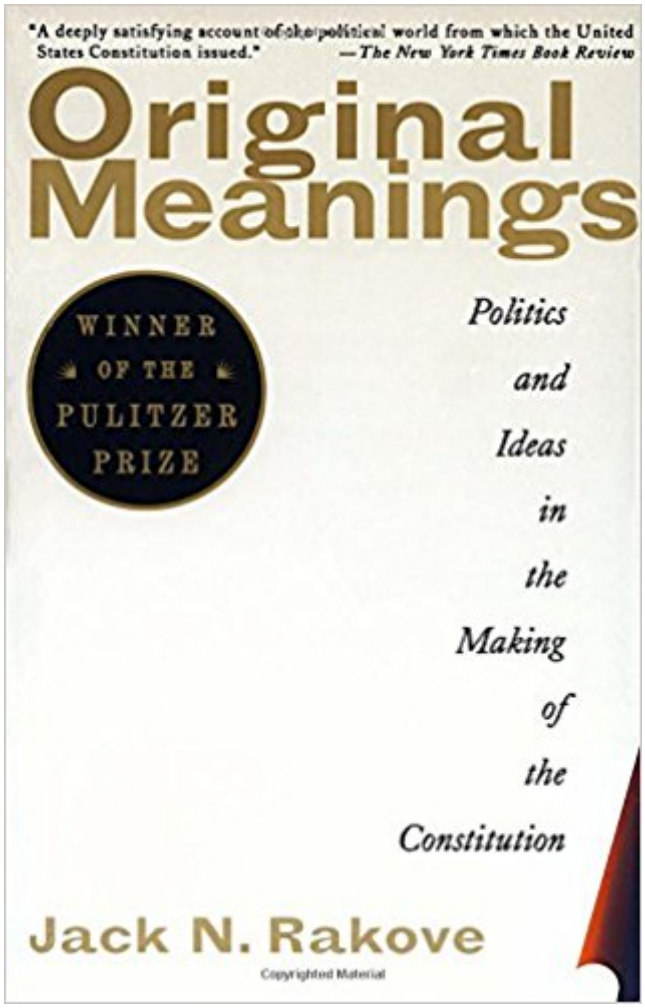
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Original Meanings: Politics And Ideas In The Making Of The Constitution



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Synopsis

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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Customer Reviews

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. --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

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. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

...it’s the best thing I’ve read on the mind and political context of the Founders at the various founding moments...the deliberation and intention of the 1787 Framers, the deliberations and intentions of the state ratification conventions c. 1787-1789, and the early debates over the institutionalization of the constitutional clauses and where the sources of political danger lurked. Jack Rakove is another of Bernard Bailyn’s crowded stable of brilliant students who with Bailyn have moved on to reshape the study of pre-revolutionary, revolutionary, and Federalist America. Original Meanings (and the plural "s" is significant) is a seminal contribution to a discussion that should dominate the next presidential election. Rakove’s critics will argue that he’s hostile to the anti-Federalists and to today’s Originalists (led by their Heralds, Scalia and Thomas), but Rakove convinces me - and I suppose it’s needless to say, I take a side in this particular debate but more or less pride myself in my ability to preserve analytic objectivity and to weigh an argument and its logic - that all the controversies of Originalism and the "Framer’s intent" are vastly more political than historical (although, as Rakove points out more than once, clarity on the historical questions is essential to inform any conversation on the controversial constitutional topics).For me - and please pardon the editorial digression - Originalism seems a variation of the Reformation battlecry, "Sola Scriptora!" (It’s more than a little ironic that skepticism of scripture is associated more closely with Roman Catholic, rather than Protestant, tradition, but the Supreme Court’s conservative caucus is uniformly devout RCC.) In government, this is a recipe - as several of the Founders and their philosophic forebears pointed out - for the dead hand of the past continuing to grip throats in the present. Jefferson opined, often, in writing (and presumably in conversation) that each generation of Americans needed to rewrite the Constitution to suit their own times. (But he was, of course, in

France, corresponding with Jamie Madison, whose story dominates these pages, while the constitution was being drafted and crawling through state-by-state ratification.) Well, we've had our constitution, warts and all, for more than 225 years, and we see what 225 years of interpreting a pre-steam-engine, slaveholder-endorsed, wild-frontier-considerate document has done to warp our body politic...and the warpage continues as the political winds blow through the Supreme Court, giving some folks the decisions they long for and others the rage that animates political rivalries bent upon overturning malign majorities on the Court. Needless to say, the constitution has been amended a mere 17 times (and, I'll bet, never again) since the first Bill-of-Rights block of amendments, which were the Federalists' promise to the state ratifying conventions that, "Okay, okay, you can have a Bill of Rights" as the price of ratification, but we're unlikely ever again to see anything that approximates the 1787 meeting to "propose amendments" to the Articles of Confederation. That's the rut we're in.That story - the tale of how our great founding document tugged and pulled into place, every issue, every bloody round of politics, every ratification struggle, with of course the Federalist Papers and the great Anti-Federalist spokesmen at center stage - is told in close, exhaustively researched detail by author Rakove, who has ended not a single argument (as in all humility he scarcely expected to) but has written a starting point for understanding the welter of issues that occupied political Americans from the mid-1780s and the palpable failures of the Articles of Confederation until the opening of Federal government business, when the provisions of the Constitution began to be realized in operational government form.So I remain in the tank for the Bailyn School of Colonial-Revolutionary historiography, and I adore this book, and particularly for its continued - I'd say eternal - relevance to a nuanced understanding of American political life. Do tackle Original Meanings. It's a dense, closely argued work, and not for beginners, but it's an essential book for our - and any - time.

Best discussion and review of debates, discussions of the Constitutional Convention that lead to the U.S. Constitution. This is a detailed work that requires careful reading.

Rakove's immensely detailed diorama of the climate of ideas and issues during the creation of the Constitution is necessary reading for scholars and those with an interest in American history alike. But, as other reviews have stated, the book ain't no costume romp; rather, it is a collection of the most specific ideas that were affecting the political life of the nation/colonies, written in a tone that manages to be both passionate and dry. Rakove himself is clearly a brilliant man, and the book's complexity is fascinating when it is not simply overwhelming. Those familiar with the Constitution will

find so very much to enjoy; each aspect and amendment of the Constitution is dissected, with due time given to its inception, how it was debated, how the leaders and working man alike felt about it, and about all the ramifications of its being included and what would be taken from the American people if excluded. This goes on for a few hundred pages, and can be an overtly challenging read if you don’t take your time with it. Those who devote themselves to it, who pause and reflect and digest Rakove’s words, will look at American government and place in the world in new and inspiring ways. A must for the patient historian.

Not a light read and one that requires some understanding of late 18th century language and thought, but well the effort for an appreciation of just how experimental this new republic and constitution were and how the framers expected later generations to use their good sense, experience and changing circumstance not only to interpret it but also to improve it.

With 22 reviews ahead of me I would normally decline to those who have said it all already, and said it very well. But when you crawl through a tome like this, a few words of recognition of the feat are liberating.I am an interested "student" of the constitution, or rather the men and process of the constitutional convention. I use quotation marks around student as one who is no longer in school, but has read a good number of books on the subject. Professor Rakove is clearly an expert and a brilliant scholar. The fact, anecdote and nuance in this book are the equivalent of three by most any other author. For that I would give it five stars. It is also a very difficult, labored read as almost every other reviewer has already said. For that, you just have to subtract one of those stars!By all means buy it and read it if the topic is of interest, but do not come to this book uninformed. This is NOT a book that should be your first on the topic. As others have said, this book was probably written for serious historians and legal minds (professional or amateur). There is allusion and nuance that take knowledge to understand and connect. With the humble admission that some of this book went over my head - I still have to admire its momentousness.And--Lord, Lord, where was Professor Rakove’s editor in all of this? Or, maybe she or he would chime in at this point with, "You should have seen his manuscript BEFORE I got my hands on it!" For a far more "readable" treatment look at Professor Akhil Reed Amar’s bookÃ Â America’s Constitution: A Biography.

The definitive answers to what the Founders were Really thinking and wrestling with. Chronological and thematic.

This is the first of the books Rakove has written linking the ideas in the Constitution to the beginnings of American politics and the contentions that fed its fire. It provides a good context in which to consider contemporary political arguments claiming ownership of those original meanings.

smooth transaction - as advertised - proves why the second amendment does not allow anyone to carry a gun anywhere

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