In 1784, Benjamin Read, a member of Congress from South Carolina, lamented the absence of competence or coherence in the government under the Articles of the Confederation. “Let the blame fall where it ought,” Read wrote to George Washington, “on those Whose attachment to State Views, State Interests, & State prejudices is so great as to render them eternally opposed to every Measure that can be devised for the public good.”

Under the Articles, the American government, in essence, had no executive and the Confederation Congress lacked the power to collect taxes, regulate commerce between the states, and conduct foreign policy. Recognizing these systemic dysfunctions, Joseph Ellis, an emeritus professor of history at Mount Holyoke College and the author of 10 books about late 18th century American politics, reminds us, a small cadre of statesmen, led by Washington, Alexander Hamilton, John Jay and James Madison, collaborated to expand the meaning of the Revolution so that it could function on a national scale.

In “The Quartet,” Ellis indicates how they orchestrated a call for a Constitutional Convention, set the agenda to replace the Articles in Philadelphia, dominated the debates in state ratifying conventions and drafted the Bill of Rights to ensure state compliance with the federal government. The victory of these nationalists over their states’ rights opponents, Ellis argues, was “the most creative and consequential” act of political leadership in American history.

The narrative and the analytical framework of “The Quartet” will be familiar to students of American history.

That said, Ellis is a superb story teller — and his running commentary serves as a series of civics lessons about the U.S. Constitution and American political culture. He notes, for example, that the two institutions which made independence possible — the Continental Congress and the Army — represented
the very centralized military and political power to which many Americans were ideologically and emotionally hostile. Because allegiances were local, or at most regional, they did not believe that a national government could represent America’s diversity of interests once common cause against England was removed from the equation.

And, Ellis reminds us, modern day tea partiers share this political legacy.

Ellis emphasizes as well that the Constitution did not completely resolve the question of federal versus state sovereignty — or for that matter the sectional differences over slavery. The founding fathers, he suggests, were forced to learn a political lesson that leaders in a “truly representation government must learn: that leadership sometimes means slowing down to allow stragglers to catch up.”

A triumph of superior organization and talented leadership, ratification of the Constitution was still a close call. Most important, Ellis concludes that the multiple ambiguities in it (on sovereignty and the scope of executive and judicial authority) rendered it a “living document,” unlike any other in the world, in which arguments about contested issues could occur in a deliberative fashion. In fact, Ellis maintains, provocatively, albeit more than a bit hyperbolically, James Madison’s “‘original intention’ was to make all ‘original intentions’ infinitely negotiable in the future.”

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