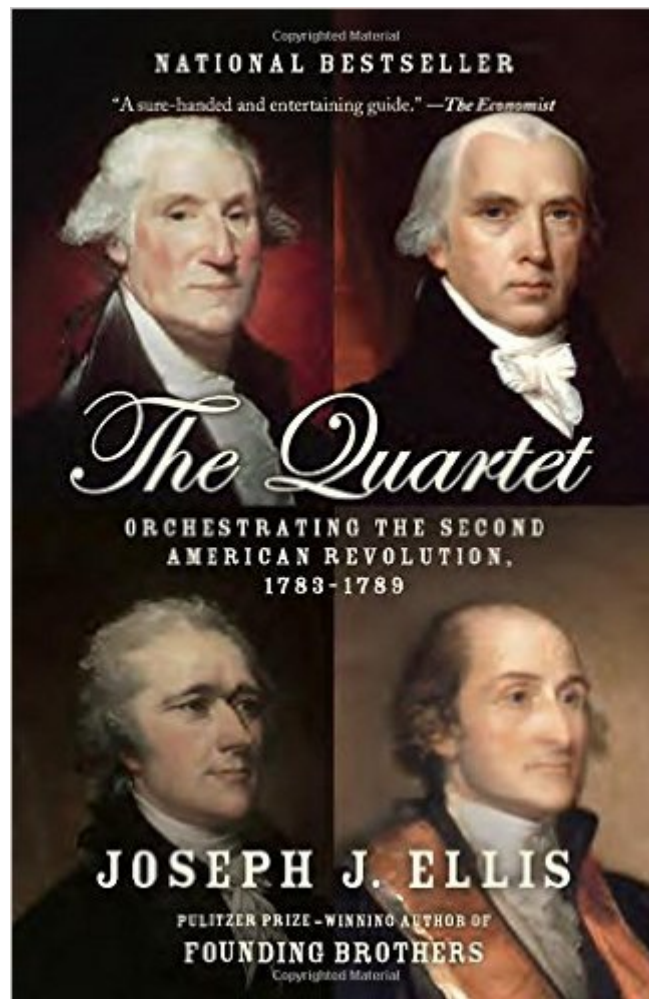


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# The Quartet: Orchestrating The Second American Revolution, 1783-1789



## Synopsis

In *The Quartet*, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Joseph Ellis tells the unexpected story of America's second great founding and of the men most responsible: Alexander Hamilton, George Washington, John Jay, and James Madison. Why the thirteen colonies, having just fought off the imposition of a distant centralized governing power, would decide to subordinate themselves anew. These men, with the help of Robert Morris and Gouverneur Morris, shaped the contours of American history by diagnosing the systemic dysfunctions created by the Articles of Confederation, manipulating the political process to force the calling of the Constitutional Convention, conspiring to set the agenda in Philadelphia, orchestrating the debate in the state ratifying conventions, and, finally, drafting the Bill of Rights to assure state compliance with the constitutional settlement, created the new republic. Ellis gives us a dramatic portrait of one of the most crucial and misconstrued periods in American history: the years between the end of the Revolution and the formation of the federal government. *The Quartet* unmask a myth, and in its place presents an even more compelling truth—one that lies at the heart of understanding the creation of the United States of America.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Joseph Ellis' new book, "The Quartet: Orchestrating the Second American Revolution, 1783 -- 1789" examines the United States' movement from independence to nationhood following the Revolutionary War. Ellis, retired as Ford Foundation Professor of History at Mount Holyoke College, has written many works about early American history and has received both the National Book

Award and the Pulitzer Prize. Ellis' short but broad, thoughtful, and provocative book argues that the United States did not become a nation upon winning independence but became instead a group of loosely-connected separate states. Ellis maintains that most people at the time lacked even a concept of national identity beyond the provincial boundaries of their communities. They thought they had fought a hard war to free themselves from the distant centralizing government of Great Britain. With the ineffective Articles of Confederation, the thirteen states appeared headed for separation and quarrels, similar to the nations of Europe. Other parts of Ellis' book are more controversial. Ellis maintains that while the first American Revolution might be viewed from the ground up, the second worked "from the top down". He finds that four individuals, the "Quartet" of his title, were primarily responsible: George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay. The first three names are unsurprising. Ellis clearly regards Washington as the essential member of the group and as the leader of both the first and second American revolutions. He gives Washington more credit than he sometimes receives for his intellectual foresight in an early writing about the deficiency of the Articles of Confederation and the need for a central government.

A few years ago Joseph J. Ellis was involved in a confusing plagiarism scandal (the major element being that he had claimed military service when, in fact, he had not served in any branch of the military). I had enjoyed several of his previous books, in particular his splendid short biography of John Adams and his biography of Jefferson, entitled *AMERICAN SPHINX*, in which he found Jefferson a bit more perplexing than I believe is warranted (for a pair of splendid short biographies on Jefferson, try R. B. Bernstein's *THOMAS JEFFERSON: THE REVOLUTION OF IDEAS* and Richard K. Matthews's magnificent *THE RADICAL POLITICS OF THOMAS JEFFERSON: A REVISIONIST VIEW*, each of which will bring more understanding of Jefferson than Dumas Malone's imposing multi-volume biography). Ellis is not a master of original research like Gordon Wood, Bernard Bailyn, or Douglass Adair, but he is an unusually fine writer. His gift is repackaging the early events in American history in forms that are perhaps the most accessible ever written, while at the same time not distorting history of any ideological purpose. I wouldn't quite call him a popular historian, but a brilliant expositor. If you have read a fair amount on early American history, there is very little here that will be new, but by teasing out a narrative of events that was already there he makes the founding of the United States as a unified nation understandable in a way that it has rarely been in the past. The dilemma of American history has always been why, after fighting a war of independence from both the English crown and the dominating landed families in Great Britain, some of whom literally owned individual colonies, did Americans decide to bring themselves once

again under a central government, though one constituted and run by themselves?

THE QUARTET by Pulitzer-Prize author Joseph Ellis is both informative and insightful. It corrects common misconceptions about the early years of our country, specifically events leading to and including the writing and ratification of the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights. After reading FOUNDING BROTHERS years before, I had been motivated to continue learning about about James Madison and John Adams. Reading THE QUARTET, which focuses upon Washington, Madison, Hamilton and Jay, I added Washington to my cast of favorite U.S. founders, and also experienced a few illuminating insights about the birth of our country's government and its relevance today. Ellis not only presents history as a narrative of the past, but he actually, perhaps unwittingly, provides a living history, since not only some of the issues but also the difficult process of achieving agreement and resolution still resonates in the 21st century. Ellis discusses the conflict between the Federalists who sought a strong federal government and the anti-Federalists who feared a central power, and wished to keep government control weak and primarily at the local and state level. These two groups are actually better considered as nationalists and confederationists. Emphasizing the important of viewing the attitudes of the founders through the lens of their own times rather than 21st century political correctness, he points out that the founders didn't assume that democracy is the "political gold standard." Democracy could too easily mean government control by a mob influenced by ignorance, emotionalism, self-interest, short-term gratification, group-think and the manipulation of the media and demagogues with their own agenda. Although the U.S.

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