

Leavitt, Gregory C. *Class Conflict: The Pursuit and History of American Justice*. New Brunswick, N. J.: Transaction Publishers, 2013. 249 pages. Cloth, \$49.95.

Americans tend to imagine that the 1787 Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia was a heavenly ordained event at which an assortment of demigods facilitated the American destiny, wrote the divinely inspired Constitution, and saved the United States from the chaos of the Articles of Confederation. This book makes a compelling argument that the convention was the centerpiece of a remarkably well-orchestrated conspiracy by American Whiggery—i.e. the gentry—to hijack the accomplishment of independence from Britain and to institutionalize elite advantage. Calling themselves the Federalist faction, the elites continually misled the public by insisting that they were committed to the primacy of the state and local control that the public cherished. The Federalists gladly welcomed the collaboration of the unwitting democrats Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, who would emit egalitarian rhetoric on behalf of the Federalists and leave the impression with the public that the Federalist agenda featured inclusive participation. The Federalists also manipulated the ambitious, clueless George Washington and the over-the-hill Benjamin Franklin into fronting for a single-minded effort to establish a hierarchical society. Contrary to their promise to confine the Philadelphia convention to the drafting of amendments to the Articles of Confederation, they immediately closed the meeting, agreed to write in secret a new constitution that would strip the states of their sovereignty, and devised a ratification process that simply set aside Article XIII of the Articles of Confederation, which required the approval of all thirteen state legislatures to change the law of the land. Then they hurriedly organized the state ratification conventions, packing them with wealthy landowners and businessmen. The members of the Anti-Federalist faction were caught by surprise by the well-organized Federalists' devious, illegal machinations. In not much longer than the blink of an eye, the Federalists had transferred sovereignty to the national government, made state policymaking subordinate to national policymaking, and designed two and a half unelected branches out of the national government's three branches. School history books paint a portrait of an American electorate that welcomed the draft constitution with adulation when it was completed on September 17th, 1787, but, in fact, "the general population was furious when the new Constitution was unveiled, revealing strong counterpoints to popular sentiments" (p. 65). The Anti-Federalists had been cheated out of the rewards of their democratic revolution, and the Federalists "now had a Constitution that would be used (or ignored) to their advantage even to present day" (p. 40).

Author Gregory C. Leavitt, a scholar of sociology and criminal justice at Idaho State University, presents a persuasive portrayal of the Whigs as having the unshakable conviction that the promotion of their own interests was the paramount priority, outranking any other values such as equity, legality, and justice. Leavitt says that the elites "were commonly and willingly ruthless to the point of murder, enslavement, and depravity and morally corrupt in the pursuit of wealth" (p. 40). He offers the example of influential Second Continental Congress member Robert Morris, head of the assembly's procurement committee during the Revolutionary War. In the war's first two years, "Morris awarded about one quarter of government contracts to his own firm of Willing and Morris" (pp. 37-38). Leavitt quotes Kevin Phillips: "Although [Morris] is remembered as a financier of the Revolution, . . . the truth is the other way around—the Revolution financed Morris" (p. 38). Many of the aristocratic families in this country established their elite status through piracy, profiteering, smuggling, slave trading, and other sordid activities, and they are still treated with deep respect. "Because of their institutionalized and

pitiless nature, many of the early American families are still found in the American *Social Register*” (p. 37).

The elites’ effort to dominate and exploit American society has “not become less merciless,” Leavitt comments. “They continued to cheat Americans through wars, exploit the labor of [immigrants] and their children, do business with the Nazis, . . . and free themselves of taxes at the expense of everyone else. They commonly produce and market bad food, bad pharmaceuticals, bad cars, bad tires, bad tobacco, bad child car seats, and toys. . . . It is not what they will necessarily do, but that they will do what is necessary to achieve these ends” (p. 40).

Chapter 2 (“Eighteenth-Century America: The Pre-Revolutionary Era,” pp. 25-56) and Chapter 3 (“The Making of the Constitution,” pp. 57-78) are the brisk page-turners in the book. The remaining chapters are informative, but not riveting, as they extend the account of elite advantage to the present. The book is a useful antidote to the extensive, uncritical literature that celebrates the development of the U. S. Constitution and has long encouraged “constitution worship” by American citizens who, to this day, are influenced by the Federalists’ smoke-and-mirrors campaign for ratification as though it occurred yesterday. It might be helpful for Americans to be aware of the long history of the elite class’s habit of maintaining a perpetual, sophisticated organizational network, which—equipped with its possession of wealth and resources—always remains about 100 steps ahead of the 80 percent of the population that makes do with 10 percent of the nation’s assets and can always rely on government authorities to come to their aid when their authority to reign supreme comes under challenge from would-be reformers and the beleaguered masses.

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