



Science and the Founding Fathers: Science in the Political Thought of Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and James Madison

By I. Bernard Cohen

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General readers, students of American history, and professional historians alike will profit from reading this engaging presentation of an aspect of American history conspicuously absent from the usual textbooks and popular presentations of the political thought of this crucial period.

Thomas Jefferson was the only president who could read and understand Newton's Principia. Benjamin Franklin is credited with establishing the science of electricity. John Adams had the finest education in science that the new country could provide, including "Pneumatics, Hydrostatics, Mechanics, Statics, Opticks." James Madison, chief architect of the Constitution, peppered his Federalist Papers with reference to physics, chemistry, and the life sciences.

For these men science was an integral part of life--including political life. This is the story of their scientific education and of how they employed that knowledge in shaping the political issues of the day, incorporating scientific reasoning into the Constitution.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Cohen's eye-opening, elegant study shows that America's Founding Fathers were true citizens of the Age of Reason who sought links between scientific principles and constitutional government. Thomas Jefferson, naturalist and inventor, had a consuming passion for scientific pursuits ranging from paleontology to zoology. The Declaration of Independence, which he wrote, reverberates with echoes of Newtonian science, as when he invokes "self-evident" truths or "laws of nature." Benjamin Franklin, far from being a mere tinkerer or inventor, pioneered the science of electricity. Franklin also developed a demographic theory that North America would become a population center of the British world; this led to the policy according to which the British annexed Canada rather than Guadeloupe as the spoils in the war against the French (1754-63). John Adams, who studied astronomy and physics at Harvard, was a founder of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in Boston. And James Madison, a devoted amateur scientist, drew on scientific metaphors and analogies in his Federalist articles. Illustrated. Cohen is Victor S. Thomas professor emeritus of the history of science at Harvard University.

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Review

"Intellectually engaging . . . deftly written." (Boston Globe)

About the Author

I. Bernard Cohen was Victor S. Thomas Professor, Emeritus, of the History of Science at Harvard University, where he taught from 1942 to 1984. He was the first American to receive the degree of Ph.D. in the History of Science. He was the author of many books, including *Science and the Founding Fathers: Science in the Political Thought of Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and James Madison*; *The Science of Benjamin Franklin*; *Revolution in Science*; *The Newtonian Revolution*; *The Birth of a New Physics*; and, with Anne Whitman, *Isaac Newton's Principia: A New Translation of Newton's Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*. He edited several series of works, including *Harvard Monographs in the History of Science*, *Three Centuries of Science in America*, and the ongoing *Studies & Texts in the History of Computing*. He was a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the Royal Astronomical Society, the British Academy, and the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei.

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Robert Hansen:

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