public-spirited

reasons. Some viewed satisfying the public creditors as an imperative of justice” (p. 215). The book’s final sentences state: “That the nation’s fundamental charter is an underdogs’ Constitution is, for most Americans, a source of tremendous pride. It is richly ironic that what has arguably become history’s greatest experiment in shielding the powerless began as a slur on the capacities of ordinary citizens” (p. 278). The evidence provided by Holton does not support his repeated theme of class conflict. The Constitution established a stable republican form of government that not only reflected the concerns of that time period, but also had the capacity to serve as the law of the land for future generations.