

Diderot once wrote to David Hume: "The reason I love you is because you would not demand of a poor wretch his baptismal certificate!" It was America's incalculable good fortune that one of its master builders, James Madison, was a man of this stripe. Modest, sagacious, and temperate, this great little Virginian devoted himself with such genuine fidelity to public service, that he has recently been described in Congress as "the most unhonored and unsung of the Founding Fathers." Even men who write and teach American history and government tend to give him conventional notice as the "father of the Constitution" but quickly pass from the human father to the paper child. Unlike John Adams, with whom Madison may be said to have shared an undeserved neglect from the American people, Madison never fought for a personal place in the artificial sunshine of history, never even availed himself of the opportunities tendered him by eager would-be biographers. Always cooperative when he was solicited for information and anecdotes on the other brilliant leaders of his time, he consistently refused to make himself the center of celebration or acclaim. As his brief autobiographical note conclusively indicates, he was a different man who shrank from self-display and directed inquirers to his papers on public subjects, letters, official transactions, finding this appropriate for "one whose whole life has in a manner been a public life." There is then a pleasing sense of the first faint stirrings of long-overdue justice in the campaign waged successfully by Irving Brant, Madison's first competent professional biographer, to have a monument built in his honor in Washington. In Brant's chiding words, "We should erect a memorial to Madison not because he needs it but because we do."

More than two generations younger than Benjamin Franklin, Madison, devoted to the same Enlightenment philosophy long before he met the aged statesman in person, had been impressed by his wisdom and genius. For the last four years of Franklin's life, while he attended the Constitutional Convention and served as President of the Council of Pennsylvania, Franklin and Madison became friends. The extent of the younger

statesman's appreciation of the aged doctor is indicated by the notes he took of the lively anecdotes the latter told in his hearing, and which Madison re-told fondly in later years. Madison was also a close and valued younger associate of George Washington; and for some time before they became arch-enemies, a cordial associate of Alexander Hamilton; but, above all, he was for half a century the intimate and perfect friend of Thomas Jefferson, whom he once called his "Tutelary Genius." Thus, when Madison died in 1836, he brought to a close the most fruitful era in American political thought and history. Madison himself was the last great luminary of the American Enlightenment, who had had friendly ties to all the men in that remarkable company of creative statesmen who forged Independence, created a representative republic, developed the American national party system, and definitively established the real independence and character of America.

Although a century and a quarter has passed since Madison died, only a tiny handful of scholars seem to understand the depth and solidity of Madison's contribution to our system of representative government. To be sure his role as the foremost architect of the Constitution is conceded by all, and this achievement did represent a high point in his career. But it was by no means an isolated, nor his first, nor final contribution! Had Madison's work in Philadelphia not been prepared for by his previous years of bold leadership in the movement for continental unification; had it not been marked by his telling campaigns for religious freedom and other legislative reforms in Virginia that brought him a deserved reputation for devotion to liberty and justice; and had his constitutional role not been followed by his constructive labors to organize the Republican party under the first administrations of the new federal government—Madison's would have been an enigmatic performance, open to widely different speculations on its worth and significance. Moreover, although Madison himself clearly did not set supreme value on the holding of public office, his Secretaryship of State and also the two terms of his Presidency (that "splendid misery" in Jefferson's phrase) were far from barren of distinctive results. Thus, it is not too much to say that Madison's significant work, over time, is at last emerging from the shadows in the second half of the twentieth century, whence, it is hoped, it will develop its own course in the future.

Since Madison was not Lincolnesque in person, nor gifted with the magic of Jefferson's bright phrases and memorable prose, nor whirled about with the turbulent passions of discovery and self-scrutiny of John Adams, nor driven by the fierce flame of glory and masterful national policy of Hamilton—one asks: wherein lay his power, and what was the creative vision at the center of his being?

The answer is to be found somewhere in the following cluster of motivations and character traits. From his early youth on, Madison was apparently deeply concerned about religion and yet critical of orthodoxy

and its presumptions to final truth, as well as to its intolerable practice of forcing men's conscience. He was thus both religiously oriented and rationally enlightened, and these strong interests were reinforced by the education he received at Dr. Witherspoon's hands when he attended Princeton College. We should note that in addition to the moral philosophy of the English and of the Scottish Enlightenment—his close reading of the works of Locke, Hume, Adam Ferguson, Adam Smith, Francis Hutcheson, Thomas Reid, and Lord Kames developed his "very early and strong impressions in favor of Liberty both Civil and Religious." An honest and earnest spirit, seeking more than fancy work and shunning the mere employment for gain (he would not be a Virginia planter on principle, since he was resolved "to depend as little as possible on the labour of slaves") naturally found an ideal vocation in the study of the principles and varieties of government; but that same conscience would not let him rest with theoretical or scholarly study only, driving him on to practice the politics of his reflective choice.

To this taste for social and political inquiry in their ethical bearings, he brought another distinctive mental talent—that of acute and penetrating logical analysis. Madison's Tenth Federalist Paper, unquestionably the most famous of the 85 essays that comprise this classic of American political literature, is only the most familiar of innumerable writings of Madison's that achieve admirable philosophical tidiness and clarity without sacrifice of observational content. Other land-marks are: Madison's cogent "Notes of Ancient and Modern Confederacies;" his speeches in the Constitutional Convention and in the Virginia Ratifying Convention; a goodly group of substantive letters expounding ideas or issues (such as his critique of Jefferson's proposed principle that "The earth belongs always to the living generation"); and his letters on union and nullification in the last years of his life; more than a few superb essays and public papers—notably his bold arguments for religious freedom and the separation of church and state in the "Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments" (1785); his defense of intellectual freedom and limited but popular government in the Report of 1800 which he submitted to the Virginia legislature in 1799; and his Treatise, written while Secretary of State in Jefferson's second administration, on neutral trade in which he developed the doctrine of freedom of the seas and neutral rights (1806)—a report estimated by John Quincy Adams to be "a standard treatise in the Law of Nations, not inferior to the works of any writer upon those subjects since the day of Grotius."

Unifying the workings of his keen mind and his strong feelings about a serious vocation of public service was the alchemy of his temperament, his personal approach to men and values. His was the priceless gift of creative compromise, born of his deep-felt courtesy to others, and the schooled and "cool" judgment that permitted him to see and to understand points of view and desires widely different from his own. In his

mid-thirties, William Pierce of Georgia, a fellow delegate at the Constitutional Convention, described him in this fashion: "Mr. Madison . . . blends together the profound politician with the scholar. In the management of every great question he evidently took the lead in the convention, and though 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. . . . Mr. Madison is about thirty-seven 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." That "remarkable sweet temper" goes a long way to explain the quality and radiance of Madison's many friendships and his many triumphs as legislative leader and political organizer.

One should not imagine, however, that Madison's sweet temper clouded his judgment, or reduced his realistic estimate and flexible handling of men. On the contrary, though the sweet temper was there, to conciliate, to effect creative compromises and modifications, to persevere, it was fortified in hard and momentous cases, with steely courage and decisiveness. Thus Madison, who had opened the Constitutional Convention with the position of the nationalistic Virginia Plan, worked tirelessly to achieve a genuine federated union, and not, as he said, a mere treaty among sovereign states. He had balanced, throughout the deliberations, the often opposite claims of libertarian, democratic human rights with imperative needs for a stronger union. Although he was "conservative" if that label means that he was concerned to provide security for property, he was also "liberal" in his determination to advance the personal liberty and happiness of the people and to avert conditions that would "blast the glory of the Revolution." The constitution, with its inflexible provisions against absolute power—whether the absolutism of a monarchy, an aristocracy, an oligarchy, or a reckless and despotic majority—in effect established a unique new form, a modern large-scale republic of limited powers. In a revealing one-sentence gloss on the Constitution as a political experiment, Madison said: "Every step was a contest between power and liberty." His patient committee work and indefatigable contributions to the debate on the Constitution all bore fruit because he was not Utopian in his thought, nor fanatical in spirit. As he once commented, with seasoned insight, "That government is best which is the least imperfect."

Then, after having struggled unrelentingly for the far-from-ideal Constitution, Madison swiftly estimated that the big battle still lay ahead, and he lost no time in preparing the public opinion that alone could float it to victory. The Federalist Papers, with their full exploration of the need for and meaning of federation, and their equally persuasive

instruction on the nature of the American democratic republic, was another heroic task of daily and unremitting labor in the months following the close of the Convention in Philadelphia. They were offered to readers under the pseudonym "Publius," and Madison and Hamilton achieved a sensational teamwork, feeding the intricate essays to the press almost before the ink had dried. Although Madison's and Hamilton's views were far from identical, they stood together solidly in showing why the Articles of Confederation had failed to exercise adequate governmental control and why a strong but limited republican government, based on popular consent, would be a benefit to the various states and various interests of the people in the states rather than a Leviathan to fear. The last and crucial arena for constitutional struggle, however, was in the state conventions themselves as they went for ratification. Madison, whose supposedly "frail" constitution has been too much noticed by historians and critics (following his own youthful declaration that ill health after his graduate study made him doubt that he would live long) hastened to Virginia to take up the staggering burden of principal advocate for ratification against what appeared to be an invincible opposition, led by the peerless orator, Patrick Henry. But Madison's weaker voice, since it conveyed pertinent information, greater truth, and a more generous hope for the future of the United States, achieved a resonance that ultimately drowned Henry's.

Instructive, too, in revealing Madison's stature as a philosopher-statesman is the generalship he provided in the critical years that followed after he had engineered ratification of the Constitution by Virginia—then the largest, most populous and most powerful state on the North American continent. As the first administration of President Washington opened, Madison quickly seized leadership in what was then the small and very select House of Representatives. Recent scholarship has shown that Madison was unquestionably the organizer of the Republican Party from early in the decade of the 1790's. In this period, Madison found himself in serious political disagreement with the political objectives and financial policies of Hamilton, his former collaborator in The Federalist Papers, and Madison joined wholeheartedly with Jefferson in formulating the ideology of the Republican Party. Differences that had always existed between Madison's and Hamilton's outlook were now hardened. Madison believed that the Hamiltonian program was attempting to "administer" the government into something fundamentally different from what the Constitution had provided. In his view, Hamilton's program played to a moneyed elite and thus threatened to erode the faith of the majority of the people (who were predominantly farmers and workers) in the new federal system. In a dramatic piece of political journalism, Madison phrased the issue this way: men had "rights to property" but also "property in rights." The second kind of property was the "larger and juster" sense of the concept, including everything to which men attach values

—religious opinions, the liberty and safety of their persons, the free use of their minds. Just governments will not confine their respect for property to the narrow concerns of money, possessions, external things—but will respect the property in rights of all the people. Not content with arguments based on the achievement of power alone, Madison interpreted the historic role of the Constitution and the government under it to be that of making power the means to the great human objective of liberty. In his philosophical reflections on the principles of government, when he was an old man, he summed up these thoughts in a phrase about America as “the workshop of liberty.”

Greater challenge and days of stress lay ahead for Madison, but from the early 1790's on his political philosophy tallied in essential points with the increasingly democratic version of republican government that we normally associate with Jefferson's name alone. Although Jefferson would always be more emphatic in his formulations about civil liberties and the moral and political ideal of equality, Madison gave him essential and effective support. They stood together against the Alien and Sedition Acts, even though Madison, as the expert philosopher of the Constitution, cautioned and moderated Jefferson's position. The Kentucky Resolutions that Jefferson drafted and the Virginia Resolutions that Madison wrote brought to a focus the repeated charges they had made that the Federalists were bent upon destroying the residual powers of the states, that they were “unconstitutional” because prepared to stretch the express federal powers in the Constitution to the point where they made the provisions of the Constitution a meaningless exercise in the limbo of legal paperwork. Since both sets of resolutions, after protesting the tyranny over opinion and free political criticism inherent in the Alien and Sedition Acts, called upon their “sister states” to express their opinions, Madison always pointed out that there was no warranted connection between the South Carolina doctrine of nullification and secession and the Resolutions of '98 and '99.

Even more valuable, perhaps, was the solidarity of outlook, program and daily political decision that existed between Jefferson as President and Madison as his Secretary of State. In perfect accord with Jefferson's radical peace policy of Embargo, Madison himself as the next President had to contend with the war that policy had tried to avert. Although Madison's Presidency has never been given the highest marks by the standard-setting historians, Brant's study of his administration has corrected the general picture in several significant aspects. For one thing, Madison can no longer be considered a hapless instrument of the young “Warhawks” in Congress; for another, the effects of the War of 1812 are now considered along with the battle-by-battle setbacks that Henry Adams concentrated on with such deliberate irony, and once the effects—of a new confidence in the enterprise, integrity and spirit of America as an independent nation—are so re-introduced, the opera bouffe interpretation of the war becomes somewhat less persuasive. Meanwhile,

Madison emerged from the grinding agonies of the Presidency not reduced but raised in the estimation of his countrymen. Numerous congratulatory addresses and newspaper tributes were paid to Madison at the close of his administration, but a letter from Albert Gallatin, from Paris, must have brought balm to his soul because of the known worth of the writer. "Few indeed have the good fortune," Gallatin wrote, "after such career as yours, to carry in their retirement the entire approbation of their fellow citizens with that of their own conscience. Never was a country left in a more flourishing situation than the United States at the end of your administration; and they are more united at home and respected abroad than at any period since the war of the independence."

If we try to penetrate the veil that Madison self-effacingly drew over his private life, likes, and loves (and what American is chaste enough to be free of that temptation?), we are taken back to the scholarly young Virginian who described his family lineage as that of "respectable, though not the most opulent Class" of Virginia planters. Madison's father, a justice of the peace and a vestryman in the Anglican church, willingly undertook the expense of his son's education; but even when Madison was active in public life he continued to depend on economic support from his father, plus loans from time to time from friends. The revolutionary war created serious financial problems for the Madisons at home, and the depreciation of war and post-war, when Virginia was unable to pay the salaries of her delegates to the Congress, put the young legislator in acute embarrassment for funds. A credit line is due to Haym Solomon, the patriotic money-lender in Philadelphia, who bailed Madison out on repeated occasions (as he did other Congressmen), refusing to take any interest. On this score, one should recall that Madison had set for himself the most rigid standards of honesty, resolving "never to deal in public property, land, debts, or money whilst a member of a [political] body whose proceedings might influence these transactions."

From innumerable converging bits of evidence, it is clear that Madison was quite a different personality in his relaxed and friendly relationships from what he was in public. Gay and effusive letters to college friends are on record in his early years, even when his bantering leads up to an earnest moral point. He remained a methodical and constant reader all through his life and, as is usually true of bookish persons, knew how to maintain a necessary solitude. On the other hand, from his college days on Madison had a streak of broad humor in him and those who knew him well apparently found some of his off-color stories strong affairs. At Princeton, he had been a member of the brilliant group of young men who were the leaders of the American Whig Society on the campus, and Madison joined happily in their rompish exploits and "Diversions." He also wrote his share of supposedly witty poems and satires, although they were more ribald and less witty than one might ideally have wished.

In his forty-fifth year, Madison fell in love with an attractive young

widow, Dolley Todd, whom he determined, practically on sight, would be his wife. New York Senator Aaron Burr was asked to arrange a meeting. On learning this, Dolley hastily wrote to one of her confidantes, "Aaron Burr says that the great little Madison has asked to be brought to see me this evening." The meeting could not have been dull, for with time out for Dolley's hesitations, they were married a few months later, in September, 1794. Dolley Madison, although a Quaker, possessed infinite zest for society, for all its "do's," furbelows, and feathers. But she did not cut corners on the culinary and managerial responsibilities of her wifely role. A neighborly letter to the Monroes, for example, in 1798, mentions that Mrs. Madison was sending "a few pickles and preserves, with half a dozen bottles of gooseberries and a bag of dried cherries." In short order, Dolley Madison charmed all of Madison's friends and her reign in the White House was double that of any other woman in American history, since she gladly assumed the role of hostess when widower Jefferson requested it. There is little doubt that this marriage, like that of John and Abigail Adams, was a transformingly happy marriage for both partners.

When Madison had withdrawn from public life, the Madisons at Montpelier were visited by "everybody who was anybody or who thought he was somebody." Every foreign visitor was certain to secure introductions to Jefferson at Monticello and Madison at Montpelier. The diaries of a few of these observant visitors almost repay the inroads they must have caused on the family budgets by their well-meant, but long-staying visits. In the pages of Margaret Bayard Smith's diary, or Jared Sparks' notes, or Harriet Martineau's sketches of life at the Madisons, we find the most unmistakable impression of what Madison was like, face to face. A fragment from a chapter devoted to the Madisons by the intelligent, liberal, and well-travelled English visitor, Miss Martineau, comments on Madison in his eighty-third year:

"His voice was clear and strong, and his manner of speaking particularly lively, often playful. . . . He seemed not to have lost any teeth, and the form of the face was therefore preserved, without any striking marks of age. It was an uncommonly pleasant countenance.

"His relish for conversation could never have been keener . . . There is no need to add another to the many eulogies of Madison; I will only mention that the finest of his characteristics appeared to me to be his inexhaustible faith; faith that a well-founded commonwealth may . . . be immortal; not only because the people, its constituency, never die, but because the principles of justice in which such a commonwealth originates never die out of the people's heart and mind. This faith shone brightly through the whole of Mr. Madison's conversation. . . ."

Actually, this faith in the American Experiment, which Miss Martineau truly read in Madison's words, was more troubled than she knew—pre-occupied as he was with the unmistakable signs of sectional struggle that threatened to undo all that his generation of creative statesmen

had been able to construct. He had himself been the prophet of a society that must ever be turbulent to some extent, filled with factional stresses and strains, achieving equilibrium out of multiplicity of interests and give-and-take techniques of adjustment. At the very outset of that "Experiment" he had asked in *The Federalist*: "What is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary." But from 1820 on, with the harsh geographical line dividing sections of the country in the Missouri Compromise, Madison had worried about the carefully devised "controls" on the proud and extensive republic. Having argued always that liberty demands diversity, requires elbow room for arguments, opposing parties, mobility, growth and progress, he had subdued the forces that swept away all past ventures in free governments: he had designed a unique "extensive republic," a federative system that would not hobble opposing interests by depriving them of the chance to speak out—but would help them to live with their differences, to examine them, negotiate them, educate them. Self-government was, he believed, a "free system . . . so congenial with reason, with common sense, and with a universal feeling" that it would surely create friends, generation after generation. Men would grasp at this supreme opportunity to provide for their own happiness—if only the violent ones would not have their way, if only men would take care of the painstaking, endless, "great and advancing cause of representative government."

A final testimonial to Madison may be read in the letter Jefferson wrote a few months before he died, to his dearest friend. "If ever the earth has beheld a system of administration conducted with a single and steadfast eye to the general interest and happiness of those committed to it, one which, protected by the truth, can never know reproach, it is that to which our lives have been devoted. To myself you have been a pillar of support through life. Take care of me when dead, and be assured that I shall leave with you my last affections." To his illustrious friend, Madison, normally a man of marked reserve, replied: "You cannot look back to the long period of our private friendship and political harmony, with more affecting recollections than I do. If they are a source of pleasure to you, what ought they not to be to me? We cannot be deprived of the happy consciousness of the pure devotion to the public good with which we discharged the trusts committed to us. And I indulge a confidence that sufficient evidence will find its way to another generation, to ensure, after we are gone, whatever of justice may be withheld whilst we are here. The political horizon is already yielding in your case at least, the surest auguries of it. Wishing and hoping that you may yet live to increase the debt which Our Country owes you, and to witness the increasing gratitude, which alone can pay it, I offer you the fullest return of affectionate assurances."

Madison's last message to his countrymen bespoke the vision of his

life: "the advice nearest to my heart and deepest in my convictions is that the Union of the States be cherished and perpetuated. Let the open enemy to it be regarded as a Pandora with her box opened; and the disguised one, as the Serpent creeping with his deadly wiles into Paradise." The very last day before Madison died, he dictated a letter of thanks to George Tucker who had dedicated his biography of Thomas Jefferson to the great little Madison. Madison concluded his thanks by tracing a barely legible signature, the last time he would ever sign his name.

A little couplet that Madison had often used to console Dolley Madison over the dreadful vexations brought to her by the spendthrift son of her first husband went:

*"Errors like straws upon the surface flow;
Those who would seek for pearls must dive below."*

Would his countrymen remember, and learn?