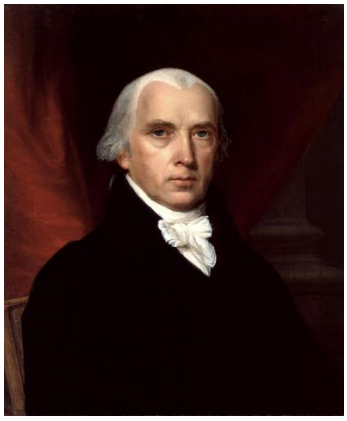
AWESOME stories

Who Was James Madison?



One of America's "Founding Fathers," James Madison was a young man when he was called-upon to play a significant role in drafting the U.S. Constitution and its Bill of Rights.

Although he was from Virginia, then a slave state, Madison voiced his opinions about unequally treating people of color. Arguing to the Virginia State Convention, on the 2nd of December 1829, he said:

> *If they* [America's slaves] *had the complexion of the Serfs in the North of Europe, or of the Villeins formerly in England, in other terms, if they were of our own complexion, much of the difficulty would be removed. But the mere circumstance of complexion can not deprive them of the character of men.*

In that same speech, Madison also called-out people for their common character flaws:

> *But Man is known to be a selfish as well as a social being. Respect for character though often a salutary [a] restraint is but too often overruled by other motives.*
>
> *When numbers of men act in a body, respect for character is often lost, just in proportion as it is necessary to control what is not right. We all know that conscience is not a sufficient safeguard, besides that conscience itself may be deluded; many being misled by an unconscious bias into acts which an enlightened conscience would forbid.* (See *Proceedings and Debates of the Virginia State Convention of 1829-1830*, at page 538.)

As a result of such character flaws, common to most people, governments need to operate based on a system of laws in which the rights of minorities are just as important as the rights of the majority. It was to that end Madison directed his attention in an earlier pursuit—before 1829—when he helped to draft the U.S. Constitution and its Bill of Rights.

The White House provides more background information on Madison's role in those endeavors (as well as a brief bio about him):

James Madison, America's fourth President (1809-1817), made a major contribution to the ratification of the Constitution by writing The Federalist Papers, along with Alexander Hamilton and John Jay. In later years, he was referred to as the "Father of the Constitution."

At his inauguration, James Madison, a small, wizened man, appeared old and worn; Washington Irving described him as "but a withered little apple-John." But whatever his deficiencies in charm, Madison's ... wife Dolley compensated for them with her warmth and gaiety. She was the toast of Washington.

Born in 1751, Madison was brought up in Orange County, Virginia, and attended Princeton (then called the College of New Jersey). A student of history and government, well-read in law, he participated in the framing of the Virginia Constitution in 1776, served in the Continental Congress, and was a leader in the Virginia Assembly.

When delegates to the Constitutional Convention assembled at Philadelphia, the 36-year-old Madison took frequent and emphatic part in the debates.

Madison made a major contribution to the ratification of the Constitution by writing, with Alexander Hamilton and John Jay, the Federalist essays. In later years, when he was referred to as the "Father of the Constitution," Madison protested that the document was not "the off-spring of a single brain," but "the work of many heads and many hands" [such as George Mason, among others].

In Congress, he helped frame the Bill of Rights and enact the first revenue legislation. Out of his leadership in opposition to Hamilton's financial proposals, which he felt would unduly bestow wealth and power upon northern financiers, came the development of the Republican, or Jeffersonian, Party.

As President Jefferson's Secretary of State, Madison [who was the named defendant in the famous judicial-review case, Marbury v Madison] *protested to warring France and Britain that their seizure of American ships was contrary to international law. The protests, John Randolph acidly commented, had the effect of "a shilling pamphlet hurled against eight hundred ships of war."*

Despite the unpopular Embargo Act of 1807, which did not make the belligerent nations change their ways but did cause a depression in the United States, Madison was elected President in 1808. Before he took office the Embargo Act was repealed.

During the first year of Madison's Administration, the United States prohibited trade with both Britain and France; then in May, 1810, Congress authorized trade with both, directing the President, if either would accept America's view of neutral rights, to forbid trade with the other nation.

Napoleon pretended to comply. Late in 1810, Madison proclaimed non-intercourse with Great Britain. In Congress a young group including Henry Clay and John C. Calhoun, the "War Hawks," pressed the President for a more militant policy.

The British impressment of American seamen and the seizure of cargoes impelled Madison to give in to the pressure. On June 1, 1812, he asked Congress to declare war.

The young Nation was not prepared to fight; its forces took a severe trouncing. The British entered Washington and set fire to the White House and the Capitol.

But a few notable naval and military victories, climaxed by Gen. Andrew Jackson's triumph at New Orleans, convinced Americans that the War of 1812 had been gloriously successful. An upsurge of nationalism resulted. The New England Federalists who had opposed the war--and who had even talked secession--were so thoroughly repudiated that Federalism disappeared as a national party.

In retirement at Montpelier, his estate in Orange County, Virginia, Madison spoke out against the disruptive states' rights influences that by the 1830's threatened to shatter the Federal Union. In a note opened after his death in 1836, he stated, "The advice nearest to my heart and deepest in my convictions is that the Union of the States be cherished and perpetuated."

Some quotes, attributed to Madison, are as relevant today as when he first made the statements. Here are a few examples:

- "The essence of Government is power; and power, lodged as it must be in human hands, will ever be liable to abuse."

- "Philosophy is common sense with big words."

- "If Tyranny and Oppression come to this land, it will be in the guise of fighting a foreign enemy."

- "The means of defense against foreign danger historically have become the instruments of tyranny at home."

- "Knowledge will forever govern ignorance; and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives."

While Madison is rarely near the top, in a most-influential U.S. president list, his leadership in drafting America's

Constitution—and the country's Bill of Rights—makes him one of the "Founding Fathers" whose contributions still impact everyday American life.

A scholar who could read seven languages, Madison did a lot of studying before he put his pen to a document starting with the words "We the People." It's fair to ask whether there would even be an American Constitution were it not for James Madison.

Tom Howard, an educator who works at Madison's home in southern Virginia (called Montpelier) tells us how hard America's 4th president worked as he drafted the document which created the U.S. federal government. Using his own library, at Montpelier, Madison worked at home:

> *He went up there and studied for months, and that's having just a light breakfast and then studying throughout the entire day before he finally took a break to rest up, to go back at it the next day.*

While studying, Madison wrote forty pages of notes comparing the pros and cons of ancient and contemporary governments. The Library of Congress, which maintains the original of this document (which Madison called "Ancient and Modern Confederacies") tells us what Madison learned:

> *In preparing for the deliberations at the Federal Constitutional Convention in the Spring of 1787, Madison studied confederated governments in antiquity and modern times and filled forty pages with observations which he called "Ancient & Modern Confederacies."*
>
> *He concluded that all confederacies - ancient and modern - suffered from the problem that had caused the debility and "imbecility" of American national government under the Articles of Confederation: the failure of the constituent states to grant adequate powers to the central government. Madison and his colleagues remedied this deficiency by ensuring that the new national government, created in Philadelphia in 1787, was endowed with sufficient power to govern.* (See "Madison's Treasures," at the Library of Congress.)

How important was Madison to America's history? As Garry Wills—who observes that Madison wasn't really tempermentally suited to be a wartime president—puts it:

> *Madison's claim on our admiration does not rest on a perfect consistency, any more than it rests on his presidency. He has other virtues. ... As a framer and defender of the Constitution he had no peer. ... The finest part of Madison's performance as president was his concern for the preserving of the Constitution. ... No man could do everything for the country—not even Washington. Madison did more than most, and did some things better than any. That was quite enough.* (Wills, *James Madison*, at page 164.)

A recent book by David O. Stewart, called *Madison's Gift: Five Partnerships That Built America*, makes the case for "quite enough." He even calls Madison the "Most Significant Framer of the New Nation." Whether that opinion is shared by many, or few, depends on the criteria one uses to evaluate U.S. Presidents.

On the other hand, it cannot be denied that 21st-century cases—which are decided by America's Supreme Court—often have a trail reaching back to Madison who did his best to put a new country on a firm legal foundation.

This portrait, by John Vanderlyn (1775–1852), depicts Madison as he appeared in 1816. It is part of the White House Collection.

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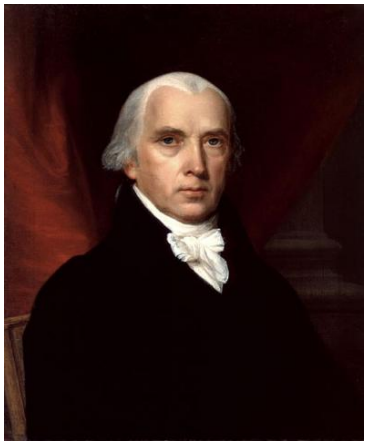

James Madison - America's 4th President

Painting is part of the White House Collection, online via Wikimedia Commons, John Vanderlyn painted this portrait of James Madison in 1816

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