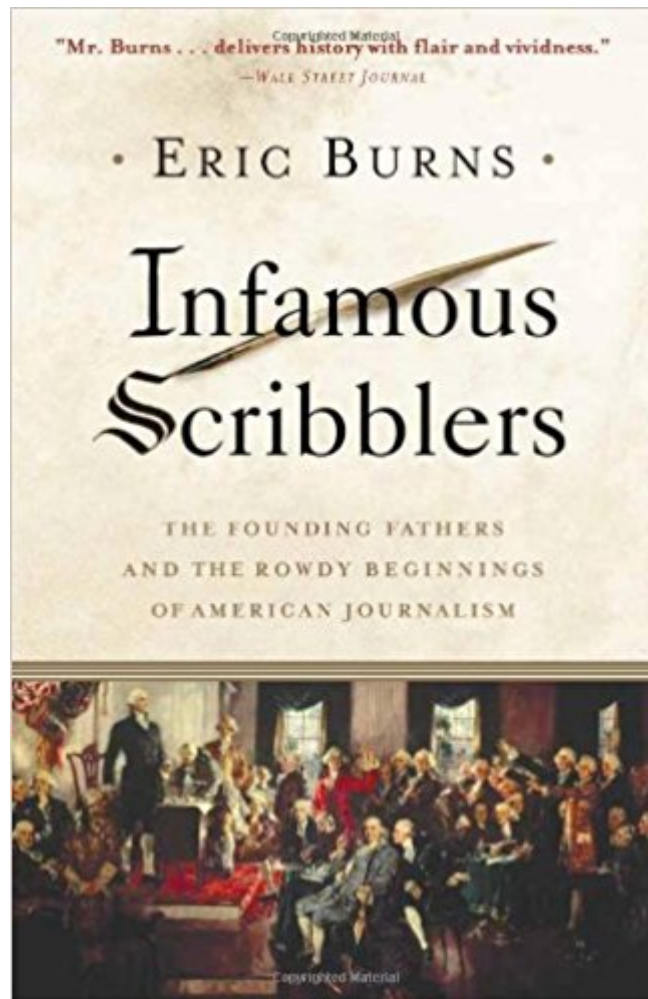


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Infamous Scribblers: The Founding Fathers And The Rowdy Beginnings Of American Journalism



Synopsis

Infamous Scribblers is a perceptive and witty exploration of the most volatile period in the history of the American press. News correspondent and renowned media historian Eric Burns tells of Ben Franklin, Alexander Hamilton and Sam Adams—the leading journalists among the Founding Fathers; of George Washington and John Adams, the leading disdainers of journalists; and Thomas Jefferson, the leading manipulator of journalists. These men and the writers who abused and praised them in print (there was, at the time, no job description of "journalist") included the incendiary James Franklin, Ben's brother and one of the first muckrakers; the high minded Thomas Paine; the hatchet man James Callender, and a rebellious crowd of propagandists, pamphleteers, and publishers. It was Washington who gave this book its title. He once wrote of his dismay at being "buffeted in the public prints by a set of infamous scribblers." The journalism of the era was often partisan, fabricated, overheated, scandalous, sensationalistic and sometimes stirring, brilliant, and indispensable. Despite its flaws—even because of some of them—the participants hashed out publicly the issues that would lead America to declare its independence and, after the war, to determine what sort of nation it would be.

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Customer Reviews

Few things can ignite a more heated debate these days than when the subject of "the media" is introduced into polite conversation. People on the left and right fault contemporary journalism for (a) giving the Bush administration a free ride, or (b) extreme bias against all things Bush and

Republican. Charges of media bias and the controversy over good vs. bad journalism are older than the nation, literally. Veteran journalist Eric Burns has written about the notorious founding fathers of journalism in a highly readable, outrageous and frequently hilarious book called "Infamous Scribblers: The Founding Fathers and the Rowdy Beginnings of American Journalism." Here, a disclaimer may be warranted. Burns hosts "Fox News Watch" on Fox News Channel (Saturdays at 6:30 p.m. ET), a program on which I appear as a panelist. Nevertheless, I am writing about his book without his encouragement, without remuneration and without even the promise of more airtime. "Infamous Scribblers" is a line taken from the pen of George Washington, who responded to the disdain some in the press and politics had for him with disdain of his own. Schoolchildren are taught many things about some of our Founding Fathers, but little about what their journalistic tormentors said about them. Burns' book wonderfully completes the record. The National Gazette was so afraid President George Washington would become a monarch that it took the slightest occasion, including Washington's 61st birthday party, to warn of impending doom to the newly born republic. Its editor, Philip Freneau (a college classmate of James Madison at Princeton), wrote, "Who will deny that the celebrating of birth days is not a striking feature of royalty? We hear of no such thing during the republic of Rome ...

You have had it up to here with newspapers and news broadcasts that are partisan and shrill. You are sick of the media focusing on scandal or even making up scandals. You can't stand the prospect of hearing from another pundit who calls for the death of her political opponents. You wish that newspapers would go back to the good old days of objectivity and impartial promotion of the public interest, perhaps when Freedom of the Press was a new concept and was being flaunted with energy and joy. Don't be too sure. In Infamous Scribblers: The Founding Fathers and the Rowdy Beginnings of American Journalism (PublicAffairs), Eric Burns (who works for Fox News!) has given a funny and thoughtful look at our nation's initial press. The title of the book comes from a phrase George Washington, who had more than his share of problems with the papers, used to describe his newsprint detractors. We may have come a long way in the technologies we use for our media, but the problems here of lies, leaks, and libel will sound familiar to modern readers. One excuse the newspapers had then that they do not have now is that they were new. Neither Europe nor the colonies had a tradition of an impartial press, so the press had to invent itself. The first newspaper was closed because the publisher was obnoxious and refused to get a license. The second was a toadying journal that printed what the authorities wanted. Ben Franklin's elder brother was the first crusading journalist, but took up a malicious crusade against smallpox inoculations.

Founding father Sam Adams edited the Boston Gazette and had no interest in printing the truth, unless the truth happened to promote American liberty.

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