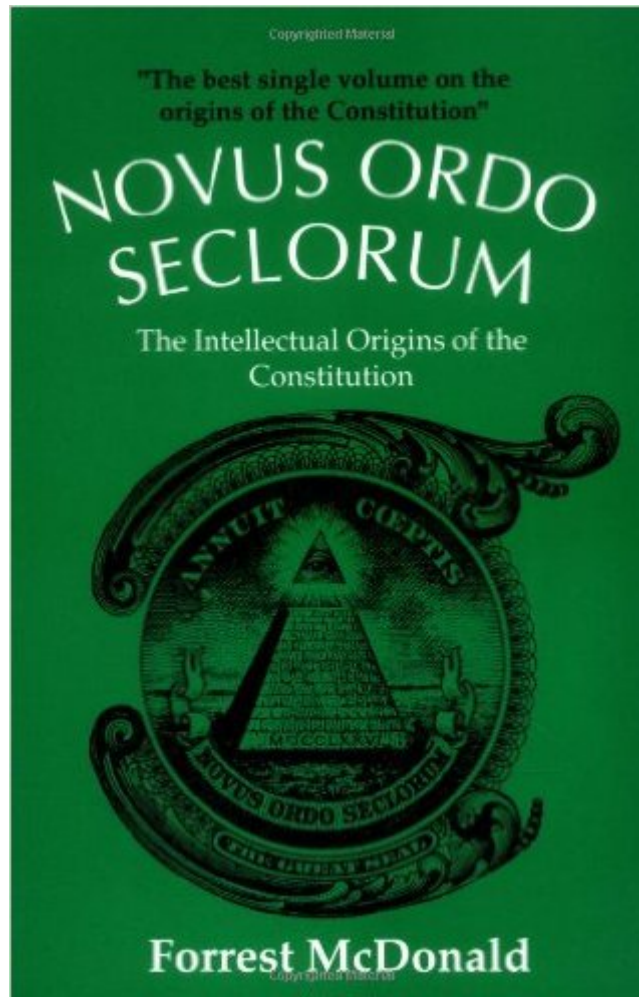


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Novus Ordo Seclorum: The Intellectual Origins Of The Constitution



Synopsis

This is the first major interpretation of the framing of the Constitution to appear in more than two decades. Forrest McDonald, widely considered one of the foremost historians of the Constitution and of the early national period, reconstructs the intellectual world of the Founding Fathers including their understanding of law, history political philosophy, and political economy, and their firsthand experience in public affairs and then analyzes their behavior in the Constitutional Convention of 1787 in light of that world. No one has attempted to do so on such a scale before. McDonald's principal conclusion is that, though the Framers brought a variety of ideological and philosophical positions to bear upon their task of building a "new order of the ages," they were guided primarily by their own experience, their wisdom, and their common sense."A witty and energetic study of the ideas and passions of the Framers." New York Times Book Review"Bristles with wit and intellectual energy." Christian Science Monitor

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Just what sorts of ideas were going on in the Framers' minds when they drafted the federal constitution? This book provides great insight into the ideas, concepts and intellectual history and framework that the Framers were operating upon. An extremely capable historian and writer, McDonald starts out by noting some important considerations facing the Framers: protecting the life, liberty and property of citizens; their commitment to republican government (although there was disagreement and uncertainty as to what that precisely meant); history (in the sense of convention, legacy and their place in its continuing flow); and political theory. The chapter on the Rights of

Englishmen begins with the Framers understandings of freedom, liberty, and property-as inherited through English common law, refined by Blackstone, and developed independently in the New World. Blackstone considered property a third "absolute right," following life and liberty. Of course, he used the word property in the more narrow sense of dominion (rather than the sense of proper as something proper or particular to an individual person). In any case, McDonald discusses Blackstone's qualifications and exceptions to this absolute right, which allowed for the regulation of property (through sumptuary laws, eminent domain, taxation, and the granting of monopoly privileges). McDonald then relates America's experience in light of the English understandings and tradition. The emphasis on property is particular important because, until the Revolution, Americans' general views about liberty were grounded in the same kinds of historical, philosophical and legal foundations as their views of property.

~Novus Ordo Seclorum~ by conservative historian Forrest McDonald is an astute and poignant political history of the fledgling American republic. The framers of the Constitution sought introduce a new concept into the political discourse, namely federalism. They, of course, were all nationalist in the sense that they hoped to strengthen and stabilize a general government. The 1787 Convention hardly started from scratch and was built on the polity existing under the Articles of Confederation. McDonald perceptively captures efforts to balance out the powers amongst the republican institutions through corporate liberty. Each institution jealously guarded their prerogatives as Madison and Jefferson was essentially the prop for the federal regime created in 1787. The first introductory chapter boldly proclaims that framers had a problem following their independence: that problem succinctly stated was the nature and form of their republic was to take. The framers were unanimous in the belief that the proper end of government was protecting life, liberty, and property. Prior to 1787, they had yet to resolve the scope and role to be played by the general government and it was agreed that that government under the Confederation was scarcely functioning effectively as it was too weak. The second chapter entitled The Rights of the Englishman brilliantly gives a history of the Anglo-American common law tradition that was so cherished by the colonials. It was their go to fortify, uphold and secure the cherished Rights of the Englishman for citizens of the American polity. The third chapter entitled Systems of Political Theory is an exploration of political debates common amongst the framers. They were well schooled in the classics from Cicero to Lycurgus.

I bought this book based on the favorable reviews below and I was not disappointed. Specifically, I

was interested in understanding the original intent(s) of the authors of the US Constitution in hopes of getting a historical context in which to locate contemporary debate regarding methods for interpreting the Constitution. This book gave me much, much more, and in engrossing and elegant prose to boot. McDonald is erudite and his knowledge has both breadth and depth. As reviewer Nisala A. Rodrigo pointed out, reading McDonald requires some work due to the level of sophistication he uses to explore the 18th century intellectual context. However, I found this text to be a useful and not overwhelming introduction to constitutional history. This is the first book I've read on the origins of the Constitution and I felt I comprehended the bulk of what McDonald was discussing. As Rodrigo suggested, the chapter on the actual making of the Constitution was a bit tedious. However, McDonald was tremendously helpful in providing a sense of the mental horizons and preoccupations of the founding fathers. For instance, I came away with the impression that the founding fathers did not have strong opinions about how original intent should be factored into future decisions involving the interpretation of the Constitution. The founding fathers were focused on substantive issues and the nitty-gritty compromises necessary to get the document ratified rather than worried by questions of hermeneutical methodologies. In fact, I believe McDonald suggests that a question regarding the appropriate role that original intent plays in judicial decisions would not have even been available to the founding fathers given that such issues did not exist at the time of ratification.

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