‘American Dialogue’: The Founders converse about our big issues

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American Dialogue

The Founders and Us
By Joseph J. Ellis
Alfred A. Knopf. 283 pp. $27.95.
Reviewed by Glenn C. Altschuler

The Founding Fathers “are busy being dead,” Joseph Ellis reminds us. That said, he claims that “they still speak to us.” If only we would listen.

In American Dialogue, Ellis, an emeritus professor of history at Mount Holyoke College and the author of a boatload of books on the Revolutionary generation, examines the insights of Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, James Madison, and George Washington on the issues of race, economic inequality, constitutional law, and foreign policy — and applies them to the challenges facing our nation in the 21st century. Elegantly written, engaging and informative, American Dialogue demonstrates that the past is — or should be — anything but a “dead hand” on the present.

Ellis identifies long-standing patterns for each of these American dilemmas. On race, for example, he challenges us to “inhabit” both sides of the Jeffersonian legacy, by refusing to dismiss “the visionary side” (embedded in the Declaration of Independence and the Northwest Ordinance of 1784) and confronting “the hypocrisy and willful blindness of the prevailing darker side.” On economic inequality, he demonstrates that for a half century (as John Adams predicted), a rising tide has lifted only yachts, the most expensive of which have been “floating on a veritable tsunami of wealth.” Endorsing Madison as “the adaptive genius,” Ellis quotes Jefferson — “We might as well require a man to wear still the coat which fitted him when a boy, as civilized society to remain under the regimen of their barbarous ancestors” — in support of a “living Constitution.” And he updates the “realistic” approach to foreign policy in George Washington’s Farewell Address.

As he provides “a round-trip ticket” from the late 18th century (with fascinating excursions to Washington’s unsuccessful attempt to prevent genocide against Indians, and to the opportunity Jefferson missed to introduce the gradual emancipation of slavery in Louisiana Purchase territories) to our current location, Ellis does not hide his own political views. He condemns the infusion of “dark money” in an orchestrated effort by corporate elites "to demonize the federal
“government.” Ellis blasts the claims of advocates of the judicial doctrine of “originalism” to political detachment as false and fraudulent — and he makes a compelling case that Antonin Scalia’s interpretation of the Second Amendment in District of Columbia v. Heller (2008) was a textbook case of “law office history” that violated fundamental tenets of historical analysis to reach a preordained conclusion. And, he declares, “the very fact that a person with Trump’s mental, emotional and moral limitations could be chosen to lead the free world casts a dark shadow of doubt over the credibility and reliability of the United States as the first democratic superpower.”

American Dialogue, then, has a voice, and “a special relevance in our own troubled time.”

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