

## Weapon of Choice: Fake News, Fake Money, and the Invention of America

**Nathan A. Allen**

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*Weapon of Choice is an arresting historical saga regarding individual agency and the chaotic power of the printed word.*

Nathan A. Allen's political history *Weapon of Choice* examines the influence of the printing press in bold detail.

Focused most on the eighteenth century, the text chronicles the drama that surrounded the creation of the printing press. It shows that historical figures like Edmund Curll pushed the boundaries regarding what was acceptable to print and disseminate. It also notes the incorporation of the printing press into British colonies and a raging debate regarding land-backed private currency versus—or in addition to—silver- and gold-backed paper currency.

Throughout, the book elucidates the impact of the press upon politics, religion, individuality, and monetary policy. It also follows the lives and actions of influential printers, politicians, and writers who made changes to the way people receive printed media. These assembled microhistories advance the notion that the ability to print changed the western world, moving its inhabitants from the feudalistic viewpoint that one's future was determined at birth toward individualism and contemporary US culture.

The book balances its need to impart enormous amounts of historical detail with interesting and lively language. Details about the lives of historical figures spark curiosity, though the text is so populated by figures, dates, and quotes that it risks becoming dry.

Both sophisticated and accessible to those without prior historical training, no detail is sacrificed during the book's exchanges between historical actors. Some observations—like a long account from Marco Polo on the Mongol palace economy and money production—tie into overall themes only loosely. Positioned as “the biography of an idea,” the book acknowledges that it is sometimes too diffuse.

The text excels at drawing big questions from its narrative sections to characterize the importance of single moments or people in the long arc of history. In general, though, most figures appear for a paragraph or two and then disappear, and the narrative through lines are not always easy to follow as a result.

Chapter introductions take poetic liberties to secure attention, as with “the box was bobbing in the waters of Long Island Sound,” and to add a sense of mystery that speeds up the pace of the historical narrative. The book's thoughtful final essays focus on fluidity, permeability, and modernity—expansive meditations that go beyond the history of printed ideas, extending backward to cave paintings and forward to Donald Trump.

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LAURA LEAVITT (May 23, 2019)

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