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With wit and flair, *Founding Myths* exposes the errors and inventions in thirteen of America's most cherished tales, from Paul Revere's famous ride to Patrick Henry's "Liberty or Death" speech. Exploring the dynamic intersection between history-making and story-making, award-winning author and historian Ray Raphael shows how these fictions—conceived in the narrowly nationalistic politics of the nineteenth century—undermine our democratic ideals.

Founding Myths: Stories That Hide Our Patriotic Past Details

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LeeAnn says

I really enjoyed this book. I have now read, at age 52 or something like that, a number of diverse histories about the American Revolution. I have also had time to think about many of the heroes of the Revolution and to wonder how in the world a war of such immense proportions could be won without the people's thinking support. I have also become aware of some of the other stories that do not get so much press.

What I got on reading Ray Raphael's book was the reason Why? remains such an important question. I felt the ferocious responsibility of understanding the role and responsibility of each citizen. The Revolution could not have succeeded without the people, and that is a basic component we must be reminded of today.

This book also underscored the importance of understanding events from the point of view of the times in which they were conducted although I'm not sure Raphael felt that way. I believe that we can see our times and our issues that must be decided now only when we try to put on the shoes of those who came before.

No, the Revolutionists did not solve all problems that would ever confront this nation. They didn't even confront slavery. The miracle is that the stage was set for more progress (and in some cases, slides).

I recommend this for every person to read, especially Americans. I think it makes our history more approachable and easier to continue than in relying on heroes to save us. Instead, we must prepare ourselves to be the heroes of our own spheres. Most of us will never be George Washington, but we can make a difference. and in fact, some may if they take on the national and international arena. All of us can affect those areas by starting and continuing conversations, exploring causes and effects within our homes and communities just as those early revolutionaries did.

Dj says

What a refreshing surprise.

Most books of this type are annoying in the sense that while they are debunking something, they don't do anything to make it clear what it would be important to show this to be false. In other words they are merely deconstructive. This book shows you why it is not really a good thing to put up a false image and what, the author believes, would be better to put in its place.

Let's take the case of Paul Revere and his Midnight Ride.

It isn't long after we learn about Paul Revere that we discover that he wasn't the only one on the ride, and in general things go down hill from there. So much so that I had come to the understanding that Mr. Revere hadn't even made it to either of the towns he had set out to warn.

As it turns out reading the Chapter on Revere in Founding Myths, he did make it to the first town down the road just not the second one.

There was no boat ride though, and he didn't have much to do with the Steeple lights either.

Raphael's point in taking on the Myth of Revere isn't to show how much or how little Revere accomplished but to show that Revere was one individual in a massive network that warned the entire state of what was going on.

In fact this revelation of the fact that praising a few as leaders hides the fact that a multitude of individuals

brought about the Revolution is a central theme of the book. He brings it up over and over again. Doing so by pointing out that Jefferson didn't come up with the ideas of the Declaration of Independence whole cloth, but that many such declarations were being made throughout the Colonies. That Sam Adams was not a Spider sitting in the middle of a web of common people that he controlled at a whim, but a late comer to the cause of Independence.

By doing more than just debunking myths, but showing a cause and effect, giving an alternative and explaining in some cases how these myths came about and were given a life of their own, this book rises above the standard fare of the Historical Reconstruction crowd.

I recommend this book freely and to all.

Diana says

I'm reading this for a paper I'm writing. The book is interesting, it brings to light all the things that are left out of the history books or are completely wrong. Did you know there was more than one rider the night Paul Revere went on his ride? How about the fact that Molly Pitcher was a conglomeration of 3 different women? It was interesting to see things that I was taught as fact as a child end up being not completely true.

Greg says

Ahhhh, there is nothing more refreshing than an historian who goes the extra mile to actually tell the truth.

Most of us know that the mythology surrounding the American revolution that is included in our grade school textbooks is just that, mythology. What Mr. Raphael does in this book is show us why the truth is a far better story than the lies we were fed as children.

This book humanizes the leaders of the revolution, from Samuel Adams (not the fictionalized beer man Sam Adams) and Paul Revere to Patrick Henry and Molly Pitcher. In doing so he creates a compelling narrative that shows us that the truth about our nations demi-gods is far more interesting.

Blaine Welgraven says

An interesting, well-researched work that argues American history was reshaped by the 19th century's Romanticist paradigm. Raphael's work is particularly strong as an examination of 19th and early 20th-century historiography; however, where the work suffers is Raphael's over-emphasis on writing what he terms "collectivist" history. This may be a noble goal, but does Raphael really expect the average historian to write such "populist" works in favor of standard autobiographies and narrative histories? Further, does he really believe all "interpretive concepts" (as author and noted European historian Euan Cameron has called them) should be abandoned for micro-histories? In emphasizing a collectivist perspective towards historical writing, Cameron raises many more questions than this 280-page work is able to answer--or is even designed to. In one moment of blinding irony, Raphael partially describes his own work when he quotes the oft-critiqued Mason Weems:

"Experience has taught me that small, i.e., quarter of dollar books, on subjects calculated to strike the

Popular Curiosity, printed in very large numbers and properly distributed, would prove an immense revenue to the prudent and industrious...."

Founding Myths is itself a populist work, with subjects chosen to arouse public curiosity, and while Raphael's work is a worthwhile study of 19th and 20th century historiography, it continually stumbles into far larger claims and recommendations (mostly for historical writing and K-12 curriculum) than its small size can adequately support. It may be a worthy argument that 21st century school-children should not be educated in a "top-down" manner, but when the very same author admits these same children lack "abstract reasoning" abilities conducive to complex historical comparisons and subtexts, what does he expect? It may be worthwhile to contend that 5th graders should study "local committees, congresses, and militia units" that would then serve as "models for the collective, political participation of ordinary citizens" during the Revolution, but Raphael nowhere deciphers how this is to transpire. If Raphael had simply stuck to chronicling the shifting narratives of historical writing as it pertained to the American Revolution, he would certainly have remained on safer, less nebulous ground. As it stands, Founding Myths wobbles precariously between the solid chronicle of shifting Revolutionary narratives, and abrupt, generalized judgments and pronouncements of modern education's systemic failings on this same subject.

Holly says

I consider myself to be a pretty well informed Revolutionary War buff. I've read Ron Chernow's biography on Washington and 1776 by David McCullough; I've watched various documentaries on the topic and a number of other books.

I was still startled by a few things in this book.

Some of them are pretty well known. It's starting to be more well-known that Paul Revere's ride didn't happen the way Longfellow described it. But many of the myths are still repeated as fact, and it was fun to see how they were wrong and the evidence to support that.

But perhaps the most interesting part of this book wasn't which stories were myths but *why* those myths persist. It was intriguing that Raphael actually broke it down and explained what it was about these myths that kept us coming back. (Makes for a good story, female protagonists, patriotism, etc.) It was just fascinating.

This was one nonfiction book that I've read lately that just flew under my fingers.

David says

This book purports to tell the "real truth" about American history. The author contends that everything we learned in fifth grade, and continue to teach our kids, is exaggerated, misleading, or downright false. Measured by his yardstick, our Founding Fathers were merely a cabal of monied white men interested only in land acquisition.

He really lost me somewhere around mid-book when he devoted two whole chapters to slamming the Mel Gibson film "The Patriot". Wake up, Mr. Raphael, the movie was *fiction*. He wastes another chapter carping

about the phrase "don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes", failing to recognize that it was used as a metaphor for "don't waste ammunition and hold your fire until the enemy is closer".

Rapheal claims to be an historian; I think he's just a nitpicker.

Bob Price says

John Adams once complained that people might think that the American Revolution was won singlehandedly by George Washington while Thomas Jefferson rode on his back...or something like that. And *that* is the point of this book.

Ray Raphael does a great service to our country by this small volume on Founding Myths. He examines some of the most enduring and endearing legends of the Revolutionary period and explains the truth behind them.

For example: Molly Pitcher never existed, Thomas Jefferson borrowed ideas for the Declaration of Independence, more slaves fought for the British, and the war didn't end at Yorktown. Say what????

The point behind Raphael's book is that many of our historic 'truths' are misrepresentations, tall tales, of true past events. We cling to these 'truths' because they are more savory than the truth behind them.

This is especially important in our charged political era, where people constantly hearken back to our Founding Period to justify current political beliefs. The Boston Tea Party would not recognize the contemporary counterpart, nor would the 'Founding Fathers' understand many of our modern debates.

Americans need to come to term with their history and not utilize history as a weapon in a modern war.

Raphael's book is basic enough for a general audience and yet sheds light on significant issues in the philosophy of history. This is a book that should be read by all who are interested in our founding period.

Raphael's passion to recover history is present throughout the book. Needless to say, I will not be inviting him over to watch *The Patriot* with me.

Chris Burd says

I had to finally give up on this book. In fairness to the author, the book that he was writing was just not the book that I was interested in reading. While a few of the "Founding Myths" discussed here were really new to me (such as the real story of Molly Pitcher), if you are even a casual reader of the history of our nation's founding, there is little surprising about the myths discussed.

But presenting highly surprising new truths is really not the goal of the author. Rather, the book goes into detailed discourse on why those particular myths have remained pervasive in our history books. The discussion is well researched and well thought out, highlighting the political and social environment at the time the stories were presented to explain why the truth has been distorted.

However well researched, it is, in my opinion, unbearably boring. I'm afraid I have given up and just skimmed through the remainder of the book.

Richard says

August 2016 update: From a FOAF on Facebook: «Most of us were shocked to learn how history had been rewritten in Communist block countries. I hope we will be just as shocked to find it happening here. Won't we?»

If you haven't read this book, now might be a good time to disabuse yourself of your myths. For something more contemporary, maybe *The Myth of the Kindly General Lee*?

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This book was much more serious than I expected. To my surprise, it turned out to be a thoughtful and carefully documented examination of the biases that have crept into the popular understanding of the founding years of the United States. The book is not without some critical flaws, but is nevertheless worthwhile and, perhaps, even important.

The cover is a bizarre image of George Washington holding a baby with an eagle's head. Or maybe an eagle with a baby's body. Anyway, the painting's title is "The Wings will Grow (Father of the Nation)", and I suppose it is appropriate for the book.

I thought this would be an accumulation of amusing anecdotes. Instead I discovered a quite readable but serious exposition on how two hundred-plus years of myth-making has distorted pretty much everything.

The author's bio states that "Ray Raphael has been a 'people's historian' for the past thirty years". If that sounds vaguely socialist to you, you'll understand where the author's overriding thesis comes in. There's nothing socialist about the book, but it is aggressively *populist*. Most historians, and especially most myth-makers, have a tendency to illuminate history by telling stories about a small number of protagonists, and this is clearly in evidence in our early American history. These can be heroic (think George Washington) or iconic (as Molly Pitcher stands for "women on the battlefield"). Raphael argues that this is a disservice to the tens and hundreds of thousands of people that actually made the revolution happen.

His book's subtitle, "Stories That Hide Our Patriotic Past", points to the way a focus on a few individuals is unpatriotic. This was a *people's revolution*, with the pressure to declare independence coming from the masses. The elites often slowed down the process, both for good reasons and bad. The leaders often had a better comprehension of the international politics and preparation necessary to make the rebellion successful, but they also had more property and prestige to risk. What steams Raphael is that today many of our myths give credit to those leaders for actually *leading*, when they were actually trailing and quite often dragging.

The primary culprits here are the storyteller and historians that treated events as the raw material in the creation of tales with a "purpose". One purpose was simple money-making, in which tales of the lives of the revolutionary generation were packaged for what we might now call "edutainment". In the early years of the republic, even as the founders were slowly dying off, simple readers and pamphlets were written that white-washed their flaws and exaggerated their heroics. This is when, for example, George Washington suddenly acquired a childhood tale involving a cherry tree.

Another common motive was to set a good example for the young: a strong example can be seen in the treatment of the Massachusetts Revolution of 1774. We usually date the beginning of the revolution to April, 1775 when the fighting at Lexington and Concord took place, supposedly in response to British aggression. In fact, during the previous summer there were massive uprisings throughout the Massachusetts hinterland (*not* in Boston) that effectively removed the British from local power.

Raphael shows clear reasons why this revolt occurred spontaneously throughout the region; each hamlet and town had adequate reasons to act on their own and communicate their actions with their neighbors. As he points out, “The Massachusetts Revolution of 1774, like all true revolutions, was a bullying affair. Crowds numbering in the thousands forced a few unarmed officials to cower and submit. This made for a powerful revolution but a scary story.” One problem for future myth-makers was that there was no hero to idolize. Undoubtedly there were local leaders and followers, but none on a grand scale. Once the story had to be molded into something that would benefit the young, the storytellers reached into Boston and picked some likely suspects to be agitators and organizers.

An even more subtle bias came from the changing requirements for national unity. Once the revolts in France and elsewhere had turned ugly and given “revolution” a bad name, similarities in the colonies were downplayed. So instead of documenting the popular and “bullying” uprisings, the focus shift towards philosophic abstractions, for example. Later, when the Civil War loomed ahead, it was considered wise to downplay any idea of revolution against proper authorities, and “rebellion” was magically transformed into “loyalty”.

The events at Valley Forge, to take one example, were massively altered: the army that winter had been a starving and near-naked ragtag army of poorly-paid lower-class elements constantly on the verge of mutiny and desertion. The original patriotic militia (e.g., the Minutemen) had, by necessity, returned to their farms and shops. So the army largely consisted of young men, poor men, and recent immigrants—those with poor prospects otherwise—who were viewed with distrust by civilians. By the time the myth-makers were done, these had become faithful soldiers who only flirted with mutiny due to the harsh winter, and were dissuaded by a few words from their beloved General Washington. In fact, the notorious winter spent at Valley Forge was milder than average.

As I was reading, it occurred to me that this book is an interesting litmus test. Many Americans really would like to truly understand the early history of the nation, but having so many myths turned upside down would be deeply disturbing for some. I can imagine some teachers (or home-schooling parents) embracing this as strong but necessary medicine. On the other hand, the culture of suspicious anti-elitism has always been strong amongst Americans. Raphael provides a paradigmatic (and astonishing) quote (p. 204):

An officer of the Daughters of the Colonial Wars, for instance, complained about books that “give a child an unbiased viewpoint instead of teaching him real Americanism. All the old histories taught my country right or wrong. That’s the point of view we want our children to adopt. We can’t afford to teach them to be unbiased and let them make up their own minds.”

This book would be seen as an assault by those that believe “my myths, right or wrong”.

And, finally, Raphael really is pushing too hard. Even as he tallies evidence of historians distorting history in the service of shifting ideological goals, he comes to his task with a strong ideological bent of his own—one that both grows tiresome and casts a shadow over his efforts.

David McCullough, author of *John Adams*, is castigated for stating in a discussion of the Declaration of Independence that “It was John Adams, more than anyone, who made it happen”. Raphael attacks:

??The last three words convey a clear implication of causality: if Adams “made it happen,” without him there might never have been a Declaration of Independence. This seems highly implausible. [...] By debating which one of these individuals, “more than anyone,” is more responsible for the nation’s independence, we participate in a parlor game, not meaningful historical inquiry.

??This game is not harmless, for it ignores the hundreds of thousands of people who actually *did* make it happen. Without John Adams, chances are the Continental Congress would still have broken ties with Britain; without a preponderance of popular support for the cause of independence, chances are Congress would have chosen a different path.

Note that Raphael has introduced two distortions: first, the “more than anyone” is shifted from a *qualifier* that places Adams first among equals, into an *emphasis* that places him first bar none. Second, McCullough’s discussion had been about the writing of the Declaration of Independence, and it is disingenuous to claim that the multitudes had anything other than a distant and indirect role. Raphael’s unwavering focus on the role of the—for lack of a better word—*proletariat* can be as distorting as well as illuminating.

Certainly if John Adams had not been present someone else would have taken a roughly equivalent role. But this ignores the critical influence that he may have had: the Declaration and Constitution were both carefully crafted compromises balancing many interests. These documents have been so crucial to the subsequent development of the United States that, clearly, a different mixture of personalities and opinions at a critical moment might have had momentous impact. Similarly, Raphael expends an entire chapter pointing out that Thomas Jefferson didn’t so much as *author* the Declaration of Independence as merely write down what pretty much everyone was saying. But if John Adams of Massachusetts had penned the Declaration instead of Virginia’s Thomas Jefferson, global history would probably be subtly different. If New York’s Alexander Hamilton had written it, things *would* have been *very* different. Even though the collective activity of the masses is under-reported and underestimated in our histories, completely removing the focus from individual actions is also misleading.

This is a good and important book. It could have been a better book, if Raphael had tipped the scales less far and belabored his perspective less. But still, it provides a salutary corrective, and wise folk should be willing to examine their biases and assumptions, even if this is sometimes unpleasant. *Founding Myths* is entertaining and informative enough that it should be read, flaws and all.

Lindsey says

Couldn't finish. The material was very dry and most of the myths that the author busted, well, he only did that. He didn't have a very strong re-telling of what events actually occurred.

Billy says

Hmm. History isn't as simple as it has come down to us. The poem about Paul Revere got it wrong; there was

more to the Declaration of Independence than TJ's inspired words; Patrick Henry's speech was unrecorded and then reconstructed; the Rev War went on after Cornwallis surrendered; and what about the Indians during the Rev War.

This book tells how we got it wrong in our national mythology, how our school texts are oversimplified. There is a lot of repetition but this was a very interesting read. I guess I knew or suspected most of what the author points out but never thought very deeply about how it really must have been.

Brandon says

This was by far one of the best history books I've read, certainly my favorite of the Revolutionary period. Raphael not only sets the record straight, telling the truth about many of our popular tales of our countries founding, but he also explains the reasoning and dangers of twisting the narrative to suit a certain control over the listeners. The most important thing garnered from this book is the fact that over the course of our history we have taken the REVOLUTION out of the Revolutionary War. We have narrowed the scope of great works by an entire group and confined them to a small cast of people, sometimes entirely fictional ones. Most of all, our history has been skewed to excise the precedent of popular uprising, that although it was necessary to secure our country as we know it, that it might never happen again against those who now control it.

Paul says

Just like Santa Claus at Christmas, some of the stories of our founding are more interesting when we tell the true ones. Important and interesting, with a very democratic (small d) bent. Gets a little preachy at times, but there are so many interesting nuggets to draw one right past that.

Matt says

The story of the American Revolution is well known and thought of as gospel by average Americans, but is that story more myth than history? Ray Raphael in his book, *Founding Myths*, aims to tell the true patriotic history behind the stories told about the American Revolution.

Investigating thirteen prominent stories surrounding the Revolutionary era, Raphael attempts to put the actual people and events in context of their time while demythologizing the past. Some of the stories are that of individuals like Paul Revere, Molly Pitcher, and Sam Adams or such events like Yorktown ending the war, the Continental Army surviving Valley Forge, and the events before Lexington and Concord. While a few myths that Raphael covered have been demystified by some pop-history documentaries since before and after the publishing of this book and others that a well-read history enthusiast already knows are false, there was one that completely surprised me and that was the events of 1774 that led up to the Lexington and Concord.

Although I knew the actual history behind the myths Raphael covered, this book was still a pleasant read if you can persevere through the repetitious references to films like *The Patriot* and Raphael's continual hyping of the Massachusetts revolution of 1774. While I understood the reference to *The Patriot* given its prominence around the time of the book's writing but it could have been toned down. Raphael's description

of the events in Massachusetts in 1774 are really eye-opening but he keeps on bringing them up throughout the book and given he already written a book about the subject before this one it makes it feel like he's attempting to use one book to sell another. Finally, Raphael's brings up how the mythical stories he is writing about are in today's textbooks in each chapter and while I think this was book information, it might have been better if he had moved that into his concluding chapter alone.

Founding Myths is fascinating reading for both general and knowledgeable history readers which is a credit to Ray Raphael's research, yet there are pitfalls that take some of the joy out of reading this book. While I recommend this book, just be weary of the repetitious nature that I described above.
