

“The Last Founding Father”

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## **The Last Founding Father**

American history is crowded with the names and faces of great men. The bravery, passion, and devotion of George Washington are hailed as the epitome of civic virtue. Hamilton and Jefferson loomed larger than life in the political arena. Both were brilliant and bombastic, proud and persuasive. All three men, though, could scarcely match the legacy left by the partner of their labors. While the debates and policy decisions of the early republic were stamped with their words and rhetoric, James Madison left his impression in the soul of the nation itself.

Democracy in America did not emerge through any one man, but one certainly ranks foremost among the figures who shaped the republic. James Madison Junior cut no heroic figure throughout his life. Since his birth in comfortable obscurity in the Virginia Piedmont in 1751, Madison was short, slight, and sickly (Meyerson 12). From an early age, though, his intellectual capacity well outpaced his physical impairments. After studying at the College of New Jersey (the future Princeton University), Madison became insatiable in his scholarship. Fluent in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, Madison absorbed philosophy, theology, and history from ancient and modern authors alike (Ketcham 45).

The Madisons were by no means impoverished, but their holdings paled in comparison to the massive plantations of the planter elite, rendering the family politically irrelevant. As such, James Madison was consigned to the equally irrelevant position of delegate to the Continental Congress in 1780. The national government under the Articles of Confederation could implement almost no important policy decisions, as all legislation had to be ratified by a unanimous vote of the states. In 1783, Madison partnered with Alexander Hamilton in an effort to bail out the barely solvent federal government. They packaged the first logroll in American history, providing exemptions and concessions to each state to secure the needed unanimity.

Their hopes were dashed by the last minute veto of just two states' recalcitrant delegations, proving, beyond doubt, the impotence of the federal Congress (Cost). Madison, like many of his contemporaries, soon came to recognize the futility of the Articles of Confederation.

However, Madison was unique among his peers in his ability to provide an alternative. When he excitedly arrived to the Constitutional Convention two weeks early, he carried a plan for an entirely new political system. Millenia of political thought, beginning with Aristotle himself, had declared government by the people unstable and dangerous, suitable merely for small city-states (Ketcham 187). Only an empire could govern a continent. The Roman Republic, after all, had collapsed to this natural form of government when its holdings stretched too far (Meyerson 164). As Plato, Machiavelli, and Hobbes had further imprinted onto European intellectual thought, only autocracy could provide stability.

Madison was not the first to propose a reconciliation of individual liberty and political security, but only his solution has weathered the ages. As Madison articulated in Federalist 10, stable government relied on an understanding of the human tendency towards dividing interests: "the latent causes of faction are...sown in the nature of man" (Madison 39). However, Madison recognized that faction was not a necessary evil to be controlled, but a positive good for ensuring the survival of the state (Ketcham 189). In a country as disunited in religion, economy, and philosophy as the United States, competition would ensure no majority could impose its will on the minority. Political parties, by necessity, would be composed of diverse interest groups (Crick 150-151). Incompetence and malice could be canceled by competition. The size and disunity of America would not prove its downfall, but its preservation.

Madison's carefully organized 'Virginia Plan' did not become the Constitution. In spite of his best efforts, a pastiche of competing interests and indecisive compromises defined the

output of the Convention. Ironically, the Father of the Constitution was initially disgusted by it (Rasmussen 206). To Madison, though, an imperfect Constitution remained far superior to the defunct Articles of Confederation. Hamilton and Madison busied themselves writing essays in its defense, and in doing so, defined the political philosophy of the nation. The Federalist Papers, although written in less than a year, became the Constitution's preeminent interpretative source. The essays have been cited in over 300 Supreme Court cases to date (Meyerson 135).

It is no exaggeration to assert that Madison ran half of the federal government during the Washington administration. While being the foremost member of the House of Representatives, Madison served as the President's primary speechwriter and policymaker. After Madison wrote Washington's inaugural address, Congress also tasked him with writing its official response (Miller). Madison's preeminent role in politics, though, was drowned out by louder voices. Many of his contributions were overshadowed by Jefferson's popular recognition, and his already obscure public image worsened during his tenure in the Executive Branch. Both Madison and Jefferson severely underestimated American reliance on the British economy. Ill-advised tariffs resulted in major economic convulsions, as well as the War of 1812 – scornfully derided as “Mr. Madison's War” (Ketcham 537).

Madison's role in the American Founding was not entirely discounted. As he entered retirement, he was widely recognized, if not as an excellent President, as a key figure of Constitutional history (Ketcham 611-612). To the sickly Madison's surprise, he witnessed another two decades of American history, becoming the last Founding Father to pass away. During that time, South Carolina threatened to secede in the Nullification Crisis, Andrew Jackson repeatedly flaunted the Supreme Court's authority, and a widening divide opened between North and South. The nation seemed poised to collapse, and the Founding Fathers, passing away in rapid succession, offered little hope for its future. Jefferson declared in 1822 that he “scarcely [knew]” whether the breakup of the states would be worse than the continuation of

the Union (Rasmussen 188). Hamilton dejectedly claimed the Constitution itself to be “a frail and worthless fabric” (Rasmussen 97).

At the end of his life, Madison reviewed and published his notes from the Constitutional Convention. However, far from falling into the despair of the other Founders, Madison’s hope in the self-correcting political system of the United States was bolstered by a reflection on the past. In one of his final personal letters, Madison wrote “The happy Union of these States is a wonder; their Constitution a miracle; their example the hope of Liberty throughout the world” (Rasmussen 222).

The last Founding Father was famously distrustful of any group in American public life. He distrusted the people at large, who would destroy the nation with mob rule, the New England mercantile class, the slaveholding planters, the uneducated, the overeducated, the elite, the common, and every shade in between. To James Madison, no political party or application of civic virtue would preserve the nation. He trusted the divisions between national and local government, the cancelling power of competing interests, and, above all else, the pursuit of liberty. Madison’s hope rested in the Constitution he drafted, secured by the Bill of Rights he proposed, guided by the political philosophy he revealed in the Federalist. No government could perfect society, and no politician would usher in utopia. Only a respect of the republic’s liberty and unity, enshrined in its Constitution, would guide the nation towards peace.

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