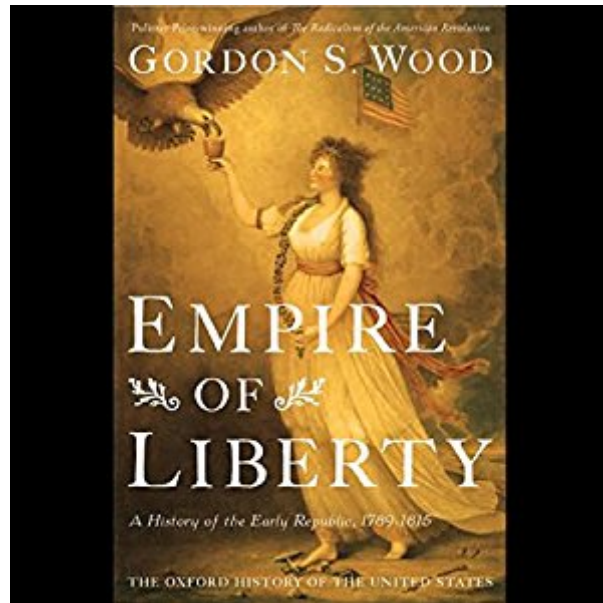


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Empire Of Liberty: A History Of The Early Republic



Synopsis

In *Empire of Liberty*, one of America's most esteemed historians, Gordon S. Wood, offers a brilliant account of the early American Republic, ranging from 1789 and the beginning of the national government to the end of the War of 1812. As Wood reveals, the period was marked by tumultuous change in all aspects of American life - in politics, society, economy, and culture. The men who founded the new government had high hopes for the future, but few of their hopes and dreams worked out quite as they expected. They hated political parties but parties nonetheless emerged. Some wanted the United States to become a great fiscal-military state, like those of Britain and France; others wanted the country to remain a rural agricultural state very different from the European states. Instead, by 1815 the United States became something neither group anticipated. Named a New York Times Notable Book, *Empire of Liberty*, part of The Oxford History of the United States series, offers a marvelous account of this pivotal era when America took its first unsteady steps as a new and rapidly expanding nation. The Oxford History of the United States is considered the gold standard for serious historians and general readers (and listeners) alike. Three of the titles have won the Pulitzer Prize for history; two have been Pulitzer Prize finalists, and all of them have enjoyed critical and commercial success. Please note: The individual volumes of the series have not been published in historical order. *Empire of Liberty* is number IV in The Oxford History of the United States.

Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 30 hours and 58 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Audible Studios

Audible.com Release Date: December 21, 2009

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B0031KN6SY

Best Sellers Rank: #93 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Politics & Current Events > Political History & Theory #311 in Books > History > Americas > United States > Revolution & Founding #478 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > History > United States & Canada

Customer Reviews

Other reviewers have provided thoughtful and comprehensive reviews of the content of this excellent book. I'll focus my own on the book as a Good Read. It's perhaps the best on U.S. history that I've read since Daniel Howe's *What God Hath Wrought*, the next one in the Oxford series, which has the same virtues. It is beautifully written and flows well; the style is precise and compact rather than elegant, but a model of measured exposition. The examples mesh beautifully into its superbly modulated flow of argument. Just about every paragraph has a point to make that is convincing and clear. This slows it down in some ways, all good ones. First, it's long and it will take months rather than days to go through and it needs active engagement and reflection by the reader. It's not skimming material. Second, it builds its picture in a way that precludes fast skipping. It doesn't have an axe to grind. It's a fairly centrist analysis that has no debunking and takes the leading political figures as essentially honorable individuals - almost all male, of course - working their way honestly to make the transition from the society and social hierarchies they were brought up in to the creation of a unique republic that fused the many interests and differences of American diversity. He places less emphasis than Howe on the economic and social dynamics underlying the cancerous issue of slavery, though his chapter, *Between Slavery and Freedom*, is a fine summary of how and why the Revolutionary leaders were so misguided in their conviction that it would just fade away. The last paragraph of the over 700 pages concludes that "The Civil War was the climax of a tragedy that was preordained from the time of the Revolution.

Thesis and Summary: In this, the 8th volume of Oxford's *History of the United States*, Gordon Wood weighs in on the Washington through Madison administrations, and gives a broad perspective analysis of the burgeoning American and American culture. Indeed, Wood's thesis can be summed up to say that by 1815 America was a thoroughly transformed nation from the one that initiated the revolution in 1776: a nation that had gone from gentleman leaders to a far more inclusive- albeit brutish- democracy. Wood begins his journey to American Democracy by explaining the "middling" class of Americans that emerged with the ratification of the Constitution. This new class of Americans did not personify the classical notion of virtue that Federalists found necessary to lead. They were a people possessed of a native congeniality for the sake of prosperity. They were fond of money making (and good at it), they weren't Harvard or Princeton educated, and they voted. It is this middling class that is the protagonist (for lack of better word) of Wood's work. He sees their growth as the Federalists' death and he sees Jefferson as their chief advocate and the man responsible for their ascendance to power. Herein one finds Wood's bias. He simply adores Thomas Jefferson and makes bare faced obeisance to him at every turn of the page it seems while

looking to traduce Federalists as much as possible. As I read this substantial work, I couldn't help but to constantly contrast it with Elkins and McKittrick's *The Age of Federalism: The Early American Republic, 1788-1800*.

What an odd, brilliant, and maddening book. Wood is a very distinguished historian: his *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia) is required reading for any student of the revolution, and after several years' hiatus, he has come back with several outstanding works, most notably *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* and *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin*. But like many great scholars, he has become infatuated with his own thesis, namely, that the revolution represented the beginning of a radical cultural transformation of America based on liberty and equality.. And because of this, in *Empire of Liberty* he makes several judgments of both coverage and assessment that are blinkered and often grotesquely unfair. The bottom line, as other reviewers have suggested, is that in order to adequately appreciate the politics of the early national period, you really should read Wood's work together with Elkins and Mckittrick's

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