



Original Meanings: Politics and Ideas in the Making of the Constitution

By Jack N. Rakove

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From abortion to same-sex marriage, today's most urgent political debates will hinge on this two-part question: What did the United States Constitution originally mean and who now understands its meaning best? Rakove chronicles the Constitution from inception to ratification and, in doing so, traces its complex weave of ideology and interest, showing how this document has meant different things at different times to different groups of Americans.

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Editorial Review

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Imagine, for a preposterous moment, that 55 national leaders convened to write a document to guide the country for hundreds of years. It seems unlikely--given that our current contingent of so-called leaders can't agree on how to balance a checkbook--that they could reach consensus on such issues as the allotment of congressional seats. The political and ideological issues that faced the creators of the Constitution were similar in some ways to those at play today. And in some ways they were vastly different ones. Jack Rakove, a history professor at Stanford University, has in this book framed the process that led to the drafting of the constitution in its historical and political context to offer insight into the difficulty of interpreting that most influential of documents.

From Publishers Weekly

Legal conservatives periodically call for judicial decisions based on an interpretation of the Constitution that accords with the "original intent" of those who wrote and ratified it. That's a vexed matter, as Stanford University historian Rakove (*The Beginnings of National Politics*) shows in this nuanced reconstruction of constitutional debates. First, he explores the difficulty of even divining the understanding of the framers. He goes on to explore James Madison's vital theorizing about federalism, the compromises involved in granting states equal Senate seats and counting slaves in the population, the concept of the Presidency and the adoption of the Bill of Rights. Rakove suggests that the country's political future--whether oriented toward the statehouses or the national capital--depends less on the framers and their constitutional language than on the actions of the American people in the framework that has been created. Moreover, he warns that even Madison's contemporary appeal to originalism was hardly a posture of neutrality. This detailed book will appeal most to students and scholars.

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From Library Journal

Surveys of Americans consistently reveal the troubling irony that we know very little about the document we profess to revere so highly: the U.S. Constitution. If more books like this nuanced, lucid work were written and read, perhaps this long-standing trend would begin to reverse itself. Rakove, editor of *Interpreting the Constitution: The Debate over Original Intent* (Northeastern Univ., 1990), has made a significant and lasting contribution to the scholarship surrounding the adoption of the Constitution. While this persuasive treatment of the ideological and political background of the Constitution will appeal primarily to scholars in the field, the public would be well served by reading this book, particularly since so many appeals and debates are conducted on the meaning of the Constitution. Rakove convincingly shows that while the Constitution's meaning is not always self-evident and that simple and simple-minded appeals to "original intent" should be rejected, neither is the meaning of our foundational political and legal instrument beyond our understanding. Of especial note is Rakove's scrutiny of James Madison. This work ranks with well-known works by Bernard Bailyn, Gordon Wood, Bruce Ackerman, and others. Its focus on the importance of language is reason enough for placing it on one's shelf. Highly recommended for all libraries. --Stephen Kent Shaw, Northwest Nazarene Coll., Nampa, Id.

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