
“[Thomas Ricks] has strong opinions he does not try to hide [and] a deep wellspring of knowledge about both military policy and military history.”

— *The New York Times Book Review*

FIRST PRINCIPLES

*from the Greeks and Romans
and How That Shaped Our Country*

By Thomas E. Ricks

“Ricks does something quite remarkable: he takes a seemingly academic topic—the Greco-Roman education of the Founding Fathers—and makes it resonate with a wide audience.”

In **FIRST PRINCIPLES:**

from the Greeks and Romans
and How That Shaped Our Country (Harper; November 10, 2020; [NetGalley](#); [Edelweiss](#)),
Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and #1 *New York Times* bestselling author Thomas E. Ricks offers a revelatory new look at the founding fathers. Examining their educations—in particular, their devotion to the ancient Greek and Roman classics—Ricks demonstrates how that influence would shape their ideals and the new American nation.

On the morning after the 2016 presidential election, Ricks awoke with a few questions on his mind: What kind of nation did we now have? Is it what was designed or intended by the nation's founders? Trying to get as close to the source as he could, Ricks decided to go back and read the philosophy and literature that shaped the founders' thinking, and the letters they wrote to each other debating these

Constitution. That is, he spread power around—between two legislative houses, three branches of the federal government, and the federal government and the states. He believed that if we were too polarized to find a compromise, we'd be frozen.

- ◁ Ricks believes that Jefferson, Madison and Adams would think that our democracy is threatened today as it becomes increasingly like an oligarchy. They'd also be surprised at how passive Congress has become; they expected it to be the most energetic part of the government.
- ◁ The founders, observing how our country has handled Covid-19, would wonder why we don't pay more attention to the public good, or "the general welfare" of the people, as it is called in the Constitution. They would argue that rights are not just for individuals, but for society as a whole. They likely would add that we have allowed the market to influence too much, especially in areas such as public health and education.
- ◁ They would be astonished at how our society has given opinions equal standing with facts. They admired rational inquiry and operated on the basis of evidence.

Throughout **FIRST PRINCIPLES**, Ricks shows us new sides to these familiar figures. He counts Washington as among our greatest generals, more thoughtful than is often recognized, both about war and about politics. He thinks John Adams has been overrated in recent years, especially as a result of David McCullough's rosy biography. He portrays Jefferson as the only one of the first four presidents to be more influenced by the Greeks than by the Romans, and especially by the philosopher Epicurus, whose views about how to pursue happiness permeate the Declaration of Independence. And (contrary to the great musical *Hamilton*) he depicts Madison as a political radical in college, strongly nationalist even before there was a nation, more an American than a Virginian.

About the Author

Thomas E. Ricks covered the U.S. military for *The Washington Post* from 2000 through 2008 and was on the staff of the *Wall Street Journal* for seventeen years before that. He reported on American military operations in Somalia, Haiti, Korea, Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Kuwait, Turkey, Afghanistan and Iraq. A member of two Pulitzer Prize-winning teams, he is also the author of several books, including *The Generals*, *The Gamble*, *Churchill & Orwell*, and the number-one *New York Times* bestseller *Fiasco*, which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. He wrote *First Principles* while a visiting fellow in history at Bowdoin College.

Praise for FIRST PRINCIPLES

“Ricks knocks it out of the park with this jewel of a book. On every page I learned something new. Read it every night if you want to restore your faith in our country.”

— **James Mattis, General, U.S.**

“Thomas Ricks’s deeply personal, patriotic quest to recover and renew the principles that animated America’s founders testifies eloquently to the value of historical understanding in these

