

[Credeur on Unger, 'Dr. Benjamin Rush: The Founding Father Who Healed a Wounded Nation'](#)

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Harlow Giles Unger. *Dr. Benjamin Rush: The Founding Father Who Healed a Wounded Nation.* New York: Da Capo Press, 2018. 320 pp. \$28.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-306-82432-6.

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Harlow Giles Unger's *Dr. Benjamin Rush: The Founding Father Who Healed a Wounded Nation* details the life and legacy of a formative figure in early American history. Unger discusses Rush's Pennsylvania farm upbringing, elite medical education, involvement in politics, family life with wife Julia Stockton Rush, and medical practice in building the case for a greater focus on his contributions to the American Revolution and early republic. Throughout *Dr. Benjamin Rush*, Unger emphasizes that Rush was unique among the Founding Fathers for his altruism and insistence that the Revolution was not revolutionary for all, leading Rush to advocate for sweeping social justice reforms and improvements to the quality of living standards in and beyond the city of Philadelphia. Unger argues that Rush was a pioneer of numerous aspects of medical practice that are still in use and mentions throughout that Rush is credited with many firsts in his theoretical writings on health and wellness. For readers unfamiliar with Rush, Unger provides a thorough introduction over nine chapters to the Founding Father's life, political contributions, and humanitarian legacy.

Throughout the biography, Unger refers to Rush's humble origins as a Pennsylvania farm boy and his compassion for others in contrasting him from other Founding Fathers. While Rush received the best available medical training in Edinburgh, and made positive impressions on Benjamin Franklin and Catherine Macaulay, his Philadelphia medical career began with a rude awakening to the city's significant health and societal problems. Startled by throngs of impoverished and diseased city-dwellers and their unsanitary living conditions, Rush immediately started treating patients, regardless of race, gender, age, or financial status. Unger emphasizes that Rush himself had little to no income but continued to treat poor patients daily and worked very long hours. Rush's early years as a practicing physician reflect a passion for healing and helping people that Unger reiterates throughout the book. Rush's deep concern for the people of Philadelphia led to his political activism and fervent desire for an egalitarian, peaceful nation.

Unger skillfully integrates Rush's Revolutionary War experience into the book's narrative, highlighting the atrocities of war that he witnessed, his treatment of wounded men on the battlefield, and his demands for radical changes to the living conditions of soldiers as well as the army's management of medical care and supplies. Rush's impatience with political inaction and injustice regarding what he considered to be a health crisis for the army led him to confront Congress about George Washington's lack of receptiveness to his concerns. Unger notes that Rush urgently pursued progress in medicine, universal education, abolition, and prison reform, insisting that expedient

action be taken to improve the nation's quality of life. Regarding Rush's social and political activism, Unger writes that, on numerous occasions, the physician accused himself of "meddling in matters foreign to my profession" (p. 124). Nonetheless, Rush's meddling created a legacy of progress and compassion. Unger highlights Rush's treatment of the mentally ill as revolutionary, noting that Rush is considered to be the "Father of American Psychiatry" for introducing such treatments as "talk therapy" and respecting the humanity of those struggling with mental illness (pp. 18, 220).

Unger writes at length about Rush's exhaustive efforts in combatting Philadelphia's yellow fever epidemic of 1783, along with his continued dedication to serving the city's impoverished and ill by founding the Philadelphia Dispensary for the Poor. While Rush's bleed-and-purge method of treating yellow fever was met with controversy, "Rush's efforts to treat the sick raised him to godlike status among most Philadelphians" and "no physician in memory had given of himself to the sick as Rush had done, even opening his house to them day and night without regard to his personal safety" (p. 156). Rush was as prolific a writer as he was a healer, and he maintained close relationships with other Founding Fathers, including John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. Unger notes that Rush generally avoided initiating conflicts, though he found himself mired in controversy on numerous occasions due to his fervor for prioritizing humanitarianism above power and profit. Author of many pieces of medical literature, Rush also wrote numerous political pamphlets to promote social justice and reforms.

Unger's engaging biography of Rush provides readers with vivid descriptions of Rush's life and work. Though Unger writes of Rush's impatience with slow progress on proposed medical and social reforms, his account of Rush in general is favorable to a fault. Readers may wonder if Rush had any shortcomings at all, as Unger presents the Founding Father's many accomplishments and pioneering feats with such great enthusiasm. Unger's account of Rush as a physician, Founding Father, and humanitarian, while overwhelmingly complimentary, provides readers with access to the life and work of an often-overlooked figure. Unger's skillful storytelling adds rich layers of texture to Rush's biography, portraying Rush as the Founding Father who harbored a genuine interest in humanitarianism. Readers will understand Rush and his life, work, and patriotism with greater depth, thanks to Unger's approachable writing style and admiration of his subject.

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