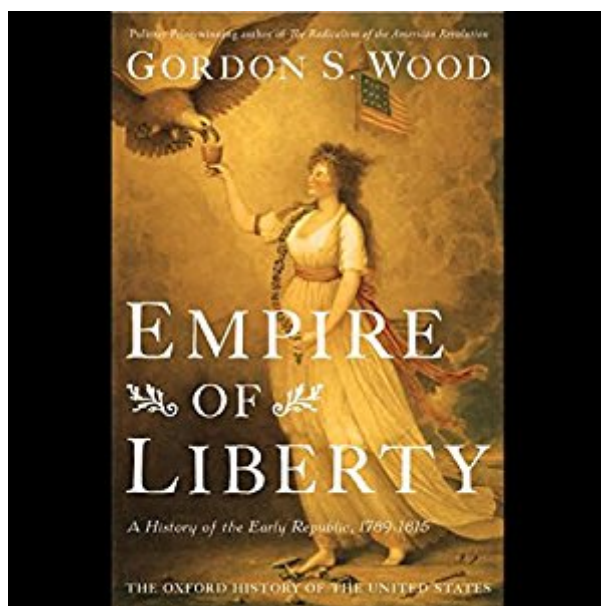


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Empire Of Liberty: A History Of The Early Republic



Synopsis

The Oxford History of the United States is by far the most respected multi-volume history of our nation. The series includes three Pulitzer Prize winners, two New York Times bestsellers, and winners of the Bancroft and Parkman Prizes. Now, in the newest volume in the series, one of America's most esteemed historians, Gordon S. Wood, offers a brilliant account of the early American Republic, ranging from 1789 and the beginning of the national government to the end of the War of 1812. As Wood reveals, the period was marked by tumultuous change in all aspects of American life--in politics, society, economy, and culture. The men who founded the new government had high hopes for the future, but few of their hopes and dreams worked out quite as they expected. They hated political parties but parties nonetheless emerged. Some wanted the United States to become a great fiscal-military state like those of Britain and France; others wanted the country to remain a rural agricultural state very different from the European states. Instead, by 1815 the United States became something neither group anticipated. Many leaders expected American culture to flourish and surpass that of Europe; instead it became popularized and vulgarized. The leaders also hope to see the end of slavery; instead, despite the release of many slaves and the end of slavery in the North, slavery was stronger in 1815 than it had been in 1789. Many wanted to avoid entanglements with Europe, but instead the country became involved in Europe's wars and ended up waging another war with the former mother country. Still, with a new generation emerging by 1815, most Americans were confident and optimistic about the future of their country. Named a New York Times Notable Book, *Empire of Liberty* offers a marvelous account of this pivotal era when America took its first unsteady steps as a new and rapidly expanding nation. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

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Customer Reviews

Gordon Wood's *Empire of Liberty* is part of the on-going Oxford History of the United States series. It fits between the edition on the American Revolution and the run up to the Civil War. Wood covers the constitutional and early national period. George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison were the presidents and Alexander Hamilton, Albert Gallatin, Timothy Dwight, James Monroe, and a host of others play the supporting roles that helped the new nation define itself. But Wood does not limit his book to political theory and governmental organization. While these were important features to our country, westward expansion, slavery, Indian relations, education, religion, and commercial developments impacted everyone from the president on down to the common man and woman. Wood expertly weaves a historical account that explains how many diverse activities brought the nation from its infancy to its youth along with the optimism, expectations, personal goals and other themes that helped define our existence. Wood is a master historian who can take on this Herculean task and have the result make sense. It would be easy to become bogged down in detail and overlook the big picture. Wood keeps a perspective about his work that befits a historian of his ability. He can address the touchy subjects like slavery and war and questionable political decisions and have them become a factor in his work without having them consume his work. The end result is a book worthy of its Pulitzer nomination. But while the book was nominated, it is also clear why it did not win the award. Wood tends to belabor some points almost to the point of being excruciatingly analytical. He goes into detail on the arts or on philosophical theories surrounding Republicanism versus Federalism to the point that the reader just wants the chapter to end. As a result the book is a tad overlong. Wood might have eliminated nearly 100 pages by adopting brevity rather than continued detailed analysis, but he had his points to make and the end result does not suffer from his tendency towards detail. For this reason the average reader may find this book tedious at times, but the serious scholar will fully appreciate the amount of research that went into this book and the amount of care Wood took to convey his message. Either way, there is a world of information to be gained from reading this book and no one who has any level of interest in our nation's history should not consider reading this book. It may take some time to get through it, but one will be much better informed about "the rest of the story" of the Founding Fathers. If the Revolution got the ball rolling (to use a tacky metaphor), *Empire of Liberty* does a

superb job in getting the historical account of America to the next level. It is a bit unfortunate that Oxford University Press has been so hap-hazard and disjointed in publishing the story of America, but at least the volumes that are complete are all solid histories that do not fail to deliver a quality product. But someday a student will be able to pick up all the volumes and read about American in consecutive volumes from accomplished historians. We're just not there yet, so be patient.

Gordon Wood's *Empire of Liberty* is an enjoyable read and a worthy entry in the Oxford History of the United States. As the title suggests, Wood covers the period from the ratification of the Constitution through the War of 1812. The book is a broad history of the period, covering political, economic, and cultural aspects of American life during this period -- everything from the classic political battles between Federalists and Republicans to changes in the structure of the American family. There are both strengths and weaknesses to this approach. In particular, the broad focus of *Empire of Liberty* gives a much more comprehensive view of the U.S. during this period than any other book I've encountered. It's refreshing to get more than simply a "Great Man" history of the era. However, the book drags in spots (especially when analyzing changes in the American psyche) partially as a result of its breadth. It seemed like another round of editing could have trimmed some of this fat. Despite this criticism, Wood's writing is always clear, well-structured, and well-argued. It was a pleasure to read, and I plan on reading some of Wood's earlier work as a result.

Considering that this book is part of the Oxford History of the United States, and then adding Gordon S. Wood as the author, you know that an important work of American history has been brought forth. Wood is a prominent historian, a learned man and supreme scholar, and while the tome is more than 700 pages there are no wasted words and the book is very informative. In reading this book, you will be delighted to learn new things about the subject matter as presented by the author. I like very much that he does not go in a strict chronological order, but rather deals in topics pertaining to the development of the nation through the first four presidents. While every historian must have his or her own theories and opinions (many involving politics), Wood presents an even handed history, and while I suspect he is leaning more toward an America that adopted an egalitarian attitude largely due to hatred of the British and admiration of the French Revolution, the author has the decency to not shove it down your throat. He does a very good job of introducing us to not only the main players during this critical time of our nation's history, but also brings forth the middling classes, as he calls them. These people are essentially what we would refer to as the "middle class" of today, whether lower, middle, or upper middle class. The rise of this class, coupled

with the concept of equality became very critical of the Federalists and their sense of upper class rule. Many of these people had visions of a type of wealth enjoyed by the British peers, but that did not work in America because land was so abundant and a "gentleman" had to come to his money by methods other than simply collecting rents and devoting his life to his interests and pleasures. America was more a working and hustling place. There were those who thought that Washington was too regal, with his formalities, levees, and sense of superiority, and while Washington was in every respect the indispensable man, he was greatly concerned about his every action and how it would set a precedent in a newly formed government. Yes, he was thin skinned, and did not do well with criticism, but he believed in a central government and a strong executive office. His eight years of serving as the chief executive were what held the nation together. In spite of the national devotion to Washington, politics were brewing. Alexander Hamilton was the most important cabinet officer in Washington's administration, and it was his brilliance in matters of finance that set America on a sound footing. His ideas of the assumption of the various state debts due to the Revolutionary War restored the credit of the United States, but it also established the Federal government as superior to that of the individual states. The author points out that with Hamilton coming from the Caribbean, and the bastard son of a Scottish peddler, he had no sense of loyalty to any state as did Jefferson and Madison and others to Virginia. He and Jefferson became adversaries who saw the utopia of the United States from totally different perspectives. Jefferson was more a philosophical visionary, possibly a man more suited to be a professor, but a person who gained immense fame as the primary author of the Declaration of Independence and then became the leader of the opposition to the Federalists. Wood does point out that the very idea of party politics at that time was totally unrelated to what we know today. Prominent men did not campaign for office, but used letters to their supporters and encouraged others to publish in newspapers opinions that were in their favor and would likely result in votes. Poor John Adams. He was the first man to suffer the office of the Vice President of the United States. His reputation as a grumpy old man was well deserved and he was a novice in political intrigue and outmatched by both Jefferson and Hamilton. His single term as president was a success in that he kept America out of a war with France and with Jefferson's election, Adams left on an early morning stage for his home without remaining to participate in the exchange of power. Jefferson, in his typical democratic style, walked to the inauguration from his boarding house. That reminds me of the same thing for dramatic effect, when Jimmy Carter walked down Pennsylvania Avenue and ushered in a completely ineffective administration. It was also interesting that the result of the election of 1800 put Jefferson in the White House, largely because he carried 82% of the electoral votes of the slave states. In those states, a slave was counted as 3/5

of a person, and the irony is that Jefferson, a slave holder who championed life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, carried only 27% of the Northern states, which reinforced the Federalist fear that the South was taking over the nation. Jefferson was called behind his back, the Negro president. While he aspired to individual freedom, it was interesting to me (from another book) that when Lafayette last visited Jefferson at Monticello and suggested that slaves be taught to read and write in order to make the transition to freedom, old Tom simply said that would not work because they would learn to forge papers and run away to freedom. Between that and Sally Hemings, Jefferson for me takes a back seat to greatness, but I felt that Wood still worships at the altar of his wickedness. There is a great chapter on slavery and it reveals how our nation appeared to be moving away from the peculiar institution, but there were two factors that changed that. The first was the invention of the cotton gin, which immediately changed the agricultural scene to cotton because it was so much more lucrative, and the revolution in Haiti which lasted for ten years and caused great concern because of its success and the brutality that the white slave owners suffered. Jefferson never recognized Haiti as a nation, but it was the next country after America to gain independence and they did allow all people to be free. Little is said about Jefferson's administration. We all know it primarily for the Louisiana Purchase, which cannot be credited to TJ's diplomatic finesse, but many historians want to brush over his disastrous embargo policy, which destroyed the economy of the United States during his mess of a second term. There is a great deal of good information here and I would suggest that everyone interested in the early development of this nation have this book in their home.

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