

favorite niece, Mrs. Willis, asked: "What is the matter, Uncle James?" Jennings recalled his master's response: "Nothing more than a change of *mind*, my dear." With that, Jennings added, "his head instantly dropped, and he ceased breathing as quietly as the snuff of a candle goes out."²

² Jennings's recollections of Madison's final months and the death scene are recorded in Paul Jennings, *A Colored Man's Reminiscences of James Madison* (Brooklyn, 1865), 18–19. It should be noted that the document was edited by "J. B. R.," who acknowledged in the preface that he recorded Jennings's recollections "in almost his own language." I have corrected a typographical error in the original. Additional information about Madison's last days has been drawn from an extract from a letter written by his brother-in-law, John Payne, on June 20, 1836, printed in the *National Intelligencer* on July 2, 1836.

1. The Character of the Good Statesman

IN THE SPRING of 1817, when James Madison quit public office for the last time, he behaved as if he were beginning rather than ending a career. Making the first leg of his journey home from Washington by steamboat, a novel means of approaching Montpelier, he was accompanied by a young writer from New York with an endearing blend of wit and patriotism. During their brief voyage down the Potomac River, James Kirke Paulding recalled, the elder statesman was "as playful as a child"; talking and jesting with everyone on board, he resembled "a school Boy on a long vacation."¹ Perhaps Madison savored memories of his first journey along the Potomac, on horseback, almost fifty years before, when an eighteen-year-old youth bound for college in Princeton, New Jersey, had confronted poor roads and seemingly countless ferries. What proved to be Madison's final passage through this area was a telling measure of the changes he had witnessed in his lifetime, and no doubt the convenience and excitement of traveling by steamboat buoyed the old man's spirits. But his good cheer also surely reflected the happy condition of his country after a crisis-ridden term as chief executive that had nearly issued in disaster. As Henry Adams observed three-quarters of a century later, with a characteristic touch of irony, "few Presidents ever quitted office under circumstances so agreeable as those which surrounded Madison."²

Most of Madison's countrymen in 1817 would probably have shared Adams's judgment but missed the irony. An old friend and neighbor, Francis Corbin, welcomed Madison home in words that

¹ Ralph L. Ketcham, ed., "An Unpublished Sketch of James Madison by James K. Paulding," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 67 (1959), 435.

² Henry Adams, *History of the United States During the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison* (New York, 1889–1891), IX, 103.

appear to have caught the sentiments of a wider citizenry: "Long may you enjoy, in health and happiness, the well earned and truly legitimate plaudits of a grateful Country, and that sweetest of all consolations, an approving conscience." Corbin had served with Madison in the Virginia House of Delegates during the pivotal and trying years just after the Revolution. At the Richmond convention of 1788 they had joined hands to win the difficult struggle to secure the commonwealth's ratification of the Constitution. Now, in April 1817, Corbin assured Madison that his recent tenure as President was the glorious capstone to an illustrious career. "The End," he exclaimed, "has indeed crowned the Work!"³

Few historians today would take seriously, much less share, Corbin's flattering assessment of his friend's eight years in the White House. Scholars generally agree that Madison achieved greatness much earlier in his career, especially in the late 1780s and early 1790s when he did more than any other individual to create and secure a republic that would, with amendments and a rather momentous interregnum in the 1860s, endure for the next two centuries. From there, convention has it, his career went into decline. Riddled with diplomatic blunders and other grievous errors of judgment, Madison's presidency was characterized by something close to colossal ineptitude in leadership, constituting a profound embarrassment to him and to the government he administered during the War of 1812. The British invasion and burning of Washington, D.C., in August 1814 and the near collapse of that government marked the appropriate nadir of a failed administration. Writing in 1938, for instance, Edward M. Burns leveled a withering blast. As chief executive, Madison "added nothing to his reputation"; in fact, his record was one "of treason to his own ideals, of humiliation and failure."⁴

Some of Madison's biographers have tried to soften this harsh view, but with little success. Certainly Madison's popularity after the war – what Ralph Ketcham has described as "the adulation

surrounding him during his last two years as President and his twenty years in retirement" – has counted for little.⁵ No one is surprised, after all, that when his contemporaries celebrated the happy conclusion of "Mr. Madison's War," some of the goodwill rubbed off on their commander in chief, no matter how hapless his leadership had been. Indeed, historians have generally portrayed this postwar euphoria among the American people as naive and short-sighted, blithely unmindful of the military and political catastrophe that had barely been averted; and Madison as president has thus been denied, for the most part, the credit and even the glory that his countrymen lavishly bestowed on him.⁶ When Madison's present-day admirers are not apologizing for his presidency, they feel compelled, at the least, to unravel the puzzle of "how such a brilliant man could become a less effective statesman as he grew older and more experienced."⁷

This unfavorable image of Madison's presidency has obscured the depth and precise nature of his postwar popularity. When Corbin referred to the sweet comfort of "an approving conscience," he doubtless echoed the sentiments of a committee of citizens from

5 Ralph Ketcham, *James Madison: A Biography* (New York and London, 1971), 605.

6 For a recent portrait of both Madison's inept leadership and the inadequacy of the federal government he had been so instrumental in creating twenty-five years earlier, see J. C. A. Stagg, *Mr. Madison's War: Politics, Diplomacy, and Warfare in the Early American Republic, 1783–1830* (Princeton, N.J., 1983). Along with Irving Brant, Madison's most thorough biographer, Ralph Ketcham has made a creditable case for viewing Madison's presidential leadership less harshly. See especially "James Madison: The Unimperial President," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 54 (1978), 116–136; "Party and Leadership in Madison's Conception of the Presidency," *Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress* 37 (1980), 242–258; and *Presidents Above Party: The First American Presidency, 1789–1829* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1984), 113–123. Perhaps the most balanced and judicious assessment of Madison's leadership during the war is Marcus Cunliffe, "Madison (1812–1815)," in Ernest R. May, ed., *The Ultimate Decision: The President as Commander in Chief* (New York, 1960), 21–54. For an interesting discussion of Madison's leadership during his first presidential administration, see Abbot Smith, "Mr. Madison's War: An Unsuccessful Experiment in the Conduct of National Policy," *Political Science Quarterly* 57 (1942), 229–246.

7 Robert A. Rutland, in a review of Ralph Ketcham's 1971 biography, in the *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 29 (1972), 171.

3 Corbin to Madison, Apr. 29, 1817, James Madison Papers, Library of Congress, series one (microfilm).

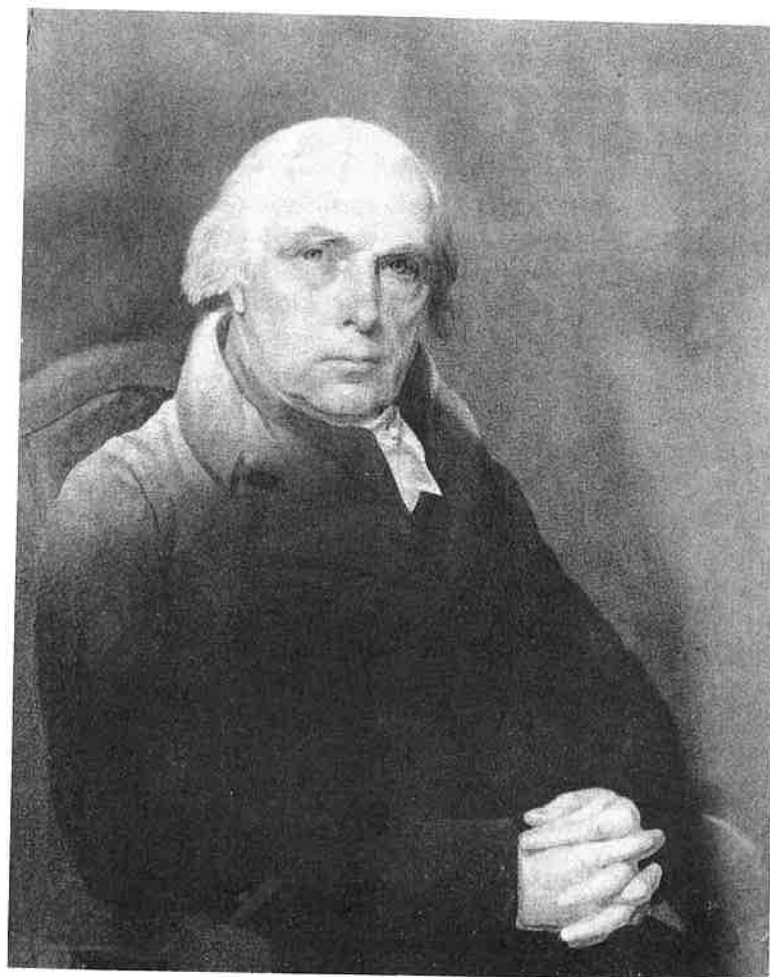
4 Edward McNall Burns, *James Madison: Philosopher of the Constitution* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1938), 19.

Washington who addressed Madison on the day he left office. After elaborating the salutary consequences of the recent war, the committee's spokesman paid homage to Madison's principled leadership: "Power and national glory, Sir, have often before, been acquired by the sword; but rarely without the sacrifice of civil or political liberty." It was with reference to his use of "the sword," indeed, that Madison's presidency deserved special commendation. He had earned the profound gratitude of his fellow citizens, the committee declared, for "the vigilance" with which he had "restrained [that sword] within its proper limits," for "the energy" with which he had "directed it to its proper objects," and for "the safety" with which he had "wielded an armed force of fifty thousand men, aided by an annual disbursement of many millions, without infringing a political, civil, or religious right."⁸ Madison had led his nation through a difficult, but ultimately successful, second war for independence – and he had done so without violating its republican soul. Writing from Paris in the summer of 1817, his Republican colleague Albert Gallatin echoed Corbin's and the committee's emphasis when he observed that "few indeed have the good fortune, after such a career as yours, to carry in their retirement the entire approbation of their fellow citizens with that of their own conscience."⁹

Such praise reminds us of the extraordinary restraint that Madison had exercised as a wartime leader. Although few Presidents have been subjected to so much personal invective and abuse, he never hinted at measures abridging freedom of speech or press, even in the face of rampant obstruction of his government's policies and countless cases of outright treason in the "eastern states" of New England. His administration pursued nothing akin to the repressive Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 – the distasteful badge of the high Federalism that, merely anticipating war, had outlawed virtually any show of opposition to the federal government and that Madison, earlier in his career, had vigorously assailed. Less than two years after the end

8 James Blake, chairman on behalf of a committee of Washington, D.C., citizens, to James Madison, March 4, 1817, Madison Papers, Library of Congress, series one (microfilm).

9 Gallatin to Madison, July 17, 1817, Madison Papers, Library of Congress, series two (microfilm).



James Madison in 1817. Portrait by Joseph Wood. Madison sat for this portrait in Washington as he prepared to leave public life. When an acquaintance first saw it, she exclaimed that "the likeness . . . almost breathes, and expresses much of the serenity of his feelings at the moment it was taken. In short, it is, *himself*." (Courtesy of the Virginia Historical Society, Richmond)

of "Mr. Madison's War," one of his admirers proudly noted that not only a powerful foreign enemy, but violent domestic opposition as well, had been "withstood without one trial for treason, or even one prosecution for libel."¹⁰ As the historian Harry L. Coles has noted, this absence of repressive legislation "enabled the country quickly to unite after the war with a minimum of bitterness and resentment."¹¹ And there is ample evidence that appreciation of Madison's behavior outlived the surge of postwar euphoria. Among the editors and orators who eulogized him in 1836, we find what one biographer has called "grateful memory of his unswerving protection of civil liberties" at a time when "provocations" had been "greatest for their restraint."¹²

Just as important to his countrymen, Madison had not used the occasion of war to expand executive power or to create a vast patronage machine. "Of all the enemies to public liberty," Madison himself had written in 1795, "war is, perhaps, the most to be dreaded, because it comprises and develops the germ of every other." As "the parent of armies," of course, war encouraged "debts and taxes," which republicans recognized as "the known instruments for bringing the many under the domination of the few." But as Madison so powerfully argued, the danger was especially acute in relation to a particular branch of the government. "In war, too," he added, "the discretionary power of the Executive is extended; its influence in dealing out offices, honors, and emoluments is multiplied; and all the means of seducing the minds, are added to those of subduing the force, of the people."¹³ War always nourished the potential for corruption; in a young and experimental republic like the United States, the danger of executive usurpation was particularly ominous.

Two decades later, in quite different circumstances, Madison's

adversaries could wax eloquent in describing this very danger in his own administration. In March 1814, for instance, a Federalist congressman from Massachusetts, Artemas Ward, vehemently opposed increasing the size of the federal army, imputing to Madison's regime nothing less than an intention "to change the form of Government." Lest his fellow legislators dismiss his words as "the vagaries or wanderings of a jealous, perhaps, distempered mind," Ward played upon the central themes of a republican melody that Americans had been humming for the better part of four decades. "All the Republics which have gone before us have lost their liberties," he reminded his fellow legislators, imploring them "to consider what has taken place in our time, and what they have read in the history of other times." They had seen "the Legislature of France turned out of the Hall of Liberty by a military force which it had nurtured and established." History told them "that the same was done in England in the days of Cromwell." And "however secure gentlemen may feel in their seats," they should not ignore the possibility that "they may witness the reaction of the same scenes here"; the military force they now voted to raise might indeed "ere long put an end to their existence as legislators." Above all, Ward cautioned the members of Congress, "Executive patronage and Executive influence are truly alarming."¹⁴

Within a year, however, any such suspicions of Madison were exposed as unfounded, even absurd. To be sure, given Madison's modest bearing and his utter lack of military experience or ambition, the thought of him becoming a dictator on horseback is ludicrous; but we might also note that he prevented anyone else from assuming that role in the midst of an unprecedented political and military crisis. And in an age dominated by the specter of Napoleon, and in a republican political culture still very much tied to classical referents, including the danger of "Caesarism," President Madison's executive restraint confirmed his principled resistance to all temptations of power and thus drew effusive retrospective praise from his

¹⁰ Benjamin Lincoln Lear quoted in Irving Brant, *James Madison: Commander in Chief, 1812-1836* (Indianapolis and New York, 1961), 407.

¹¹ See the judicious assessment in Coles, *The War of 1812* (Chicago and London, 1965), 257.

¹² Brant, *Madison: Commander in Chief*, 523.

¹³ Madison, *Political Observations*, April 20, 1795, in William T. Hutchinson et al., eds., *The Papers of James Madison* (Chicago, Charlottesville, 1962-), XV, 518.

¹⁴ Joseph Gales, comp., *Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States, 1789-1824* (Washington, D.C., 1834-1856), 13th Cong., 2d sess., II, 1826, 1827.

constituents, including many Federalists.¹⁵ An orator at a Fourth of July celebration in 1816 boldly predicted that Madison's name would "descend to posterity with that of our illustrious Washington," since "one achieved our independence, and the other sustained it."¹⁶ He was wrong about Madison's image in history, of course, but the linking of Madison to Washington, quite common in the postwar years and almost inconceivable today, points again to the source as well as to the extent of the adulation that surrounded him.¹⁷

Although Madison's republican restraint as president and commander in chief contributed, ironically, to his later reputation as indecisive and incompetent, it earned substantial dividends in his own time. Writing from Braintree shortly after the presidential election of 1816, John Adams told Madison (who had not stood for reelection) that "such is the State of Minds here, that had Mr. Madison been candidate, he would probably have had the votes of Massachusetts and consequently of all New England."¹⁸ Adams was generally not one to flatter rivals for public esteem. But even if we allow for some measure of polite hyperbole in his estimation of his correspondent's popularity in the vicinity of Boston — only recently the center of intense opposition to the war against England — his statement to Jefferson a few months later confirms his sincerity. "Notwithstand[ing] a thousand Faults and blunders," Adams

15 For an interesting discussion of related themes for a later period, see Edwin A. Miles, "The Whig Party and the Menace of Caesar," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 27 (1968), 361–379.

16 Quoted in Brant, *Madison: Commander in Chief*, 407.

17 For greater insight into this unlikely link between Washington and Madison — who were, in fact, as alike as they were different in representing a new, republicanized conception of heroic leadership — see the brilliant analysis in Barry Schwartz, *George Washington: The Making of an American Symbol* (New York and London, 1987), esp. chaps. 4–6. As I will suggest below, so many of the character traits ascribed to the decidedly uncharismatic Washington by his adoring contemporaries — diffidence, modesty, self-restraint, patience, steadiness, and perseverance, for instance — were also especially applicable to Madison's character and behavior, and were therefore central to his countrymen's veneration of him.

18 Adams to Madison, Dec. 6, 1816, in Washburn Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, IX, 12.

mused, Madison's administration had "acquired more glory, and established more Union, than all his three Predecessors, Washington Adams and Jefferson, put together."¹⁹ The mood captured in Adams's penetrating judgment was not always evanescent, either. Some of Madison's countrymen remembered the last two years of his presidency as the pinnacle of republican triumph, as nothing less than a golden age in which "a balmy peace" had overtaken the profound crisis of national confidence that had accompanied the tumultuous passions of war and regional partisanship. Moreover, they could attribute this happy situation, to a remarkable extent, to the diffusive influence of Madison's personal character. Writing in 1844, the Whig John Pendleton Kennedy attempted to evoke the spirit of this luminous postwar world, in which "the calm and philosophic temper of Mr. Madison, the purity of his character, the sincerity of his patriotism, and the sagacity of his intellect" had inspired "universal trust."²⁰

Kennedy's allusion to Madison's sage intellect jibes nicely with our image of him as a profound thinker. But his references to Madison's "calm and philosophic temper" and to "the purity of his character" were probably more vital to the nostalgic reverence that many Americans of the antebellum era, especially Whigs, came to feel for him and his presidency. In 1845 Charles Jared Ingersoll (a Democrat) published a multivolume "historical sketch" of the War of 1812 that assessed both Madison's leadership and his reputation. Compared to Jefferson and Washington, Ingersoll acknowledged, Madison must be judged deficient in genius and command. Yet "no mind has stamped more of its impressions on American institutions than Madison's," and his presidency was especially revealing of both his limitations and his peculiar virtues. Assuming the position of chief magistrate "bequeathed to him by his more salient predecessor with a complication of difficulties," Madison, Ingersoll averred, "went through the war meekly, as adversaries alleged shrinkingly,

19 Adams to Jefferson, Feb. 2, 1817, in Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters* (New York, 1971 [orig. publ. 1959]), 508.

20 [John Pendleton Kennedy], *Defence of the Whigs, by a Member of the Twenty-Seventh Congress* (New York, 1844), reprinted in Daniel Walker Howe, ed., *The American Whigs: An Anthology* (New York, 1973), 87.

no doubt with anxious longing for the restoration of peace, but without ever yielding a principle to his enemies or a point to his adversaries; leaving the United States, which he found embarrassed and discredited, successful, prosperous, glorious and content." Ingersoll went on:

A constitution which its opponents pronounced incapable of hostilities, under his administration triumphantly bore their severest brunt. Checkered by the inevitable vicissitudes of war, its trials never disturbed the composure of the commander-in-chief, always calm, consistent and conscientious, never much elated by victory or depressed by defeat, never once by the utmost emergencies of war, betrayed into a breach of the constitution. Exposed to that licentious abuse which leading men in free countries with an unshackled press cannot escape, his patience was never exhausted; nor his forbearance deprived of dignity by complaint, retort, or self-defence, but in the quiet serenity of rectitude, he waited on events with uninterrupted confidence.²¹

American readers, of course, could hardly fail to see the appropriate analogy. Madison may not have been the equal of General Washington; no one was. But in his stoical perseverance in the face of countless setbacks, not to mention his steady adherence to principle amid alarming confusion and disorder, Madison, as a civilian commander in chief during this second war for independence, offered a display of bravery and self-command reminiscent of the heroic example set on the battlefields of the Revolution. As Ingersoll suggested, everything that went into his quiet but firm leadership – his unflappable dignity; his unwillingness to despair; his unyielding confidence in American institutions and the character of the people; and his dogged persistence – somehow overcame all of his specific failures and misjudgments. This kind of leadership may, in fact, have literally saved the republic. Modern historians remind us that a different, less happy outcome was far from inconceivable. "That government should have survived in Washington at all after August 1814 [following the successful British invasion] was itself no mean achievement," the historian J. C. A. Stagg has recently noted, "and

for this Madison was largely responsible. By persisting in his duty and refusing to admit defeat, even under the most difficult circumstances, he ensured that his administration could survive the war and enjoy the benefits of peace when it came."²²

Ingersoll's survey of Madison's career (and his two decades of retirement, when he provided "a model for American statesmen"), culminated in the question he expected his readers in 1845 to have: "What then is the shading of this seeming strain of panegyric?" "No one has been more abused than Madison," he admitted, "but not only did it all die away, but died before he died." Although "a remnant of inveterate, respectable federalists" still denied his merits, "the great body of his countrymen" were now "unanimous in awarding him immortality." Much more than Jefferson, Madison enjoyed "undivided favour." And Ingersoll knew why: "He was no hero, not a man of genius, not remarkable for the talent of personal ascendancy. But his patriotic services are parcel of the most fundamental civil, and the most renowned military grandeur of this republic, and his private life without stain or reproach."²³

Those who had known Madison well, especially during the War of 1812, seconded Ingersoll's contention that Madison's public conduct was best understood as the projection of an exemplary character and temperament. No better example of this common insight can be found than the testimony of Edward Coles, who was the president's private secretary for six years and hence a member of the White House family. Madison's "persevering and indefatigable efforts to prevent the war" as well as his "manner of carrying it on," Coles remarked in the 1850s, "were in perfect keeping with the character of the man, of whom it may be said that no one ever had to a greater extent, firmness, mildness, and self-possession, so happily blended in his character."²⁴ A fellow Virginian by birth and a cousin of Madison's wife, Dolley, Coles's acquaintance with the Madisons went back to the 1790s, when as a child he had helped his family welcome the middle-aged congressman and his young bride for a

²¹ Charles J. Ingersoll, *Historical Sketch of the Second War Between the United States of America and Great Britain* . . . (Philadelphia, 1845), I, 260, 262–263.

²² Stagg, *Mr. Madison's War*, 436.

²³ Ingersoll, *Historical Sketch*, I, 263, 265.

²⁴ Edward Coles to William Cabell Rives, Jan. 21, 1856, printed in *William and Mary Quarterly*, 2d ser., 7 (1927), 164.

postnuptial visit. From 1809 to 1815, Coles, now in his mid-twenties, became Madison's regular companion. Much later, when he wished to convey to his countrymen an accurate sense of his mentor's greatness, Coles made an intriguing observation – one wholly at odds with Madison's modern historical reputation – that casts fresh light on Madison and on the reverence his presence, and later his memory, frequently evoked.²⁵

Writing in 1854 to the Virginia historian Hugh Blair Grigsby, who had solicited his recollections, Coles drew extensive parallels between Madison and Washington. He noted of Madison, in this connection, that "if History do him justice, posterity will give him credit, more for the goodness of his heart, than for the strength and acquirements of his mind."²⁶ Coles acknowledged Madison's intellectual brilliance, but he insisted that his impressive mind (and the fascinating conversation it produced, for which he was justly renowned) were "but decorations to set off to advantage his pure and incorruptible virtue and integrity." At first glance Coles's observation smacks of republican ritual in its celebration of Madison's disinterested commitment to the public good, long a *sine qua non* of the virtuous statesman; yet clearly he meant something more specific than that. A just history, he said, would show Madison to have been "the most virtuous, calm, and amiable, of men, possessed of one of the purest hearts, and best tempers with which man was ever blessed." It was Madison's peculiar temperament and the character it shaped, more than the depth of his mind or even his specific achievements, Coles believed, that entitled him to sit by Washington's side in the pantheon of classical heroes that had graced the American scene in the days of the Founding.²⁷

25 Coles is discussed at some length in the chapters that follow. There are several perfunctory accounts of his life but no full-scale biography. Probably the best single source of information on him remains Elihu Benjamin Washburne, "Sketch of Edward Coles, Second Governor of Illinois, and of the Slavery Struggle of 1823-4" (Chicago, 1882), reprinted in Clarence W. Alvord, ed., *Governor Edward Coles* (Springfield, Ill., 1920).

26 The relevant extract from this Coles-to-Grigsby letter of Dec. 23, 1854 may be found in Coles's hand in the William Cabell Rives Papers, Library of Congress, box 85.

27 *Ibid.*

As his secretary, Coles had observed Madison's conduct under the kind of "trying circumstances" that indeed put character to the test. As Charles Francis Adams noted in 1841, "foreign war and domestic discord came together upon him in a manner that would have tried the nerves of the strongest man."²⁸ But "amidst all the troubles and excitement attendant on a foreign war, and provoking feuds at home," Coles recalled, he had never once heard the president "utter one petulant expression, or give way for one moment to passion or despondency." It seemed that "nothing could excite or ruffle him"; no matter how vexing the provocation, he had remained "collected" and "self-possessed." Coles asserted that this rigorous self-control – a calm, deliberate steadiness of mind and behavior (again, so reminiscent of Washington) – had shaped Madison's leadership in entirely admirable ways. Without a single lapse, he told Grigsby, Madison had succeeded in abiding by his own "maxim" that "public functionaries should never display, much less act, under the influence of passion." Moreover, he had been "ever mindful of what was due from him to others, and cautious not to wound the feelings of any one." Indeed, at times during the war Coles had found the president's patience with his many critics exasperating. Besieged by deputations of citizens with advice and instructions, Madison's habit was to listen with the utmost attention, despite the tax on his valuable time and patience. Once, when Coles had pleaded with him to ignore an importunate group of delegates soliciting an interview, Madison had told his secretary, in no uncertain terms, that since these citizens had come a long distance to advise him, surely their president owed them his attention for an hour or two.²⁹

Coles's portrait of Madison's temperament and its influence on his public conduct was confirmed by other intimates. James Barbour, a major figure in both Virginia and national politics in the early nineteenth century, was also Madison's Orange County neighbor. In 1836 he eulogized his friend in terms that Coles must have appreci-

28 [Charles Francis Adams], "The Madison Papers," in *North American Review* 53 (1841), 75.

29 Coles to Grigsby, Dec. 23, 1854, in Rives Papers, Library of Congress, box 85. Reference to the specific instance cited may be found in Mary Cutts's memoir of the Madisons, in the Cutts-Madison collection (microfilm), Library of Congress.

ated, praising Madison's "private virtues, equal to, if not beyond, his public worth" and paying great attention to "the force of his character" on public life. Above all, Barbour said, Madison was distinguished "for a serenity of temper, which, under no circumstances, in public or private, did I ever see disturbed." This serene temperament was not the demeanor of a bland or dull man, however, as Barbour emphasized Madison's gentle charm and benevolence. Cheerful by nature, he frequently indulged in "a playful Attic wit," but "always without a sting" — it was, Barbour said, "the rose without the thorn." Scrupulously attentive to the needs and feelings of others, Madison had an uncanny ability to make acquaintances and visitors comfortable. "With the less intelligent of these," Barbour observed, "he seemed anxious to veil his superiority, and, by kindness and affability, to elevate them to a feeling of equality with himself"; quick to discern "the bent of their minds," he was always able to give to the conversation "a congenial direction." But what Barbour saw as most remarkable about Madison was his ability either to control or to vanquish altogether the darker side of his passionate nature, which in other men nourished the selfish motives of revenge and spite. In testimony that other acquaintances often corroborated in a similar tone of disbelief, Barbour declared that he had never heard Madison "speak ill of any one." And such extraordinary "magnanimity of character" saved him, as a public leader, "from the degradation of prostituting his high trust to the gratification of private malice," of which, indeed, he simply had "none to gratify."³⁰

Madison's sensitive respect for the opinions, motives, and feelings of others was so much a part of the man that few who knew him — no matter in what capacity — failed to comment on it. Paul Jennings, the slave who witnessed his death, proclaimed him "one of the best

30 James Barbour, *Eulogium upon the Life and Character of James Madison* (Washington, D.C., 1836), passim (the quotations are, in sequence, from pages 6, 25, 28, 27, 28, and 21). On Barbour and his ties to Madison see Charles D. Lowery, *James Barbour, A Jeffersonian Republican* (University, Ala., 1984), passim. When Charles Jared Ingersoll visited Montpelier shortly before Madison's death, he was struck by Madison's extraordinarily balanced temperament, noting that he never once spoke disparagingly, in personal terms, of anyone, even his political adversaries, throughout the visit. See "Visit to Mr. Madison," *Richmond Enquirer* (from the *Washington Globe*), August 19, 1836.

men that ever lived." Like Coles and Barbour, Jennings recalled that he had never seen his master "in a passion," which from his perspective manifested its significance in Madison's treatment of his chattels. Jennings had never known him to have struck a slave or allowed an overseer to strike one. And whenever any of Madison's servants had been charged with theft or misbehavior, "he would send for them and admonish them privately, and never mortify them by doing it before others."³¹

Unlike Jennings, the historian Grigsby — Coles's correspondent in 1854 — had no intimate knowledge of Madison. At the tender age of twenty-three, however, he had met and observed the seventy-eight-year-old patriarch for several months when they served as fellow delegates to the Virginia Constitutional Convention of 1829–30. Grigsby later wrote historical sketches of both this convention and an earlier one that Madison had attended before Grigsby had been born — the Virginia Ratifying Convention of 1788. The historian drew his evocative portrait of Madison at both gatherings from a variety of sources, including information provided by intimates like Coles and the collective memories of earlier generations that now comprised a form of Virginia folklore. But Grigsby's personal memories of the elderly Madison, still vivid many years later, apparently did more than simply confirm the composite portrait that emerged from these other sources. They helped him understand why Madison had been so influential in the founding of the American republic — indeed, why his distinctive temperament, his mild reserve and modest detachment, had in fact enhanced rather than diminished his public influence, especially at the 1788 ratifying convention that Grigsby later chronicled.

Weighed down by the infirmities of age and by an aversion, Grigsby suspected, to "mingling too closely in the bitter strifes of a new generation," Madison had taken little part in the formal proceedings of the 1829 convention in Richmond. It was in private conversation that he had made "the strongest impression on the hearts" of young people like Grigsby. "The accuracy and freshness of his literary and political reminiscences astonished the admiring listener," the historian recalled. Amid a swirl of youthful vigor, the

31 Jennings, *A Colored Man's Reminiscences of James Madison* (Brooklyn, N.Y., 1865), 15.

old man had somehow managed to be "the delight of the social circle." After listening to Madison, moreover, Grigsby had concluded that he was simply "incapable of imputing a harsh motive to any human being." He had watched, for instance, as Madison spoke warmly to a young friend, "fresh from a New England College," of "Quincy, Otis, Daggett, Dexter, and the younger Sherman." Here the former president recalled men who had opposed his administration and the War of 1812 "with a zeal that brought them to the verge of disunion." Much to Grigsby's surprise, Madison spoke of them "with as deliberate an appreciation of their merits as if they had held a far different course."³²

Grigsby clearly revered the patriarch he met in Richmond in 1829, but as an historian he admired Madison more for his character than for his political judgment. In fact, Grigsby was a fervent latter-day Antifederalist. He introduced his history of the 1788 convention by patronizing the Madison-led Federalists, whom he charged with having misjudged Virginia's need for the protection of a more powerful federal government. Grigsby contended, on the contrary, that the commonwealth had been in the midst of a prosperous era of free trade when the convention met; not understanding — with "disastrous results" — the great truths of the science of political economy, "our fathers" had hastily adopted an unnecessary Constitution that forced Virginia to relinquish control over her commerce. Despite Grigsby's outspoken reverence for the Articles of Confederation (a government that he modestly judged "the most perfect model of a confederation which the world has ever seen"), he respected Madison's achievement in overthrowing that government and, most important, attributed his success to the public influence of an exemplary character and temperament.³³

One of Madison's most admirable qualities, Grigsby suggested, was "the courtesy and the respect with which he regarded the mo-

tives and treated the arguments of the humblest as well as the ablest of his opponents." Viewing an argument in debate "not in respect of the worth or want of worth of him who urged it," but solely "in respect of its own intrinsic worth," Madison's oratory, as Grigsby revealingly put it, was "in unison with his general character." This "philosophical cast of mind" not only kept him "free from the personalities of debate"; it was a key to understanding the outcome of the 1788 convention.³⁴ According to Grigsby, Madison's calm, judicious, and high-minded commentary on his opponents' taunts and tirades — including emotional outbursts from the Antifederalist leaders Patrick Henry and George Mason — exercised tremendous, ultimately decisive, influence on many of his fellow delegates. This wise posture offered a striking contrast to that of his friend Edmund Randolph who, lacking Madison's control, "could not repress a spirit of sarcasm and defiance in answering the purely political interrogatories of Henry." And according to Grigsby, Madison's exemplary behavior at this 1788 convention established a reputation for him that, "diffused throughout the State," became "the groundwork of his subsequent popularity."³⁵ What the young historian had seen in the elderly Madison whom he met in Richmond in 1829, in sum, was winning evidence of the distinctive character and temperament that had made Madison, four decades earlier, Virginia's premier statesman and "the Father of the Constitution."



By Edward Coles's standards, history has failed to do Madison justice. The dominant image that has come down through the years is not the appealing portrait sketched by Coles, Barbour, and Grigsby,

³² Hugh B. Grigsby, *The Virginia Convention of 1829-30: A Discourse Delivered Before the Virginia Historical Society* (Richmond, 1854), 9, 11, 12. Obviously Madison's admirers, including Grigsby, exaggerated his benevolent temper. Earlier in his career, especially, he had been most capable of imputing harsh motives to others and of indulging his own measure of partisan passion.

³³ Hugh Blair Grigsby, *The History of the Virginia Federal Convention of 1788 . . .*, reprinted in *Collections of the Virginia Historical Society*, new series, IX, 11-13, 18, 21.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 97-98; Grigsby, *Virginia Convention of 1829-30*, 10-11. Senator Thomas Hart Benton, in his recollections of Madison, made a similar point when he referred to Madison's speeches and writings "as illustrations of the amenity with which the most earnest debate, and the most critical correspondence, can be conducted by good sense, good taste, and good temper." See *Thirty Years' View; or, A History of the Working of the American Government for Thirty Years, from 1820 to 1850* (New York, 1854), I, 679. I am indebted to Elaine Swift for bringing this material to my attention.

³⁵ Grigsby, *History of Convention of 1788*, 97-98.

but rather one of a diminutive scholar characteristically clothed in black – a reclusive, soft-spoken, colorless figure, intelligent and learned perhaps, but lacking both the warmth and the vigorous presence of his charismatic colleague Jefferson. Those who knew better – which is to say, those who knew Madison well – would be peeved, but probably not surprised, to learn what history has made of him. Margaret Bayard Smith, a sensitive observer of the Washington scene and an especially astute judge of both character and ideas, always found Madison captivating. After spending a long evening at Montpelier in 1828, she reported to a correspondent that her host's conversation – "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" – had an overwhelming "interest and charm" that the conversation of few living men could. She then added sadly, however, that "this entertaining, interesting and communicative personage, had a single stranger or indifferent person been present, would have been mute, cold and repulsive."³⁶

Smith's comment reminds us of the conspicuous qualities of modesty, reserve, and detachment that generated what was in fact a common impression among "strangers": that Madison was cold, gloomy, and unsociable. His reluctance to assert his presence – and to impose himself and his views on others, whether in the drawing room or in the public arena – helped form the familiar image of him as the shy, sober, withdrawn intellectual who was simply too timid to inspire, much less command, his fellow citizens. But those qualities have been too easily exaggerated and misconstrued, in Madison's time and our own, and we must be especially wary of inadvertently conflating Madison's diminutive stature, his mild temperament, and the Federalist caricatures of his ineptitude as president³⁷ and mistaking the result for the prevalent image of him in his own time, especially during his retirement. When one of

³⁶ Gaillard Hunt, ed., *The First Forty Years of Washington Society* . . . (New York, 1906), 235.

³⁷ For a discussion of how the Federalists created "a Madison mythology" that has (regrettably) dominated the writing of history, see Irving Brant, "Madison and the War of 1812," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 74 (1966), 51–67.

Madison's twentieth-century biographers observes of his public demeanor, for instance, that "as always throughout his life, he was regarded as a learned and agreeable person, but not as an inspiring leader," we can see better how modern judgments of "leadership" (as well as the Federalist caricature) can shade imperceptibly into assessments of how Madison's contemporaries must have viewed him.³⁸ And we can learn even more about Madison and the cultural significance of his character by viewing him through the eyes of a few acute observers who juxtaposed him with his most famous associate.

Most but not all of Madison's admirers also admired Jefferson. The tradition of comparing the two men began while they were alive, especially after 1817 when it was common for American and foreign travelers alike to call upon the two retired presidents who lived only thirty miles apart. Some visitors recorded their impressions and, without necessarily drawing invidious distinctions, tended to judge each in the light of the other. George Ticknor, a young professor at Harvard College who had met and befriended Jefferson ten years earlier, visited both Montpelier and Monticello in December 1824. Now in his mid-seventies, Madison struck Ticknor as "certainly the gayest person of that age" he had ever known. Declining to talk about "passing political events" for fear of becoming embroiled in partisan controversy, he nonetheless sparkled in conversation. Ticknor, who taught languages and belles lettres at Harvard, judged Madison's "power over the English language" as "quite remarkable"; he had seldom encountered anyone "whose common conversation was marked with such a richness, variety & felicity of expression." Yet Ticknor also noticed that Madison tended to confine this conversation within "narrow boundaries" and that his range of subjects was "somewhat limited." As Ticknor described Madison, there was indeed a marked quality of restraint about the man. He declined to discuss matters he considered inappropriate or about which he judged himself uninformed or ignorant. Although Ticknor did not present Madison's discretionary caution and apparent intellectual timidity as serious deficiencies, his tone suggested disappointment.

Jefferson, by contrast, was far less inhibited in Ticknor's pres-

³⁸ Abbot Emerson Smith, *James Madison: Builder* (New York, 1937), 329–330.



Thomas Jefferson in 1821. Replica of a portrait painted from life by Thomas Sully at Monticello. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division)

ence. He talked about anything and everything, which impressed the professor from Cambridge. Here was a man who, at eighty-one, still studied Greek and Anglo-Saxon and kept abreast of the "progress of knowledge" far better than did most of Ticknor's students.

If Madison had declined to comment on the current political scene, moreover, Jefferson expressed himself on this subject as freely as on any other, vigorously conveying, for instance, his distaste for the presidential candidacy of Andrew Jackson. Yet Ticknor also noticed something else that appears to have disturbed him: despite his voluble candor, Jefferson was in fact "singularly ignorant & insensible on the subjects of passing politics." He received only one newspaper and failed to maintain "a strict intercourse with the post office." Indeed, though Jefferson expressed strong views on the presidential contest, he was badly misinformed, believing, for example, that Connecticut had cast its votes for Jackson. "In all this," Ticknor wrote, "he differs very signally from Mr. Madison, who receives multitudes of newspapers, keeps a servant always in waiting for the arrival of the Post – and takes anxious note of all passing events."³⁹

Ticknor was not the only professor drawn to comparative observation. George Tucker, who taught moral philosophy at Jefferson's University of Virginia, had even greater opportunity to contemplate the two retired statesmen whom he so much admired. In 1835 he published a highly complimentary biography of Jefferson which he dedicated to Madison. Over twenty years later, when Tucker began to sketch a history of his own life, he included recollections of the two legendary patriarchs that quietly juxtaposed their characters and personalities. He confided to his journal that Madison had been "an especial favorite with me ever since I had known him, for independent of his profound and far-reaching views in the science of government and legislation, he had unwonted gentleness and suavity of manner, which joined to a large fund of anecdote which he told very well, made him one of the most companionable men in existence." Tucker found this "habitual cheerfulness" all the more remarkable after learning from Madison's physician that he had suffered from three diseases during his retirement, "any one of which might at any moment have carried him off." Tucker was moved to add, moreover, that "Mr. Jefferson too had most winning manners when he chose to exert them, but he was occasionally somewhat

³⁹ George Ticknor to George Bancroft, Dec. 26, 1824, Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

dictatorial and impatient of contradiction, which Mr. Madison never appeared to be."⁴⁰

Tucker adverted here to a significant contrast in temperament that had not been lost upon others. In 1807 Sir Augustus John Foster, a young British diplomat, included both Montpelier and Monticello on his itinerary when he journeyed south from Washington. Foster was not enamored of either the young republic or its leading lights, but before this journey he had apparently viewed Jefferson as "more of a statesman and man of the world" than his secretary of state, the pedantic Madison, whom Foster thought "rather too much the disputatious pleader." Foster discovered, however, that Madison was not only "better informed" but "a social, jovial and good-humoured companion full of anecdote and sometimes matter of a loose description relating to old times, but oftener of a political and historical interest." The Englishman noticed, indeed, that Madison differed from his more famous compatriot in subtle but telling ways. According to Foster, Jefferson was notorious "for his holding to any opinion that he had taken up, no matter whose, with great obstinacy." Apparently the English diplomat saw nothing at Monticello to call into question the gist of an anecdote that had been related to him in Washington by Daniel Clark, the elected delegate to Congress from the New Orleans Territory. Having been invited one evening by President Jefferson to discuss the Territory, Clark remained at the White House for three hours. During their interview Clark discovered that the president had been "falsely informed" on several points. When the congressman attempted to correct him, however, Jefferson continually recurred "to his own sentiment founded on such false reports." The exasperated Clark concluded that Jefferson's aim was to try to get him to commit himself, "by hook or crook," to the president's own theory, "getting at the real fact appearing with him to be quite of inferior importance."⁴¹

40 "Autobiography of George Tucker," *The Bermuda Historical Quarterly* 18 (1961), 141-142.

41 Richard Beale Davis, ed., *Jeffersonian America: Notes on the United States of America Collected in the Years 1805-6-7 and 11-12 by Sir Augustus John Foster, Bart.* (San Marino, Calif., 1954), 154-155.

Foster's preference for the less imperious and self-absorbed Madison was shared by a later European visitor, who also recorded his impressions of the two men. In the late spring of 1825, Carlo Vidua, a widely traveled and well educated forty-year-old Italian count, undertook the American presidential tour. After visiting John Adams in Massachusetts, he turned south to Virginia. Stopping first at Montpelier on the morning of May 11, Vidua sketched a vivid portrait of Madison for a correspondent in Italy:

My visit lasted until the next day because he invited me to dinner, then did not let me leave that night, and would have liked me to remain there some days longer. He is a small, thin old man, but of a kindly and pleasant face; his bearing is very aristocratic, and without assuming the air of importance and dignity befitting one of his station, he displays an indescribable gentleness and charm, which I thought impossible to find in an American. I have heard very few people speak with such precision and, above all, with such fairness.⁴²

Two days later Vidua was at Monticello. Suffering from the arrival of hot weather, the eighty-two-year-old Jefferson was barely well enough to receive the visitor, who hoped to use a letter he carried from the renowned German traveler and scholar Alexander von Humboldt to gain his host's attention. Vidua was finally able to ask Jefferson the same list of questions that he had posed to Madison and Adams, ranging over such topics as the recent revolutions in Spanish America, the prospects for the abolition of slavery in the United States, and the potential effects of extending the American system of government to Europe. Both Jefferson and Madison, Vidua wrote, gave "complete and detailed answers" to his queries. He hinted, with a touch of irony perhaps, that Madison — who had never been to Europe — displayed a much more sensitive understanding of the complex issues involved in the last subject than did the more cosmopolitan Jefferson. And on the whole, Vidua concluded, Madison's reflections struck him as "the most profound" and "the most weighty," denoting both "a great mind and a good heart."⁴³

42 Elizabeth Cometti and Valeria Gennaro-Lerda, "The Presidential Tour of Carlo Vidua with Letters on Virginia," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 77 (1969), 396.

43 *Ibid.*, 399-400.

The Italian confessed, however, that his comparative judgments may have been affected by Madison's exceptional kindness. Vidua apparently had serious difficulties with English. "It may be that I feel myself transported with gratitude," he mused, because although all of his presidential hosts "indicated that they enjoyed my conversation," only "Mr. Madison was kind enough to speak slowly and clearly in order to allow me to understand, and to pay careful attention to comprehending my English so full of gallicisms." According to Vidua, the American people generally celebrated Jefferson as "the first man" of the republic and, in keeping with their practice of boasting, "the first of the whole world." Only "a few persons" shared his own preference for Madison — but "the kind of men these few are," he added, "consoles me for not adhering to the common people's view."⁴⁴

John Quincy Adams believed he had taken fair measure of both men in the years after 1800. In his eulogy of Madison in 1836, the former secretary of state and president made no secret of his dislike of Jefferson and his reverence of the less celebrated colleague. Madison's relationship with Jefferson, Adams concluded, was "the friendship of a mind not inferior in capacity and tempered with a calmer sensibility and a cooler judgment."⁴⁵ Six years later, another New Englander who had embraced Jeffersonianism during Jefferson's presidency, Supreme Court justice and Harvard law professor Joseph Story, echoed Adams's judgment. Story privately shared his admiration of Madison with Ezekiel Bacon — who also had been a Jeffersonian in the early years of the century. "I entirely concur with you," he told Bacon, "in your estimate of Mr. Madison — his private virtues, his extraordinary talents, his comprehensive and statesman-

like views. . . . in wisdom I have long been accustomed to place him before Jefferson."⁴⁶

No doubt Story and Bacon recalled their days together as Jeffersonian members of Congress during the final months of the great embargo of 1807–1809. No doubt, too, they knew that an enraged Jefferson had never forgiven them for their role in persuading Congress to repeal his administration's system of commercial legislation. What they did not know was that when President Madison had been desperately searching for a nominee to the Supreme Court in 1810, he had floated Story's name past Jefferson. The sage of Monticello had dismissed the candidacy of the thirty-one-year-old Massachusetts lawyer, whom he called "a pseudorepublican." Jefferson reminded Madison, indeed, that the loathsome Story was a "tory" who had "deserted us." Madison appointed Story to the Court.⁴⁷ Speaking of the two leaders of their old party, Story observed to Bacon in 1842 that "you and I know something more of each of them in trying times, than the common politicians of our day can possibly arrive at. I wish some one who was perfectly fitted for the task, would write a full and accurate biography of Madison. I fear that it can hardly be done now; for the men who best appreciated his excellences have nearly all passed away. What shadows we are!"⁴⁸



To use Charles Ingersoll's phrase: what, then, is the shading of this seeming strain of panegyric? Viewed through the eyes of Story and the many others who admired him, Madison approached and pro-

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 400.

⁴⁵ John Quincy Adams, *Eulogy on James Madison* (Boston, 1836), 54. As Merrill D. Peterson has wryly noted, Adams's funeral eulogy was "a remarkable performance," nothing less, indeed, than "an apology for Madison's Jeffersonianism." See Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (New York, 1960), 136. Even more explicit and specific indications of Adams's strong feelings about the two men can be found in his letter to Edward Everett of October 10, 1836, in the Edward Everett Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁴⁶ Joseph Story to Ezekiel Bacon, Apr. 30, 1842, in William W. Story, ed., *Life and Letters of Joseph Story* (Boston, 1851), II, 420.

⁴⁷ Jefferson to Henry Dearborn, July 16, 1810, and Jefferson to Madison, Oct. 15, 1810, in Paul Leicester Ford, ed., *The Works of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1905), XI, 143, 151–152. See also James McClellan, *Joseph Story and the American Constitution: A Study in Political and Legal Thought* (Norman, Okla., 1971), chap. 1, and R. Kent Newmyer, *Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story: Statesman of the Old Republic* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1985), 70–72.

⁴⁸ Story to Bacon, Apr. 30, 1842, in Story, *Life and Letters*, II, 420.