

JAMES MADISON

The Lives of Eighteen from Princeton remains an improperly neglected collection of biographical essays issued to commemorate the two hundredth anniversary of Princeton University. Adair's pithy unfootnoted study of Madison is marked by his customary fine prose and a predictable (if unusual) attention to Madison's intellectual environment.

I

EVERY COLLEGE tends to bask in the reflected glory of its famous alumni; alma mater naturally likes to hint that she is in large part responsible for the successful careers of her most illustrious sons. Yet any college which parades its distinguished graduates as proof that it is a nursery of genius lays itself open to a jibe made long ago by Adam Smith. That learned Scot complained in 1776 that educational institutions were always taking undeserved credit for the development of the talents of their students; a young man who starts his higher education "at seventeen or eighteen, and returns home at one and twenty, returns three or four years older . . . and at that age it is very difficult not to improve a good deal in three or four years."

It is safe to say, though, that for eighteen-year-old James Madison, Jr., who entered Princeton six years before Smith made his cynical

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remark, the undergraduate years laid the foundation he was to build on 'all his days. And since James Madison became one of the chief architects of our political democracy, the "father of the American Constitution," and president of our nation during its formative stage, his sojourn at Nassau Hall under the tutelage of the learned Dr. John Witherspoon was of incalculable importance to the destiny of the United States.

James Madison, Jr., born March 5 (O.S.), 1751, was the oldest child of the leading family of Orange County, Virginia. His ancestors, planters in both the paternal and maternal lines, ranked, by his own description, "among the respectable though not the most opulent Class" of Virginia society. Orange County lies in the piedmont between the fall line and the Blue Ridge. The chief families of this region, the Madisons and the Jeffersons, while a little less wealthy and aristocratic than the great tidewater families, demanded, and were accorded, the deference due to members of an established ruling class. The Madisons' wealth and political power were solidly based. James Madison, Sr., was a justice of the peace and a vestryman in the Anglican church—offices held only by men of ranking social position; he owned more than a hundred slaves, and the cultivated portion of the Montpelier plantation alone amounted to nearly two thousand acres. At birth, James Jr. entered a station of life that provided him with the values and opportunities esteemed most desirable by current Virginia standards.

Besides inherited wealth and position he had an advantage far more important—a first-rate brain. Although neither his father, nor his brothers, nor any other members of his immediate family or their descendants ever exhibited any particular intellectual distinction, James Jr., through the mysterious alchemy of the genes, was endowed with a capacity for extraordinary intellectual accomplishment. Writing his autobiography at the age of eighty, he recorded as the first important incident of his life his intellectual delight in the discovery of *The Spectator*. He was then eleven years old. The

memory of the profound impact of that literary classic led him to argue, seventy years later, that from "his own experience" it was a book "peculiarly adapted to inculcate just sentiments, an appetite for knowledge, and a taste for the improvement of the mind and manners." Madison, of course, put the cart before the horse. His natural "appetite for knowledge" was the cause of his excitement over *The Spectator*, not an effect of it.

Madison's failure to become conscious until he was nearly twelve of his own "taste" for mental improvement reveals the somewhat restricted intellectual opportunities available even to a member of the Virginia aristocracy in the eighteenth century. Though born for "the intellectual pleasures of the closet," Madison grew up in an open-air society where guns and horses, dogs and stirrup cups were treated as far more important adjuncts of life than books. It was a gracious way of living, but it was also profoundly frustrating for the development of the mind and spirit. A description of colonial Virginia by George Tucker, which was read and approved by Madison himself, speaks of the gentry as generally "open handed and open hearted; fond of society, indulging in all its pleasures, and practicing all its courtesies. But these social virtues also occasionally ran into the kindred vices of love of show, haughtiness, sensuality—and many of the wealthier class were to be seen seeking relief from the vacuity of idleness not merely in the allowable pleasures of the chase and the turf, but in the debasing ones of cock-fighting, gaming, and drinking. Literature was neglected, or cultivated, by the small number . . . rather as an accomplishment and mark of distinction than for the substantial benefits it confers." When existence is as easy and pleasant as it was for the first gentlemen in the Old Dominion there can be little of the discipline necessary for sustained creative thought; the mind of upper-class Virginia, like that of most aristocracies, was marked by dilettantism and philistinism. The pleasant tyranny of social life with its endless rounds of dinners, barbecues, fish fries, and riding parties could only be resisted by a major effort of the

will; and even among the best minds of Virginia there were few who succeeded in emancipating themselves. Add to these distractions the provincial nature of life on the scattered country seats, the lack of scholarly companionship to provide what Madison termed "mutual emulation and mutual inspection," and it is understandable why Virginia's colonial culture was relatively so barren of intellectual accomplishment. An individual like young James Madison could only begin to realize his own potentialities after he was exposed to ideas and scholarly habits alien to the complacency of his native state.

Madison's initiation into the larger world of ideas occurred in 1762 when he entered the school established in King and Queen County by Donald Robertson, who had emigrated to Virginia from Scotland some ten years earlier. Madison describes Robertson as "a man of extensive learning and a distinguished Teacher." Under his direction for five years the young Virginian "studied the Latin and Greek languages, was taught to read but not speak French, and besides Arithmetic & Geography, made some progress in Algebra & Geometry. Miscellaneous literature was also embraced by the plan of the School." Within this comprehensive curriculum, Robertson's standards of performance were strict; but Madison's affectionate references to his teacher in later life show that this introduction to learning was viewed as an adventure rather than a task. Here, in the Scotch classicist's library, the first of any scope to which young Madison had access, he began to discover for himself the resources hidden in books.

In 1767 the boy left Robertson's school to study under a new teacher, the Reverend Thomas Martin of New Jersey, who had become rector of the Brick Church in Orange County. Since there were now four Madison children of school age, Mr. Martin agreed to live at Montpelier and supervise their lessons. Under this arrangement the young minister tutored James for two years. Martin had been graduated from Princeton in the class of 1764. His praise of Nassau Hall influenced the Madisons to select it as the place to which James should go for his higher education. Their choice was also determined by the reputation

Princeton was rapidly acquiring under its new president, the famous Dr. Witherspoon, as the most progressive college in America.

2

WHEN JAMES MADISON rode north to Princeton in the summer of 1769, a vastly important chapter of his life began. He set out, an eager intelligent boy, with no clear idea of what calling he would follow or where his talents would lead him. He returned home some three years later with his A.B. degree, a mature young man who had fully developed the rigorous habits of thought that were to mark him always and to make him the most scholarly of American statesmen. At Princeton, the direction of his thinking was finally set; his mind henceforward would be continually preoccupied with the analysis and understanding of society and of principles of government. The Princeton years helped also to determine the goals of his thought, and to crystallize the standards and values that were to govern his political theorizing. At Nassau Hall he was immersed in the liberalism of the Enlightenment, and converted to eighteenth-century political radicalism. From then on James Madison's theories would advance the rights and happiness of man, and his most active efforts would serve devotedly the cause of civil and political liberty.

The twenty-three-year-old college at Princeton which Madison entered in 1769 was dominated by its new president, Dr. Witherspoon. This learned cleric, who lived in a perpetual storm center of ecclesiastical and political controversy, was a vigorous rather than a profound thinker, markedly dogmatic in questions of politics, religion, and philosophy, but always dramatic and provocative in his dogmatism. His reputation as a great teacher rests on the testimony of a whole generation of undergraduates whose mental life was aroused and guided by contact with him. In the case of eighteen-year-old James Madison, Witherspoon fully satisfied the need that most young men have in their formative years for a friend and confidant in whom they feel both wisdom and authority. Stimulated

by Witherspoon's aggressive intellect, Madison's own mind bloomed. His joyous kindling to the new ideas and the scholarly discipline offered him at Princeton led the Virginian to carry double the normal load of classes, finishing the required four-year course in a little over two years. This necessitated, as Madison reports in his autobiography, "an indiscreet experiment of the minimum of sleep and the maximum of application which the constitution would bear. The former was reduced for some weeks to less than five hours in the twenty-four."

Madison was awarded his A.B. degree in the autumn of 1771. Then, as if to demonstrate that his accelerated program was the result of a voluntary and happy absorption in learning rather than a desire to finish his schooling quickly and return home, he insisted on staying on at Princeton for postgraduate work. During the winter of 1771-1772 he continued under Witherspoon's guidance, devoting his time to "miscellaneous studies" including some law, and "to acquiring a slight knowledge of the Hebrew, which was not among the regular College Studies."

It was, however, in the regular senior course labeled "Moral Philosophy" that Madison encountered the ideas which were to affect his life most significantly. The syllabus of Witherspoon's lectures in this course, which has been preserved with the list of recommended readings, explains the conversion of the young Virginian to the philosophy of the Enlightenment.

Because the French Revolution was a great drama, many people still think of the Enlightenment as a peculiarly French development connected primarily with the theories and ideas of such philosophes as Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot, and their circle. Actually the Enlightenment was international in scope. Every European nation produced its crop of philosophers. Moreover, while the Parisian salons were probably the chief center of advanced social thinking, the Scotch universities after 1750 were almost equally important in systematizing and disseminating the revolutionary ideas of the age. The great names in this sudden flowering of the Scotch intellect are David

Hume, Francis Hutcheson, Adam Smith, Thomas Reid, Lord Kames, and Adam Ferguson. Their books formed the core of the moral philosophy course at Princeton, and it was in these works treating of history, ethics, politics, economics, psychology, and jurisprudence, always from the modern and enlightened point of view, that Madison received his "very early and strong impressions in favor of Liberty both Civil & Religious."

A description of Madison's character as a statesman written in 1789 by Fisher Ames, when the Virginian was at the peak of his fame, shows how thoroughly he had assimilated at Princeton the ideals of the Scotch thinkers and how profoundly they conditioned his lifelong approach to politics. Ames, a political opponent, noted that Madison was "well-versed in public life, was bred to it, and has no other profession." Yet, Ames complained, politics "is rather a science than a business, with him." In this statement he paid unconscious tribute to the great Scotch philosophers Madison studied at college.

Hutcheson, Hume, Smith, and others among the eighteenth-century philosophers had conceived the bold and noble dream of reducing politics, economics, law, and sociology to a science. Their great model was Newton, who had demonstrated a century earlier that reason could discover the natural laws of the physical universe. Now in their turn the Scots aspired to use reason to discover the immutable laws of human nature. If the science of man and society was once established, it would allow reformers to reshape political, social, and economic institutions progressively so as to bring them into harmony with nature's divine plan and thus create a new social order which would guarantee liberty, equality, and happiness to all men. It was this vision that fascinated young Madison while he studied at Nassau Hall. It was to this dream that he dedicated his life. The scholarly treatises of Ferguson, Hume, and Kames, which Madison read in Witherspoon's course, did not appear to him as dusty academic exercises, but rather as thrilling manifestoes in a program of political

and social regeneration. To him the arguments of the philosophers became the slogans of a fighting faith. If the social scientist could gain, by the study of history, sure knowledge of the anatomy of political society, he would be able to diagnose and cure its ills. This high concept of the function of the scholar-statesman was Princeton's greatest gift to James Madison. His complete acceptance of it throughout his life made him, with Franklin and Jefferson, one of the great American representatives of the Enlightenment.

Princeton also gave James Madison his first opportunity for intimacy with a congenial circle of friends. Nor was this a minor benefit. Like many diffident individuals the Virginian, throughout his life, showed a deep emotional need for affection. His manner tended toward stiffness and reserve, and he did not make friends easily. Even after he had become a famous statesman his self-confidence was not proof against the least suspicion of indifference or hostility in others. The comments of that famous Washington hostess Mrs. Margaret Bayard Smith are revealing in this connection. Writing of a visit made to Montpelier in 1828, she describes the brilliance of Madison's talk, "which was a stream of history . . . so rich in sentiments and facts, so enlivened by anecdotes and epigrammatic remarks, so frank and confidential as to opinions on men and measures, that it had an interest and charm, which the conversation of few men now living could have." Nevertheless, she adds: "This entertaining, interesting, and communicative personage, had a single stranger or indifferent person been present, would have been mute, cold and repulsive." Only a sympathetic environment could release Madison's deep capacity for friendship. Orange County had not provided such an environment in his youth. There is no record of any warm feeling toward his fellows at Robertson's school, or any evidence that his relations with his brothers and numerous cousins were particularly close. When he arrived at Princeton, however, he entered as an equal member a brilliant group of young men whose tastes and talents were similar to his own. In William Bradford, Philip Freneau, and

Hugh Henry Brackenridge—all of whom were to distinguish themselves in the arts and professions after leaving college—Madison discovered a trio of friends he would cherish all his life.

It was with this group, the leaders of the recently organized American Whig Society, that Madison found what he termed “recreation and release from business and books” while at Nassau Hall. With them he took part in those “Diversions” and “Foibles” of student life so charmingly described in the diary of Philip Fithian, who entered college during Madison’s last term. As Fithian speaks of the undergraduate practices of “giving each other *names & characters*; Meeting & Shoving in the dark entries; Knocking at Doors & going off without entering; Strowing the entries in the night with greasy Feathers; freezing the Bell; Ringing it at late Hours of the Night,” one smiles at the conventionality through the centuries of student mischief, in which young Madison presumably shared. We do know certainly that he participated in another contemporary custom mentioned by Fithian: the “writing witty pointed anonymous Papers, in *Songs, Confessions, Wills, Soliliques, Proclamations, Advertisements &c.*”¹ Preserved among the Bradford manuscripts in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania is a series of Whig satires in verse on the members of the rival Cliosophic Society. Among them are several of Madison’s which indicate that, although he was a limping poet, he had already developed the taste for ribald jokes which was

1. The remainder of Fithian’s catalogue of undergraduate “Foibles” is worth printing if only to round out the picture of student mores at Princeton in Madison’s day. Fithian continues: “Picking from the neighborhood now & then a plump fat Hen or Turkey for the private entertainment of the Club. . . . Parading bad Women, Burning Curse-John, Darting Sun-Beams upon the Town-People, Reconnoitering Houses in the Town, & ogling Women with the Telescope—Making Squibs, & other frightful compositions with Gun-Powder, & lighting them in the Rooms of timorous Boys, & new comers—the various methods used in naturalizing Strangers, of incivility in the Dining Room to make them bold; writing them sharp & threatening Letters to make them smart; leading them at first with long Lessons to make them industrious—And trying them by Jeers and Repartee in order to make them choose their Companions &c &c.”

to scandalize a British ambassador when the Virginian was secretary of state.

3

WHEN MADISON left Princeton and returned home in 1772 he entered the unhappiest period of his life. After the exciting years at Nassau Hall, Montpelier seemed an “obscure corner” of the world and inexpressibly lonely. Madison’s letters to William Bradford written at this time are almost pitiful in their nostalgia to breathe “again . . . your free air.” To add to his spiritual desolation his health had finally cracked from the strain of overstudy; for a time he believed he had epilepsy and was oppressed with a morbid expectation of an early death. Then, as his strength slowly came back under a regimen that balanced reading with exercise, the problem of his future career filled him with doubts and hesitations. Madison was strongly inclined to a profession that would provide a “decent and independent” income as an alternative to plantation ownership for, from principle, he wished “to depend as little as possible on the labour of slaves.” Yet the practice of law, toward which his intellectual interests pointed, required physical strength and ability in public speaking which he did not possess. His voice, like Jefferson’s, was abnormally weak, and his self-assurance completely failed him in large public gatherings. So although Madison, during 1772–1773, started “a course of reading which mingled miscellaneous subjects with the studies intended to qualify him for the Bar . . . he never formed any . . . determination” to become a professional pleader. From the books he was buying for his library and from the comments in his letters to Bradford we rather see that his chief preoccupation at this time continued to be public law, or, as he described it to his friend, “the principles and modes of government [which] are too important to be disregarded by an inquisitive mind.”

It was at this time, too, that James Madison first translated his enlightened principles into political practice. A group of Baptist

preachers in Orange and Culpeper counties, whose growing congregations had attracted the unfriendly notice of the Anglicans, were prosecuted under the religious laws of Virginia and jailed for nonconformity. Although admitting that the "enthusiasm" of these dissenters "rendered them obnoxious to sober opinion," Madison could not stomach this denial of religious liberty. To quote his own words, he "squabbled and scolded, abused and ridiculed," first "to save them from imprisonment" and, when that failed, "to promote their release from it." This action on his part was to have an unexpected effect on his political fortunes, for, as he reports in his autobiography, "this interposition tho' a mere duty prescribed by his conscience obtained for him a lasting place in the favours of that particular sect." Consequently when the Anglican church was disestablished in Virginia and the dissenters were allowed to vote, Madison discovered that he could count on a solid bloc of Baptist supporters in his home district, no matter who ran against him, a decided advantage for a political philosopher who never became a colorful campaigner on the hustings.

The outbreak of the Revolution ended Madison's worries both over his future career and his poor health as "he entered with the prevailing zeal into the American Cause." Prevented from joining the army by "the discouraging feebleness of his constitution," he served during 1775 on the Revolutionary committee that ruled Orange County. Then in the spring of 1776, mainly through his family connections, he was chosen as a delegate to the convention whose task it was to establish a new government for Virginia. When he journeyed to Williamsburg in May 1776 and took his seat in this convention he found at last the profession for which talent and his training at Princeton had prepared him. Henceforth his life was devoted to the public service, and as one of the master builders of a new nation, he played a major part in framing the political institutions of the United States in accordance with the generous and humanistic creed of the Enlightenment.

Madison's role in the famous Virginia Convention of 1776 provides a striking example of the part political theory plays in revolutions. Every successful political revolution is to a large extent theoretical, since revolutionists faced with the hateful conditions that breed rebellion are forced to appeal from what is to what ought to be. They must attack current corrupt practices from the standpoint of an ideal system which they are struggling to establish. Theory, which etymologically means "vision," provides the new points of reference that replace the old norms; without theory to chart a visionary road into the uncertain future, revolt becomes no more than an incandescent blaze of unreasoning and destructive violence. The radical principles which directed the Virginia Convention's work of state building were set forth in the famous Declaration of Rights drawn up by George Mason. But it was James Madison who revised Mason's clause respecting religious freedom and in so doing made his first major contribution to American democracy.

Mason's theory of religious liberty originally written into the Declaration of Rights was revolutionary by eighteenth-century standards: "That religion . . . can be governed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence; and, therefore, that all men should enjoy the fullest toleration in the exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience." Madison, viewing the problem on the basis of his reading at Princeton and his studies since leaving college, objected on principle to the inclusion of the word "toleration" in the Declaration of Rights, for it implied that freedom of conscience was a privilege that the state could grant or withhold as it saw fit. He viewed freedom of conscience as a "*natural and absolute right*" and hence completely outside the jurisdiction of government. So, while the delegate from Orange, "being young and in the midst of distinguished and experienced members," did not open his mouth during the debates in the convention, he did play an important part in its proceedings, for he prevailed on Mason to amend the clause on religious liberty in accordance with his own more advanced theory.

Thus, through James Madison's intervention, it was proclaimed for the first time in any body of law drawn up in a Christian commonwealth that freedom of conscience is a substantive right, a right which could only be secured by a complete separation of church and state. In 1776 this separation was still only an ideal; even in Virginia church and state were not divorced. Nevertheless the public and official acceptance of Madison's theory clearly defined the issue thenceforth for all Revolutionary America and designated the field of battle where the struggle for religious freedom would be fought. In 1786 Madison at last had the satisfaction of seeing his ideal subscribed to in its entirety by the Virginia legislature. In 1789 he himself was to embody the principle in the federal Bill of Rights. By the time he died in 1836 the complete separation of church and state had become the established norm throughout the United States.

Unfortunately for Madison his constituents did not appreciate his silent services in the Virginia Convention. When he sought election to the legislature in 1777 he was defeated. The austerity of the campaign principles which he conceived necessary to maintain the "purity" of republican government also contributed to this setback, for he refused to recommend himself to the voters in the traditional fashion by providing them with "spirituous liquors, and other treats." This defiance of custom was too shocking for the Orange voters; Madison's constituents, well plied with drinks by his opponents, attributed his "abstinence" to "pride or parsimony." While thus excluded for a time from elective office, the young Virginian still continued active in public life. In November 1777 he was appointed by the Assembly to the Virginia Council of State, whose eight members served as the governor's cabinet. He remained a member of this body until 1779, when, Thomas Jefferson being governor, he was appointed by the legislature one of the Virginia delegates to the Continental Congress, in which he served until November 1783.

Madison's six years of appointive office in the Virginia Council of State and in the Confederation Congress supplemented his theories

of government with that subtle form of political wisdom that can come only from experience. As a councillor of state he came to know all the foremost Virginia leaders, and entered upon a deep and lasting friendship with that other enlightened philosopher, Thomas Jefferson. As a congressman he met and co-operated with distinguished men from other states, and grew steadily in awareness of the common interests shared by all thirteen.

Gradually Madison came to take a leading part in the congressional business relating to finances, national defense, trade, western lands, and international relations. Theory and experience now went hand in hand. Though his auditors still agreed that "he speaks low, his person is little and ordinary," nevertheless as they marked him in action they found that his "sense, reading, address, and integrity" made him remarkably persuasive. "His language is very pure, perspicuous, and to the point. . . . He states a principle and deduces consequences, with clearness and simplicity." Above all, his fellow statesmen were struck by his scholarly industry and marvelous grasp of fact; "he is a studious man, devoted to public business, and a thorough master of every public question that can arise, or he will spare no pains to become so, if he happens to be in want of information." It is no wonder then that on the termination of his service in Congress, James Madison returned to Virginia with a national reputation as "one of the ablest Members that ever sat in that Council."

During these years in Congress he became more than a Virginia statesman, representing as he did a national point of view that transcended class and sectional interests. Madison had entered politics with a less provincial attitude than most of his contemporaries. Now, taught by his years in congressional service, he became with Washington the most continental-minded of all the Virginia leaders. By the nature of his associations and work at Philadelphia he had been under tremendous pressure to think in national terms concerning the general welfare. When he returned home in 1783 the young statesman had gained a mature perspective which identified the cause

of the American Union with the cause of liberty throughout the world.

4

MADISON'S RETURN to private life was brief. In 1784 he was elected to the Virginia House of Delegates and at once became the leader of the radical party in the place of Jefferson, who had been appointed American minister to France. During the next three years he was instrumental in finally disestablishing the Anglican church, enacting a large portion of Jefferson's revised code of laws, and strengthening the basis of state finances. Moreover, while strenuously working to make his own state a model of enlightened administration, he was increasingly aware of the larger problems confronting the nation. During these years in the Virginia legislature he steadily urged that the powers of the Confederation be strengthened. It was largely on his initiative that Virginia participated in the series of interstate conferences that led ultimately to the Philadelphia Convention of 1787.

The Convention of 1787 provided the Princeton-trained political philosopher with the opportunity of rendering his greatest service to his country. In recognition of Madison's role in the Philadelphia meeting historians have named him "the father of the Constitution." By 1787 the Confederation had declined into impotence; government credit was desperate; Congress, unable to maintain order or even to protect itself, was powerless in the face of treaty violation and foreign commercial discrimination. As the powers of Congress declined, the center of political gravity shifted to the states, which soon were engaged in a series of bitter local rivalries. Inside each of these petty sovereignties, postwar depression and deflation touched off virulent class struggles between debtors and creditors as each group strove to control the state machinery in order to protect its own economic interests. In one quarter ominous voices were heard to declare that America was geographically too large and too heterogeneous to con-

tinue under a single government; while in another it was openly stated, for the first time since 1776, that the only cure for the ills of the new nation was to liquidate the republican experiment and establish an American monarchy. It seemed to thoughtful Americans in every section that the Union, which had been the instrument of victory in winning political liberty from England, was doomed to dissolve under the tensions of postwar disagreement. Against this background of economic distress, sectional quarrels, class conflict, and ideological confusion, the Convention called to reform the Confederation met at Philadelphia in May 1787.

Long before he journeyed to Philadelphia, Madison had become convinced that the fate of republican government in America and hence throughout the world hung in the balance. As early as 1785 he had begun to warn his fellow citizens that unless the Union was strengthened there would be a competitive system of jealous sovereign states, involving "an appeal to the sword in every petty squabble, standing armies, and perpetual taxes." Internal weakness would make the disunited states "the sport of foreign politics," threaten the very existence of liberty, and "blast the glory of the Revolution." In view of the decay of the Confederation, Madison had already taken steps to approach the problem scientifically. Since Jefferson in Paris had access to the book stalls of all Europe, Madison recruited his aid in building up an extensive collection of "treatises on the ancient or modern Federal Republics." In preparation for the Philadelphia meeting he was therefore able to study in his own library the structure and principles of all the confederations described in history. The result embodied in two memoranda, entitled respectively "Notes of Ancient and Modern Confederacies" and "Vices of the Political System of the United States," is probably the most fruitful piece of scholarly research ever carried out by an American.

Madison's reading of the accounts of historic confederations, such as the Lycian League, Amphictyonic Council, the United Netherlands, was discouraging; as precedents they furnished "no other light than

that of beacons, which gave warnings of the course to be shunned, without pointing out that which ought to be pursued." His studies confirmed his belief, steadily growing as he watched the American Confederation totter toward "imbecility," that it would be impossible to establish a stable federal system based on any principles tried in the past. Madison's reading underlined a further point. Never in all the history of the world had it been possible to organize a republican state in a territory as vast as America; never in the past had it been possible to frame a popular government for a population of such heterogeneous elements as those inhabiting the United States. As he discovered in his books, and as Alexander Hamilton was later to argue in the Convention, all political theorists agreed that a stable republic promoting the general welfare of a varied population could be established only in a small country. Stable empires of vast extent had been organized in the past, but they had all been held together from above by the power of a king.

It is James Madison's greatest glory as a philosopher-statesman that he accepted the challenge of the impossible. He transcended the impossible by inventing a completely new type of federal state, which while solidly resting on majority rule at the same time provided adequate safeguards for the rights of minority groups. From his reading and experience he evolved an original theory of republican federalism differing completely from the principles of any of the historic confederations. A full month before the Convention met he had elaborated his novel scheme in his memoranda and in letters to Jefferson, Randolph, and Washington. He had also commenced work on the blueprint of a governmental structure that would institutionalize this theory. It was a brilliant intellectual achievement which won for the thirty-five-year-old Madison the right to be called the philosopher of the American Constitution. His theory, embodied in the structure of the American Union, was to prove also the greatest triumph in practical application of the Enlightenment's ideal of scientific political research.

The story of Madison's labors to get his theory elaborated into the document known as the United States Constitution is too familiar to be detailed here. The Virginian played a decisive part in every phase of constitutional creation. On the basis of his theory, which he submitted to Washington's careful inspection, he was able to persuade the general that the Convention was not doomed to impotence before it opened and that he should attend as a delegate. Washington's prestige, both at Philadelphia and during the struggle for ratification, proved of major significance in the outcome. It was Madison's theory too that provided the basis of the Virginia Plan which, after it was worked over by the assembled delegates for nearly four months, emerged as the new constitution. During the long summer days in the Convention, Madison, in the words of a fellow delegate, "took the lead in the management of every great question"; one of three debaters who were heard most frequently, he spoke from the floor 161 times. Whether in committee or in open session it was reported that "he always comes forward the best informed man on any point in debate. The affairs of the United States, he perhaps, has the most correct knowledge of, of any Man in the Union." Finally, marvelous to relate, it was James Madison, "the profound politician" blended "with the scholar," who somehow managed to find the extra energy necessary to write out daily a meticulous report of all the debates in the Convention. Although this exacting task almost killed him, as he later admitted, still he was determined that future political philosophers should have the "Debates" as scientific data requisite to carry forward the study of republican government.

Madison's labors for the Constitution did not end with the adjournment of the Convention. Almost at once the long bitter struggle to secure ratification began. During the winter of 1787-1788 the Virginian collaborated with Alexander Hamilton and John Jay in writing *The Federalist*, the classic exposition of the Constitution and the most important American contribution to the world's political literature. In the spring of 1788, elected a member of the Virginia

ratifying convention, he acted as leader of the pro-Constitution party and matched himself against the great Patrick Henry, who was chief of the opposition. Until the final vote was taken the issue hung in doubt, and with it the question of whether the Constitution would be given a trial. Virginia being both the largest and the most populous of the thirteen states, her rejection would have proved fatal to the plan. In the most dramatic episode of his career, Madison faced the fiery, passionate oratory of Henry and smothered it with his quiet, lucid reasoning. When the final vote was taken, the logic of Madison and the Constitutional party had caused eight members of the opposition to disregard the express wishes of their constituents, and two more to vote contrary to specific instructions. As a result the Constitution was approved by the narrow margin of 10 out of 168 votes.

5

ALTHOUGH the new Constitution was finally ratified in 1788, it was still merely a blueprint; the task remained of transforming its paper provisions into the institutions of a functioning government. To this delicate operation the first Congress addressed itself. Madison almost missed sharing in this labor: Patrick Henry's hatred first blocked his election to the new Senate and then attempted to prevent his choice as a member of the House. Luckily for Madison his loyal Baptist supporters remembered their ancient debt and backed him solidly; and so in 1789 he began the first of his four terms as a Virginia representative in Congress. From the day he took his seat he was the leading member of the lower house. There was no act of legislative business during the first session in which he did not participate with his customary erudition. He sponsored the first ten amendments to the Constitution, which make up the federal Bill of Rights, introduced the first revenue bill, helped organize the executive department, and acted as President Washington's congressional adviser and ghost writer. It was a strenuous period full of "delays and perplexities" arising in large part from the complete "want of precedents." Many

times Madison felt that "we are in a wilderness, without a single footstep to guide us." Yet the task was accomplished. By the end of the first session of the first Congress, "the more perfect union" had successfully made the transition from paper to practice.

Before the new government had been in operation a year, Madison became deeply disturbed over the trend of events in the national capital. In his view, the trouble lay in the activities and policies of Alexander Hamilton, secretary of the Treasury. To the New Yorker no federal scheme could provide a sufficiently centralized authority to subsist in so large a country; and even worse was "the disease" of democracy which afflicted America. Hamilton, therefore, seized the opportunity during the formative stage of the new government to "administer" it—the term is Madison's—so that it would more closely approach his ideal of a consolidated oligarchy. With devious brilliance, Hamilton set out, by a program of class legislation, to unite the propertied interests of the eastern seaboard into a cohesive administration party, while at the same time he attempted to make the executive dominant over the Congress by a lavish use of the spoils system. In carrying out his scheme, though he personally was above corruption, Hamilton transformed every financial transaction of the Treasury Department into an orgy of speculation and graft in which selected senators, congressmen, and certain of their richer constituents throughout the nation participated. As Madison watched Hamilton's program develop, he became disillusioned and bitter. In the Convention he had fought to create a Constitution under which "the interests and rights of every class of citizens should be duly represented and understood." Now he saw the machinery of his new government being used to exploit the mass of the people in the interest of a small minority.

Before the end of the first Congress, Madison, therefore, began to attack the Hamiltonian program as "unconstitutional" no less than antirepublican. In so doing, he probably saved the Constitution from being abrogated by the rising mass of injured citizens, and

guaranteed that the American experiment in democratic government should continue on a national basis.

Hamilton's system of class government, while brilliantly successful in enlisting the loyalty of "the rich, the wise, and the well born" for the Constitution, in truth contained a major threat to American nationalism. During the struggle for ratification, a majority of the people had opposed the Constitution as containing a potential threat to their liberties. Living in an almost self-sufficient agrarian economy, they were content with the security provided by the system of independent states and saw little need for a stronger union. This majority was still deeply suspicious of the national government at its birth in 1789. Every device that Hamilton used to win the loyalty of the propertied elite tended to confirm the suspicions of the yeoman farmers and middle-class groups and to erode their faith in the new government.

Not the least of James Madison's services to American nationalism was to put himself at the head of this potentially dangerous opposition and thus guarantee that it would remain loyal to the Union. Thomas Jefferson was to prove the great organizer and symbol of the anti-Hamiltonians; but Madison had already formulated the principles of the opposition before Jefferson assumed the role of party chief. In speeches, letters, and a series of essays contributed to the newspaper edited by his fellow Princetonian, Philip Freneau, "the father of the Constitution" stressed again and yet again that it was not the federal Union that was at fault but the individuals at its head. The Constitution itself was sound; the evil lay in Hamilton's perverted "interpretation" of the document.

Thus, an aroused party which might well have developed revolutionary tendencies was marshaled by Madison under the banner of a higher loyalty and a stricter veneration of the Constitution. Once again the Virginia theorist and political philosopher had played a decisive part in fixing the pattern of future political behavior in America. Following Madison's lead, discontented groups in the

United States, even though out of power, have traditionally looked to the Constitution for the protection of their rights, and thus has been maintained that amazing balance between stability and change which has characterized our national existence. Certainly, this developed pattern of loyal opposition made the election of Thomas Jefferson and the reversal of national policies in 1800 a coup which, although "revolutionary," was still strictly constitutional.

During Jefferson's two terms as president, Madison served officially as his secretary of state and unofficially as his dearest friend and most trusted adviser. Since the president was a widower, it also came about that Madison's wife, the famous and attractive Dolly, whom he had married in his forty-fifth year, became the official hostess for the administration. As secretary of state, James Madison shared fully in the two great triumphs of Jefferson's first term: the program of domestic reform that finally identified the Union as a people's government and the Louisiana Purchase, which extended the bounds of the republican experiment clear to the Pacific. In like manner, Madison was a leader in the unsuccessful attempt during Jefferson's second administration to develop through the Embargo a system of economic sanctions to replace the use of force in our foreign relations. In 1808, through Jefferson's influence, Madison was chosen to succeed him as president.

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AS CHIEF EXECUTIVE, James Madison added few laurels to his reputation. He inherited from his predecessor the insoluble problem of preserving American neutrality in the midst of the titanic struggle between England and Napoleon. Before the beginning of his second administration the Virginian had become convinced that there was no alternative to war against England, if the United States was to maintain its maritime rights and its economic independence. Unfortunately, the talents of the philosopher-statesman were designed for peace rather than war; after the opening of hostilities Madison's

inadequacies as a military chieftain soon became apparent. Throughout the conflict, he was hampered in exerting executive leadership by his theory that Congress should take the initiative in determining policy.

As it turned out, the United States was fortunate to emerge from the struggle territorially intact. Not a single American war aim was achieved; Washington was captured, and the president was forced to flee to the Virginia woods for safety; only the unexpected victories of the final months of the conflict—at Baltimore, Plattsburg, New Orleans—allowed his contemporaries to set down “Mr. Madison’s War” as an American triumph. Yet the sentiment of national unity, which Madison had labored so long to inculcate by rational appeal, flowered under the irrational emotions released by the war, and the last remnants of antirepublicanism were swept away in the flood of patriotic pride. Soon after the treaty of peace, James Madison’s presidential term ended and put a period to his forty years of public service.

After his retirement to Montpelier, Madison “devoted himself to his farm and his books, with much avocation, however, from both by an extensive and often laborious correspondence which seems to be entailed on Ex-Presidents.” A large part of his time was spent in arranging his letters and editing for the enlightenment of posterity the carefully preserved “Notes” on the debates in the Constitutional Convention. He was closely associated with Jefferson in the founding of the University of Virginia and became its rector after Jefferson’s death in 1826. When he had almost reached his eightieth birthday he reluctantly served as a member, but took no important part, in the Virginia Constitutional Convention of 1829. It was about this time that he dictated his short autobiography, nearly a fifth of which deals with his happy years at Princeton.

As Madison grew older, he withdrew as far as possible from politics. When pressed in 1830 for his opinion on a current controversial topic he wrote: “A man whose years have but reached the canonical

three-score-and-ten . . . should distrust himself, whether distrusted by his friends or not, and should never forget that his arguments, whatever they may be, will be answered by allusions to the date of his birth.” Yet, on the two issues of slavery and states’ rights which were eventually to threaten the existence of his beloved Union, his principles forced him to break his silence. Until his death, he lent his active support to the African Colonization Society from an awareness that the “dreadful calamity” of Negro bondage was incompatible with the republican principles of liberty and equality. On one other subject also he would not hold his peace. When the South Carolinians, during the tariff controversy, tried to use his name and Jefferson’s to support their doctrines of nullification and secession, he repeatedly and publicly denounced their position as constitutional heresy.

James Madison lived on peacefully to the age of eighty-six, deeply happy in his marriage, still full of “inexhaustible faith” in the future of the great democratic commonwealth he had done so much to establish. On the morning of June 28, 1836, he died quietly in his easy chair. It is reported that even his slaves wept when he was buried in the Montpelier graveyard.