

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Richard Beeman. *Plain, Honest Men: The Making of the American Constitution*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2010. Pp. 544. Paper, \$18.00; ISBN 978-08129-7684-7.**

Richard Beeman's work examines, as the title suggests, how the Constitution was made. It is authoritatively researched, as the author surveyed Madison's writings, those of other contributors, and *The Federalist Papers*, as well as consulting many other sources. The purpose is twofold: first, to humanize that founding document. Instead of describing it as a "miracle from Philadelphia," as Catherine Drinker Bowen did, Beeman views it more as the work of men. He uses a quotation of Gouverneur Morris for his title, and so himself is not calling the Founding Fathers plain or ordinary. However, if forced to choose between man and god to describe the founders, Beeman, long-time professor at the University of Pennsylvania and author of multiple books, clearly would choose man. Beeman's second purpose is to wade into the debate about how we interpret the Constitution. This is not in terms of what any specific provision means, but more how certain we can be about how the Founding Fathers (or the founding generation) understood any provision. He argues that it is difficult to tell what they thought would actually happen and notes how many of the provisions were arrived at quickly with little discussion. For instance, the "necessary and proper" clause was agreed to swiftly with no dissenting vote. Thus, about all the current generation can tell is that everyone might have agreed on the meaning, but there is little to tell what that meaning was. He also points out that little discussion was done at the ratification conventions and that various states had external reasons to adopt the Constitution, and so they focused on that (whether or not to join) rather than what the Constitution meant. Turning to *The Federalist Papers*, he notes that these were more "political propaganda aimed at persuading undecided voters to support the Constitution" than "high-minded political theory." Thus, interpreting them as exactly what the Constitution meant at the time is problematic.

Finally, Beeman weighs in on another political debate about the Constitution, whether the document is to be a living item or an unchanging one. He points out how Jefferson and Madison throughout their lives had differing views, and argues that we should honor the Constitution, but also should "have faith in the wisdom of citizens of our own age to guide our continuing political experiment." That such an answer (and such a compromise) would please neither side in today's constitutional law debates would resound well with the Founding Fathers, many of whom compromised greatly in order to get the nation we began with.

This book can be used in a wide variety of classes. For those interested in constitutional history, it obviously can be used in an early America or constitutional history class. For those wanting to prepare materials to teach those classes, of course it would be useful as well. The book also examines the effect of slavery on the Constitution and so would be a good source for lectures or discussions over that issue.

*Plain, Honest Men* runs a bit long, so the level of the students would have to be considered: Would students balk at reading a 500-page book? Beeman's presentation is quite readable, but there is only a three-month period generally covered, and so of course the book drags at points for the non-professional reader.

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**Bruce Watson. *Freedom Summer: The Savage Season That Made Mississippi Burn and Made America a Democracy*. New York: Viking Press, 2010. Pp. 384. Hardcover, \$27.95; ISBN 978-0-6700-2170-3.**

While conservative commentator Glen Beck asserts that he is intent on restoring the Civil Rights Movement, in *Freedom Summer*, Bruce Watson reminds readers that the history and legacy of the movement that transformed America in the 1960s is considerably different from contemporary Tea Party politics. Watson, a journalist who has written fine histories of the labor movement and the Sacco-Vanzetti case, records the courageous efforts of college students in 1964 who risked their lives to assure that all citizens were accorded the promise of American life. With apologies to Tom Brokaw and those who battled fascism during the Second World War, an argument certainly can be made for these 1960s youth as "the greatest generation."

Although the focus of the book is upon young college students, predominantly white, who journeyed to Mississippi in the summer of 1964, Watson acknowledges that they joined an indigenous Southern movement pioneered by little known African-American activists and martyrs such as Herbert Lee. The black leadership of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was divided over the advisability of introducing white volunteers into rural Mississippi, but the arguments of Bob Moses carried the day and Freedom Summer was born. In early June 1964, SNCC veterans began training volunteers who would live with black Mississippians while working on voter registration drives and teaching at freedom schools.

Watson observes that most Mississippi whites perceived the idealistic volunteers to be agitators and leftists reminiscent of Yankee occupation during Reconstruction. The so-called invasion of Mississippi was met with considerable violence that Watson chronicles well. The murders of volunteers Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney in Philadelphia, Mississippi, are a focal point of the narrative. Although Moses agonized over the dangers to which the Northern college students were subjected, there is little doubt that the murders of white volunteers Goodman and Schwerner galvanized the attention of the nation's press on Mississippi. In developing the details of this case, Watson provides an informative rejoinder to the 1988 film *Mississippi Burning* which privileged the Federal Bureau of Investigation at the expense of grass roots black activism.