



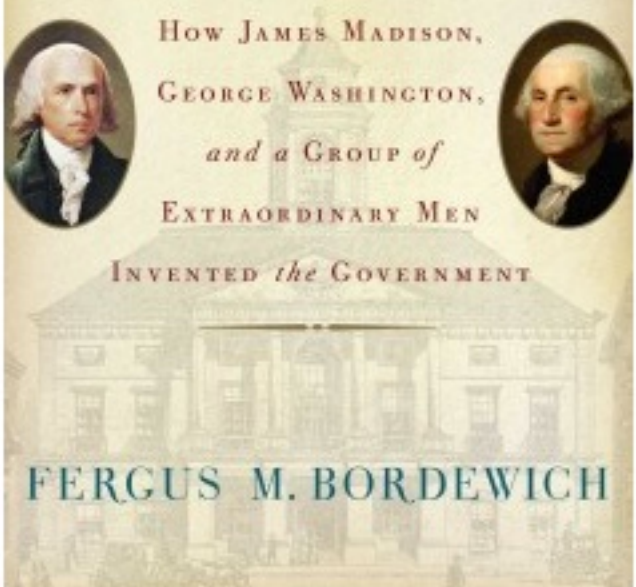
The FIRST CONGRESS



HOW JAMES MADISON,
GEORGE WASHINGTON,
and a GROUP of
EXTRAORDINARY MEN



INVENTED *the* GOVERNMENT



FERGUS M. BORDEWICH

The early days of the US remain remarkably fertile ground. Every minor event is ripe for rediscovery since so much of what happened in the 1700s was fragile, tentative and might have gone terribly wrong. The First Congress? An entire book devoted to that now-mocked body's baby steps towards federal government? Why not? Entire books have been published about passing the Bill Of Rights and that was only one piece of business before the elected representatives who needed to prove to themselves, their voters and indeed the world that men could come together, disagree, argue, fight and somehow get things done -- things that were good not just for their state but for the nation. The first Congress passed amendments that convinced straggling states to join the US, passed Alexander Hamilton's remarkably complex bill setting up a financial system and ways to tax incoming goods so the government would actually be able to pay its bills, haggled over where to place the permanent capitol and passed the buck on the ever-prickly issue of slavery. Yes, the crisis of slavery was ever-present, thanks to Quakers whom author Fergus M. Bordewich portrays as nobly if rather naively pressing their case assuming the rightness of the cause would sway minds. They were, needless to say, wrong. Bordewich doesn't break any new ground or put things in a dramatically new light. But he does a good job of creating the context, of reminding us that it might very well NOT have worked. From the first meeting where almost no one showed up on time to later gatherings where members were prompt and quorums were met and the business of passing legislation was expected rather than a minor miracle, this is solid, popular history. -- Michael Giltz