



Genius of the People: The Making of the Constitution

Charles L. Mee Jr.

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"Charles Mee has recreated the vivid drama of 1787 . . . Genius of the People is an absorbing look at the incomparable personalities who brought us our Constitution."

- Michael Beschloss

Genius of the People is a timely account of how America's national government came to be born during the Constitutional Convention of 1787. Charles L. Mee, Jr., vividly describes the personalities, issues, conflicts, and implications of an epoch-making meeting of brilliant and not-so-brilliant political leaders, who had different and often opposed agendas and whose disagreements and compromises, alliances and feuds, vision and shortsightedness create the main storylines of the years to come.

Mee sets the events and issues of the Convention against a background of a small but diverse society that had just won its independence and was already wracked with dissension and factionalism as to how it should be governed. The axial line of Mee's account is the ongoing struggle between what he calls the party of liberty and the party of order. On one side was the loose coalition of states' rights and local government people, such as the patrician democrat George Mason, the tenacious Puritan shopkeeper Roger Sherman, and the prototypical Southern politician John Rutledge. Opposed to them and their followers was the coalition of nationalists led by the frail but resourceful James Madison, the arrogant Gouverneur Morris, and the brilliant, aristocratic Alexander Hamilton.

These two broad positions roughly organized a myriad of different interests, ideals, and whims. Forced by their disagreements to one unpleasant compromise after another, the delegates finally found themselves compelled to resort to a set of general principles based on the American experience that people are most secure and most free when power is not gathered up in the hands of a few - not the president and his friends, or of a class of businesspeople or landed gentry, or of the military, or of a group of politicians.

Without partisanship, Mee has written a history of the Convention for our own time. On virtually every page, his reporting on the proceedings undermines the view of many Americans of the Constitution as a rigidly fixed screed of political fundamentalism. At the same time, Mee invigorates and challenges the reader's faith in American democracy. He shows us our dissatisfied and contentious Founding Fathers entrusting their own class interests and power to the genius of the American people for self-government, knowing fully that only a politically informed and active public could preserve their work.

Genius of the People: The Making of the Constitution Details

Date : Published June 24th 2013 by New Word City, Inc.

ISBN :

Author : Charles L. Mee Jr.

Format : Kindle Edition 352 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Politics, Historical



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From Reader Review Genius of the People: The Making of the Constitution for online ebook

Jennifer Martin says

In the introduction, Charles Mee states that contrary to common perception, the framers of the Constitution were not a group of like-minded men with the same goals. His book does an excellent job of proving his thesis. It is well researched and organized, and includes humor and details about the framers which keep the reader engaged.

Evelyn says

This was a real eye opener regarding the struggles that went into the making of our constitution. With the recent history of the relationship with the King of England, the writers were in a struggle between forming a strong central government vs. strong local government. Interesting, these same issues remain today. Throughout the book, Benjamin Franklin seemed to stay in the background until a crisis would bring him to his feet and his wisdom calm the troubled waters. Once written, the ratification process was not any easier. Pennsylvania was the first but not without violent persuasion being used. Massachusetts set the tone for signing but with the understanding that amendments would be added. The absence of a Bill of Rights was a real issue.

Lea Gallardo says

Loved this book particularly in view of today's political climate. It really gives you a good understanding of how "genius" these people were to consider a document that would take us into an unknown future.

Pat Ellis says

Four stars for the content, which includes numerous details that were new to me. The interplay of personalities and agendas was fascinating, and, for me, the Constitution becomes less an amazing document and more of a logical outcome of dueling perspectives of what was needed to bind the states under one government at that time. Thank heavens there were people willing to bend their individual desires for the good of the new nation. That includes, wonder of all wonders, people willing to change their minds after listening to others.

Quinndara says

The best book of three that I have about the Constitutional Convention. In addition to pictures and details of the main contributors, I appreciated details of the setting: Philadelphia, the city, the insufferable heat wave,

the omnipresent black flies and mosquitoes which caused much debate over whether to open or close the windows. One man even took a hornet's nest home to hang in his living room to combat the pests. It was a good read and prompted me to know more about how George Washington, (after listening for 4 months to the conflicts, disagreements, disputes and compromises) as the first president, implemented the elements of the constitution that was wrung from the convention.

Steven Williams says

This book is about the Constitutional Convention in 1787 which produced our Constitution except the amendments which were added later. After a prologue Charles L. Mee, Jr. introduces "The Man"--James Madison, and the need for something to replace the wanting Articles of Confederation. Next comes George Washington--"The Man of Order" and the role he was thought to be able to fill. Then comes Benjamin Franklin who once was trying to convince England how to run the colonies. He was a man of Philadelphia where the convention was set, which was a good thing as he would often come to play a mediating role between the ones wanting a strong central government and the ones who felt the states needed to play a more powerful role. Living in Philadelphia was essential because he was beset with various ills and wouldn't have been able to travel. Next comes the arrival of the early contestants, as it was a battle between the two strongly entrenched positions. Finely, Mee covers the opening session. This finishes part 1.

More briefly in part 2 Mee relates the basic principles and the role of democracy. Executive power is also related. In part 3 the battle begins in earnest. Each party's tactics are given a thorough look, and what was called "The Great Compromise" at the end. Part 4 gives a description of the various components to the Constitution. Slavery is hammered out, and the signing of it is described. The epilogue gives a brief description of the ratification process.

This book reads most naturally as a story. Mee introduces each character as they enter the stage and role that they played. The narrative flows without losing a beat. At the time of reading it was the best book that I had read for a couple of months and was the reading highlight while I was ill for quite sometime. I might even search out Amazon for some other books of his.

I could recommend this book for just about all Americans as it gives the story of the difficulty producing the Constitution—the most important document in all of American history. Others for which I could recommend this book are for all those, including non-Americans, who take an interest in American history, especially its founding.

Julie Griffin says

With the election and all the interest in the Constitution I picked up this book I have had for a while on the process of writing, finalizing, and ratifying the Constitution. I wanted to regain the love I had developed for the Constitution during law school. It helped, but also reminded me of the compromises and some self-interest and the more radical democratic ideas that got lost in the process. It still amazes me as a piece of self-government that had not been done before. Casual readers will be interested in the personalities of the writers, the factions of localists and centrists, and the reminders of the personalities and histories of the original colonies. And Hamilton playgoers might be reminded that Hamilton was NOT a populist. Enjoyed the hammering out of the concepts of representation by election, who counted for representation, states vs.

central government power, whether the senate should have power over the president or vice versa, and indeed who had the power to write a constitution and how could it be ratified.

John P. Vickers says

A stunning window on the creation of the Constitution

The book transports you to Independence hall! You seem to experience the heat and feel the frustrations and emotions of the founders! Describing how they looked and describing their backgrounds, completed the picture!

Ron says

In "Genius of the People" historian Charles Mee writes a fascinating account of the fifty-five delegates from the original thirteen states that gathered together in Philadelphia during the hot summer months of 1787 to debate and then draft the U.S. Constitution. Representing all facets of America, from the academic and business cities of New England, the trade centers of New York and Philadelphia to the slave states of the south, they all brought to the convention drastic differences in how they wanted to see the federal government structured. The book describes in stark terms the battles waged that summer, especially among the key players including James Madison, Benjamin Franklin, George Washington and other founding fathers. That we have a constitution at all is an outstanding achievement of diplomacy, political will and extraordinary patriotism. This book is a really good lesson in American history.

Judy says

I read this when I was getting my undergraduate degree in history from Cal State Hayward. Remember it as a good book.

Andrew Scholes says

Good read

There was a lot of details about the founding of the nation that I had not previously heard. I enjoyed the book.

David says

Fascinating book into the making of our country's most important document. It's very interesting how the political differences they were dealing with then exactly mirror the differences of today.

5 stars- highly recommended if you enjoy history

Bryan Alkire says

Interesting detail but a bit light overall

Judy says

I've been trying off & on for a number of years to remember the name & locate this book. I read it for an American history course when I was working on my history degree. What I did remember was how great the book was & how much I learned. It's interestingly written--doesn't read like a text book. The reader becomes acquainted with the early framers of our country.

Suzanne says

I started and then put aside this book but really wanted to finish it and will go back and reread parts of it again later, as well as my highlighted portions. I found it illuminating and fascinating, as it laid out the back and forth arguments of the various political and property-owning factions of the men representing the states. The issues they failed to address, at all or sufficiently, and the self-interests in play, plague us still today in Washington DC. The book gives a greater understanding of how the Constitution came about, leading to an understanding of its purpose and intent, strengths and weaknesses, and why we are still fighting some of the issues today (hint: possibly because it truly was a group of elitist white guys putting it together primarily on their own behalves). The words of the framers, and their disagreements, lend clarity to hotly-debated portions of the Constitution too.

The title is a quote from the convention. The Constitution, like the new Republic, was meant to reflect the "genius of the people" despite the many and varied factions among us. Did it? Or did it just pretend to? and not even that very deeply? We are lucky so many of the participants kept journals or diaries and made them available. This "biography of the birth of the Constitution" gives me a better understanding and perspective on today's policy fights and self-interests.

If you are interested in good government or politics or the Constitution, or even just history, this little book should be on your "shelves."
