



THE UNPOPULARITY OF POPULAR HISTORY IN THE ACADEMY:

An Academic's Thoughts on
David McCullough's Visit to Campus

By Todd Estes

By most accounts, David McCullough's visit to Oakland University was a great success. For two days in April 2003, the noted historian was on campus to deliver the inaugural Distinguished Lecture in the Humanities and to speak to students about writing history. McCullough attracted a huge crowd for his public talk, garnered excellent media coverage and exposure for the university, helped raise money for the school at a successful fund-raising dinner, and generated a great deal of excitement among students as well as members of the community who lined up to get their copies of his books autographed and to meet the famous historian. Most of those involved in the two-day event seemed to go away having enjoyed their encounter with the Pulitzer Prize-winning author.

Admittedly, the warm, sunny spring weather didn't hurt anyone's disposition, but the real secret to the success of the event was McCullough himself. He is a popular, well-known, best-selling author and a captivating speaker. He is articulate, poised, self-deprecating, and charming. He tells great stories. He is pleasant and at ease, and he quickly puts others at ease, too. The general public knows him well from his long string of

publications on a variety of topics, and from his appearances as a television talking head or lecturer. He has also been a very public voice advocating for the study of history and the preservation of the past. In fact, McCullough came to Oakland fresh from testifying just a few days earlier before Congress on the value of history. On top of everything else, he looks the part. If ever Hollywood had a role calling for an historian it would cast David McCullough. He is, as a historian friend of mine wrote, “exactly what television producers and popular audiences want their historians to look and sound like.”¹

During his two day visit to Oakland, I had the opportunity to meet McCullough in several small-group settings, to introduce him at, and to moderate, a discussion with students, and to dine at his luncheon table, as well as to attend his public lecture. In settings large and small he demonstrated the same personable and friendly qualities. In short, it seems impossible not to like David McCullough personally.

Despite all this—even despite the great weather—there was something missing in his talks, something disappointing about his visit. More broadly, there is something missing in McCullough’s writings. And while I could not quite identify the absence at the time, I’ve done a lot of thinking since about the issues he raised. In fact, the McCullough visit to Oakland provides a way to think about the larger issue of popular history and academic history, about the type of history written by non-academics and that written by scholars, and about the reasons why popular history is so often detested by historians in the academy. Using the McCullough visit as a point of departure, this essay will explore the rocky relationship between popular history, academic history, and the kinds of people who write each. It will offer reasons for the unpopularity of popular history in the academy.²

Two points should be established at the outset. First, the dividing line between popular and academic history is far from absolute. Any definition of either term would necessarily be imprecise. Some academic historians—Civil War scholar James McPherson and early American historian David Hackett Fis-

cher, to name just two—write very successfully for popular audiences without sacrificing scholarly rigor; and some popular historians write serious works of history which certainly pass academic muster. Despite the permeability between categories, these two types do exist and contain certain distinct characteristics. So, while granting a certain amount of fuzziness in the labels, the differences in the types of history that the labels signify are real. Secondly, I should make it clear that this is not an attack on David McCullough, nor is it frontal assault on popular history in general. Rather, using McCullough as an example, it is an attempt to understand why the best-selling works of history are so poorly thought of by academic historians and to explore the disconnect between what history is in the minds of the general public—which is fed a steady diet of McCullough-like works—and what history is as defined and practiced by professional historians.

We might begin with some questions: why do academic historians think so little of McCullough's work and of the work of many popular historians? Why do they consistently dismiss the writings of the man who is, in the public imagination, "Mr. History?" And why has the latest McCullough product, *1776*, met with much the same fate as his earlier book, *John Adams*: fawning media attention, best-selling status—and outright dismissal and hostility from academic historians?³

McCullough's recent books are part of a resurgence of what many term "Founders Chic," a revival of interest in the Founding Fathers, specifically, and the American Founding more generally. In the past five years especially this resurgence has produced a plethora of work, much of it by writers aiming for the general reading public. New biographies of leading figures (and even secondary figures) filled the shelves of bookstores and the catalogs of the History Book Club. Although studies of the Revolutionary War have always been popular, this revival focused on more than just military history. It zeroed in on what is today termed "character," and examined the personalities of the founders. This revival of interest generated widespread recognition. Both *U.S. News and World Report* and

Newsweek gave extensive coverage to this phenomenon in 2001. And the years since then have shown no diminishing of the trend. All things relating to the Founding era seem to attract attention, and books by both popular and academic historians on early America continue to sell.⁴

If a single book could be said to be the exemplar of “Founders Chic” it would have to be McCullough’s 2001 magnum opus *John Adams*, a 751-page behemoth. The book flew off the shelves of bookstores and climbed the bestseller lists. Suddenly, America’s second president was hot, enjoying a popularity he never enjoyed in his day. McCullough’s book and the attention it garnered pushed “Founders Chic” front and center.⁵

In some ways, this was a good thing for early American historians (of whom I am one) in that it sparked interest in the period. Suddenly, the early republic—the area of my research and teaching interests—seemed popular. People who had never paid much attention to early America were reading (or at least buying) a book on the topic. And on a personal level, friends who had never read anything about early America made it a point to tell me how much they enjoyed the Adams book and to ask me questions about it. I was always unsure how to respond. While grateful for, and delighted by, their interest in my period of history, I was nonetheless deeply troubled by the book and their fondness for it and never developed a stock response. In some ways, this essay is my belated rejoinder to the beseeching of friends, family, and neighbors who seemed to think that I would be as thrilled by the book as they were and were slightly puzzled, even disappointed, that I lacked their enthusiasm.

Founders Chic, and McCullough’s book especially, drew negative reviews from professional historians. Since McCullough’s *John Adams* was the most visible and best-known (the *ur-text*, if you will) of the trend, it was the book that drew most of the fire from academic historians. In a lengthy review, Princeton historian Sean Wilentz astutely noted that McCullough’s portrait of the second president focused almost en-

tirely on Adams's character. McCullough was deeply admiring of Adams who, he admitted, was a bit cranky and contrarian, but was basically honest, plucky, feisty, dogged, courageous, plainspoken, and devoted to his wife Abigail; in other words, a deeply good man. But Wilentz noted that McCullough never fully addressed Adams's ideas or his thinking about politics. For a man who wrote voluminously and succeeded at the highest levels of politics, the Adams that emerged in McCullough's telling was strangely devoid of ideas or political persuasions. Even when McCullough did discuss politics it was usually limited to the level of character comparisons with Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, and Adams's other great rivals who came off as decidedly inferior men compared to McCullough's hero. Yet, as Wilentz made clear, it is impossible to understand, let alone come to terms with, Adams without a thorough study of what he wrote, what he thought, and how he acted politically.⁶

This gets close to my central complaint about the book, something I struggled to articulate to non-historian friends. The obsessive focus on character, to the exclusion of nearly all else, severely limited the book as serious history by failing to explain a central conundrum of Adams's career: if Adams was the honest, courageous, down-to-earth, Everyman-president, and the deeply good man, citizen, and husband that McCullough gives us, then how in the world did this paragon become the first American president to lose reelection in 1800? And to Thomas Jefferson, whose character was not nearly so spotless? McCullough has a dilemma here. Either the American electorate was fundamentally wrong and turned out of office a deserving man in 1800 for someone morally inferior, or something else explains what historians refer to as the first peaceful transfer of power in history when the Federalist Adams turned over the White House keys to the Democratic-Republican Jefferson. Since McCullough seems to be suggesting that Adams's character traits were distinctly "American" traits, shared by his countrymen at large, and since America's rejection of Adams would seem to reflect poorly on the national character,

McCullough can't really bring himself to indict the country for its poor judgment. And since he has not delved into the much deeper and complex political and ideological reasons that led to the downfall of Adams and his Federalists and the rise of Jefferson and his Republicans, he cannot provide the historical context for understanding and explaining Adams's defeat which had relatively little to do with character and nearly everything to do with politics and ideology. Instead, McCullough simply moves on. The remainder of the book traces out Adams's long retirement period, and is replete with more stories and anecdotes that serve to underscore, yet again, Adams's fundamental goodness. You cannot understand Adams at all, let alone understand why he lost the presidency, without knowing the length and detailed political context of the 1790s and the still-evolving first party conflict. And readers of this book did not find that understanding in its pages.

While this lengthy and weighty tome did display two of McCullough's great strengths—prodigious research and masterful storytelling—those skills were put to no original end. We get over 700 pages of artfully told stories and anecdotes, piling up on top of each other, each revealing yet another aspect of Adams's sterling character, his fundamental goodness. McCullough writes, he entertains, he tells stories, he moves Adams through his career anecdote by anecdote, story by story: "Narrative, narrative, narrative," Wilentz lamented.

Other historians noted additional shortcomings in McCullough's book. Jeffrey Pasley found *John Adams* to be of a piece with McCullough's previous blockbuster, *Truman*, as an example of the historical-figure-as-celebrity school which takes figures of the past, even such seemingly un-sexy ones as John Adams, strips them down to essential character components, and presents them—free of their historical context—to the public as figures to be admired and celebrated. Once again, the complexities, inconsistencies, and rough edges that actually make historical figures so interesting to academics are air-brushed and smoothed flat to make public consumption effortless. McCullough's subjects, Pasley wrote, are typically

“great men and events that most people have heard of, described in lively, human, but stately prose that tastes full-bodied but goes down smooth.” Given his gifts, McCullough could have turned America’s obscure 13th president, Millard Fillmore, into an icon, Pasley observed. Pasley noted, too, the exaggerated emphasis on character and personality in McCullough’s portrayal of Adams and the ways in which that celebration of character misunderstands Adams historically since he was, after all, a deeply unpopular figure with many Americans, even some of those in his own Federalist party. Obviously, it was that unpopularity that contributed mightily to his defeat in 1800.⁷

Finally, in a scathing review of *Founders Chic*, historian David Waldstreicher echoed earlier complaints by Wilentz and Pasley. He observed that much of the recent *Founders Chic*—and Waldstreicher targeted several academic historians as well—has turned the history of early America into little more than dueling personalities. Elections, congressional votes, foreign policy decisions are all presented as being, deep down, not about rival philosophies or ideologies or even ideas but pretty much just about rivals. Thus, the election of 1800 did not so much pit Adams and Federalism on one side against Jefferson and Republicanism on the other (with the wildly different worldviews contained in each) as much as it simply matched Adams—irascible, honest, devoted, and above all, good—against Jefferson, whose character was marked by slave-owning, sexual indiscretions, and his generally dandyish temperament. At least that is how the election contest looked to McCullough. Waldstreicher notes the ahistorical thinking inherent in such views. “Whoever wins, character is king. McCullough’s ultimate subject,” Waldstreicher observes trenchantly, “is less John Adams than it is a certain sort of heroic greatness . . . Greatness itself justifies the personalizing approach.”

It is no coincidence that many commentators have noted a marked similarity in McCullough’s portrayal of Truman and of Adams. One could take the adjectives and characterizations McCullough applied to Truman and apply them to Adams (or

vice-versa) with little discernable difference. Truman also was presented as cranky, honest, courageous, devoted to his wife, a man of the people, and above all as—you guessed it—good. Waldstreicher understands the appeal of such treatments. “The lure of character and reputation is understandable,” he writes, in part because it is perhaps helpful to some to have historical figures rendered as comprehensible as neighbors or relatives. And in McCullough’s version of Adams, the second president is “about as familiar as the grandfather you never met.”⁸

But for all its attractive traits, seeing the past as being only contests of character seriously distorts history. Plus, as Wilentz wrote (and as Pasley and Waldstreicher would surely agree), history is much more interesting precisely *because* of, not in spite of, the messy, broken, complicated, ambiguous world in which the founders lived and worked. At least it is more interesting to historians. Perhaps many Americans—particularly in the anxiety of a post-9/11 world—crave the comfort and simplicity of a simple, straightforward narrative in black and white with good guys winning over bad guys, with no ambiguities or loose ends to muddy heroic accounts, and with no complicated counter-arguments to threaten the affirmation provided by triumphalist narratives that are all celebration with no retrospection. But historians know that the past has never been that clean, that neat, or that uncomplicated. Accounts that portray American history that way may be reassuring, but they are most certainly false, or at least incomplete.⁹

The McCullough on display when he came to Oakland to give his talks was the same one that, simultaneously, thrills so many with his colorful, eventful presentations of the past and yet drives many academic historians to distraction. At his well-received public talk, McCullough quoted Barbara Tuchman (an earlier history popularizer who had her own dichotomized relationship with an adoring, book-buying public on the one hand and a largely dismissive batch of academics on the other) that the secret to doing good history boiled down to two words:

“tell stories.” McCullough intoned this sage advice to cheers from the crowd.

Telling stories is certainly what McCullough does, and he does it as skillfully and compellingly as anyone writing today. But most academic historians tell stories in their books, too; again, pick up works by David Hackett Fischer and James McPherson for examples of storytelling *and* historical analysis. The difference is that McCullough *only* tells stories and eschews any real analysis of what the stories mean or how and why they are significant. This is a crucial difference—perhaps *the* crucial difference—between popular history and academic history, and it goes a long way toward explaining the unpopularity of works like McCullough’s in the academy. Again, those categories are not absolute and segregated and there are popular historians who do contextualize and interpret, just as there are academic historians who tell lots of interesting stories and share anecdotes in their work.¹⁰

This brings us back to the sense of disappointment with McCullough’s Oakland lecture and the other talks he gave while on campus, a disappointment that stems from a characteristic flaw of McCullough’s kind of history, one readily apparent in examining his recent writings on early American history. An example will suggest what I mean. I served as the moderator of a small-group discussion between McCullough and Oakland students which focused largely on his Adams book. I led off the session by noting that we talk to our students about historiography—defined simply as the history of historical writing on a particular problem or topic—and the differences in historical interpretations between historians who study the same events. I then asked McCullough what he saw as the major *interpretive* differences between his work on John Adams and the works of other historians who have written about him. McCullough never really answered the question. He proceeded to talk instead about how he got interested in Adams, and what led him to write the book on Adams. But he never really began to tackle the heart of the question. He never told us where his interpretations of Adams differed from

those of other historians. He didn't answer the question because of one simple reason: he couldn't. McCullough did not make interpretations of Adams, he did not challenge previous arguments or interpretations of Adams because he offered no interpretative analysis of Adams in his book. I was not trying to trap McCullough; merely trying to see if he could speak to what many historians consider the single most glaring omission in McCullough's works—the absence of an interpretive angle or thesis about his subject.

Historians exist in a culture of argument. They typically begin research projects by reading what previous historians have written and identifying either gaps in the existing knowledge or, more frequently, finding something in the existing interpretations with which to disagree—some interpretation that struck them as wrong or incomplete or in need of revision. Historians conceive of their books with a sense of the existing historical literature firmly in mind. They write their books self-consciously with an eye toward staking out a position in that body of literature and toward developing an interpretive position which revises, expands, reverses, or qualifies but which, above all, *engages* the existing literature. In other words, they join a conversation already in progress and never definitively settled. As the great Dutch historian, Pieter Geyl, once wrote: "History is an argument without end." New books are evaluated in part on how successfully they engage the previous literature and on what contributions they make to the emerging historiographical debates over, let's say, the emergence of the first party system in the 1790s. Thus, the work of academic historians is all about argument, thesis, and interpretation, and the ongoing work of academic scholarship consists not so much in discovering new facts or pieces of evidence (although sometimes this happens), as in rearranging the existing evidence and literature to find new patterns, to create new interpretations, and to develop the reasons why we need to revise our understanding of a particular historical problem, issue, or figure.¹¹

McCullough's *John Adams* fails all these tests. It offers no

new interpretations. It provides no compelling thesis or arguments. It does not engage with the existing scholarly literature which is chock-full of a variety of interpretations of Adams. It even fails to explain a very basic justification for any new book: why the book is needed in the first place. Particularly when the subject is as well-worn as John Adams, and particularly since so many good books about Adams already exist, the burden of any writer must be to articulate a compelling reason to produce yet another. Since McCullough's book offers no reinterpretations or even any discussion of other interpretations, and since it does not really tell us anything new about its subject, it serves as little more than a collection of stories and anecdotes, albeit stylishly done.

Is this enough? Is stating that "John Adams was a good man" in a graceful and entertaining way worth such a lengthy book, especially when no books on Adams I know of seriously dispute that point? What does a reader of McCullough take away after finishing the last of the book's 751 pages? A clearer sense of Adams than was previously possible? A new way to think about him and his career? Another way of seeing Adams in the context of his times? Or, only that John Adams was a good man. Is that even an important point? Has that reader, in fact, actually been taught something new or important about Adams, or has she merely been entertained? A good work of history may be entertaining—some of the best often are—but they are primarily distinguished not by their chatty anecdotes but by the solid interpretative schemes and arguments that characterize their thesis. If a book is only entertaining it is of little value to scholars or students. That is the main reason that I would never assign McCullough's *John Adams* in one of my classes on early America. Even if it were much abridged, there would be nothing there for students to grasp or use, no interpretation to think about and compare to other arguments, no pedagogical purpose to be served. Even if my only aim was to teach students about excellent writing styles, I would select other books on early America which combine graceful, fluid prose with rigorous analysis and interpretation.

Another reason that academic historians find so little of value in many works of popular history—particularly the current wave of Founders Chic—is not only that they make no effort to engage the historiography of a given subject, but that such works often represent (without knowing it) a throwback to much earlier schools of historiography which have only fleeting connections to the present state of scholarship. Writers like McCullough are actually reaching back at least two scholarly generations in writing their very traditional life-and-times biographies that were the essential components of traditional political history, the kind that reigned until the 1960s or so. Since then two scholarly generations have sprung up to supplant the traditional political history. Lacking catchy names, they might be labeled the new political history of the 1960s and 1970s which borrowed methodologies from the social sciences and paid particular attention to ethnocultural factors that shaped politics. More recently a new, new political history updated the older new political history by focusing attention on the practices, rituals, and customs that played a role in shaping political culture. Thus, McCullough and the other practitioners of Founders Chic are actually reaching back several generations in the evolution of early American political history. Their work is not engaged with either of the two most recent schools or concentrations of political history. Their books seem stuck in a kind of history that has not been practiced by most academic historians in nearly half a century. And the writers of Founders Chic history not only fail to place their works in a historiographical context, their books show virtually no signs of having been informed by the insights of the two most recent schools of political history. This accounts in part for the hostile way that Founders Chic has been received by academic historians. It also explains the difficulty and genuine puzzlement academics have in knowing how to respond to work that seems untethered to any of the scholarly debates and uninformed by any of the recent findings and developments that have moved early national political history beyond the founders.¹²

Another reason academics tend to be very skeptical of the work of popular historians is because so many of them write about such widely divergent topics and different eras. Stephen Ambrose, another best-selling popular historian not well-regarded in the academy, wrote books on Richard Nixon, the Transcontinental Railroad, World War II, and the Lewis and Clark expedition—topics that spanned several centuries. McCullough, for example, has published on the Panama Canal, Harry Truman, John Adams, and now the American Revolution. Four distinct topics, four distinct eras. Each has its own literature, its own historiography, and its own set of questions and debates that scholars have grappled with over the years. Besides the historiography there is also the history of the period. To write knowledgeably about John Adams, one has to know early republic history intimately just as one would need to be very familiar with the history of the early 20th century to understand the times of Harry Truman.

Scholars devote large chunks of their lives trying to master just one of these periods of time. And even specialists would admit that mastery is an illusion. There is simply too much of the past to learn and too much history writing about the past to ever know everything. But academic historians think, with good reason, that only someone who has spent years reading, thinking, researching, and writing about, say, the 1790s can be in a position to write something significant on John Adams, could produce a work that would be situated in the larger body of writing on Adams and on the period, and a work that would grow out of a deep knowledge of, and familiarity with, the materials of that time period. Dipping in and dipping out, reading selectively and trying to gain a sense or a flavor of the period before moving on to some other very different era and topic is not enough. Too often, the result is the kind of superficial treatment of people and events found in many popular histories.

This is not to say that novices or non-academics can have nothing of value to say or to add to the ongoing historical debates. Sometimes, it takes a new pair of eyes to look at histori-

cal sources and see what those rooted in a period may overlook or downplay. But such instances are fairly rare. Furthermore, the deep study of a period that academic historians engage in is not simply a matter of accumulating diverse bits of knowledge or stories which can then be put onto a page. The years of reading and study and immersion in the primary and secondary materials of a historical age are necessary to grasp the larger culture and background of the subject matter and to locate that subject in the era. Just as physicians do not jump from cardiology to orthopedics to neurosurgery to pediatrics, neither do academic historians careen from era to era, specialty to specialty. Only popular historians jump in and out of different periods, blissfully unaware of how little they know about the age but presuming to speak about any number of different eras and topics.¹³

In the last analysis, is there any real harm done by the David McCullough's of the world? Will all the many devoted readers of McCullough's books be any worse off for having read them? They won't be so much harmed, I would argue, as cheated—cheated out of reading what history can be at its best. The sad part for many historians is that so many members of the reading public will continue thinking that McCullough's works are serious history and that all history writing is or should be like McCullough's. There should be more to say about John Adams than simply that he was a good man—and there is much more than that to be found in some of the excellent works about him. There should be a larger purpose to writing (and reading) a work of history than simply to be entertained—and there are larger purposes (as well as good entertainment) in serious academic writings on early America. There should be more to history than simply or only telling stories. While “story” is embedded in the word “history,” good history has never been and cannot be merely a collection of stories. Without a larger purpose, bereft of an argument to make or an interpretation to offer, with no meaning given to all those stories, works like McCullough's will, in the end, cheat their readers and deprive them of the joys of a more subtle,

complex, and nuanced understanding of the past that raises (often troubling) questions and gives us a multi-dimensional perspective on people and events.

REFERENCES

The author wishes to thank Carl Osthaus, Bruce Zellers, and Marvin Ninneman for their thoughtful comments on an early draft of this essay.

¹ Jeffrey L. Pasley, "Federalist Chic," *Common-Place* (February 2002), online at www.common-place.org/200202.shtml (accessed 4/27/2005).

² Of course, there are also reasons for the unpopularity of academic history among the general public—but that is a subject for a different essay. For discussions of that issue see the important essay by David Greenberg, "That Barnes and Noble Dream: What's Wrong With the David McCullough's of History," online at <http://slate.msn.com> (May 17 and 18, 2005). This article appeared on the History News Network (May 23, 2005) under a slightly different title: "What's Wrong with David McCullough's Kind of History?" See www.hnn.us/articles12073.html. See also the discussion in Gordon Wood, "Founders & Keepers," *New York Review of Books* 52 (July 14, 2005), 34–36.

³ For an enlightening discussion of McCullough's latest book and his kind of history in general see Greenberg, "That Barnes and Noble Dream: What's Wrong With the David McCullough's of History." For some additional discussions of Founders Chic and the issues raised by it, see Anne Matthews, "Leading Men: Authorities on the Revolutionary Era Say How the Founding Fathers Became Cultural Heroes," *American Scholar* 74 (Spring 2005), 126–131; Gary B. Nash, "The Unruly Birth of America," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (July 1, 2005), B6–B8; and also Wood, "Founders & Keepers."

⁴ See Jay Tolson, "Founding Rivalries," *U.S. News and World Report* (February 26, 2001), 51–55 and Evan Thomas, "Founders Chic: Live from Philadelphia," *Newsweek* (July 9, 2001), 48–49.

⁵ But Founders Chic was not solely a product of popular histories. Academic historians such as Joseph Ellis, Joanne Freeman, and

John Ferling, among many others, produced studies that fed the craze. See Ellis, *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* (New York, 2000); Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven, 2001); Ferling, *Setting the World Ablaze: Washington, Adams, Jefferson, and the American Revolution* (New York, 2000). These works tend, however, to be much better works of history than much of the popular fare.

⁶ Sean Wilentz, “America Made Easy: McCullough, Adams, and the Decline of Popular History,” *The New Republic Online* (July 2, 2001), at www.tnr.com/070201/wilentz070201. This excellent essay is an extended rumination on the broader decline of popular history which, several decades ago, seemed to be alive and well with academics writing serious books for a serious reading public and non-academics writing books that were read, taught, and respected in the academy. Wilentz points to Bernard DeVoto as a great example of a writer whose work crossed those boundaries effortlessly. Furthermore, as his title suggests, Wilentz also laments that McCullough’s work and others like it require very little thought or effort on the part of readers. American history is presented as a pageant or parade of great figures, great events, and great (and uncomplicated) stories to be soaked up without reflection or troubling thoughts.

⁷ Pasley, “Federalist Chic.” As his title suggests, Pasley contends that the recent round of Founders Chic is actually “Federalist Chic,” since it tends to venerate largely conservative Federalist figures such as Adams, Hamilton, and Washington. Thus, “Federalist Chic” is in some ways a product of the current conservative political environment of the early-21st century United States. The recent celebrations of the founders is “politically right-handed, heavily favoring the conservatives of the founding era . . . who stood against or above the rise of democratic politics and the further expansion of individual rights.” Pasley also notes how the celebration of autocratic figures and concentrated power tends to provide a historical prop for the Bush-Cheney administration and for conservatives more generally.

⁸ David Waldstreicher, “Founders Chic as Culture War,” *Radical History Review* 84 (Fall 2002), 185–194. Quotations at 190, 191.

⁹ For discussions of the battles that sometimes emerge between academics and non-academics over interpretations of the American past, especially the conflict over celebratory historical narratives that gloss over or ignore flaws, see Joyce Appleby, *A Restless Past: History*

and the American Public (Lanham, Maryland, 2005), and Gary B. Nash, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York, 1997). For an additional discussion of the use of the past for present-day politics, see Mary Jacoby, “Madame Cheney’s Cultural Revolution: How the Vice-President’s Wife Makes Sure That Historians and Other Scholars Follow the Right Path,” *www.salon.com* (August 26, 2004).

¹⁰ Two well-received recent works on Founders written by popular historians but praised by academics are Walter Isaacson, *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* (New York, 2003) and Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York, 2004).

¹¹ David Greenberg makes an intelligent distinction about writing historiographically: “If a book is conceived with *only* historiography in mind—with academic disciplinary debates and research agendas dictating the focus and the form—it’s unlikely to succeed in the public realm. If it’s conceived *without* historiography in mind, it’s unlikely to succeed as scholarship. I’d propose what might be called a Goldilocks approach to historiography.” (emphasis is Greenberg’s). See Greenberg, “That Barnes and Noble Dream.”

¹² For examples of the “new, new” political history as well as discussions of the evolution of the field, see the important new book edited by Jeffrey L. Pasley, Andrew W. Robertson, and David Waldstreicher, *Beyond the Founders: New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic* (Chapel Hill, 2004). For the points discussed in this paragraph of my essay see especially William G. Shade, “Déjà vu All Over Again: Is There A New New Political History,” pp. 387–412. On other recent trends in early American political history see Joanne B. Freeman, “The Culture of Politics: The Politics of Culture,” *Journal of Policy History* 16 (2004), 137–143.

¹³ Examples of this sort of dabbling abound. I recently reviewed a book written by a popular historian on Benjamin Rush, a significant yet undeservedly lesser-known figure from early America. This author had also written several other biographies including ones on Fiorella LaGuardia (New York city mayor in the 1930s), and Grover Cleveland (U.S. president in the 1880s and 1890s). His author biography on the book’s dust jacket noted that he has also served as Editorial Director of two encyclopedias, one on American history and the other on the Bible. Additionally, he “has lectured on history and classical music, served as a combat correspondent and feature writer

for *Pacific Stars & Stripes*, and has been a book critic and columnist for a number of U.S. newspapers.” He may well be a Renaissance man, but scholars are justified in questioning the depth of knowledge possessed by these jacks-of-all-trades.