**The Myth of the Greedy Founders Homework Due December 7, 2012 Name\_\_\_\_\_\_**

<http://www.aflcio.org/mediacenter/speakout/thom_hartmann.cfm>

While reading, annotate using:

* Check (✓ – concept or fact that is already known
* question mark (?) – concept or fact that is confusing or not understood
* exclamation mark (!) – something that is unusual or surprising
* plus (+)– idea or concept that I want to remember

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**Thom Hartmann**

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This is excerpted from Thom Hartmann's *Screwed: The Undeclared War Against the Middle Class*. Hartmann is a nationally syndicated daily talk show host at Air America Radio, and *Screwed* is available at the Union Shop Online™.

Unfortunately, many believe that our nation was founded exclusively of, by and for “rich white men” and that the Constitution had, as its primary purpose, the protection of the superrich. They would have us believe that the Constitution’s signers didn’t really mean all that flowery talk about liberal democracy in a republican form of government.

But the signers didn’t send other people’s kids to war, as have two generations of the oligarchic Bush family. Many of the Founders themselves gave up everything, even risking (and losing) their lives, their life’s savings or their homes and families to conceive and birth this nation.

The theory of the “greedy white Founders” was first widely advanced by Columbia University professor of history and self-described socialist Charles A. Beard, who in 1913 published a book titled *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*.

Numerous historians—on both the right and the left—have since cited his work as evidence that America was founded solely for the purpose of protecting wealth interests. His myth unfortunately helps conservatives support ending the estate tax, or “death tax,” as the “the way the Founders would have wanted things” so that the very richest few can rule America.

But Beard was wrong.

The majority of the signers of the Constitution were actually acting against their own best economic interests when they put their signatures on that document, just as had the majority of the signers of the Declaration of Independence.

In 1958, one of America’s great professors of history, Forrest McDonald, published *We the People: The Economic Origins of the Constitution* that bluntly states that Beard’s “economic interpretation of the Constitution does not work.”

Over the course of more than four hundred meticulously researched pages, McDonald goes back to original historical records and reveals who was promoting and who was opposing the new Constitution and why.

McDonald notes that a quarter of all the delegates to the Constitutional Convention had voted in their own state legislatures for laws that would have helped debtors and the poor and thus harmed the interests of the rich. “These [bankruptcy/debt relief laws] were the very kinds of laws which, according to Beard’s hypothesis, the delegates had convened to prevent,” says McDonald. He adds: “Another fourth of the delegates had important economic interests that were adversely affected, directly and immediately, by the Constitution they helped write.

While Beard theorized the Framers of the Constitution were largely drawn from the class of wealthy bankers and businessmen, McDonald showed that the “most common and by far the most important property holdings of the delegates were not, as Beard has asserted, mercantile, manufacturing and public security investments, but agricultural property.” Most were farmers or plantation owners, and owing a lot of land did not make one rich in those days.

McDonald then goes into an exhaustive and detailed state-by-state analysis of the state constitutional ratifying conventions that finally brought the U.S. Constitution into law. For example, in Delaware which voted for ratification, almost 77 percent of the delegates were farmers, more than two-thirds of them small farmers with incomes ranging from 75 cents to $5.00 a week. Only slightly more than 23 percent of the delegates were professional men—doctors, judges and lawyers. None of the delegates was a merchant, manufacturer, banker or speculator in Western lands.

But did farmers support the Constitution because they were slave owners or the wealthiest of the landowners, as Beard had guessed back in 1913?

McDonald shows that this certainly was not the case in Northern states like New Hampshire and New Jersey, which were not slave states. But what about Virginia and North Carolina, the two largest slaveholding states, asks McDonald rhetorically. Were their plantation owners in favor of the Constitution because it protected their economic and slaveholding interests?

“The opposite is true,” writes McDonald.

In both states the wealthy planters—those with personality interests [slaves] as well as those without personality interests—were divided approximately equally on the issue of ratification. In North Carolina small farmers and debtors were likewise equally divided, and in Virginia the great mass of the small farmers and a large majority of the debtors favored ratification.

So what did motivate the Framers and the Constitution?

Along with the answer to this question, we may find the answer to another question historians have asked for two centuries: Why was the Constitutional Convention held in secret, behind locked doors; and why did James Madison not publish his own notes of the convention until 1840, just after the last of the other participants died?

The reason, simply put, was that most of the wealthy men among the delegates were betraying the interests of their own economic class. They were voting for democracy instead of oligarchy. They were voting to create and maintain a middle class instead of creating a nation of, by and for the rich.

The people who hammered out the Constitution had such a strong feeling of history and destiny that it at times overwhelmed them. Their writings show that they truly believed they were doing sacred work—something greater than themselves, their personal interests and even the narrow interests of their wealthy constituents back in their home states.

The Founders’ decision to create a democracy in America was not easy. As John Quincy Adams said, “Posterity—you will never know how much it has cost my generation to preserve your freedom. I hope you will make good use of it.”

They were a tiny group, and the British Empire was very large. How did they succeed?

Samuel Adams, the tavern owner in Boston who was instrumental in stirring up the Boston Tea Party, said, “It does not take a majority to prevail. But rather an irate, tireless minority, keen on setting brushfires of freedom in the minds of men.”

That’s who the Founders were and what they did. They were revolutionaries who knew that a vital democracy lay in supporting the middle class and minimizing corporate power. And that’s what we must be and what we must do.

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This is Hartmann’s thesis: “The majority of the signers of the Constitution were actually acting against their own best economic interests when they put their signatures on that document, just as had the majority of the signers of the Declaration of Independence.”

*Underline the evidence Hartmann uses to support his position. Which evidence do you think is the most compelling? Why? (be specific)*