



THE FOUNDING FATHERS READING LIST

Annotated Books, Quotes & Primary Sources — With She's Right Commentary

Most people think they know the Founding Fathers. They know the names — Washington, Jefferson, Hamilton, Madison — and maybe a handful of quotes. But the real depth of what these men believed, debated, feared, and built is sitting right there in books that most Americans have never cracked open.

This reading list is my personal guide to the sources that shaped my thinking — the primary documents, the essential histories, the philosophical foundations, and the modern voices carrying that tradition forward. Each entry includes what the book is about, a key quote, and my honest take on why it matters right now.

You do not have to read them all at once. Start with one. Then another. The Founders spent their lives on these ideas — we can spend a few weeks.

An educated patriot is a free patriot.

PRIMARY SOURCES — Straight From the Founders

Read what they actually wrote before letting anyone tell you what they meant

The Federalist Papers

Alexander Hamilton, James Madison & John Jay | 1788 | Public Domain — Free online

Difficulty: ★★☆☆ | Time: Read one paper a week — it will change how you see everything

This is the single most important document for understanding what the Constitution actually means. Written as newspaper essays to persuade New York to ratify the Constitution, the Federalist Papers explain the Founders' thinking in their own words — on separation of powers, federalism, human nature, and why the system was designed the way it was. When a Supreme Court justice cites original intent, this is what they are reading.

"If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary."

— James Madison, **Federalist No. 51**

SHE'S TAKE:

Start with No. 10 (factions and democracy), No. 51 (checks and balances), and No. 84 (why a Bill of Rights was controversial). Once you read this, you will never again accept a politician's claim that the Constitution is 'a living document' that means whatever they want it to mean.

The Anti-Federalist Papers

Brutus, Centinel, Federal Farmer & others | 1787–1788 | Public Domain — Free online

Difficulty: ★★☆☆ | Time: Pair with the Federalist Papers for the full debate

The other side of the founding debate — and just as essential. The Anti-Federalists argued that the Constitution gave too much power to a central government and that a federal government would inevitably become tyrannical. They demanded a Bill of Rights. They were right on that last point, and wrong on some others — but reading both sides is how you actually understand the founding.

"The powers of the general legislature extend to every case that is of the least importance — there is nothing valuable to human nature, nothing dear to freemen, but what is within its power."

— Brutus No. 1, 1787

SHE'S TAKE:

The Anti-Federalists predicted many of the problems we face today — an overreaching federal government, an unaccountable judiciary, and the erosion of state sovereignty. They were the original limited-government conservatives. Read them and realize this debate is 235 years old and still not settled.

Common Sense

Thomas Paine | 1776 | Public Domain — Free online

Difficulty: ★★▣▣▣▣ | Time: One afternoon — it is only 50 pages

The pamphlet that lit the fire of revolution. Written in plain language for ordinary colonists, Common Sense made the case that monarchy was absurd, that independence was not just possible but necessary, and that America could become something the world had never seen. It sold 500,000 copies in a country of 2.5 million people. No single piece of writing did more to turn colonists into revolutionaries.

"These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it now deserves the love and thanks of man and woman."

— Thomas Paine, *The American Crisis*, 1776

SHE'S TAKE:

Read this when you feel like the fight for liberty is hopeless. Paine wrote it when Washington's army was freezing and losing. The Founders did not have the luxury of giving up — and neither do we. It is a short, powerful reminder that every generation has to earn its freedom.

The Declaration of Independence & The Constitution

The Founding Fathers | 1776 & 1787 | Public Domain — Free online

Difficulty: ★★▣▣▣▣ | Time: Read both in one sitting — then re-read them every year

You cannot defend what you have not read. The Declaration is not just a historical document — it is a philosophical statement about the nature of rights, the purpose of government, and the right of a people to abolish a government that violates those rights. The Constitution is the operating manual for the republic. Every American should have both memorized. Most cannot name the five freedoms in the First Amendment.

"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."

— Declaration of Independence, 1776

SHE'S TAKE:

Print these out. Underline them. Argue with them. The Declaration tells you WHY we have a country. The Constitution tells you HOW it is supposed to work. If you only read two things on this entire list, make it these two. Everything else is commentary.

ESSENTIAL HISTORY — What Every American Should Know

The books that give you the full picture the schools left out

1776

David McCullough | 2005 | Simon & Schuster

Difficulty: ★★███ | Time: A few weekends — reads like a novel

McCullough focuses on the single most desperate year of the Revolution — when Washington's army was outnumbered, outgunned, and on the verge of total collapse. This is not a textbook. It reads like a thriller. You will understand for the first time just how close America came to never existing, and just how much ordinary men sacrificed to make it happen.

"The fate of unborn millions will now depend, under God, on the courage and conduct of this army."

— George Washington, August 1776

SHE'S TAKE:

After reading this, you will never take the Fourth of July for granted again. These men did not have guaranteed victory — they had freezing winters, no pay, and desertions. They fought anyway. That is the standard we inherited. It is worth knowing.

John Adams

David McCullough | 2001 | Simon & Schuster

Difficulty: ★★███ | Time: A couple of weeks — it is long but gripping

Adams is the most underrated Founder — a brilliant, stubborn, deeply principled man who never became as famous as Jefferson or Washington, partly because he refused to play politics. This biography gives you an intimate look at what it cost to build a nation, the fierce debates among the Founders, and the character it took to do what was right when it was deeply unpopular.

"Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passion, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence."

— John Adams, 1770

SHE'S TAKE:

Adams defended the British soldiers after the Boston Massacre because he believed every accused person deserved a fair defense — even when the mob wanted blood. That is rule of law over mob justice. In an era when we cancel people before the facts are in, Adams is more relevant than ever.

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Founding Fathers

Brion McClanahan | 2009 | Regnery Publishing

Difficulty: ★★☆☆ | Time: A quick, engaging read

A direct counter to the revisionist history being taught in most schools today. McClanahan profiles the Founders as they actually were — not the simplified caricatures of progressive textbooks — and makes the case that their political philosophy was far more conservative and libertarian than modern politicians on either side would ever admit.

"The Founders did not create a democracy. They created a constitutional republic, and there is a profound difference."

— Brion McClanahan

SHE'S TAKE:

Hand this to anyone who tells you the Founders were hypocrites whose ideas no longer apply. It is a fast, readable antidote to the 1619 Project version of American history. The Founders were complicated men — but their ideas were right, and this book makes that case clearly.

Washington: A Life

Ron Chernow | 2010 | Penguin Press

Difficulty: ★★★☆☆ | Time: A committed month — it is 928 pages and worth every one

The definitive biography of the indispensable man. Chernow's Washington is not a marble statue — he is a real human being with flaws, doubts, and a relentless drive to do right by his country. What separates Washington from every other powerful man in history is what he did not do: he refused a crown, stepped down voluntarily, and handed power back to the people. That has almost never happened in human history.

"Guard against the impostures of pretended patriotism."

— George Washington, Farewell Address, 1796

SHE'S TAKE:

Washington's Farewell Address alone is worth the entire book. He warned against political parties, foreign entanglements, and national debt. He was right about all three. We ignored him on all three. Read this and understand what genuine leadership — not ambition dressed up as service — actually looks like.

PHILOSOPHY OF FREEDOM — The Ideas Behind the Republic

The intellectual foundations the Founders built on — and that still hold today

The Road to Serfdom

F.A. Hayek | 1944 | University of Chicago Press

Difficulty: ★★☆☆ | Time: Dense but readable — two to three weeks

Written in 1944 by an Austrian economist who watched European socialism firsthand, this book made the case that central economic planning inevitably leads to totalitarianism — not by accident, but by design. Hayek showed that once government takes control of the economy, it must control everything else to make the plan work. This was radical when published. It has proven prophetic.

"Economic control is not merely control of a sector of human life which can be separated from the rest; it is the control of the means for all our ends."

— F.A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*

SHE'S TAKE:

Every person who thinks the government can manage the economy without managing your life needs to read this book. Hayek is not making a political argument — he is making a logical one. The Founders understood instinctively what Hayek proved systematically: concentrated power destroys liberty, always.

Democracy in America

Alexis de Tocqueville | 1835 | Public Domain — Free online

Difficulty: ★★☆☆ | Time: Read in sections — it rewards patience

A French aristocrat visited America in 1831 and wrote the most insightful analysis of American democracy ever produced — by an outsider who saw what Americans took for granted. Tocqueville predicted with stunning accuracy both the strengths of American democracy and its greatest threats: the tyranny of the majority, the softening of citizens through dependence on government, and the slow erosion of freedom through comfort.

"The American Republic will endure until the day Congress discovers that it can bribe the public with the public's money."

— Attributed to Alexis de Tocqueville

SHE'S TAKE:

Tocqueville saw the welfare state coming 150 years before it arrived. He called it 'soft despotism' — a government that does not tyrannize but instead makes citizens 'timid and industrious animals, of which government is the shepherd.' Sound familiar? This book is uncomfortable because it is accurate.

The Law

Frederic Bastiat | 1850 | Public Domain — Free online

Difficulty: ★★●●● | Time: Under 100 pages — read it in one sitting

A French economist writing in 1850 who somehow described exactly what American government looks like today. Bastiat defines the law as the collective organization of the individual's right to self-defense — nothing more, nothing less. He then explains how the law becomes perverted when it is used for plunder: taking from some to give to others. He called this 'legal plunder' and showed how it destroys the moral foundation of society.

"The state is the great fictitious entity by which everyone seeks to live at the expense of everyone else."

— Frederic Bastiat, *The Law*, 1850

SHE'S TAKE:

This may be the most important 75 pages ever written on the philosophy of government. It is free, it is short, and it will permanently change how you think about taxation, welfare, and the role of the state. I cannot recommend it strongly enough. Share it with everyone.

The 5000 Year Leap

W. Cleon Skousen | 1981 | National Center for Constitutional Studies

Difficulty: ★★●●● | Time: A week or two — very accessible

Skousen argues that the Founding Fathers synthesized the best ideas from thousands of years of human civilization to create a system of government so effective it produced more progress in 200 years than the previous 5,000. He identifies 28 principles the Founders believed were essential to liberty and prosperity — principles rooted in natural law, biblical tradition, and classical philosophy.

"The Founders felt that the God of nature had endowed men with certain inalienable rights, and that no government had the authority to take those rights away."

— W. Cleon Skousen

SHE'S TAKE:

This is the book I recommend to anyone who wants to understand the Founders' worldview from the ground up. It is not academic — it is practical and accessible. If you are new to constitutional conservatism, start here before you tackle the Federalist Papers.

MODERN MUST-READS — The Fight Continues

Conservative and libertarian voices carrying the Founders' torch in the modern era

Liberty and Tyranny: A Conservative Manifesto

Mark Levin | 2009 | Threshold Editions

Difficulty: ★★███ | Time: A week — hard to put down

Levin lays out the philosophical divide between the conservative and the 'statist' with clarity and fire. He covers free markets, the Constitution, environmentalism, immigration, and the judiciary — showing how each policy area represents either a return to founding principles or a departure from them. This was a #1 New York Times bestseller and remains one of the most important conservative books of the modern era.

"The Conservative believes that man's liberty is not the gift of the state but is preexistent to the state."

— Mark Levin, *Liberty and Tyranny*

SHE'S TAKE:

Levin makes the conservative case with the kind of passion and constitutional grounding that you rarely see in modern political commentary. This is not talking points — it is a serious philosophical argument. Read it, then read his follow-up, 'Ameritopia,' which shows how utopian thinking always leads to tyranny.

The Conscience of a Conservative

Barry Goldwater | 1960 | Victor Publishing

Difficulty: ★★███ | Time: A few evenings — only 127 pages

Written in 1960, this slim book launched the modern American conservative movement. Goldwater argued that conservatism was not about preserving the status quo but about returning to the principles of individual liberty, limited government, and free markets that made America great. He was dismissed as an extremist. His ideas became the foundation of the Reagan Revolution twenty years later.

"I have little interest in streamlining government or making it more efficient, for I mean to reduce its size."

— Barry Goldwater

SHE'S TAKE:

Goldwater lost the 1964 election in a landslide. He also wrote a book that changed American politics for the next half century. The lesson: being right matters more than being popular in the short run. His definition of conservatism is still the best I have ever read — and it is only 127 pages.

The Federalist Society: How Conservatives and Libertarians Revolutionized the Law

Michael Avery & Danielle McLaughlin | 2013 | Vanderbilt University Press

Difficulty: ★★☆☆ | Time: A few weeks — dense but important

Understanding how originalism became the dominant legal philosophy of the conservative movement — and how a small group of law students in 1982 built an organization that now shapes the Supreme Court — is essential for anyone serious about constitutional law and the long game of liberty. Whether you agree with every conclusion or not, this is a fascinating history of ideas in action.

"It is emphatically the province and duty of the judicial department to say what the law is."

— Chief Justice John Marshall, *Marbury v. Madison*, 1803

SHE'S TAKE:

The left has spent decades packing every institution — schools, media, courts, agencies — with their ideology. This book shows how conservatives fought back on the legal front, methodically and successfully. It is a blueprint for playing the long game in the battle of ideas.



WHERE DO YOU GO FROM HERE?

Keep reading. Keep questioning. Keep sharing.

Every book on this list will lead you to another. The Federalist Papers will send you to the Anti-Federalists. Tocqueville will send you to Bastiat. McCullough will send you to primary sources. That is how it works — one good book opens a door that opens another door.

Share this list with a friend who thinks they already know American history. Give it to your kids. Drop it in a Facebook group. The best weapon against revisionist history is the original sources — freely available, written in plain English, and more radical and more beautiful than anything the textbooks told you.

The Founders read voraciously. They argued endlessly. They disagreed on almost everything — and out of that friction they built the freest nation in human history. The least we can do is read what they wrote.

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