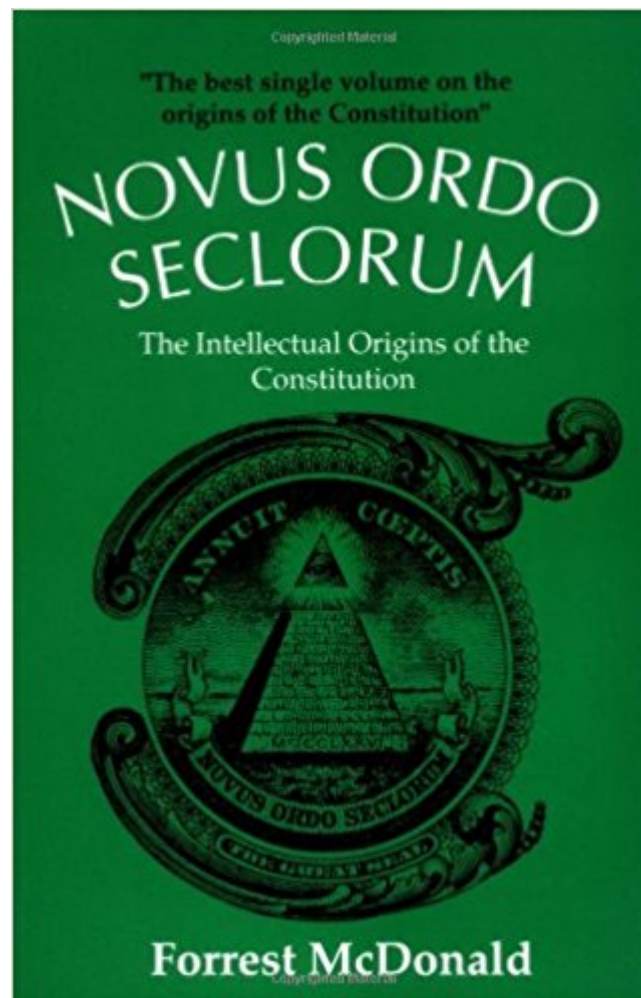




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# Novus Ordo Seclorum: The Intellectual Origins Of The Constitution



## Synopsis

This is the first major interpretation of the framing of the Constitution to appear in more than two decades. Forrest McDonald, widely considered one of the foremost historians of the Constitution and of the early national period, reconstructs the intellectual world of the Founding Fathers—including their understanding of law, history political philosophy, and political economy, and their firsthand experience in public affairs—and then analyzes their behavior in the Constitutional Convention of 1787 in light of that world. No one has attempted to do so on such a scale before. McDonald's principal conclusion is that, though the Framers brought a variety of ideological and philosophical positions to bear upon their task of building a "new order of the ages," they were guided primarily by their own experience, their wisdom, and their common sense. "A witty and energetic study of the ideas and passions of the Framers." •New York Times Book Review "Bristles with wit and intellectual energy." •Christian Science Monitor

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"An important, comprehensive statement about the most fundamental period in American history. It deals authoritatively with topics no student of America can afford to ignore." •Harvey Mansfield, author of *The Spirit of Liberalism*

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'An important, comprehensive statement about the most fundamental period in American history. It deals authoritatively with topics no student of American can afford to ignore.' - Harvey

Mansfield, author of the Spirit of Liberalism

Novus Ordo Seclorum by Forrest McDonald is well described by its subtitle, The Intellectual Origins of the Constitution. I found the book well organized and relatively easy to read in comparison with Donald Lutz's The Origins of American Constitutionalism (which I've read and reviewed) and Bernard Bailyn's The Ideological Origins of the Constitution (which I admit I'm still struggling to finish). Novus Ordo Seclorum flows very logically. The main chapter titles illustrate the logical flow: 1. The Problem 2. The Rights of Englishmen 3. Systems of Political Theory 4. Systems of Political Economy 5. The Lessons of Experience, 1776-1787 6. The Framers 7. The Convention 8. Powers, Principles and Consequences. Some of the most significant ideas that stuck with me after reading Novus include the following: 1. The Lockean Idea of Equality: All men are created equal in the sense that none has a natural right to rule others (politically). This idea was intended as an argument against absolute monarchy, the divine right of kings, claimed by the Stuart monarchs of the 17th Century. It was probably in this sense that the phrase found its way into the Declaration of Independence. Subsequent criticism of Jefferson as hypocritical for writing such high sounding words while holding slaves is justifiable in terms of today's political standards. However, in 1776, the words were focused entirely upward at the monarchy. The idea that they could apply downward had not yet been commonly understood. 2. Locke postulated a logical system of natural law based on three principles: (1) Man has a duty to honor his Creator, (2) Therefore, Mankind ought to be preserved since to do otherwise would dishonor the Creator, (3) Since Mankind needs to live in Society to preserve itself, it follows that Society must be preserved. 3. Locke goes on: In a State of Nature, the earth and all things belong to Mankind in common. However, every individual owns his body and his labor, and, consequently, the products of his labor. When he mixes his labor with what Nature has provided, he creates property that is uniquely his own. 4. There were two strains of Republicanism: Puritanical Republicanism sought moral solutions to political and economic problems while Agrarian Republicanism sought more effective political-economic-social arrangements to solve these problems. Puritanical Republicanism, as the name suggests, was strongest in New England, while Agrarian Republicanism was strongest in the middle and southern colonies. (I'm not sure why the term Agrarian was chosen since the approach would appear to apply to commercial and manufacturing settings as well as agricultural.) 5. In the late 18th Century, three systems of political economy were in competition: (1) The Mercantilists held that all economics, and international trade in particular, were a zero-sum system based on a fixed,

finite pool of wealth, (2) The Physiocrats held that the pool of wealth could be increased but only slightly and only by means of agricultural labor, (3) Capitalism held that the pool of wealth could be increased dramatically by capital investment and more efficient allocation of labor.<sup>6</sup> Following the American Revolution, the states, under the Articles of Confederation, sought to impose mercantilist systems in their economic relations with each other as well as with the outside world. The Constitution established free trade among the states (Article 1), thereby creating the largest free trade zone in the world. I have read elsewhere that the elimination of the Corn Laws in Britain in the 1840s led to the rise of capitalism and free trade throughout the Atlantic world. I now suspect that, after Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, the US Constitution was the next most significant document leading to growth of capitalism and free trade. To me, at least, this was a significant revelation. Thanks, Dr. McDonald.

Forrest McDonald is one of the greatest living American historians. This book should not only be on the bookshelf of all those who enjoy readings about the American founding, but should be carefully read and re-read. Each reading gives a deeper understanding of the miracle of the foundation of this nation. Excellent!!

*Novus Ordo Seclorum* was the book I used to teach the Constitution to international students for a US History course. I was amazed by McDonald's intense research and his comprehensive treatment on the topic. Actually he only spends the second half the book dealing with the Constitution and the Philadelphia Convention. In the first four chapters he describes the long tradition of the English constitution, as well as the prevailing ideals in republicanism and the English Opposition which had an impact later in Philadelphia. I especially liked how McDonald debunked some American myths, such as the belief that James Madison was the "father" of the US Constitution, or that Alexander Hamilton was a champion of the free market and laissez-faire economics. IMHO, the most interesting part of the book was Chapter 7 on the Convention itself. The reader may be astonished to find that there wasn't really a dominant voice or movement which created the Constitution that Americans have revered for 200 years. Throughout the Convention there were competing voices and interests, many long speeches and appeals which ultimately produced nothing, and a helluva lot of compromise. If you think just reading this chapter is tedious, you can only imagine the actual proceedings. James Madison wasn't kidding when he said that the document was "the work of many heads and many hands." It is interesting to note that even though McDonald spends half the book describing the British theories which came to America and

influenced the Framers, he acknowledges that the final outcome of the Constitution and its structure had less to do with these theories than "common sense" and the Framers' prevailing interests (p. 262). One could applaud McDonald for being thorough; however this revelation somewhat diminishes the relevance of the material in the first half of the book. As a lecturer, I found this book to be a wonderful resource, and it definitely increased my own insight into the theories behind the document. However, the content was a bit too advanced for my undergraduate students, so I just made the last 4 chapters mandatory reading. The book would probably be best suited for an upper-division or graduate-level course.

i really appreciate the work that this author has put into this book. it is an outstanding review of the traditions, customs, and thoughts of the colonial period with brief discussion of the pre-colonial foundations. i learned so much from this work! i plan to re-read it in a year or two to gather new information. this is highly recommended for all of us who have wondered, "where did the framers come up with that idea?". now, we have a better clue. i give this 5 stars and a solid "A". it is highly recommended.

Novus Ordo Seclorum is a very specific and academic read on the intellectual origins of the Constitution. Forrest McDonald, in what can only be described as a marvelously researched and specifically footnoted text, digs extraordinarily deep as he seeks out the philosophies and the readings of our framers and they sought to construct a more cohesive nation from an obviously failing and loosely assemble group of sovereign states under the Articles of Confederation. His research and range of knowledge is, at times, daunting. This is a work that is not easily read the first time and one that most, if not all, with an interest in this topic, will pull off their shelves through the years as a reference to further readings. A word of caution - this book should only be read by those who have a significant interest in a deep and academic research into this very specific topic. That said, simply wonderful historical research.

Literate, astonishingly well-researched

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