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**Andrew S. Trees: The Founding Fathers and the Politics of Character**

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# Introduction

THOUGH POLITICAL INDEPENDENCE had been won by 1783, Americans, individually and collectively, still needed to establish their identity or, as they would have said in the eighteenth century, their “character.” Indeed, neither an end to war nor the ratification of the Constitution represented a final revolutionary settlement. As Washington warned in 1783,

[T]his is the moment to establish or ruin . . . national Character forever. . . It is yet to be decided, whether the Revolution must ultimately be considered as a blessing or a curse: a blessing or a curse, not to the present age alone, for with our fate will the destiny of unborn Millions be involved.<sup>1</sup>

The meaning of the Revolution, according to Washington, would only be established once the newly independent people agreed upon a character that would draw them together as a purposeful union.<sup>2</sup> That would prove a most difficult task, as briefly discussed in the preface and more fully elaborated here.

Americans were far more prepared to say who they were not. They knew, for example, that they were not English.<sup>3</sup> Winning the Revolution brought to an abrupt close the many years of striving to be British. They knew, too, that they did not want to be politicians. The Revolution had been an effort, in many ways, to cleanse America from the taint of British corruption, but Americans saw the republican governments created to replace imperial rule as fragile creations, easily susceptible to corruption themselves. The politician, a man of self-interest rather than the common good, embodied the corruption that so many Americans feared. Alexander Hamilton could write sneeringly in *Federalist #11* of “the little arts of little politicians,” confident that such a feeling would meet widespread support.<sup>4</sup> According to Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary*, the very word meant something unsavory. The great lexicographer defined the politician as a “man of artifice, of deep contrivance.” If politicians were dangerous individually, their combination in a party or a faction compounded the threat, creating a profound hostility in most Americans to political parties.<sup>5</sup> Political circumstances reinforced these attitudes. In colonial and revolutionary times, legislative battles with royal governors and later military battles with Britain had demanded unity, not division.<sup>6</sup>

The newly established national government provided no established institutions or rules to fill this void. The fluid postrevolutionary environment offered only broad and vague guidelines, and even the most mundane

issues, such as the manner of dress or the president's title, were bitterly contested.<sup>7</sup> The hostility to politicians and parties meant that politics in the early republic would have to be practiced in a somewhat oblique manner. Continuing to contest the meaning of the Revolution, American leaders struggled to impose their own different understandings of the Revolution and to use that to form political characters for themselves and the nation that would allow them to act politically, while not acting as politicians.<sup>8</sup>

Engaging in a highly personalized form of politics that could aptly be termed the politics of character, they wrestled with this problem on two levels: their own individual political characters and the nation's character. They considered the two projects as interrelated and viewed their own characters as templates that could shape that of the country.<sup>9</sup> To understand their struggles, we must first begin to understand what character meant to them. In the eighteenth century, the word meant something far different than it does today. It possessed a largely public meaning that was virtually synonymous with reputation, rather than an intrinsic quality. It was almost a tangible possession, something one fashioned, held, and protected, so that one would speak of "acquiring" a character.<sup>10</sup> By the end of the century, though, the meaning of character was undergoing a process of redefinition. The larger trajectory of its meaning is readily apparent. Publicly weighted conceptions in the early part of the eighteenth century would give way to nineteenth-century notions of character that relied predominantly on private life. But that shift was not preordained or readily apparent to the founders. The relative importance of the public and private sides of one's character during this period was a subject of constant debate.<sup>11</sup>

The distinction between public and private life has received considerable scholarly attention, particularly from those studying gender, who have persuasively argued for the interdependence of the two terms.<sup>12</sup> Political historians have generally paid less attention to the issue.<sup>13</sup> But in the political world of the early republic, the ambiguity between public and private life was both pronounced and central to defining the nature of the emerging polity. Authority and legitimacy were under negotiation not only with one's peers but with the nation's citizens, and choices about how to distinguish public from private life had direct implications not just for the elite political world but for the nation as a whole.

Embroiled in this redefinition by the personalized nature of political life, the founders articulated a broad spectrum of possibilities in their struggles to give shape to this undefined world. In a famous example of one of the narrowest constructions of public life, Thomas Paine in "Common Sense" called government "the badge of lost innocence." He noted that "even in its best state [it] is but a necessary evil."<sup>14</sup> In Paine's rendering, government was an affliction, and public life needed to be circumscribed

as narrowly as possible. A few years later, Benjamin Rush claimed that a citizen was “public property. His time and talents—his youth—his manhood—his old age—nay more, life, all belong to his country.”<sup>15</sup> In this view, citizens did not have private lives, only public ones to be devoted to the nation. One of the most vexing problems facing the revolutionaries was how to navigate the territory staked out between these two extremes. Focusing on four of the most significant efforts, this study explores the attempts of Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, John Adams, and James Madison to shape the new republic according to their conceptions of character.<sup>16</sup>

All four, not surprisingly, undertook this task largely through writing, a choice dictated simply by the size of the new nation. Indeed, writing became one of the crucial arenas for the politics of character in revolutionary America.<sup>17</sup> In his contemporary history of the American Revolution, David Ramsay made his own claim for the centrality of writing. “In establishing American independence,” he wrote, “the pen and the press had merit equal to that of the sword.”<sup>18</sup> Although the war was the means for gaining independence, the meaning of that independence was largely determined through writing, first with the Declaration of Independence and later with the multitude of efforts at constitution writing throughout this period.<sup>19</sup> Washington Irving fittingly called the new nation a “LOGOCRACY,” a “*government of words*.”<sup>20</sup> The founders recognized the power of the written word, crafting thousands of letters, pamphlets, and essays in an attempt to shape the new nation. The centrality of writing to them remains largely underappreciated during our own day—literary critics usually focus on the few poems and novels from this period, and historians often overlook issues of rhetoric and style.

*The Founding Fathers and the Politics of Character* explores the founders’ attempts to construct character through particular forms of writing, the rhetorical “how” of the creation of identity. More specifically, it considers each founder in tandem with a genre that was particularly well suited to represent his “character.”<sup>21</sup> These pairings are not programmatic; letter writing, for instance, was central to all of the founders. But they do provide a useful tool for better understanding the founders’ attempts to construct character. The documents used are not always the typical ones for studying the politics of the early republic. Instead of exploring the usual sources—constitutions, official correspondence, legislative debates—this book focuses on more personal texts that reveal both individual and national dimensions of character building. Although employing an historical framework, this work is shaped by that most fundamental of literary questions: how does a text accomplish its purposes? Crossing some of the usual boundaries between history and literary studies, it sees literary and rhetorical choices as profoundly intertwined with politics.

Each chapter is structured around one particularly revealing textual performance. Episodic in structure, the chapters first consider the generic resources available to that founder. Then, they examine the character that each of the founders attempted to create, concentrating in turn on its personal, political, and national implications. Finally, each chapter explores the problems that the founder encountered as a result of his character. Throughout, this study focuses on the rhetorical attempts to navigate and shape the complicated terrain of character in the early republic and on the centrality of that terrain to the emerging national political realm.

The chapters also outline a larger trajectory in the politics of character. Instead of following a chronological order, they trace the differing distinctions that the founders made between the public and private sides of character. Moving from Jefferson's convoluted intermingling of public and private life to increasingly well articulated ideas about how to distinguish between the two, the clearer distinctions correspond to a decreasing reliance on personal character by the founders. To make use of the metaphor suggested by one meaning of character, Jefferson remained backstage because of fears about the believability of his character. Hamilton confidently walked the stage only to find that the audience judged him harshly. Convinced of his own character, Adams placed himself in the audience, judged the performances of others, and proposed new roles for them to play. Seeing character itself as the problem, Madison attempted to leave behind the stage altogether. The conclusion explores the tentative and incomplete resolution of these issues through the character of George Washington as it was fashioned by Mason Locke Weems in his famous biography. Weems recast Washington's distinctly eighteenth-century concerns about character into a form more in tune with nineteenth-century conceptions, as character came to be associated with private life, rather than public, a shift that also marked the end of the sharply personalized politics of character at the heart of this study.<sup>22</sup>

### Four Revolutions

While serving as the model for the characters of the founders, the American Revolution revealed different lessons to each one—four contrasting understandings of what the Revolution meant that led to four contrasting visions of how to secure the Revolution not just on the battlefield but, as John Adams once phrased it, in the hearts and minds of American citizens. For Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, John Adams, and James Madison, the urgency of the Revolution crystallized various inchoate beliefs based on an array of biographical, psychological, social, economic, political, and cultural considerations into distinct ideas about character.

For Thomas Jefferson, those lessons were learned largely from the land that he called his country, Virginia. Jefferson spent most of the war years in the Virginia government, rather than in the Continental Congress, and he attributed the success of the war effort to what he viewed as the spontaneous outpouring of the voluntary efforts of citizens and states on behalf of the nation, direct proof that a strong national government was not only unnecessary but counterproductive. Near the end of his 1786 letter to Maria Cosway, Thomas Jefferson's thoughts turned to his great touchstone, the Revolution:

If our country when pressed with wrongs at the point of the bayonet, had been governed by its heads instead of its hearts, where should we have been now? Hanging on a gallows as high as Haman's. You began to calculate & to compare wealth and numbers: we threw up a few pulsations of our warmest blood; we supplied enthusiasm against wealth and numbers; we put our existence to the hazard when the hazard seemed against us, and we saved our country.<sup>23</sup>

For Jefferson, the Revolution and even politics were matters of the heart, of pulsations of warm blood rather than rational calculation. The same understanding of the Revolution can be found in the Declaration of Independence, in which Jefferson claimed that the British were deaf to the voice of "consanguinity," which should have united the British with the Americans in affective bonds.<sup>24</sup> In language cut from his draft by the Continental Congress, he denounced England's lack of feeling in even stronger terms, writing, "These facts have given the last stab to agonizing affection, and manly spirit bids us to renounce forever these unfeeling brethren."<sup>25</sup> The heart alone spoke for some larger sense of public good, of a sentimental journey in which no man's misfortune would go unnoticed and in which the people, bound together by affection, would triumph.

Affective bonds, the pulsations of warmest blood, would always be what Jefferson sought in his own relationships, in his politics, and in his imaginative vision for the country. He cast these relationships as friendships, uncoerced ties of mutual affection among equals. This conception provided the means for Jefferson to act in the political sphere without running afoul of his cherished beliefs about the natural unanimity of the country and the illegitimacy of political disagreement.

To explore this Jeffersonian vision of character, the first chapter focuses on a 26 January 1799 letter from Jefferson to Elbridge Gerry, a vexatious and unpredictable Massachusetts leader who became Jefferson's only significant non-Republican, New England correspondent during the late 1790s. The genre of the familiar letter cast Jefferson in his most comfortable persona, a friend renewing ties with another friend, even as he attempted to use the letter for more instrumental, political purposes. His

reliance on the letter illustrated his problematic combination of public and private life in his attempt to refashion the political world in the image of his domestic society, and his “character” only exacerbated the ambiguity between public and private in the early republic. On the personal level, his attempt to use bonds of emotion to cement political alliances undermined his sincerity. On the national level, his solution allowed no legitimacy for political differences and threatened to create not union but disunion.

Unlike Jefferson, who was born into the Virginia gentry, Alexander Hamilton struggled to overcome his humble origins, an experience that prepared him to see the Revolution in a different light. In his earliest surviving letter, written at the age of twelve when he was stranded on the periphery of the British empire, Alexander Hamilton complained of “the groveling and condition of a clerk.” Wanting to “exalt my station,” Hamilton hoped for the chance to prove himself, writing simply, “I wish there was a war.”<sup>26</sup> He would get his wish only a few years later, serving in the Continental Army during the American Revolution. Like many other committed nationalists of the early republic, Alexander Hamilton formed his understanding of the Revolution from the frustrations and humiliations of serving in a national army that was hampered by fears of centralized power. He turned to honor as a code of behavior that would assure not just his own glory but the glory of the nation.

Hamilton had little faith in the American people and in Jefferson’s so-called bonds of affection. The behavior that Hamilton witnessed as an officer left him with a sour view of his countrymen’s character. Merchants profited at the expense of the army, a practice so widespread that Hamilton called it an “*epidemical sprit of extortion*.”<sup>27</sup> Gangs roamed the countryside, stealing private property while claiming to combat traitors. Much of the South degenerated into complete lawlessness. Perhaps worst of all, Americans seemed unable to rouse themselves to the task of securing their liberty. Hamilton complained to a friend, “Our countrymen have all the folly of the ass and all the passiveness of the sheep in their compositions. They are determined not to be free and they can neither be frightened, discouraged nor persuaded to change their resolution.”<sup>28</sup> Even Congress failed to exhibit the character Hamilton expected. Although he thought that its first members “would do honor to any age or nation,” he watched them be drawn off by “local attachment, falsely operating,” replaced by members he considered second-rate men. In contrast to Jefferson, Hamilton saw the individual states as obstacles to national glory. Blinded by local loyalties, political leaders failed to see that their true duty and the crucial work of the country was at the national level.<sup>29</sup> His faith in the Continental Congress eroded and led him to lament Congress’s “folly, caprice [and] a want of foresight” and to accuse it of

“ductility and inconstancy” as well as “feeble indecisive and improvident” treatment of the army.<sup>30</sup> His feelings of disgust for the situation overwhelmed him, and he wrote despairingly in 1780, “I hate Congress—I hate the army—I hate the world—I hate myself. The whole is a mass of fools and knaves.”<sup>31</sup>

Revealing the link between personal and national character, Hamilton felt the shortcomings of his country personally. “These things wound my feelings as a republican more than I can express,” he wrote.<sup>32</sup> When the country seemed unable to win the Revolution through its own efforts, he complained, “I have the most pigmy-feelings at the idea.”<sup>33</sup> Even the failures of Congress, “the great council of America,” Hamilton took as a reflection on himself, claiming that their actions “in some degree make me contemptible in my own eyes.”<sup>34</sup>

Hamilton would work to rectify those humiliations for the rest of his life. His early desire for personal glory would be transmuted through the experience of the Revolution into a broader desire to achieve personal and national glory. At the close of the war, he made a special request to Washington. “I build a hope that I may be permitted to preserve my rank,” he wrote, “as an honorary reward for the time I have devoted to the public. As I may hereafter travel, I may find it an agreeable circumstance to appear in the character I have supported in the revolution.”<sup>35</sup> Although his request was denied, Hamilton carried the self-understanding shaped by the “character” he had “supported in the revolution.” Distrusting the mass of men, he attempted to fashion a political elite to lead the nation to glory. Seeing loyalty to individual states rather than to the nation as a defect in the national character, he hoped to create a national government powerful enough to command respect. Throughout, he shaped his conduct and his country according to the dictates of honor.

To understand the Hamiltonian vision, the second chapter focuses on his infamous “Reynolds pamphlet,” in which he defended his conduct as secretary of the treasury by admitting to adultery. The personal-defense pamphlet fit neatly with Hamilton’s character. It was the genre most suited to a written defense of honor for a public audience. In the pamphlet, he also attempted to construct his own distinction between public and private life. He argued that the private lives of elite men had little, if anything, to do with their fitness for office. His reliance on honor, however, undermined the very character that it was intended to secure. On the personal level, his use of honor subverted his effort to construct a wall between public and private life, because dishonor in one realm meant dishonor in the other. On the national level, the elitist code of honor, never the only guidebook to political behavior even during colonial times, was overwhelmed by a rapidly democratizing and increasingly partisan



public who cared little for the elaborate etiquette that was supposed to guide the behavior of gentlemen.

John Adams's experience in the Continental Congress and as a diplomat gave him a nationalist perspective, but he did not share Hamilton's confidence in the nation's elite. He embraced at different times both Jefferson's optimism and Hamilton's pessimism regarding his fellow countrymen, an ambivalence that remained at the core of his thinking. In contrast to both men, John Adams feared that the real Revolution would never be understood by his fellow countrymen. Eyewitness to the complicated back-room maneuvering of the Continental Congress as well as to the insincerity and cloaked messages of diplomatic life, he wrote to one correspondent, "I consider the true history of the American revolution & of the establishment of our present Constitutions as lost forever."<sup>36</sup> He asked Jefferson, "Who shall write the history of the American revolution? Who can write it? Who will ever be able to write it?"<sup>37</sup>

From his earliest days working for American independence when he attacked the "dark intrigues and wicked machinations" of British officials, Adams saw the nation as beset by plots and conspiracies.<sup>38</sup> To unmask the lies and deceptions that he saw all around him, he clung to an austere sense of virtue, which he thought would allow him to probe beneath the facades that all men presented (a stance that left him equally distrustful of what he viewed as the deceitful face of friendship and the blinding self-importance of honor).

With virtue as his beacon, he set himself the task of unmasking the deceptions that befuddled the American people, a Sisyphean effort when he considered how often they were misled by appearances. "I admire Bonaparte's expression 'The Scenery of the Business.' The scenery has often if not commonly in all the business of human life, at least of public life, more effect than the characters of the dramatis personae or the ingenuity of the plot," he wrote after retiring from public life. "Recollect within our own times. What but the scenery did this? or that? or the other? Was there ever a *coup de theatre* that had so great an effect as Jefferson's penmanship of the Declaration of Independence?"<sup>39</sup> Adams worried that the entire history of the Revolution would come to be seen through the distorted lens of one vast coup de théâtre. He joked in a letter to Benjamin Rush that the "History of the Revolution will be one continued lie. . . . The essence of the whole will be *that Dr. Franklin's electrical Rod smote the Earth and out spring George Washington. That Franklin electrized him with his Rod—and henceforth these two conducted all the Policy, Negotiations, Legislatures and War.*"<sup>40</sup>

For Adams, though, the dangers of deceit and dissimulation were not simply a product of the instability of the Revolution or even of politics

but were part of the fabric of human nature. In an essay written as a young man, Adams claimed that self-deceit was “the source of far the greatest and worst part of the vices and calamities among mankind.”<sup>41</sup> And no one was exempt. “Even the few favorites of nature, who have received from her clearer understandings and more happy tempers than other men,” he noted, “are often snared by this unhappy disposition in their minds, to their own destruction, and the injury, nay, often to the utter desolation of millions of their fellow-men. . . . the greatest genius, united to the best disposition, will find it hard to hearken to the voice of reason, or even to be certain of the purity of his own intentions.”<sup>42</sup> In a world where appearances often misled and where one’s own motives were cloudy, virtue was his guide, serving as both his own stringent code of conduct and as the lens through which he judged the behavior of others. Only strict attention to the dictates of virtue, according to Adams, could ensure that the nation would remain true to its revolutionary heritage.

To understand Adams’s struggle to keep himself and his nation virtuous, the third chapter focuses on his diary. Removed from the lure of public approval that so often tempted men away from the path of virtue, the diary provided a forum for the kind of searing self-examination on which Adams relied to determine the motives behind his own action and the actions of others. Assailed by self-doubt about even his own virtue, though, Adams struggled to find some way to distinguish true from false virtue, a struggle that the diary, with its lack of any outside standards to confirm or deny his own judgments, only exacerbated. His reliance on virtue also undermined any clear distinction between public and private life because it straddled both. His corrosive examination of the demands of virtue eventually convinced him that the nation’s character would have to be built on a different foundation.

As one of the youngest founders, most of James Madison’s formative revolutionary experiences occurred in the 1780s, a period when Jefferson serenely surveyed the new nation from Virginia and talked of his retirement, when Hamilton finished his military service and began his legal training, and when Adams served as a diplomat in Europe. During this time, Madison struggled to work under the unwieldy Articles of Confederation and watched state legislatures break into unruly factions bent on pursuing private interests rather than the public good. He realized that the politics of character was itself part of the problem. For himself, he created a personal character so circumspect that most who first met him usually felt nothing but an overwhelming disappointment. He fashioned a character based on justice, in which the personal would be cleaved from the political, and personal predilection would give way to unbiased reflection.

On the eve of the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, Madison wrote “Vices of the Political System of the United States,” an attempt to address the various problems that were afflicting the nation and to offer his own blueprint for a just government.<sup>43</sup> The American Revolution had ignited an intense and prolonged bout of constitution writing in the nation, as states were forced not simply to replace the royal charters that had governed them but to attempt to apply the lessons of the Revolution.<sup>44</sup> If these constitutions can be read as commentaries on the meaning of the American Revolution, Madison’s own thoughts were a commentary on those commentaries, not simply assessing the failure of state legislatures to act according to a just standard but also reconsidering the meaning of the Revolution itself.

In his extended analysis, attempting to recover lessons that had been neglected in the intervening years, Madison offered a précis of his own ideas on the difficulty of postrevolutionary governance in America. At the end of his composition, he focused on problems within the state governments, which revealed where the ideals of the Revolution had not been met. He complained of the “multiplicity of laws in the several states” and the “mutability of the laws of the states.” Such instability could never be the foundation for proper government, because laws were “repealed or superseded, before any trial can have been made of their merits, and even before a knowledge of them can have reached the remoter districts within which they were to operate.” He complained of the “luxuri-ancy of legislation” that state legislatures seemed to produce on a yearly basis. In a nation in which laws were supposed to provide the foundation for a just and prosperous order, the state governments had failed miserably, not even supplying a readily interpretable legal framework. Worst of all, according to Madison, was the “injustice of the laws of the states,” a failure to protect the central value of government, justice.

Madison was criticizing a fundamental premise of revolutionary thought—that government should express the will of the majority. Madison’s critique did not represent a rejection of the Revolution. One of the vices he identified, the “want of ratification by the people of the Articles of Confederation,” recognized the importance of a central lesson of the Revolution: the political legitimacy of a republican government rested on the people themselves. Popular sovereignty was only one of many political lessons, though. State politics in the 1780s had given ample evidence that majority rule was, at best, an insecure foundation for the public good. Madison himself recognized the profundity of this challenge. He noted that the injustice of state laws “brings more into question the fundamental principle of republican Government, that the majority who rule in such governments are the safest Guardians both of public Good and private rights.” Even “respect for character,” according to Madison, would not restrain men from injustice.<sup>45</sup>

Arguing that these problems had to be overcome if America was to secure the benefits of the Revolution, Madison's answer was to create a government that stood above partisan self-interest, one that was sufficiently neutral to protect the interests of all its citizens. He wrote, "The great desideratum in Government is such a modification of the sovereignty as will render it sufficiently neutral between the different interests and factions, to controul one part of the society from invading the rights of another, and at the same time sufficiently controuled itself, from setting up an interest adverse to that of the whole Society." If government could be a sufficiently neutral judge, a just government would surely be the result.

To understand Madison's personal and national vision of justice, the fourth chapter explores *Federalist* #37. The essay provided the perfect generic medium for Madison's politics of justice. The anonymity of the essay mirrored Madison's own desire to escape the politics of character. Its persuasive power rested not on the character of its author but on the strength of its arguments. Even as personal character was shorn from national character, though, Madison still found himself facing an intractable foe, the ambiguity inherent in language itself, "that cloudy medium," as he called it.

As the Earl of Shaftesbury warned, "Of all the artificial Relations, formed between Mankind, the most capricious and variable is that of *Author* and *Reader*."<sup>46</sup> Shaftesbury's remark is a useful reminder as this study begins examining the founders' written efforts to craft their characters—a tale rich in irony as they all too often found that the responses to their efforts were as capricious and variable as Shaftesbury promised.<sup>47</sup> In the process of articulating the relationship between author and reader, these men attempted to define the polity in ways no less profound than their comments on more familiar political subjects. That they struggled in their efforts to give shape to the emerging nation proves not just the truth of Shaftesbury's words but the vexing elusiveness of character in the fluid postrevolutionary political world.