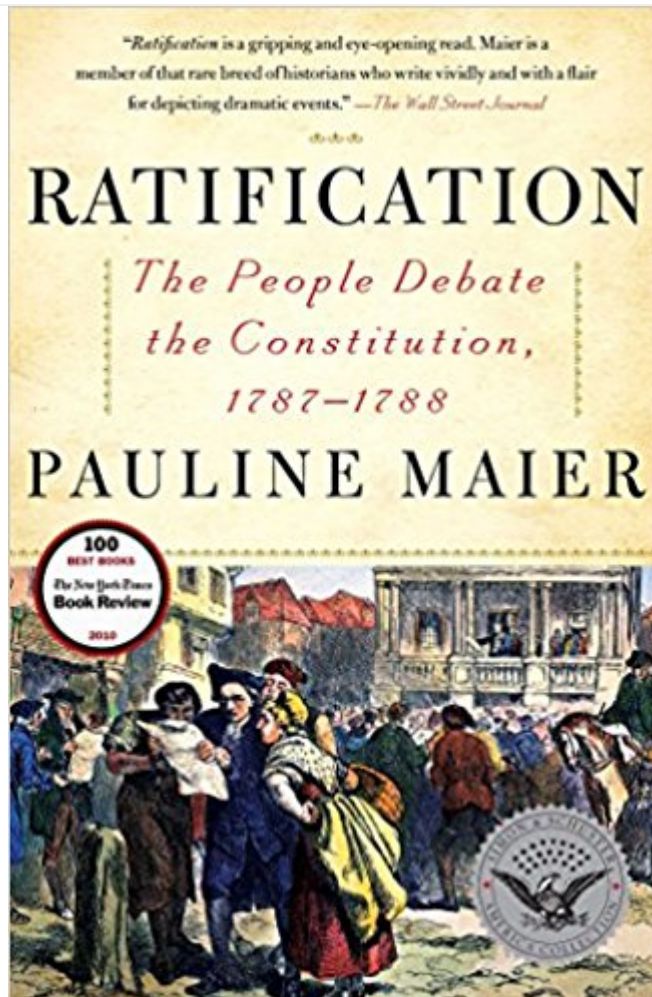


{essays in history}

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Ratification: The People Debate the Constitution, 1787-1788



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Reviewed Work(s)

Ratification: The People Debate the Constitution, 1787-1788. By Pauline Maier (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010). Pp. xviii + 590. Hardcover, \$30.00.

Pauline Maier's *Ratification* represents the most comprehensive examination of the struggle to ratify the U.S. Constitution to date. Published during one of the most politically divisive years in recent memory, it stands as a stark reminder that the United States has, since the beginning, been a deeply divided country politically, with strong opposing arguments on most political topics. While some describe an apparently seamless transition from the Articles of Confederation to the Constitution, Maier reminds the reader that staunch opposition to a strong federal system existed throughout the young confederacy. Bookending her work with the thoughts and reactions of George Washington – first with his reaction to the idea of the Constitutional Convention and then to his election as president – the author provides a continuous, chronological account of the Constitution from finished compromise to working government.

With considerable respect given to the mountains of studies on ratification, Maier relies extensively on primary sources, many of which are used for the first time in this monograph. Using the records of each state's ratifying convention – where such documents still exist – and numerous mini-biographies of the proponents of both sides of the debate, a fascinating account emerges of the depth with which the citizens of the several states passionately debated the pros and cons of the new document. Federalist arguments stood in stark contrast to understandable reservations against the creation of a powerful centralized government, especially considering how recently the citizenry had won their independence from just such an authority.

Maier also provides detailed accounts concerning the use of the press during the debates, particularly how publishers of various periodicals utilized their freedom of press to promote their own agenda, while in most cases respecting the opposition. Of particular note is Maier's focus

on James Madison, who is shown to have traveled throughout the country promoting the Constitution as it stood. The issue of a lack of a bill of rights – central to the anti-federalist argument – is presented in great detail as well, with special attention given to the many proposed amendments to the document. After a state-by-state account of the ratification process, the author concludes her work with the implementation of the new government and its maiden effort: the passing of some of the proposed amendments, resulting in what we now recognize as the Bill of Rights.

Ratification will likely stand for years to come as the definitive work on this important period in the nation's founding. One statement, however, does stand out as particularly jarring in contrast to the overall judicious nature of the rest of the work. Maier writes, "Information traveled slowly in the eighteenth century" (252). Considering the speed with which the original draft of the constitution made its way throughout the states and to the public, and the speed with which the states assembled ratifying conventions and decided the matter – within eight months, eight of the nine states necessary for ratification had done so – the speed by which information travelled appears to the modern reader quite amazing. Indeed, Maier demonstrates the rapid exchange of information with her keen attention to the ways in which the press transmitted the debates on the Constitution, as well.

Examining dozens of proponents and opponents to the issue, Maier's account of the ratification of the Constitution provides an excellent window into this pivotal moment in American history, exposing the imperfections of some of the key Founders, chipping away at the marble without tearing them down. What results is a lesson for all who fear that after two hundred twenty years, the United States has become too politically volatile and divided: it has always been so, and has both survived and thrived.

Richard Hall

Columbus State University



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