

## James Madison: Father of the Constitution

By ROBERT M. THORNTON

Until recent years, James Madison has not been given his proper due. Oh, he has been acknowledged as the "Father of the Constitution," but many of us have trouble explaining in detail just what that means. Madison and his neighbor, Thomas Jefferson, were friends and coworkers in the cause of liberty for fifty years, and some of us — myself included — have thought of the former merely as Jefferson's right-hand man: his faithful lieutenant. He was that, of course, but much, much more. While his interests were not as varied as Jefferson's — whose are? — he was a political thinker of the first chop and Jefferson's intellectual equal. Happily, this has been recognized in the last dozen years or so, and the fourth president has come into his own. Several books recognize that as a "man of formidable, mental equipment," Madison was, from 1776 on, "an intellectual leader, sometimes *the* leader." Years ago, Clinton Rossiter wrote that "Madison was a combination of learning, experience, purpose, and imagination — that not even Adams or Jefferson could have equalled." Robert A. Rutland calls Madison *The Founding Father*.

James Madison (1751-1836), one of the youngest of the "Founding Fathers," was 5 feet, 6 inches tall, and weighed 125 pounds. He must have looked like a boy, standing next to Washington and Jefferson. Unlike most Virginians, he was not a rider, and preferred to travel in a carriage, with someone else holding the reins. As a young man, he was "diffident, frail and obviously a grind, often allowing himself only three hours sleep."

Madison was a student all of his life. He kept a candle burning by his bedside all night, and his wife said that he "slept very little, going to bed late and getting up frequently during the night to write or read." He read very little fiction; mostly, his reading was in the fields of politics, history, comparative institutions, jurisprudence, international law, and, particularly, accounts of ancient and modern confederacies.

"I am dull and infirm," Madison declared, "and do not expect a long or healthy life." But his frail little body carried him along for eighty-five years, and however much his body suffered the ravages of age, his mind never failed him. In his old age, besides reading, he carried on a voluminous correspondence with many prominent contemporaries. Visiting Madison in 1830, Jared Sparks declared that "the intellect and memory of Mr. Madison appear to retain all their pristine vigor." Only a few days before his death, a visitor observed a wasted body that encased a mind "still as bright and sunlike as ever." Never," he declared, "have I seen *so much mind in so little matter*."

But while Madison was studious, he was far from being a recluse. While detesting crowds, he was fond of companionship, and was at his best in small groups, where his eloquence, learning, and powerful mind could be used for the best results. He had a great simplicity of manners; and he was an inveterate enemy of form and ceremony.

At Presidential receptions, Madison "circulated freely among the people and was polite to all. When he spoke, no ponderous words of wisdom fell from his lips, but he talked and encouraged others to talk of lighter things, and occasionally he made remarks which caused the men to laugh and the women to blush; for, by a strange contradiction, this man who was more deeply read than any other of our presidents, and who knew more about the science and philosophy of government, was a frivolous humorist in the relaxations of private life, and, when the mood was on him, could send the guests about his table into roars of laughter." "Few men possessed so rich a flow of language, or so great a fund of amusing anecdotes, which were made the more interesting from being well-timed and well-told." When he was eighty, Madison quipped to Jared Sparks that "having outlived so many of my contemporaries, I ought not to forget that I may be thought to have outlived myself." When a foreign potentate requested concubines for his

entourage, Madison charged the cost to "appropriations to foreign intercourse."

Madison married late but very well. A widow, Dolley Payne Todd, was "one of the most vivacious belles in the capital, a character she seems to have maintained to the end of her eighty-five years." She was described as being pert, vivacious, and buxom. In Philadelphia, she heard often of Madison's fame and his complimentary remarks about her charm. "Aaron Burr said," she told a friend, that "the great little Madison has asked to be brought to see me." He came, and she conquered — and capitulated, too. He was forty-four, and Dolley was twenty-six when they married, and she became his constant and unrivaled love for forty-one years. She was a "charming, dainty, darling, delightful, gracious, furbellowed, turbaned, heroine whom everyone admired and loved and made much of, but no more than her great little husband." "She made friends with everyone . . . and probably made them the President's friends, too, and to that extent, proved an invaluable social aide."

Saul Padover described Madison as a "striking historic figure, deserving to rank among the greatest Americans who created this republic. He was a man of almost classic virtues — a statesman, a selfless patriot, and a political philosopher who was in the fortunate position of being able to translate his thought into a living institution."

"A mental giant if no physical colossus," wrote Paul Wiltach, Madison was "perhaps the greatest single figure in the framing and adoption of the Constitution." Clinton Rossiter agreed that Madison was the leading spirit and the most efficient member of the Constitutional Convention.

His foresight in drafting the Virginia Plan and making it the agenda of the convention, his willingness to debate great issues and small with courteous and learned intensity, his dozens of suggestion of ways for his colleagues to extricate themselves from thickets,

his membership on three or four essential committees, even perhaps his doggedness in the major struggle for power — these are the solid credentials of the one Framer who stands, modestly and eternally, first among his splendid peers.

John Jay, co-author of *The Federalist*, together with Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, declared that any system of government which does not take account of men as *they are* will soon prove abortive. Madison held the same belief and never devised any form of government based on the false idea that men are angels. What is government itself, he asked, but the greatest reflection on human nature? If men were angels, neither external nor internal controls would be necessary. But in framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, one must first enable the government to control the governed and also oblige it to control itself. That is, government must never be too strong or too weak but have just enough power to carry out its main task, the protection of liberty and property. It is, Madison said, a “melancholy reflection that should be equally exposed to danger whether government has too much or too little power.”

Madison agreed with John Adams that “the accumulation of all powers, legislative, executive, and judiciary in the same hands, whether of one, a few, or many, and whether hereditary, self-appointed, or elective, may be justly pronounced the very definition of tyranny.”

Madison warned that a democracy controlled by a majority could pose a threat to individual rights, “not from acts of government contrary to the sense of its constituents, but from acts in which the government is the mere instrument of the major number of constituents.” Albert Jay Nock observed in several places that this was what James Madison called “the old trick of turning every contingency into a resource for accumulating force in government.”

Madison knew that when forming a new government, the most important question to be answered is: What is man? He was not an optimist concerning human nature. The human record was full of evil, viciousness, cruelty, and

folly, and wherever there is an interest and power to do wrong, wrong will generally be done. Enough a child of the 18th century enlightenment, he balanced his gloom with a streak of hopefulness. While not sharing Jefferson’s optimistic faith about progress and human perfectibility, he rejected the Hamiltonian concept of total depravity.

Madison shared with Jefferson a lifelong passion for religious freedom and distrust of any kind of clericalism. History taught him that established churches, relying on the power of the state, created ignorance and corruption. The exercise of religion, he insisted, should be completely separated from government, so that every person would be free to worship, or not to worship, where, how, and what he pleased. Man, he said, is accountable to his God alone, and not to any priest or hierarchy.

Fisher Ames was a political opponent of Madison, but wrote eloquently about his fine qualities as a statesman:

He is possessed of a sound judgment, which perceives truth with great clearness, and can trace it through the images of debate, without losing it . . . As a reasoner, he is remarkably perspicacious and methodical. He is a studious man, devoted to public business, and a thorough master of almost every public question that can arise, or he will spare no pains to become so, if he happens to be in want of information. What a man understands clearly, . . . he will explain to the admiration of others, who have not thought of it at all, or but little, and who will pay in praise for the pains he saves them.

In his *James Madison: The Founding Father*, Robert A. Rutland puts it well when he reminds our generation that “Madison was a man of character, an American who was committed to the ancient idea of ‘virtue’ in a public man. He placed his country ahead of his own personal requirements,” and shared with his peers this sense of “disinterestedness.” Rutland believes that the poet Robert Frost “may have been closer to the truth than anybody had ever come in assessing Madison’s career.” Frost read *The Federalist* late in life, and it “had a

great impact on his thinking about America, its goals, and its leadership.” Frost interpreted the dream of the Founding Fathers as a “vision to occupy the land with character.” Frost wrote: I think I know . . . what Madison’s dream was. It was just a dream of a new land to fulfill with people in self-control.”

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“I prefer the  
folly of  
enthusiasm  
to the  
indifference  
of  
wisdom.”

— Anatole France  
(1844-1924)