

**Empire of Liberty:
A History of the Early
Republic, 1789-1815**

by Gordon Wood
Oxford University Press

On the Tube

■ **"Sam Cooke: Crossing Over"** (*American Masters*).

Brings to life the peerless melder of church and pop sounds who built a business and rock 'n' roll from his lilting singing and savvy music sense.

■ **"Passing Strange"**

(*Great Performances*). Spike Lee chronicles a young black musician's unusual path of self-discovery in the 1970s.

■ **"Wyatt Earp"** (*American Experience*).

Documentary delves into the complex contradictions of the lawman whose life embodies the West's great paradoxes.

■ **Faces of America**

Professor Henry Louis Gates uses DNA testing and genealogical research to shed new light on 11 famed Americans.

■ **"Dolley Madison"**

(*American Experience*). Starring two Tony Award winners (Eve Best and Jefferson Mays) as the Madisons, this episode gives America's "first First Lady" some overdue props.

■ **"Behavioral Economics"** (*Nova*).

Uncovers why we all thought the 21st-century boom would never end, and how to avoid thinking that again.

—Gene Santoro

The precarious compromises wrought during the

Constitutional Convention of 1787 set the stage for this epic chronicle of the early republic by a Pulitzer Prize-winning historian. A consensus had emerged among the Founders: Drastic reforms were needed to check what Wood labels the "logrolling, horse-trading, and pork-barreling" of parochial state politics that had run rampant under the Articles of Confederation. Once the Constitution became law, however, the

America's dominant political philosophy—with ironic results.

After narrowly defeating Adams in the 1800 presidential election, Jefferson set to work dismantling the pomp and prerogative of the first two presidencies. He traded Adams' six-horse coach for a market cart, halved the military budget and repealed federal taxes on whiskey and land. Most significantly, true to his romantic vision of a land of yeoman farmers, he undid Hamilton's efforts to create a centrally managed economy financed by a permanent national debt.

Absent an overweening national government and with few other reliable sources of authority, early 19th-century America verged on anarchy. Wood describes the quite typical 1812 spectacle of "mobbing" in Baltimore: A pack of 40 angry Republicans besieged and then dismantled the office of a Federalist newspaper. Alcohol consumption was higher in 1820 than at any other point in America's history (five gallons per capita annually). Out-of-wedlock births occurred at rates not seen again until the 1960s. The growing social dissolution led one commentator to remark that America "greatly wants a principle of attraction and cohesion."

It found one in the new "middling" Americans, who increasingly displaced the Founders' "natural aristocracy" as the country's energizing class. Their dreams of upward mobility eventually shaped a new unifying ideal, based on a national dedication to the pursuit of money. "From one end of the continent to the other the universal roar is Commerce!" declared Doctor Samuel Mitchill in 1800, with more than a note of distaste. Of course, urban entrepreneurial America was the antithesis of Jefferson's design. But as Wood's clear-eyed, deeply informed and witty scholarship makes clear, this country and its people were too diverse and dynamic to be limited by any single vision.

An insult in 1798 provoked the first brawl on the floor of Congress, then located in Philadelphia.

Founders were deeply divided about how to revamp the government. Federalists Alexander Hamilton, John Adams and George Washington looked to a stronger central government endowed with, the monarchist-inclined Adams said, "the splendor and majesty" to inspire (and if necessary coerce) allegiance to the nation. But Jefferson preferred nearly no national government at all. *Empire of Liberty* explains how his libertarian vision became

“An elective despotism was not the government we fought for”

—Thomas Jefferson

—Kevin Hartnett