

Reclaiming the Constitution

Known as the curmudgeonly “Lou Grant,” actor Ed Asner has written a book challenging the right-wing ownership of our nation’s founding document

BY JOANNE ZUHL
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Famous for channeling his inner grouch, actor Ed Asner reached a tipping point last year in the build-up to the 2016 election.

The multi-E Emmy-winning actor was fed up with the United States Constitution and its authors being co-opted to endorse partisan ideology and to deify candidates by association. It was the misrepresentation – and outright lies about the document, history and the factual lives of the Founding Fathers – that compelled him to dive into what really happened nearly 230 years ago when our country’s foundation was being laid.

The result is “The Grouchy Historian: An Old-Time Lefty Defends Our Constitution Against Right-Wing Hypocrites and Nutjobs.” As the title suggests, Asner doesn’t pull any punches when it comes to tackling the conservative tick of rewriting history.

And as Asner notes in his book, “nobody thumps the Constitution like a right-wing Republican.”

Asner rose to fame as Lou Grant on the “Mary Tyler Moore Show,” and went on to acclaimed performances in “Roots” and “Rich Man, Poor Man.” A younger generation knows him better as the voice of Carl Fredrickson in the animated film “Up.”

In real life, he has been an outspoken liberal voice against conservative authority. He has stated that he believes his very public criticism of President Ronald Reagan

on Central American policy led to him being blacklisted, and his popular TV series, “Lou Grant,” being cancelled.

Asner is currently starring in the one-man comedy “A Man and his Prostate,” performing Nov. 11 at the Elsinor Theater in Salem. On Sunday Nov. 12, he’ll be reading from “The Grouchy Historian” at Powell’s at Cedar Hills Crossing.

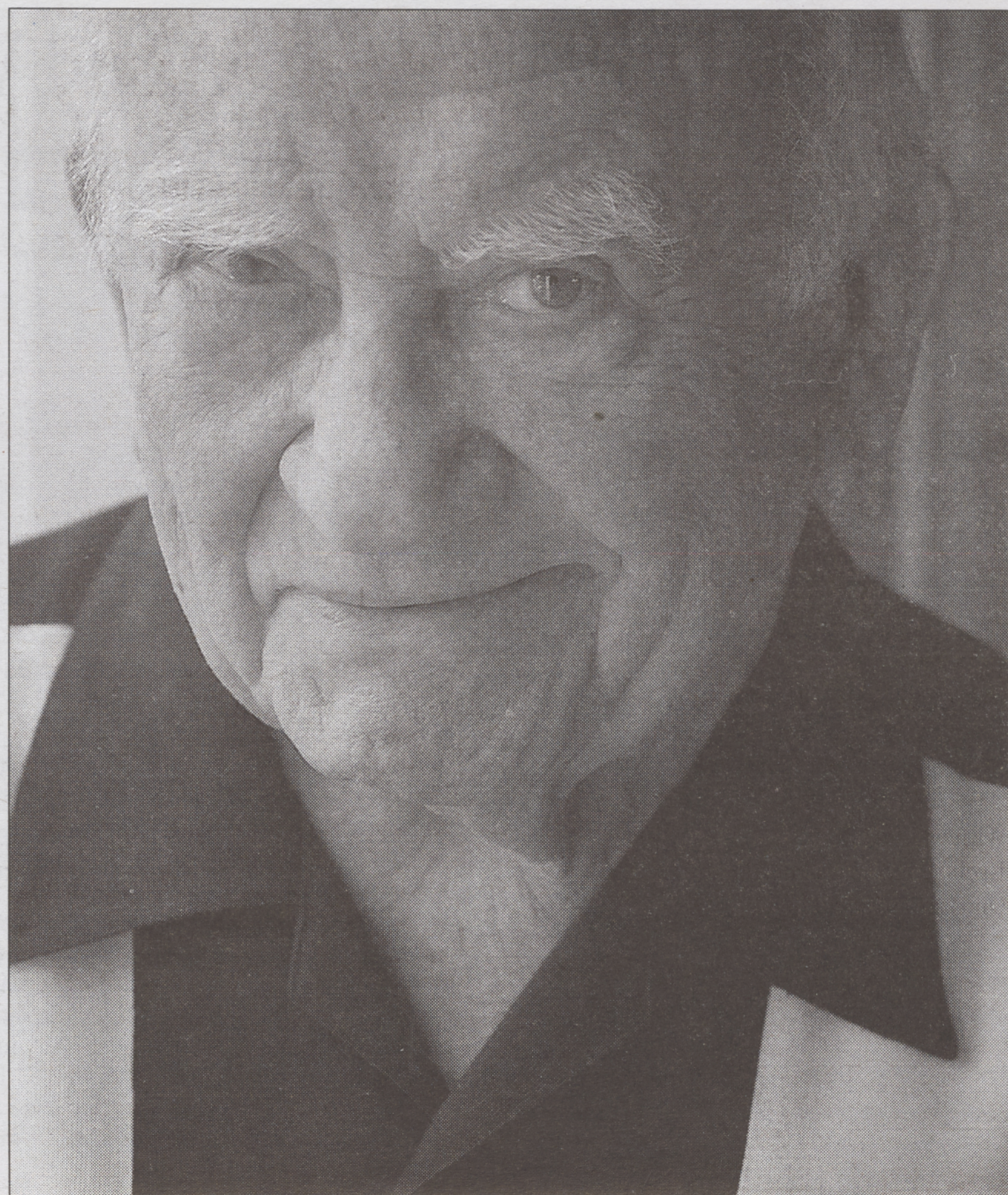
Early in his book, Asner makes a point to knock the Founding Fathers off their historic pedestals, using their own quotes to show their human side, their pettiness and their vulnerabilities, he said, speaking by phone from California. The goal was also to take the sanctimonious sheen off the people behind the document – that these are not gods, with whom only the conservative right can converse.

“I wanted to show that they’re human, that the process isn’t perfect,” Asner said. “That the outcome wasn’t perfect, that it was being hammered at and is still being hammered at.”

Asner, along with coauthor Ed Weinberger, did extensive research for the book, and Asner said he came away equally cynical and reverent of the document and its authors.

Contrary to the Christian Right, the Founding Fathers, he says in the book, were Deists in their approach to governing, “preferring reason to revelation; embracing the morality of Christianity but not its theology.”

Now, however, we’re “besieged” with the



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argument that our country was founded on Christianity, he said. “Even today, by the religious right, we’re made to feel like we’re flaunting freedom in the face of their beliefs,” he said.

But there is no “God” in the Constitution. There is no “God” in the Preamble.

Asner makes no claim that his book – despite lengthy footnotes and a long bibliography – is an “objective” study, or tailored for historical experts. But it does tackle many of the myths purported about our history on right-wing media outlets where the Constitution has become a “weapon in the service of the self-righteous.”

Asner reflects on both the past and the present, on issues such as slavery, religion, the Second Amendment and the NRA, free speech and Citizen’s United, and the Supreme Court. But for all the gravity of the topics, it’s a fun and heady read.

Asner concludes the book comparing the self-righteous backslapping of today’s politicians to the self-questioning posture of the Founding Fathers: “Wise men who know only too well what they did not know were sharply aware that their Constitution was less than perfect,” Asner writes. “They were not so superior to believe that they had solved and settled, once and for all, the governing of a new nation.”

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