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“[Thomas Ricks] has strong opinions he does not try to hide [and] a deep wellspring of knowledge about both military policy and military history.”

— *The New York Times Book Review*

FIRST PRINCIPLES

*What America’s Founders Learned from the Greeks and Romans
and How That Shaped Our Country*

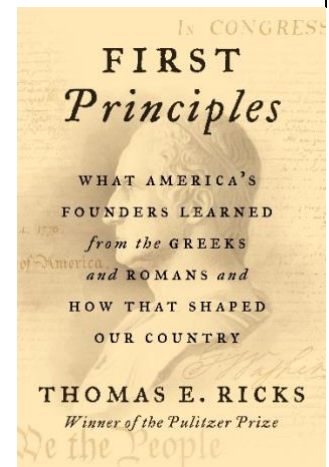
By **Thomas E. Ricks**

“Ricks does something quite remarkable: he takes a seemingly academic topic—the Greco-Roman education of the Founding Fathers—and makes it resonate with grand relevance... Offering a look at the Founders rarely glimpsed, Ricks successfully argues that America needs to rediscover its classical roots.”—*Library Journal*, **STARRED REVIEW**

“An immersive and enlightening look at how the classical educations of the first four U.S. presidents (George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison) influenced their thinking and the shape of American democracy... With incisive selections from primary sources and astute cultural and political analysis, this lucid and entertaining account is a valuable take on American history.”

—*Publishers Weekly*, **STARRED REVIEW**

“An exploration of the major influences of America’s first four presidents... [In 2016 Ricks asked,] ‘What kind of nation do we now have? Is this what was designed or intended by the nation’s founders?’... [He] reassures readers that the durable Constitutional order can handle a Donald Trump, and he concludes with 10 strategies for putting the nation back on course... Penetrating history with a modest dollop of optimism.”—*Kirkus Reviews*



In **FIRST PRINCIPLES: *What America's Founders Learned from the Greeks and Romans and How That Shaped Our Country*** (Harper; November 10, 2020; [NetGalley](#); [Edelweiss](#)), Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and #1 *New York Times* bestselling author Thomas E. Ricks offers a revelatory new look at the founding fathers. Examining their educations—in particular, their devotion to the ancient Greek and Roman classics—Ricks demonstrates how that influence would shape their ideals and the new American nation.

On the morning after the 2016 presidential election, Ricks awoke with a few questions on his mind: What kind of nation did we now have? Is it what was designed or intended by the nation's founders? Trying to get as close to the source as he could, Ricks decided to go back and read the philosophy and literature that shaped the founders' thinking, and the letters they wrote to each other debating these crucial works—among them the *Iliad*, Plutarch's *Lives*, and the works of Xenophon, Epicurus, Aristotle, Cato, and Cicero. For though much attention has been paid to the influence of English political philosophers, like John Locke, closer to their own era, the founders were far more immersed in the literature of the ancient world.

The first four American presidents came to their classical knowledge differently. Washington absorbed it mainly from the elite culture of his day; Adams from the laws and rhetoric of Rome; Jefferson immersed himself in classical philosophy, especially Epicureanism; and Madison, both a groundbreaking researcher and a deft politician, spent years studying the ancient world like a political scientist. Each of their experiences, and distinctive learning, played an essential role in the formation of the United States. In examining how and what they studied, looking at them in the unusual light of the classical world, Ricks is able to draw arresting and fresh portraits of men we thought we knew.

FIRST PRINCIPLES follows these four members of the Revolutionary generation from their youths to their adult lives, as they grappled with questions of independence, and forming and keeping a new nation. In doing so, Ricks interprets not only the effect of the ancient world on each man, and how that shaped our constitution and government, but offers startling new insights into these legendary leaders.

Contemporary Relevance

Based on enduring pieces of literature, **FIRST PRINCIPLES** is a deft and lasting work of intellectual history, yet one essential to our understanding of how America became what it is today. For instance:

- What would Washington, Adams, Jefferson and Madison have thought of today's United States? They would have been appalled by the way money dominates our politics, by the way corporations and the rich control the financing of campaigns. Jefferson and Madison, especially, would take issue with Wall Street's influence over Congress. On the other hand, they would be pleased to see that the Constitution has endured for more than two centuries.
- Would they be bothered by our political gridlock? No. Madison would tell us that the gridlock we all worry about today is not a bug but a feature, designed by him into the

Constitution. That is, he spread power around—between two legislative houses, three branches of the federal government, and the federal government and the states. He believed that if we were too polarized to find a compromise, we'd be frozen.

- Ricks believes that Jefferson, Madison and Adams would think that our democracy is threatened today as it becomes increasingly like an oligarchy. They'd also be surprised at how passive Congress has become; they expected it to be the most energetic part of the government.
- The founders, observing how our country has handled Covid-19, would wonder why we don't pay more attention to the public good, or "the general welfare" of the people, as it is called in the Constitution. They would argue that rights are not just for individuals, but for society as a whole. They likely would add that we have allowed the market to influence too much, especially in areas such as public health and education.
- They would be astonished at how our society has given opinions equal standing with facts. They admired rational inquiry and operated on the basis of evidence.

Throughout **FIRST PRINCIPLES**, Ricks shows us new sides to these familiar figures. He counts Washington as among our greatest generals, more thoughtful than is often recognized, both about war and about politics. He thinks John Adams has been overrated in recent years, especially as a result of David McCullough's rosy biography. He portrays Jefferson as the only one of the first four presidents to be more influenced by the Greeks than by the Romans, and especially by the philosopher Epicurus, whose views about how to pursue happiness permeate the Declaration of Independence. And (contrary to the great musical *Hamilton*) he depicts Madison as a political radical in college, strongly nationalist even before there was a nation, more an American than a Virginian.

About the Author

Thomas E. Ricks covered the U.S. military for *The Washington Post* from 2000 through 2008 and was on the staff of the *Wall Street Journal* for seventeen years before that. He reported on American military operations in Somalia, Haiti, Korea, Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Kuwait, Turkey, Afghanistan and Iraq. A member of two Pulitzer Prize-winning teams, he is also the author of several books, including *The Generals*, *The Gamble*, *Churchill & Orwell*, and the number-one *New York Times* bestseller *Fiasco*, which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. He wrote *First Principles* while a visiting fellow in history at Bowdoin College.



Praise for FIRST PRINCIPLES

“Ricks knocks it out of the park with this jewel of a book. On every page I learned something new. Read it every night if you want to restore your faith in our country.”

— **James Mattis, General, U.S. Marines (ret.) & 26th Secretary of Defense**

“Ricks knows his subject well, and, equally important, he writes about it lucidly.”

— **Gordon Wood, University Professor at Brown University, and author of *The Radicalism of the American Revolution and Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic***

“Thomas Ricks’s deeply personal, patriotic quest to recover and renew the principles that animated America’s founders testifies eloquently to the value of historical understanding in these troubled times. Steeped in the classics, the founders could not have imagined our world and we are now, more than ever, acutely conscious of their failure to engage with the fundamental problem of racial slavery and its enduring legacies. But Ricks offers us a timely reminder of what the first four, nation-making presidents *could* imagine and did struggle to achieve.”

— **Peter S. Onuf, Thomas Jefferson Professor of History, Emeritus, University of Virginia, coauthor of *Most Blessed of the Patriarchs: Thomas Jefferson and the Empire of the Imagination***

“*First Principles* is a fascinating and erudite look at how Greek and Roman writers influenced members of the Founding Generation. From the Harvard-educated John Adams to the largely self-taught George Washington, the most well-known of American Revolutionaries, turned statesmen, looked to the classical world to answer critical questions about the nature of power and the nature of government.”

— **Annette Gordon-Reed, the Charles Warren Professor of American Legal History at Harvard Law School, and Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Hemingses of Monticello***

Praise for CHURCHILL AND ORWELL

“Both subjects, he tells us in this page turner written with great brio, are ‘people we still think about, people who are important not just to understanding their times but also to understanding our own.’... what comes across strongly in this highly enjoyable book is the fierce commitment of both Orwell and Churchill to critical thought.” — ***New York Times Book Review***

“An elegantly written celebration of two men who faced an existential crisis to their way of life with moral courage — and demonstrated that an individual can make a difference.”

— ***San Francisco Chronicle***

“Readers of this book will realize, if they needed reminding, that the struggle to preserve and tell the truth is a very long game.” — ***Los Angeles Times***

“A pungent and pointed piece of history, a great gift for any history lover on your list.”

— ***Seattle Times***

“*Churchill & Orwell* is an eminently readable, frankly inspirational and exceptionally timely tribute to the two men Simon Schama called ‘the architects of their time.’ It is to be hoped that their counterparts in intellectual clarity and moral courage are among us today.”

— ***Minneapolis Star Tribune***

“Another one is a book by Thomas Ricks about Winston Churchill and George Orwell. The two never met, but their parallel lives and their views of how society should function, notions of individual freedom, limitations of politics and so on — extraordinarily harmonious thoughts in different places, really very impressive. I went in assuming [they'd be at odds], but quite the reverse. Really, very interesting.” — **John Le Carré**

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