



Thoughts from Linda:

## The U.S. Constitution and Other Key American Writings

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For my 100<sup>th</sup> book to review since the beginning of the COVID pandemic in 2020, I selected this collection of key American writings. I was inspired to select this book for a number of reasons.

First, as a citizen of the United States, I have always believed we have significant responsibilities that go along with our rights. To my way of thinking, a key responsibility for everyone is to be aware of and intelligent with the founding documents that form the basis of this country. There is much political discourse right now in the United States, and these founding documents are important for all of us as citizens who have our voice via our right to vote.

Secondly, as a former teacher of U.S. Government and history early in my career, I have a natural intellectual interest in all things related to this subject.

Thirdly, my husband and I recently attended *Hamilton*, the musical, and I realized I had not actually read *The Federalist Papers*. I wanted to find them.

Finally, I was motivated to select this book because of a most troubling set of facts that I learned from Richard Hass's book *The World--A Brief Introduction*, which I reviewed in September 2020 and have been thinking about ever since.

Hass had recently researched graduation requirements in American universities and discovered that "it is possible to graduate at most of these without gaining even a rudimentary understanding of the world." In fact, he found out that of over eleven hundred American colleges and universities, only 17% required students to take any courses in U.S. government or history. Only 3% required them to take coursework in

economics. Unbelievably, one survey he saw noted that some of our top universities allow students to graduate with a history degree without taking a single course in U.S. history or government.

Our high schools are also not doing a good job in education, using our basic foundational approach, much less the history of this country over the past 250 years. Add this to the fact that roughly 1/3 of high-school graduates do not go to college, and of those who do, only 40% get degrees. So, in short, we can assume that much of the United States' 'basic literacy' is missing from many of our citizens.

This book can work to correct that, although the first thing to know is that this book is not a history book. In fact, here is only a very short narrative of an explanation of each set of documents included. It is simply a collection of our founding documents and other key American writings that have become part of the fabric of the country over our history, up through the Obama administration. There are 57 documents that comprise the 434 pages in this beautifully bound leather-like book.

The first document shown is the short *Mayflower Compact of 1620*, the governing Charter of the English colony established at Plymouth, Massachusetts. This was most likely written by John Carver, the man who helped to organize that voyage and became the first Governor of the Colony. It describes the coming together in a formal 'Civil Body Politick' noting the self-authorization under the auspices of King James of Great Britain. It lays out the purpose of the pact and the functions to be performed and was signed by 41 men in the Colony. It reveals how people thought of organizing themselves in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and did so in this new colony.

It is still thrilling for me to read the *Declaration of Independence's* opening words, realizing the enormous message contained therein. The second paragraph was once memorized by most high schoolers in America: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."

We know that this document was drafted by a committee consisting of John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Roger Sherman, and Robert Livingston. While Jefferson wrote the first draft, it was adjusted with 86 specific alterations by the committee in 1776. It was unanimously adopted on July 4th and then signed by 56 members of the Second Continental Congress on August 2, 1776.

Of the 85 essays that comprise *The Federalist Papers*, 9 are included in this book. They were written by Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison between October 1787 and May 1788. The essays were published anonymously, under the pen name "Publius," in various New York state newspapers of the time.

*The Federalist Papers* were written and published to urge New Yorkers to ratify the proposed *United States Constitution*, which was drafted in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787. In lobbying for the adoption of the *Constitution* over the existing *Articles of Confederation*, the essays explain particular provisions of the *Constitution* in detail. For this reason, and because Hamilton and Madison were each a member of the Constitutional Convention, *The Federalist Papers* are often used today to help interpret the intentions of those drafting the Constitution.

The 9 *Articles* included in this book are very relevant to issues we see every day, such as the separation of powers, the differences between republics and democracies, and the philosophical doctrines of limited government. It is also interesting to see Hamilton and Madison lay out the potential issues of corruption, greed among those in power, and authoritarian instincts as they made their arguments for a constitution and the voice of the people. This is so relevant today as these topics are being interpreted and reinterpreted in our current times.

You'll see several US Presidents' inaugural Addresses, including those of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, and Barack Obama. Also included are Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address and Gettysburg Address, Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, Dwight Eisenhower's Farewell Address, and Reagan's Brandenburg Gate famous speech of 1987.

Other interesting items include The United States Bill of Rights, The Louisiana Purchase Treaty, Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal Policy of 1830, the Surrender of Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce in 1877, Albert Einstein's Letter to FDR with concerns about the atomic bomb in 1939, and the Brown vs. Board of Education ruling which was decided May 17, 1954.

I appreciated re-visiting The Civil Rights Act of 1964, the speech of Geraldine Ferraro as she accepted the Vice-Presidential Nomination in 1984, and Barack Obama's announcement of the death of Osama Bin Laden in 2011.

One of my favorite speeches of all time is the JFK Inaugural Address. It certainly motivated me, and I hope it inspires all Americans.

In closing then, here is an excerpt from this speech given January 20, 1961, by our youngest ever person to be elected President.

"...We dare not forget today that we are the heirs of that first revolution. Let the word go forth from this time and place to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans--born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage--and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this Nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world...In your hands, my fellow citizens, more than in mine, will rest the final success or failure of our course. Since this country was founded, each generation of Americans has been summoned to give testimony to its national loyalty...In the history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger...the energy, the faith, the devotion that we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it--and the glow from that fire can truly light the world.

And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you--ask what you can do for your country." And then, he continued, "My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you but what together we can do for the freedom of man."

This collection of founding and historical documents reminds me of the amazing good fortune we have today, to live in a country that was carefully constructed from 'whole cloth' with noble ideas by brilliant and learned men (I acknowledge here that this was the 18th century, and I do not judge the culture of that era by the more evolved values of our age, such as the rights of women, racial prejudice, etc.). Certainly, the history of America is filled with contradictions and massive inequities, and yet, it is thrilling to read and reflect upon the visionary original works and words of Hamilton, Madison, and Jefferson, as well as the more recent examples of leadership such as those expressed by the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the US Constitution of 1920, and the speeches of Presidents Johnson, Reagan, and Obama.

In America today, as some books are being banned, and history is being challenged in a highly politicized environment, truth is important, and facts are critical. I encourage teachers and parents alike to make this volume a part of their libraries and knowledge base. It provides a baseline of common knowledge and language and is a great place to start.