

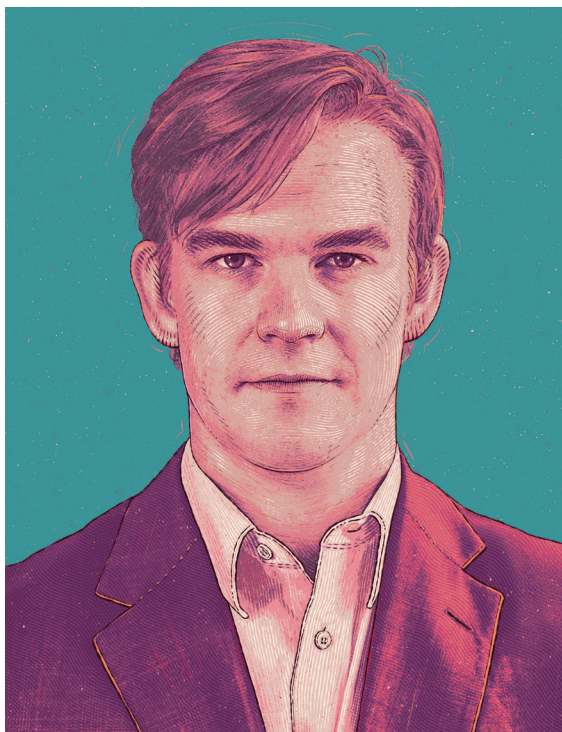


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Last Word: On Pursuing Happiness, with Friends

By Paul Best

The Framers of the Constitution spent the summer of 1787 in frenzied debate. One month after convening in Philadelphia, Benjamin Franklin told the assembled delegates on June 28 that they were still “groping as it were in the dark to find political truth.” By July 10, deliberations were “in a worse train than ever,” George Washington told Alexander Hamilton: “I *almost* despair of seeing a favorable issue to the proceedings of the convention.” In mid-August, James Madison noted “the extreme anxiety of many members of the Convention to bring the business to an end.”

But by mid-September, the Framers had a Constitution that resolved many of the thorniest issues under consideration. It was a feat that Washington deemed “little short of a miracle,” and apparently worth celebrating with a miraculous amount of booze.

The delegates strolled a few blocks down the street on September 14 to City Tavern, where the First Troop Philadelphia City Cavalry threw a farewell party for Washington to close out the convention. The resulting bar tab for 55 attendees included 54 bottles of Madeira wine, 60 bottles of claret wine, 22 bottles of port, 12 bottles of beer, 8 bottles of cider, and 7 large bowls of punch, along with dinner, hors d’oeuvres, and more drinks for the 16 musicians who performed.

The Founders were serious men. They pored over classical texts in Latin and Greek, studied ancient governments, debated the nature of man and the role of the state, and designed a government that has done a remarkable job of fulfilling the Declaration’s promise of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The Founders also liked to have a good time, striking a balance they may have gleaned from antiquity. Cicero was the most important classical figure in shaping the thought of the Founders, but his

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contemporary and ally Cato the Younger also served as inspiration. When the Continental army was camped at Valley Forge in the winter of 1777, considered by many the darkest period of the Revolutionary era, Washington inspired his troops by putting on a play of Joseph Addison’s *Cato, A Tragedy*, which dramatized Cato’s defense of republicanism and unwavering opposition to Julius Caesar.

Cato’s incorruptible nature made him the embodiment of Stoic virtue, inspiring John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon to write *Cato’s Letters*, from which the Cato Institute draws its name. But Cato, like the Founders, also understood that the pursuit of happiness requires more than studious learning. In a biography of Cato in *Parallel Lives*, the Greek historian Plutarch wrote that because Cato was “prevented from literary pursuits” by his all-consuming civic and public occupations during the day, he would gather “with the philosophers at night and over the cups”:

“For this reason, too, when a certain Memmius remarked in company that Cato spent his entire nights in drinking, Cicero answered him by saying: ‘Thou shouldst add that he spends his entire days in throwing dice.’”

The frequent bouts of merriment familiar to the Founders are increasingly foreign to Americans today. Drinking has been in decline

throughout the US in recent years—a drop variously attributed to inflation concerns, rising marijuana use, and the recognition of alcohol’s adverse health effects.

Some of this decline may be welcome, but it is also happening alongside increasing isolation among young people, the disappearance of third places, and a degradation of civil society.

A quarter-millennium after the Founding, many Americans now maintain friendships through carefully curated social media profiles, order their meals via food-delivery apps, and argue with strangers online instead of engaging with others in real life.

Drinking more alcohol will not fix these problems—indeed, some of the Founders were teetotalers and many of them viewed temperance as a virtue—but the backslapping and toasts that took place at City Tavern on September 14, 1787, are an often overlooked but essential ingredient of a flourishing republic.

You don’t have to party like the Founders (and you probably shouldn’t try), but consider raising a glass with your friends and family this summer, and enjoy the revelry and camaraderie that sustain us in the pursuit of happiness. ♦

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Best is the managing editor and senior writer for the Cato Institute’s *Free Society* magazine.