

The Volokh Conspiracy

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Remembering Gordon Wood

STEVEN CALABRESI | 6.10.2026 2:29 PM

Gordon Wood was a towering scholar in every way. He was the best historian of the American Revolution and of the writing of the Constitution and, in general, of the period from 1760 to 1826, of all time. No-one else in the 237 years since the Constitution went into effect even comes close.

Gordon's two biggest contributions were (1) in expanding our understanding of the American Revolution by defining it as a moment of radical political and societal transformation where an older world rooted in hereditary privilege was rejected in favor of republicanism and the equality of all human beings, and (2) in explaining how Americans came to put their faith in our written and amended Constitution. Gordon knew each of the Framers vividly, and he wrote about all of their lives. He described their virtues and vices with perfect precision. He was as institutionally honest an historian as one will ever find. He did not write hagiographies, but instead painted an accurate portrait of the great men he wrote about. He was as great an historian as Herodotus and Thucydides, which is high praise indeed.

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STEPHANIE SLADE | FROM THE JULY 2026 ISSUE

nation. He saw us all as from the start of our history as being defined by believing in the idea that all human beings are created equal and have an inalienable right to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. We are Americans because we believe in that idea whether our ancestors were English, French, German, Italian, Irish, Polish, Jewish, or of African or Asian descent. Gordon was just as adamant in denouncing nativism as he was in denouncing the 1619 Project. Gordon also never overstated or understated his case on any point or person of historical interest.

The four cardinal virtues identified by the Greeks and Romans are practical wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance. Gordon embodied all four of the cardinal virtues. He was firm, sharp, and decisive, but also a deeply humble, modest, and kind man who loved his neighbor as himself. When the meek inherit the earth, Gordon will inherit all the land east of the Mississippi River. I tried to persuade him to let me write a biography of him, and he adamantly refused. He wanted to be known as a great historian, not as a celebrity.



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Although Gordon was an agnostic Episcopalian, he embodied the three Christian virtues identified by St. Thomas Aquinas: faith, hope, and love. He lived an exemplary life in every way, down to celebrating the 70th anniversary of his marriage to his wife Louise shortly before he died.

He was also one of my five best friends in the world because he was so much fun to talk to. He had an immense knowledge, having read and remembered more books and articles than anyone else I had ever known. He was cheerful and a wonderful colleague. During two semesters during which he taught at the Northwestern Pritzker School of Law, he every day ate lunch—a brown bag lunch he had made himself—in the faculty commons, engaging in countless conversations. When I moved to Rhode Island in 2007, I had lunch with him right away, and we became good friends immediately. I will miss those conversations and treasure their memory for the rest of my life.

Gordon Wood was both the best scholar ever of the American Founding, and a wonderful and virtuous human being.

NEXT: Why America's inequality story doesn't add up

STEVEN CALABRESI is the Clayton J. & Henry R. Barber Professor of Law at Northwestern Pritzker School of Law, where he specializes in constitutional law. He also teaches regularly at the Yale Law School. Before going into teaching, he worked in the Reagan White House, and was a Special Assistant for Attorney General Edwin Meese III. He has written or co-written many law review articles and several books, including *The Meese Revolution: The Making of a Constitutional Moment* (2024) (with Gary Lawson).



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