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A Revolution in Favor of Government: Origins of the U.S. Constitution and the Making of the American State. *By Max M. Edling.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. xii + 333 pp. Index, notes. Cloth, $35.00. ISBN 0-195-14870-3.

Reviewed by Pauline Maier

This modest-sized book makes a large argument, and one that's certain to reopen historical debate over the federal Constitution and the ratification debates of 1787–88. Since the publication of Gordon S. Wood's monumental *Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (1969), historians have explained the Constitution as a response less to the weaknesses of the Confederation than to abuses of authority by the powerful, intensely democratic state legislatures established at the time of independence. The single most persuasive evidence for that position is a memorandum James Madison composed in April 1787—a month before the Philadelphia convention met—on the "Vices of the Political System of the United States." Most of the "vices" Madison's listed were faults of the states.

Max M. Edling, a research fellow and university lecturer at Uppsala University in Sweden, disputes Wood's interpretation. Madison was not characteristic of the Constitution's supporters, he says. Most Federalists were in fact concerned with remedying critical shortcomings in the Confederation and creating a "fiscal–military state" modeled after European states. Edling therefore views the American founding as an event within a larger process of "state formation" common to Europe and America in the early modern period (roughly the fifteenth through eighteenth centuries).

European nation states of that era had limited functions: above all, they raised armies and funds to support those armies through taxes and also loans, which became a conventional way of financing wars. After 1689, Edling writes, Britain proved exceptionally good at those tasks, since the Crown could secure permission to raise taxes and maintain an army from one place—Parliament—rather than having to negotiate with regional authorities. The landed gentry who sat in the House of Commons were willing to cooperate, in part because they could level the greater part of the tax burden on the middling and lower classes, most of whose members could not vote. However, as the modern British state emerged, a set of opponents—“Country” spokesmen, unlike the “Court” party that defended the Crown—insisted that the creation of a “standing army,” an escalating national debt, and the resultant centralization of power were a threat to traditional British liberties.

The attempt by Parliament to tax colonists to help support an army in America caused a firestorm. Here the people who would have to pay the taxes could vote. The colonists rallied behind their provincial assemblies’ exclusive right to tax, drawing heavily on English “Country” ideas. The Crown’s use of regular soldiers against civilians also fed a disillusionment with Britain that led toward independence. Later, Edling says, the Antifederalists repeated the same “Country” arguments, attacking provisions in the Constitution that allowed the national government to raise taxes without the consent of state legislatures and to maintain a peacetime “standing army.” With those powers, they predicted, the nation would overwhelm all countervailing forces, including the states, and in that process destroy American freedom. Meanwhile, the Federalists, like English “Court” spokesmen, insisted that the nation needed critical military and plenary fiscal powers to defend the country’s freedom against hostile foreign states.

In fact, Edling notes, the lines of division were less stark than the Country/Court distinction suggests. Most Antifederalists actually conceded the need for a stronger national government. They were willing to give the federal government an exclusive right to tax imports and often also the right to impose an excise tax on “spirituous liquors.” They were even willing to let the federal government raise “direct taxes”—essentially poll and land taxes—if the state legislatures were first given an opportunity to raise an equivalent sum but failed to do so. Although the Federalists rigorously rejected that limit on federal taxing power, they recognized a need to make concessions to widespread popular suspicions of central power, some of which they themselves shared. As a result, the regime the Federalists founded kept its peacetime army small and inconspicuous, and it used force against civilians only very cautiously, even in response to the Whiskey Rebellion. Moreover, Federalist financial policies had a positively liberating effect. As much as 90 percent of state expenditures in the 1780s went toward retiring state war debts, and most state legislatures raised the necessary funds through poll and land taxes. Those “direct” taxes were regressive, since they made no allowance for unequal wealth and inadequate allowances for variations in lands' productivity. Direct taxes were also hard for individuals to avoid. By assuming state debts and so eliminating the need for those taxes, Alexander Hamilton's financial program removed the root cause of domestic disorders, such as Shays's Rebellion. Moreover, Hamilton funded the debt, exchanging outstanding notes for new federal bonds on which the Treasury had only to make interest payments. And that it could do with income from import duties, a less oppressive form of taxation, since it hit only those who bought imported items. The "light and inconspicuous" state the Federalists founded persisted, Edling argues, long after they fell from power.

Inevitably in a book of this scope minor errors intrude, none of which undermine the general argument. (Edling suggests, for example, that the Articles of Confederation gave Congress certain powers before the Articles were ratified. He also asserts that neither the states nor the federal government reformed the militia until the Dick Act of 1903, overlooking a major reorganization on the state level after the great railroad strike of 1877.) More important, *A Revolution in Government* is based on a fresh reading of extensive sources, succinctly summarizes relevant information that's often unfamiliar, and puts American history in a comparative context.

Although Edling presents his argument with scrupulous clarity, the book is not light reading. Readers are, however, rewarded for their efforts with a more profound understanding of the peculiar American system of government that emerged from the struggles and debates of the 1780s and an explanation of why it is we keep returning to the writings of that time. The ratification debates of 1787–88 began the process of interpreting the Constitution, which we continue. Equally important, the fundamental question of whether the "fiscal–military state" founded by the Federalists is entirely compatible with popular liberty has never gone away.

Pauline Maier is the William Rand Kenan Jr. Professor of American History at MIT. She is the author of several books and articles on the American Revolution, including American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence *(1997), and she contributed chapters on American history through early 1800 for* Inventing America: A History of the United States *(2003), which gives particular attention to innovation as a* *theme in American history. She is currently writing a book on the ratification of the federal Constitution.*