

The founders' failures: Counting on future generations

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [October 21, 2008](#) issue

Many of the issues before us in this election year were present at the founding of the nation, as I learned from Joseph J. Ellis's *American Creation: Triumphs and Tragedies at the Founding of the Republic*. I have never read such a clear explanation of the conflict between what Ellis calls the "spirit of '76" and the "spirit of '87."

Much of the nation's early political energy, Ellis explains, came out of the conflict between the revolutionary idealists, like Jefferson and Madison, who argued for the sovereignty of individual states and represented the southern "planter culture," and the pragmatists, led by Alexander Hamilton, who wanted a strong central government, a national bank and the authority to override decisions by individual states.

The founders' two great failures, Ellis says, were in their handling of slavery and the status of Native Americans. Why didn't they resolve the slavery issue once and for all when they had the opportunity? There were economic reasons—the southern colonies depended on slavery—and political realities—the representatives of the southern colonies were deeply suspicious of any hint of a move to abolish slavery or establish the authority to do so. "In the end it was psychologically impossible for the founders to imagine the peaceful coexistence of whites and free African Americans in the same nation-state."

On the Indian question, the founders originally tried to protect tribal homelands. "Tribes were to be regarded as sovereign natives and ultimately assimilated into the union as new states. Extensive negotiations were held in 1789 between the United States government and the Creek Nation, whose chief was Alexander McGillivray, an eloquent, charismatic leader who came close to uniting all Native American tribes in the east. A treaty was signed—but almost immediately was broken. There was simply no way to prevent the steady movement of white settlers into Creek borders short of building something akin to a wall." Could the story have turned out

differently? The answer, Ellis says, is a “dispiriting but firm no.”

Washington, Jefferson and other founders understood their failures and hoped that future generations would redress them. Ellis’s book is sobering to read at a time when we consider which leaders will most effectively guide the nation through its current crises and address its unfinished tasks.