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When I was in high school, all the American history courses I took were taught by the football coach, who made it quite clear that he was just as unhappy being in the classroom as we were. Some sliver of interest in history survived that gauntlet, so when I got to college I took several history courses, though I majored in philosophy. When the time came to decide about my career, I told everybody who asked that I was going to law school. Why I said that escapes me, but it was a clear answer that put an end to the conversation, and thereby concealed the awkward fact that I really did not have a clue about what I wanted to be when I grew up.

One day in the spring of my junior year I was in a rug store with my roommate checking out cheap rugs for our room. Somebody came up and asked me the threatening question—what are you going to do after graduation?—and I heard myself say: "I'm going to go to graduate school in history." Why I said that remains a mystery to this day, but at some subconscious level I was probably processing the elemental fact that I did not have the money to afford law school and that there were fellowships available for graduate school in history, which I had at least a shot to win. Yale offered me one, and the rest, as they say, is history.

My favorite historians back then were Richard Hofstadter, chiefly for his *The American Political Tradition*, C. Vann Woodward, mostly for his *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, and Edmund Morgan, whose little book, entitled *The Puritan Dilemma*, struck me as a gem. What all these historians had in common, at least in retrospect, was the capacity to combine a scholarly agenda with an accessible prose style that reached an audience beyond the groves of the academy. I presumed from the start that I was supposed to do the same thing, and all my conversations with Woodward and then Morgan, my eventual advisor, confirmed the correctness of that presumption.

Flash forward thirty years. I was determined to recover my identity as a scholar after spending ten years as Dean of Faculty at Mount Holyoke. When I read the scholarly journals, most of the articles struck me as pedantic parodies of the sort satirized in *Lucky Jim*. When I told colleagues that I was thinking of writing biographies of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, most were incredulous, wondering why I would want to write about "the deadest-whitest-males in American history." None of them shared my presumption that historians were supposed to write books that attracted a readership beyond the academy. Their only audience was fellow historians within their respective specialties. And why, in heaven's name, they asked, would I want to write about mainstream politics, which everybody knew was over-plowed ground with no prospects for making a fresh scholarly contribution? It seemed to me, I replied, that studying the American founding while eschewing politics was like showing up at Fenway Park with a lacrosse stick. This was regarded as a confession of intellectual bankruptcy.

Then a strange thing happened—the founders became fashionable. Over the last decade eleven books on the revolutionary generation made *The New York Times* best-seller list and several other books made the expanded list, meaning they sold tens or hundreds of thousands of copies. The History Channel, C-SPAN, and PBS ran programs about the founders or interviewed authors with books about them. Responding to this surge in the marketplace, publishers offered sizable advances to authors like David McCullough, Ron Chernow, Walter Isaacson, and Stacy Schiff. These authors had two things in common: first, they were all splendid writers, who knew how to tell a story; second, none of them were professional historians. As a card-carrying historian who contributed to this publishing phenomenon, I was an anomaly. What we might call the founders' surge was not a top-down movement driven by the scholarly agenda, but rather a bottom-

up movement driven by educated but ordinary readers. Ironically, historians who professed an interest in recovering the lives of ordinary Americans in the past had essentially abandoned ordinary readers in the present, leaving the field open to a group of gifted amateurs, who were not burdened by the methodological and ideological agenda of the profession.

Just as war is too important to be left to the generals, history is too important to be left to the historical profession. As I read the numbers, the genie is already out of the bottle and the founding era has come to rival the Civil War as a topic that claims the attention of millions of citizens, readers, and re-enactors. The conversation within the academy remains cloistered and in-house. The more important and expansive conversation is occurring in newsletters, blogs and websites promoted by organizations like the NHC and the Gilder Lehrman Institute. This may not be where tenure is, but it is where the intellectual action and the public are. I happen to think that it is also the place where the true spirit of Hofstadter, Woodward, and Morgan (who still lives) reside everlastingly.

Which is to say that, despite a massive detour into the academic underbrush, we are back at the place where I started those many years ago.