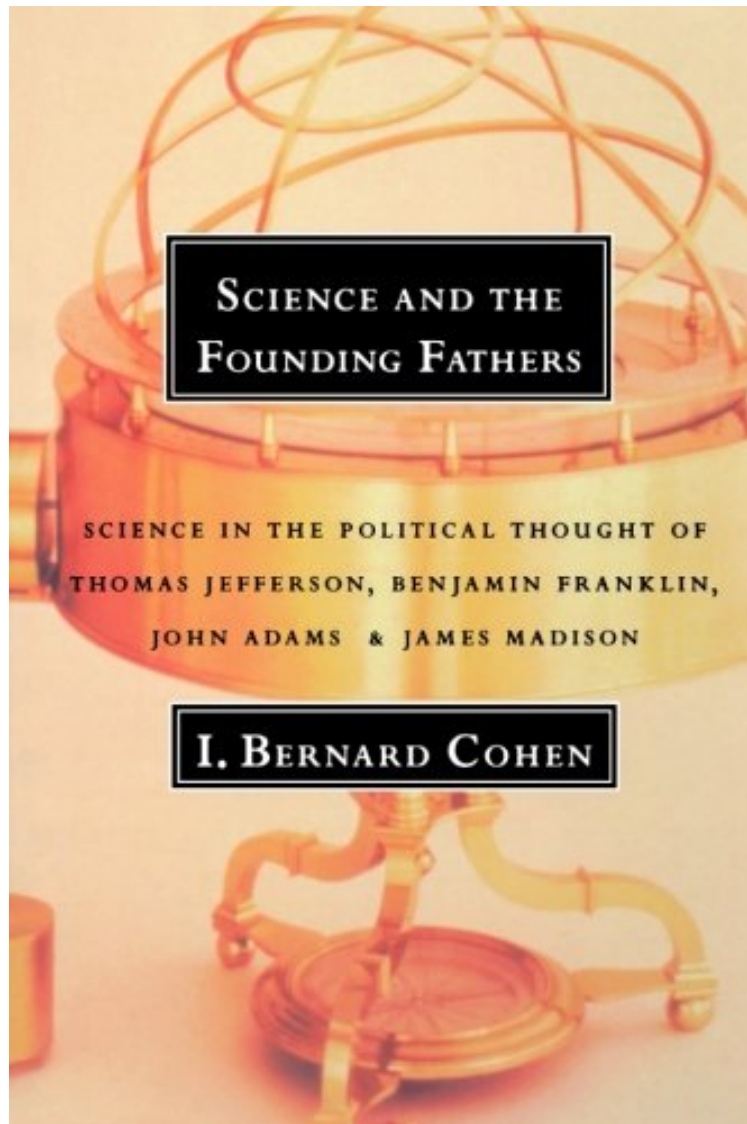


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# Science and the Founding Fathers: Science in the Political Thought of Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and James Madison

*I. Bernard Cohen*

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16 of 16 people found the following review helpful. Science Literacy=Understanding our Founding FathersBy C. M. LevinCohen does an excellent job in describing how the Founding Fathers based so much of our country's most vital documents-the Declaration of Independence the Constitution- their other writings, such as the Federalist Letters, on the science of their time, which Franklin Jefferson had a great part in the making. In our time, as we look at the sad state of scientific literacy, are we in danger of losing our grasp of these documents because the underlying concepts of science aren't understood?

General readers, students of American history, and professional historians alike will profit from reading this engaging presentation of an aspect of American history conspicuously absent from the usual textbooks and popular presentations of the political thought of this crucial period. Thomas Jefferson was the only president who could read and understand Newton's Principia. Benjamin Franklin is credited with establishing the science of electricity. John Adams had the finest education in science that the new country could provide, including "Pneumatics, Hydrostatics, Mechanics, Statics, Optics." James Madison, chief architect of the Constitution, peppered his Federalist Papers with reference to physics, chemistry, and the life sciences. For these men science was an integral part of life--including political life. This is the story of their scientific education and of how they employed that knowledge in shaping the political issues of the day, incorporating scientific reasoning into the Constitution.

From Publishers WeeklyCohen's eye-opening, elegant study shows that America's Founding Fathers were true citizens of the Age of Reason who sought links between scientific principles and constitutional government. Thomas Jefferson, naturalist and inventor, had a consuming passion for scientific pursuits ranging from paleontology to zoology. The Declaration of Independence, which he wrote, reverberates with echoes of Newtonian science, as when he invokes "self-evident" truths or "laws of nature." Benjamin Franklin, far from being a mere tinkerer or inventor, pioneered the science of electricity. Franklin also developed a demographic theory that North America would become a population center of the British world; this led to the policy according to which the British annexed Canada rather than Guadeloupe as the spoils in the war against the French (1754-63). John Adams, who studied astronomy and physics at Harvard, was a founder of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in Boston. And James Madison, a devoted amateur scientist, drew on scientific metaphors and analogies in his Federalist articles. Illustrated. Cohen is Victor S. Thomas professor emeritus of the history of science at Harvard University. Copyright 1995 Reed Business Information, Inc. Intellectually engaging . . . deftly written. - Boston GlobeFrom the Back CoverFor Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and James Madison, science was an integral part of life-including political life. This is the story of their scientific education and of how they employed that knowledge in shaping the political issues of the day, incorporating scientific reasoning even into the Constitution.