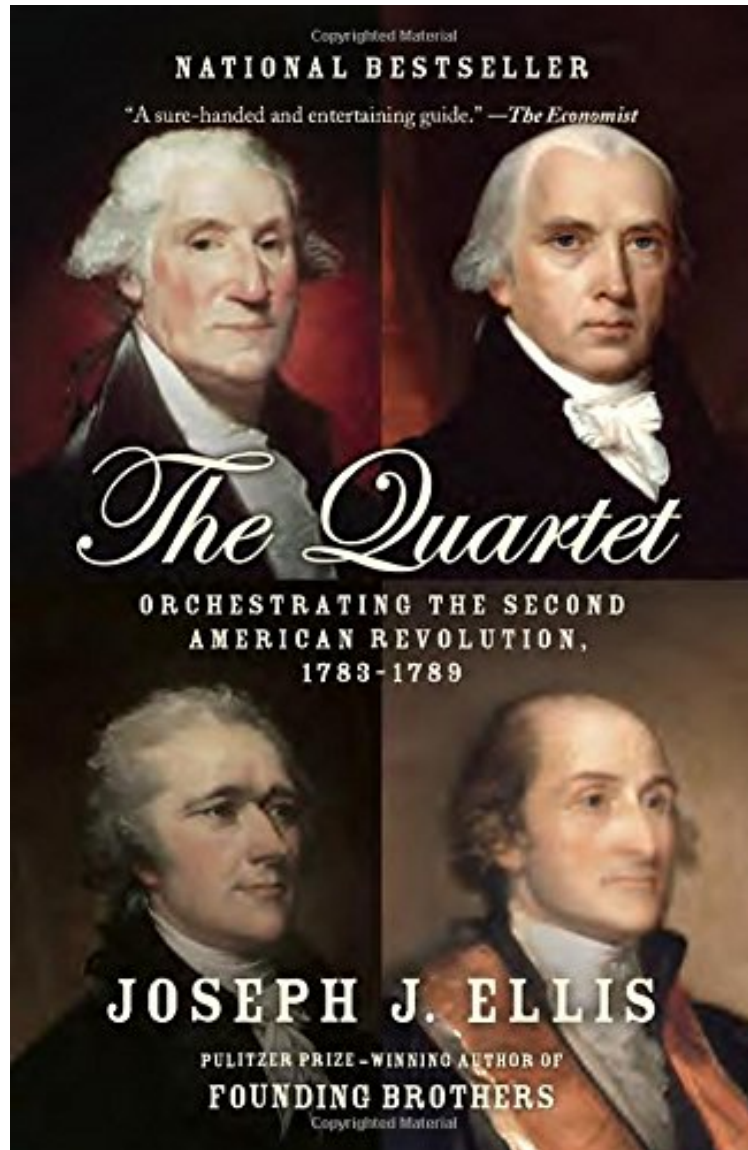


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# The Quartet: Orchestrating the Second American Revolution, 1783-1789

Joseph J. Ellis

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Joseph J. Ellis : The Quartet: Orchestrating the Second American Revolution, 1783-1789 before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Quartet: Orchestrating the Second American Revolution, 1783-1789:

188 of 195 people found the following review helpful. Joseph Ellis and the Making of a Nation. By Robin Friedman

Joseph Ellis' new book, "The Quartet: Orchestrating the Second American Revolution, 1783 -- 1789" examines the United States' movement from independence to nationhood following the Revolutionary War. Ellis, retired as Ford Foundation Professor of History at Mount Holyoke College, has written many works about early American history and has received both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. Ellis' short but broad, thoughtful, and provocative book argues that the United States did not become a nation upon winning independence but became instead a group of loosely-connected separate states. Ellis maintains that most people at the time lacked even a concept of national identity beyond the provincial boundaries of their communities. They thought they had fought a hard war to free themselves from the distant centralizing government of Great Britain. With the ineffective Articles of Confederation, the thirteen states appeared headed for separation and quarrels, similar to the nations of Europe. Other parts of Ellis' book are more controversial. Ellis maintains that while the first American Revolution might be viewed from the ground up, the second worked "from the top down". He finds that four individuals, the "Quartet" of his title, were primarily responsible: George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay. The first three names are unsurprising. Ellis clearly regards Washington as the essential member of the group and as the leader of both the first and second American revolutions. He gives Washington more credit than he sometimes receives for his intellectual foresight in an early writing about the deficiency of the Articles of Confederation and the need for a central government. Ellis sees Madison more as a highly savvy politician and lawyer than as an original thinker. The partial surprise on Ellis' list is John Jay who tends to be less well-known than he deserves. Jay negotiated the treaty of Paris and worked early and diplomatically, including with opponents, for the cause of nationhood. Other leaders who play supporting roles in Ellis' account include financier Robert Morris, Thomas Jefferson, and Gouverneur Morris, the drafter of the Constitution. In another claim that will provoke controversy, Ellis' reading of the second American revolution is avowedly elitist. He argues that most people had no interest in nationhood because a broad national vision would be inconsistent in some ways with their limited goals such as avoiding taxation and living beyond their means. Ellis recognizes the controversial nature of his perspective. He writes in the book's Preface: "All democratic cultures find such explanations offensive because they violate the hallowed conviction that, at least in the long run, popular majorities can best decide the direction that history should take. However true that conviction might be over the full span of American history, and the claim is contestable, it does not work for the 1780s, which just might be the most conspicuous and consequential example of the way in which small groups of prominent leaders, in disregard of popular opinion, carried the American story in a new direction." Ellis takes the reader through the Confederation years, the preliminaries to the Constitutional Convention, the Convention itself, and the proceedings in the states for the ratification of the Constitution, including the writing and significance of "The Federalist Papers". The book concludes with the enactment of the Bill of Rights. Ellis does not attribute superhuman wisdom to the founders but he also avoids the current tendency to belittle their accomplishments through an anachronistic importation of today's values into the late 18th Century. Among other things, his book discusses briefly but well the dilemma the founders faced over slavery. The book stresses the value of ideas and thinking, compromise, practicality, commitment, and humility in the second American revolution and the founding of the national government and its shifting contours of Federalism. This book has a great deal to teach and provides ample material for reflection. It also made me want to learn more about George Washington, whose role throughout the Revolutionary Era amply comes through in this book, by reading the Library of America volume of his writings. George Washington : Writings (Library of America). Washington and his accomplishments cannot be over-emphasized.

Robin Friedman

167 of 180 people found the following review helpful. Another highly informative yet thoroughly entertaining book by Joseph Ellis

By Robert Moore

A few years ago Joseph J. Ellis was involved in a confusing plagiarism scandal (the major element being that he had claimed military service when, in fact, he had not served in any branch of the military). I had enjoyed several of his previous books, in particular his splendid short biography of John Adams and his biography of Jefferson, entitled AMERICAN SPHINX, in which he found Jefferson a bit more perplexing than I believe is warranted (for a pair of splendid short biographies on Jefferson, try R. B. Bernstein's THOMAS JEFFERSON: THE REVOLUTION OF IDEAS and Richard K. Matthews's magnificent THE RADICAL POLITICS OF THOMAS JEFFERSON: A REVISIONIST VIEW, each of which will bring more understanding of Jefferson than Dumas Malone's imposing multi-volume biography). Ellis is not a master of original research like Gordon Wood, Bernard Bailyn, or Douglass Adair, but he is an unusually fine writer. His gift is repackaging the early events in American history in forms that are perhaps the most accessible ever written, while at the same time not distorting history of any ideological purpose. I wouldn't quite call him a popular historian, but a brilliant expositor. If you have read a fair amount on early American history, there is very little here that will be new, but by teasing out a narrative of events that was already there he makes the founding of the United States as a unified nation understandable in a way that it has rarely been in the past. The dilemma of American history has always been why, after fighting a war of independence from both the English crown and the dominating landed families in Great Britain, some of whom literally owned individual colonies, did Americans decide to bring themselves once again under a central government, though one constituted and run by themselves? What I like most about Ellis's book, in addition to

its excellent prose and clear narrative, is his focusing primarily on four Americans that students of the writing of the constitution know as crucial. but who more casual students might not. He correctly leaves out figures like John Adams (though he played an important role at the constitutional convention), Thomas Jefferson (though he did play a role indirectly as the major influence on James Madison, who is arguably the most important person in the creating of the constitution and getting it ratified) is for the most part absent from the story, as is Benjamin Franklin, whose health had begun to fade by the mid-1780s. Instead, he tells the story from the standpoint of George Washington, who contributed little of substance to the creation of the new nation apart from lending his formidable support to the idea of a new nation (indeed, except for creating the precedent of presidents not serving for life, which he could easily have done had he wished, Washington's ideas were for the most part not followed by Congress or later presidents: he pushed for a far more powerful central government that we ended up with, symbolized by many such institutions as a national university to be situated in the national capital and supported the inclusion of Native Americans in the new nation, as long as they gave up hunting and embraced agriculture), James Madison, Alexander Hamilton (the individual whom neither the Right or Left today wants to count as one of their own, largely because he was in most ways a conservative while at the same time agreeing with Washington on the need for a strong central government - the best book that I've read on Hamilton, and in fact maybe the best book that I've read on the Founding Generation apart from Gordon Wood's many masterpieces, Bernard Bailyn's *THE IDEOLOGICAL ORIGINS OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION*, and Douglass Adair's remarkable collection of essays *FAME AND THE FOUNDING FATHERS*, is Gerald Stourzh's *ALEXANDER HAMILTON AND THE IDEA OF REPUBLICAN GOVERNMENT* [on a personal note, I had looked for a copy of this book for years until finally locating one, and was ecstatic upon receiving it to see the signature of the previous owner of the book, "Merrill D. Peterson," the author of some of the finest books ever written concerning the history of the United States, including a superb short book on the complex relationship between Adams and Jefferson and his masterful volume on the dominant Congressional personalities in Congress during the antebellum period, *THE GREAT TRIUMVIRATE: WEBSTER, CLAY, AND CALHOUN* - sadly Peterson made only a couple of marks in the book]), and John Jay. The latter is the greatest of the Founders of whom people know almost next to nothing. Apart from serving as an ambassador, writing several of the *FEDERALIST* papers, and serving in the Supreme Court people know next to nothing about him, and I firmly count myself among them. One of the greatest services of this book is helping to give Jay the credit he deserves for his role in creating the United States. I strongly recommend this book. I don't love Ellis like I do Gordon Wood, whom I consider a national treasure, or find myself looking at everything differently, like I do after reading Richard Mansfield or Douglass Adair, but because of his skill as a writer I find myself enjoying Ellis more than any other writer about this period of American history. My only complaint with Ellis is that he tends in his overall output to keep crisscrossing the same time period. I would love to see him write something outside his specialized field. Even if he were only to write a book on the conflict between Jefferson and Marshall, it would be nice to see his take on something other than the original set of Founders. But as long as he continues to write such informative yet entertaining books, I won't truly complain.

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. A Concise, yet moving, Introduction into the Development of a New Nation By Christopher J. Toy Without overdoing the review, I felt that this book demystified the evolution of the constitution during the period between the initial Declaration of Independence and the initiation of the Constitution in 1791. The era of the "Articles of Confederation" was always just that, a title, with little explanation of the nature of the federation and why the constitution became a necessity. Other reviews have criticized this book for using too broad strokes, but I think the for average American whose U.S. history is often limited to a virtual "whitewash", the breadth of these "strokes" is far finer and valuable introduction to the real people who were the "Founding Fathers". The four main figures -- Washington, Hamilton, Jay, and Madison -- each had a significant role to play in guiding the disparate states to form a union that could in its albeit lurching manner forge a path as a nation into the future. The author uses a style that is very accessible and has a firm momentum that keeps the narrative moving forward. What is more important is that level of detail will whet one's appetite for more and provide the skeleton on which to hang a more complex analysis. Although I am not an American history scholar, I sense that this analysis is based on original sources which one will not find contradicted in any subsequent reading were the reader to decide to dive deeper into the subject. For someone who wants a solid understanding of how our national structure found its way into existence, this book is a very fine introduction.

In *The Quartet*, Pulitzer Prizewinning historian Joseph Ellis tells the unexpected story of America's second great founding and of the men most responsible: Alexander Hamilton, George Washington, John Jay, and James Madison: why the thirteen colonies, having just fought off the imposition of a distant centralized governing power, would decide to subordinate themselves anew. These men, with the help of Robert Morris and Gouverneur Morris, shaped the contours of American history by diagnosing the systemic dysfunctions created by the Articles of Confederation, manipulating the political process to force the calling of the Constitutional Convention, conspiring to set the agenda in Philadelphia, orchestrating the debate in the state ratifying conventions, and, finally, drafting the Bill of Rights to assure state compliance with the constitutional settlement, created the new republic. Ellis gives us a dramatic portrait

of one of the most crucial and misconstrued periods in American history: the years between the end of the Revolution and the formation of the federal government. The Quartet unmasks a myth, and in its place presents an even more compelling truth that lies at the heart of understanding the creation of the United States of America.

Historian Joseph Ellis masterfully illuminates the untrodden path, as Washington put it, that led to that crucial stage of sewing up the elements of the new country. . . . Deeply insightful. New York of BooksThe dissentersGeorge Washington, Alexander Hamilton, John Jay and James Madisonfaced no less a task than redefining the meaning of the War for Independence in what amounted to a Second American Revolution. How they did so is the burden of the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Joseph Ellis' *The Quartet*, an engaging reconsideration of the arduous path to the Constitution. The Wall Street JournalCustomary, graceful prose. His portraits [show] his sure touchhighlighting Washingtons dignity, Hamiltons energy, Madisons learning and Jays diplomacy. New York Times Book The author is a sure-handed and entertaining guide through the thickets of argument, personality and ideology out of which the American nation emerged. The EconomistEllis shows the extraordinary capacity of these four leaders to understand the events, discuss them dispassionately, explain them to the American people, reach compromise, rise above pettiness and sacrifice personal wealth, power and popularity for the long-term public good. Given the rarity of these qualities today, Ellis book is a compelling reminder of the political virtues that created the American republic. Star TribuneEllis lives and breathes the Founders, and he deploys his customary zip and trenchant scholarship in showing how four central figuresWashington, John Jay, Alexander Hamilton and James Madisonconceived and promoted a new political framework built on the Constitution." NewsdayThis is more than just a reinterpretation of a vital transition in our history; it is a reflection of new material from an episode that occurred two and a quarter centuries ago. . . .Having set forth the analysis, Ellis plunges into the narrative. His is an inviting voice and his story compelling, built around irresistible figures who, as the annual publishing lists amply display, retain their appeal in our own time. The Boston GlobeThe Quartet achieves its purpose, providing a clear explanation of how the real United States of America came into being. Miami HeraldEllis, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 2001 for *Founding Brothers*, reminds us that what Catherine Drinker Bowen has called the Miracle at Philadelphia wasnt destiny or ordained by God. It was created by perceptive men who understood human nature, history and politics and could foresee what this country could become should its people choose to have a strong central government. St. Louis Post DispatchAn author who breathes life into the dead and immediacy into the past, Ellis illuminates Americas rebirth, the men who made it possible and the framework they created. With rich research and intelligent interpretation, *The Quartet* burnishes his reputation as a writer, a thinker and a humanist. Richmond Times DispatchAbsorbing in its details, and convincing in its arguments, *The Quartet* is sure to appeal to history nerds and American politicians. As another election season approaches, a look back at the creation of the government, and the reasons why these founding fathers did what they did, is sure to be engrossing reading for anyone. Shelf AwarenessA brilliant account of six years during which four Founding Fathers, in disregard of public opinion, carried the American story in a new direction. In a virtuosic introduction, Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award winner Ellis maintains that Abraham Lincoln was wrong. In 1776four score and seven years before 1863our forefathers did not bring forth a new nation. . . . Ellis reminds us that the 1776 resolution declaring independence described 13 free and independent states. Adopting the Constitution in 1789 created the United States, but no mobs rampaged in its favor. . . . Ellis delivers a convincing argument that it was a massive political transformation led by men with impeccable revolutionary credentials. . . . This is Ellis ninth consecutive history of the Revolutionary War era and yet another winner. Kirkus(starred review)About the AuthorJOSEPH J. ELLIS is the Pulitzer Prizewinning author of *Founding Brothers*. His portrait of Thomas Jefferson, *American Sphinx*, won the National Book Award.He lives in Amherst, Massachusetts, with his wife, Ellen, his youngest son, three dogs, and a cat.Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.Preface: Pluribus to UnumThe idea for this book first came to me while listening to twenty-eight middle school boys recite the Gettysburg Address from memory in front of their classmates and proud parents. My son Scott was teaching science at the Greenwood School in Putney, Vermont, and had invited me to judge the annual oratorical contest. I dont remember exactly when it happened, but at some point during the strenuous if repetitious effort to get Lincolns words right, it dawned on me that the first clause in the first sentence of Lincolns famous speech was historically incorrect.Lincoln began as follows: Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this Continent a new Nation. No, not really. In 1776 thirteen American colonies declared themselves independent states that came together temporarily to win the war, then would go their separate ways. The government they created in 1781, called the Articles of Confederation, was not really much of a government at all and was never intended to be. It was, instead, what one historian has called a Peace Pact among sovereign states that regarded themselves as mini-nations of their own, that came together voluntarily for mutual security in a domestic version of a League of Nations.And once you started thinking along these lines, there were reasons as self-evident as Jeffersons famous truths why no such thing as a coherent American nation could possibly have emerged after independence was won. Politically, a state-based framework followed naturally from the arguments that the colonies had been hurling at the British ministry for over a decade, which denied Parliaments right to tax them because that authority resided within the respective colonial legislatures, which represented their

constituents in a more direct and proximate fashion than those distant members of Parliament could ever do. The resolution declaring independence, approved on July 2, 1776, clearly states that the former colonies were leaving the British Empire not as a single collective but rather as Free and Independent States. Distance also made a huge difference. The vast majority of Americans were born, lived out their lives, and died within a thirty-mile geographic radius. It took three weeks for a letter to get from Boston to Philadelphia. Political horizons and allegiances, therefore, were limited obviously no such things as radios, cell phones, or the Internet existed to solve the distance problem so the ideal political unit was the town or county government, where representatives could be trusted to defend your interests because they shared them as your neighbors. Indeed, it was presumed that any faraway national government would represent a domestic version of Parliament, too removed from the interests and experiences of the American citizenry to be trusted. And distrusting such distant sources of political power had become a core ideological impulse of the movement for independence, often assuming quasi-paranoid hostility toward any projection of power from London and Whitehall, which was described as inherently arbitrary, imperious, and corrupt. And so creating a national government was the last thing on the minds of American revolutionaries, since such a distant source of political power embodied all the tyrannical tendencies that patriotic Americans believed they were rebelling against. In 1863 Lincoln had some compelling reasons for bending the arc of American history in a national direction, since he was then waging a civil war on behalf of a union that he claimed predated the existence of the states. This was a fundamental distortion of how history happened, though we may wish to forgive Lincoln, since it was the only way for him to claim the political authority to end slavery. Truth be known, nationhood was never a goal of the war for independence, and all the political institutions necessary for a viable American nation-state were thoroughly stigmatized in the most heartfelt convictions of revolutionary ideology. The only thing holding the American colonies together until 1776 was their membership in the British Empire. The only thing holding them together after 1776 was their common resolve to leave that empire. Once the war was won, that cord was cut, and the states began to float into their own at best regional orbits. Any historically informed prophet who was straddling that postwar moment could have safely predicted that North America was destined to become a western version of Europe, a constellation of rival political camps and countries, all jockeying for primacy. That, at least, was the clear direction in which American history was headed. To say that something happened to change that direction is obviously inadequate. The beauty of the Lincoln version of the story is its presumption that a national ethos was already embedded in the political equation, albeit latently or implicitly, so that what we might call the second revolution of 1787 followed naturally from the first in 1776. But for all the political, ideological, and demographic reasons already noted, the transition from the Declaration of Independence to the Constitution cannot be described as natural. Quite the contrary, it represented a dramatic change in direction and in scale, in effect from a confederation of sovereign states to a nation-size republic, indeed the largest republic ever established. So how do we explain such a seismic shift in the gravitational field of American political history? Well, the kind of bottom-up explanation that works so well to convey popular opposition to British imperial policy in the 1760s and 1770s will not work in the 1780s. Mobs did not appear, urging the creation of a fully empowered American nation. Quite the opposite: the dominant historical forces in the 1780s were centrifugal rather than centripetal, meaning that the vast majority of citizens had no interest in American nationhood; indeed, they regarded the very idea of a national government as irrelevant to their local lives and ominously reminiscent of the British leviathan they had recently vanquished. There was no popular insurgency for a national government because such a thing was not popular. The obvious alternative explanation is top-down. All democratic cultures find such explanations offensive because they violate the hallowed conviction that, at least in the long run, popular majorities can best decide the direction that history should take. However true that conviction might be over the full span of American history and the claim is contestable it does not work for the 1780s, which just might be the most conspicuous and consequential example of the way in which a small group of prominent leaders, in disregard of popular opinion, carried the American story in a new direction. There is an ironic precedent for this argument. During the first half of the twentieth century Charles Beard and his disciples, chiefly Merrill Jensen, created a school of thought, called the Progressive School, that dominated our understanding of the revolutionary era. While much of their work has not aged well, chiefly its claim that the founders were driven primarily by economic motives, two features of their story line remain abidingly relevant: first, that the founders must not be regarded as demigods with unique access to supernatural wisdom; and second, that the transition from the Articles of Confederation to the Constitution was orchestrated by a political elite that collaborated to say conspired seems sinister, but it is what the Progressives meant to replace a state-based confederation with a federal government that claimed to speak for the American people as a collective whole. In virtually every other respect, the narrative offered in the pages that follow veers in a different direction from the Progressive interpretation. My sense is that the most prominent leaders of this founding elite were driven by motives that were more political than economic, chiefly the desire to expand the meaning of the American Revolution so that it could function on a larger, indeed national, scale. The great conflict, as I see it, was not between aristocracy and democracy, whatever those elusive categories might mean, but rather between nationalists and confederatists, which is shorthand for those who believed that the principles of the American Revolution could flourish in a much larger political theater and those who did not. Finally, my version of the story regards the successful collaboration of

this small cadre not as a betrayal of the core convictions of the American Revolution, but rather as a quite brilliant rescue. My argument is that four men made the transition from confederation to nation happen. They are George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison. If they are the stars of the story, the supporting cast consists of Robert Morris, Gouverneur Morris (no relation), and Thomas Jefferson. Readers can and should decide for themselves, but my contention is that this political quartet diagnosed the systemic dysfunctions under the Articles, manipulated the political process to force a calling of the Constitutional Convention, collaborated to set the agenda in Philadelphia, attempted somewhat successfully to orchestrate the debates in the state ratifying conventions, then drafted the Bill of Rights as an insurance policy to ensure state compliance with the constitutional settlement. If I am right, this was arguably the most creative and consequential act of political leadership in American history. It made a huge difference that all four of the political collaborators identified here possessed impeccable revolutionary credentials. (The posture of Progressive historians has always seemed somewhat odd on this score, since the men they accused of hijacking the American Revolution were all central players in making the victory over Great Britain happen.) If the overarching issue at stake was what direction the American Revolution should take after independence was won, no one could accuse them of failing to grasp the almost mystical meaning of The Cause. And since Washington was the one-man embodiment of all the semi-sacred reverberations that term conveyed, his endorsement of the national agenda provided a crucial veneer of legitimacy for their bold and slightly illegal project. It also helped that all four of them had served in the Continental Army or the Continental (then Confederation) Congress, which meant that they had experienced the war for independence from a higher perch than most of their contemporaries. They were accustomed, as Hamilton put it, to think continentally at a time when the allegiances and perspectives of most Americans were confined within local and state borders. Indeed, the very term American Revolution implies a national ethos that in fact did not exist in the population at large. Perhaps the best way to understand the term American Revolution is to realize that it describes a two-tiered political process. The first American Revolution achieved independence. It was a mere, or perhaps not so mere, colonial rebellion. It also created a series of mini-republics in the former colonies, now states, but it did so in ways that were inherently incompatible with any national political agenda. The second American Revolution modified the republican framework existent in the states in order to create a nation-size republic. The overly succinct way to put it is that the American Revolution did not become a full-fledged revolution until it became more expansively American. Or even more succinctly, the first phase of the American Revolution was about the rejection of political power; the second phase was about controlling it. More practically, the United States could not become the dominant model for the liberal state in the modern world until the second American Revolution of 1787-88.