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The drafting and ratification of the federal Constitution should be a pivotal topic in American historical studies, linking colonial and Revolutionary history. Instead, Pauline Maier complains, the "disjunction" between the two periods has been growing; with the exception of a few senior historians, only political scientists and law professors till this neglected field. But I think she exaggerates. Recent historiographical developments suggest that the disjunction is disappearing.

Before I elaborate this claim, let me briefly address the other two disjunctions Maier emphasizes, the one "between scholarly interests and those of the reading public" and the other "between historical scholarship and history as taught in secondary school." Of course, these disjunctions have always been with us, but they don't strike me as particularly severe now. As long as I've been in the business, historians have complained about failing to reach a general audience and about how we need to "return to narrative." Yet all this time, even during the heyday of social science history, historians *have* been reaching a general audience. Jeremiads about our impending irrelevance have reinforced the powerful influence of best-seller lists, bicentennials, and high school curricula in shaping our agenda. Rants against American exceptionalism—the all-purpose pejorative for this pandering to the public—are themselves eloquent testimony to our continuing relevance and responsiveness. The danger is not that we will lose our readers, but that we'll end up having nothing useful or difficult or discomfiting to say to them.

Maier suggests that the profession as a whole has moved progressively—or, perhaps, regressively—"from political to social and then cultural history," taking concluding potshots at "imagined communities" and the so-called "public sphere." These missiles, to mix metaphors, seem misguided to me. Benedict Anderson and Jürgen Habermas, once fashionable, are easily caricatured these days, and it is undoubtedly the case that much silly and reductive work has been committed in their name. The complaint appears to be that big generalizations about print culture are not empirically grounded. But surely the return to politics and political culture should be welcome, particularly when historians move past print and dig deep in the sources. And students of national identity and nation-making provide a good antidote to exceptionalism—taking the "nation," its singularity and its superiority, for granted—without indulging in America-bashing (another perverse and lamentable symptom of exceptionalism) or avoiding the subject altogether. New work on nation-building and political culture is in fact addressing the very disjunction Maier laments. This work promises to liberate us at last from the reductive influence of the ideological school on our understanding of the Revolution.

Building on the neo-Whig resuscitation of political and constitutional thought, the republicanists located the real Revolution in a putative ideological transformation that antedated the war itself, making mere institutional developments seem epiphenomenal. The search for deep patterns in political discourse and their remote classical origins mirrored the social historians' search for deep structures in society. Both approaches militated against political history. Both either insisted on the fundamental continuity between colonial and Revolutionary history, or stipulated a Revolutionary transformation that had little or nothing to do with politics in the conventional sense. The ascendancy of the republican revisionists was thus a disaster for political history in the narrow, conventional sense. Promising beginnings to the study of Revolutionary political mobilization—including Maier's superb *From Resistance to Revolution* (1972)—could not be sustained, despite the extraordinary efforts of the new social historians to prepare the way. It was hard to take mobilization seriously when it had so little apparent connection to the deep cultural and social transformations that the study of political language supposedly illuminated. What was happening on the ground seemed epiphenomenal at best, and the relation between the real Revolution and the military conflict itself seemed increasingly tenuous.

The problem with the revisionists' conception of ideology is that it obscures contingency, and therefore the domain of political choice and action in which our subjects operated. They are instead depicted as prisoners of language, captured by a worldview that blinded them to reality. Or, to put the case more modestly, the revisionists mined the discourse of the period so effectively for deeper meanings, meanings that transcended immediate circumstances, that these circumstances themselves, the world as our subjects themselves understood it, faded from view. But there are good reasons to believe that the ideological wave has at last crested and that historians are returning to the Revolution. This could only happen when scholars *stopped* taking the ideas of the Revolution (as the revisionists understood them) quite so seriously and *stopped* assuming that the evolution of political institutions was itself in any meaningful sense ideologically determined. In short, the revival of the political history of the Revolution, now in progress, depended on the ultimate exhaustion of the republican synthesis.

Recent historiographical developments are encouraging. The now fashionable study of nationalism and national identity offers a much more modest and politically instrumental understanding of ideologies as inventions and improvisations that were necessarily responsive to actual circumstances. In retrospect, the (successful) nation is the prime site for political mystification in the modern world; in prospect, however, any given nation is at best a project, a bet against long odds, that cannot succeed without effective mass mobilization. American patriots may have begun mobilizing long before the break with Britain, but they had no clear sense of what they were mobilizing *for* or whether, when the crisis came, they would have sufficient popular support to claim some sort of legitimacy; at first, they could have no idea that they were making a nation—whatever that was. Maier's *American Scripture* (1997) is an exemplary study of the culminating phase of the mobilization process leading up to independence. She rightly emphasizes the importance of widespread local initiatives, thus focusing our attention on the importance of

the particular social and political contexts that the ideological historians tended to overlook. By the same token, many communities did *not* declare their own independence, loyalists remained dominant in many parts of what became the United States, and opportunists everywhere kept their options open.

Maier's deconstruction of a monolithic Declaration (written by Jefferson on behalf of a notional American people) is a breath of fresh air, an invitation to scholars to mobilize once again for a proper study of the Revolution. But she was not working in a historiographical vacuum or wasteland when she wrote *Scripture*, nor is she doing so now in her current work on the ratification of the federal Constitution. Complementary efforts by students of civic life to move beyond—or beneath—abstract formulations of the bourgeois public sphere are also yielding promising results (John Brooke's important essays have helped set the agenda for these efforts and his study of Columbia County, New York [forthcoming from the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture], fully redeems their promise.) The history of specific associations, not a generalized associational impulse linked to the transformation of underlying class relations, resulted in Revolutionary political change—a point Maier made very effectively in her "Revolutionary Origins of the American Corporation" in the *William and Mary Quarterly* (1993) on the proliferation of the corporate form in post-Revolutionary America, despite the powerful republican antipathy to monopoly. Younger scholars are showing a new and salutary interest in who joined what civic groups—political, military, fraternal, religious, and charitable—and what purposes they hoped to achieve. (For a good introduction to the exciting new literature on this and other themes in the history of the early republic, see David Waldstreicher, Jeffrey Pasley, and Andrew Robertson, *Beyond the Founding, New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic*, just published by North Carolina).

More immediately to the point of Maier's present project, new work in British imperial and Atlantic history as well as in the history of Indian country during the Revolutionary era gives us a fresher sense of the geopolitical context and consequences of the Revolution. Ideological (and exceptionalist) navel-gazing—what sort of regime did the founders inaugurate?—is giving way to a more historicized account of how the Revolutionaries understood their world and what they hoped to accomplish. As Maier notes, Max Edling's *A Revolution in Favor of Government* (2003) is a wonderful example of the interpretative payoffs of this changing perspective: whatever their ideological tendencies and preferences, the founders "wanted to form a 'fiscal military state' like those of contemporary Europe." There was plenty of room for controversy in this state-making project, as there would be for decades to come over the character of American federalism. David Hendrickson's *Peace Pact: The Lost World of the American Founding* (2003) is a brilliant exploration of the conceptual problems of *federal* state-building that provides a necessary complement to the new literature on American political development. And I would emphasize here as well Jack Greene's *Peripheries and Center* (1986), a now classic study that framed the federal problem in the larger context of British imperial as well as American constitutional history and thus bridged the disjunction between our understandings of the colonial and Revolutionary periods.

The time is right for Maier's study of the ratification debates. I'm mildly chiding her here for exaggerating the problems in the field in a somewhat self-serving way. The disjunction between colonial (and imperial) and early national history is not as great as she claims, and she will not be bridging it alone (or in the lonely company of senior historians who write about the founders). But Maier has always been at the forefront of our field—in her work on mobilization and the "Old Revolutionaries," in her study of Jefferson and the Declaration—and I wouldn't want to quarrel with her sense of what's missing and what's wrong with the field if it provides the rationale and impetus for still more important work.

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Political History's Demise?

Paul A. Rahe

I come at the question raised by Pauline Maier from a peculiar perspective. I was trained in ancient Greek and Roman history. In graduate school I took not one course in American history, and I paid it very little attention when I was an undergraduate. I stumbled into the field more or less by accident. Unhappy with the orthodoxy then current regarding the Spartan constitution, I set out to write a thumbsucker comparing the Spartan constitution, which I knew I did not fully understand, with the American Constitution, which I wrongly presumed was more familiar and easier for one such as myself to comprehend. I quickly discovered that modern constitutionalism is a slippery subject; my thumbsucker ran to 1200 pages and took me a decade to write; and I now hold a chair in American history and teach 17th-century English history as well. This gives me an odd perspective on the early American field—not unlike the one recommended by Thomas Jefferson to his young correspondents, for my formal education and my subsequent self-education more or less tracks his suggestion that, to be able citizens, Americans need to know the history of self-