

Steven Moynihan
TAH – Final Project
9/25/08

The Summer of 1787
David O. Stewart

Introduction

The *Summer of 1787* by David O. Stewart is a compact and compelling recount of the Constitutional Convention. Stewart provides an accessible account suitable for any person interested in U.S. history and particularly a high school student.

Summary & Review

Stewart's book does not add anything new to the already numerous volumes on the drafting of the Constitution; the scholar or experienced reader in the Constitution will not find much analysis. This is not the intent of the author. What Stewart accomplishes is a well-written narrative providing a very readable story for a mainstream audience. The descriptive account replays the familiar story and the important events from the summer of 1787 that the general reader will enjoy.

The *Summer of 1787* recounts the founding of our government, a story that has been told before, but worth retelling. Stewart covers the Constitutional Convention in a chronological order, beginning with the meeting between George Washington and George Mason at Mount Vernon in March of 1785. This meeting, to discuss the growing problems in the new United States of America, became the impetus for the Constitutional Convention. Both men agreed the Articles of Confederation's shortcomings needed addressing. Stewart continues the tale through twenty-one chapters, each an episode from the summer of 1787, focusing on the gathering in Philadelphia, the politicking, and ultimate compromise that forged the Constitution.

The convention in Philadelphia is explained through the people and events from that fateful summer. What Stewart accomplishes is not a grand tale of demigods, but an accurate account that puts the participants in a more human context.

Stewart handily recalls the personalities that are so familiar and so celebrated to many. Washington, Franklin, Adams, Madison, and Mason. In describing Franklin though, he provides a more humanistic description, “Those meeting him in 1787 noted the contrast between his titanic reputation and his mundane appearance – in the words of one, he was a ‘short, fat, trunched old man.’ But he also does an excellent job introducing less known characters that provide a deeper and more colorful appreciation of the events in 1787. On Gouvenor Morris of Pennsylvania:

Morris’s magnetic presence was made more dramatic by the oaken peg leg below his left knee. Seven years earlier, he had lost the lower part of the leg in a carriage accident just a few blocks from the State House. Owing to his rakish reputation, many assumed the injury occurred in a flight from a jealous husband. Contemporaries suggested that the loss in no way reduced his appeal to women.

The people are important to this story. And for many readers, understanding the characters with all their successes and faults, the *people* who would make our government, makes the story so much more enjoyable. From history books and probably many history classrooms, these people have become distant and unapproachable – demigods. Stewart removes the pretentious and pious and replaces them with genuine and ordinary. But by no means was the summer of 1787 ordinary – it was of course an incredibly important moment in history.

What may strike the reader are the numerous opportunities for failure. What if the twelve attendees at the Annapolis convention decided to go home? No drive, no push for a more involved meeting. No Philadelphia. What if a compromise on slavery could not be reached? No Constitution. How do we resolve the issue of representation? In fact, the entire process, and much of the book highlights this, was a constant compromise.

Relevance to Classroom

As stated earlier, I this is an accessible book. I wanted to choose a book that students would enjoy reading. I teach AP United States History and Government. For enrichment work that goes beyond the textbook and class readings, I assign the students a book to read each semester and the students must provide a book review. They are free to choose their book, but of course it must cover government or politics. Many students gravitate to the books on contemporary politics – probably for obvious reasons, as they are generally more readable and up to date. Most students avoid the books on the history of the Constitution – probably because most books are very scholarly and heavy. But I think students miss out on the complexity of the story. Unfortunately we do not have time to cover the Convention with as much detail and are often relegated to understanding the plans like Virginia and New Jersey or coming to terms with compromises, whether “Great” or unfortunate, like slavery.

This book will provide students the chance to read an engaging book about such a critical time in history without becoming burdened by that great moment. It does not forget that people make history and in the process of making history, people are living in the present. History is of course not a forgone conclusion – the men in Philadelphia were

not sure exactly the outcome of the work would be. Stewart does an excellent job detailing the grinding work of the Constitutional Convention. Though light on analysis, Stewart does offer some at the end of the book with his take on the Electoral College. Stewart also covers slavery with a critical voice and often his narrative returns to slavery, the apparent inconsistencies and the compromises that followed. Sometimes Stewart misses some details; though probably not out of neglect or indifference, but out of necessity. Some may find the book lacking or it may leave them asking for more. What just went on during some the backroom deals? The book flows and people, events, and their words are chosen to help the story develop and keep the reader engaged. In the end, all stories have to leave out some details. I would recommend using this book for a United States history or government class.