

Center *for the Study of the* American Constitution

No. 2: James Madison 1751-1836

Born in 1751, James Madison called himself “a child of the Revolution.” The eldest son of the wealthiest planter in Orange County, Virginia, Madison received a liberal education culminating at the College of New Jersey (Princeton), where the Revolutionary philosophy was instilled in him by the college president, the Reverend John Witherspoon, a recent Scottish immigrant. After graduating in three years and studying another year directly under Witherspoon, Madison returned to Virginia where he became active in county and then state Revolutionary government service.

The state legislature elected Madison to Congress, where he served three consecutive one-year terms from 1781 to 1783, making him ineligible for the next three years. (Under the Articles of Confederation, delegates to Congress could serve only three years within any six-year period.) Madison came to be one of the most active and influential delegates in Congress. He sought to increase Congress’ powers either through amendments or through a broad interpretation of the Articles themselves.

When he returned to Virginia, Madison served as a leading figure in the House of Delegates. For two years he strenuously opposed Patrick Henry’s proposal for a general assessment, or taxes, to provide public support for Christian (non-Catholic) ministers. Instead, Madison obtained legislative approval of Virginia’s Act for Religious Freedom, a proposal initiated seven years earlier by Thomas Jefferson. While serving in the state legislature, Madison continued his efforts to strengthen Congress. He served in the Annapolis Convention and wrote the Virginia act authorizing the election of delegates to the Constitutional Convention to which he was elected. He was the primary author of the Virginia Plan that served as the agenda for the Constitutional Convention, and he was one of the most frequent speakers in the Convention. His extensive notes, published posthumously in 1840, provide the most thorough account of the Convention’s proceedings and debates.

Reappointed to Congress in 1787, Madison was active in the debate to ratify the new Constitution. While in New York City, he served as a clearinghouse of information for Federalists throughout the country, wrote about one-third of the eighty-five numbers of *The Federalist* (along with Alexander Hamilton and John Jay), and successfully led Virginia Federalists in ratifying the Constitution in the state convention in June 1788. In January 1789 he was elected to the first U.S. House of Representatives. He wrote George Washington’s presidential inaugural address and served as Washington’s de facto protocol secretary for two years. Opposed to the economic and diplomatic policies of Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton, Madison and Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson established an opposition political party. After four terms in Congress, Madison retired in 1797. Under President Jefferson, Madison served as secretary of state from 1801 to 1809, during which time the Louisiana Purchase took place. In 1809 Madison succeeded Jefferson and served two terms as president. In 1817, he retired from public service to Montpelier, his Orange County plantation, where in 1836 he died at the age of eighty-five. ■

Eliza House Trist to Thomas Jefferson, 13 April 1784

He has a Soul replete with gentleness humanity and every social virtue. . . .

William Short to Thomas Jefferson, Richmond, 15 May 1784

The [Virginia] Assembly have not yet proceeded to active Business. They have formed great Hopes of Mr. Madison, and those who know him best think he will not disappoint their

most sanguine Expectations.

Luigi Castiglioni: Sketches of American Statesmen, 1787

He is a man of about 30 years of age, of likable manners and unaffected modesty.

William Pierce: Sketches of Members of the Constitutional Convention, 1787

Mr. Maddison is a character who has long been in public life; and what is very remarkable every Person seems to acknowledge his greatness. He blends together the profound politician, with the Scholar. In the management of every great question he evidently took the lead in the Convention, and tho' he cannot be called an Orator, he is a most agreeable, eloquent, and convincing Speaker. From a spirit of industry and application which he possesses in a most eminent degree, he always comes forward the best informed Man of any point in debate. The affairs of the United States, he perhaps, has the most correct knowledge of, of any Man in the Union. He has been twice a Member of Congress, and was always thought one of the ablest Members that ever sat in that Council. Mr. Maddison is about 37 years of age, a Gentleman of great modesty,—with a remarkable sweet temper. He is easy and unreserved among his acquaintances, and has a most agreeable style of conversation.

Bushrod Washington to George Washington, Richmond, 7 June 1788

[In the Virginia ratifying Convention.] Mr. Madison followed, and with such force of reasoning, and a display of such irresistible truths, that opposition seemed to have quitted the field.

Cyrus Griffin to James Madison, New York, 14 April 1789

We all rejoice greatly at your election [to the U.S. House of Representatives]; indeed, my dear sir, we consider you as the main pillar of the business on the right side.

Fisher Ames to George Richards Minot, New York, 3 May 1789

Madison is a man of sense, reading, address, and integrity, as 'tis allowed. Very much Frenchified in his politics. [He favors the French over the British.] He speaks low, his person is little and ordinary. He speaks decently, as to **manner**, and no more. His language is very pure, perspicuous, and to the point. Pardon me, if I add, that I think him a little too much of a book politician, and too timid in his politics, for prudence and caution are opposites of timidity. He is not a little of a Virginian, and thinks that state the land of promise, but is afraid of their state politics, and of his popularity there, more than I think he should be. . . . He is our first man.

Fisher Ames to George Richards Minot, New York, 29 May 1789

He is very much devoted to the French, it is said, and his reasonings were not very logical [on the bill to discriminate against British imports], nor much to the credit of his political character. That you may be less liable to misunderstand my idea of him in future, take this explication of it. He is probably deficient in that fervor and vigor of character which you will expect in a great man. He is not likely to risk bold measures, like Charles Fox, nor even to persevere in any measures against a firm opposition, like the first Pitt. He derives from nature an excellent understanding, however, but I think he excels in the quality of judgment. He is possessed of a sound judgment, which perceives truth with great clearness, and can trace it through the mazes of debate, without losing it. He is admirable for this inestimable talent. As a reasoner, he is remarkably perspicuous and methodical. He is a studious man, devoted to public business, and a thorough master of almost every public question that can arise, or he will spare no pains to become so, if he happens to be in want of information. What a man understands clearly, and has viewed in every different point of light, he will explain to the admiration of others, who have not thought of it at all, or but little, and who will pay in praise for the pains he saves them. His clear perception of an argument makes him impressive, and persuasive sometimes. It is not his *forte*, however. Upon the whole, he is an useful, respectable, worthy man, in a degree so eminent, that his character will not sink. He will continue to be a very influential man in our country. Let me add, without meaning to detract, that he is too much attached to his theories, for a politician. He is well versed in public life, was bred to it, and has no other profession. Yet, may I say it, it is rather a science, than a business, with him. He adopts his maxims as he finds them in books, and with too little regard to the actual state of things.

William L. Smith to Edward Rutledge, New York, 9 August 1789

Mr. Madison is a great friend to a strong government—his great abilities will always give him much weight with the administration—I believe he now is much in the confidence of the President & he will hereafter stand a chance of being President himself; in the meantime, he will be a leading man in the Cabinet Council. His mildness of character & a certain timidity which accompanies his political conduct render him unfriendly to a republican government.

Abigail Adams to Cotton Tufts, New York, 1 September 1789

Mr. Madison is a very amiable character, a man of virtue & probity.

William Samuel Johnson: Conversation with George Beckwith, New York, 1789

Mr. Maddison, a Delegate from Virginia took a very active and leading part [in the congressional debates]. He is an Elve of Mr. Jefferson's, who is still our Minister at Paris, and may be esteemed as not exempt from a French bias. . . . and [Madison] being a man of genius and talents, his exertions had a considerable influence.

Thomas Lee Shippen to William Shippen, 12 April 1790

I am already charmed with Madison. Both before & at dinner yesterday I had a great deal of conversation with him, and I really begin to think that he deserves all his reputation.

Andrew Craigie to Daniel Parker, New York, 5 May 1790

Mr. Madison[’s] politicks this session have disgusted many of his best friends.

Abigail Adams to Cotton Tufts, 30 May 1790

Madison leads the Virginians like a flock of sheep.

John Trumbull to John Adams, 5 June 1790

Maddison's character is certainly not rising in the public estimation. He now acts on a conspicuous stage and does not equal expectation. He becomes more and more a Southern Partisan and loses his assumed candor and moderation. Indeed no man seems to have gained much reputation in the present session of Congress.

Alexander Hamilton to Edward Carrington, Philadelphia, 26 May 1792

In respect to our foreign politics the views of these Gentlemen [Madison and Jefferson] are in my judgment equally unsound & dangerous. *They have a womanish attachment to France and a womanish resentment against Great Britain.*

Edward Livingston to Robert R. Livingston, Philadelphia, 24 December 1795

His great fault as a politician appears to me a want of decision and a disposition to magnify his adversaries strength. [He has] a habit of considering the objections to his own plans so long and so frequently that they acquire a real weight & influence his conduct. . . . He never determines to act until he is absolutely forced by the pressure of affairs & then regrets that he has neglected some better opportunity. . . . He is a very amiable very well informed, and I believe one of the most honest & upright men this country possesses.

Margaret Bayard Smith to Susan B. Smith, Washington, D.C., 26 May 1801

I admire the simplicity and mildness of Mr. M's manners, and his smile has so much benevolence in it, that it cannot fail of inspiring good will and esteem.

Joseph Story to Samuel P. P. Fay, Washington, D.C., 30 May 1807

Madison is a most agreeable, modest, and unaffected man, of a short stature, and of a mild countenance. He converses with ease, and seems very well versed in diplomacy. The character of his mind seems to be formed by that of Jefferson, and the pupil is not an unfinished likeness of the master. He has the reputation of a well-read scholar, and without doubt would always sustain a considerable rank in the counsels of a free government.■