



Review by Márcia Balisciano

Madison's Gift, pp. 419

James Madison's gift, referred to in the title of David O. Stewart's impressively researched biography, was his ability to partner with others to ensure a fledgling nation found stability in uncertain times. In exploring his relationship with five pivotal figures – Alexander Hamilton, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe and Dolley Madison – he also reveals Madison's many gifts. In particular, his "profound yet affable brilliance," expressed through studied and reasoned analysis, and quiet, yet heartfelt, oratory, which helped realise a Constitution and national government capable of the peaceful transition of power and adequate defence in war.

Stewart masterfully weaves the chronology of Madison's life into his story of how Madison engaged with his partners, each of whom imparted something he lacked.

Hamilton – commanding presence

Alexander Hamilton, Stewart points out, showed that raw talent could get you far in the new America. Born in the Caribbean to a father who disappeared when he was ten and a mother who died shortly thereafter, he did not have a promising start. But as a young trading house clerk he excelled so local leaders sent him to mainland America for formal education, where he eventually attended what became Columbia University. At the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, he joined the Continental Army where he came to the attention of George Washington, who elevated him to aide-de-camp.

From this vantage point Hamilton saw that the government under the Articles of Confederation was too weak to function well, not least in its ability to collect taxes and pay wages to soldiers. He found a kindred spirit in James Madison, whom he joined as a member of the Continental Congress. According to a visiting Frenchman, Madison could "be more profound than Mr. Hamilton, but less brilliant," though at this point in their lives, they were equally committed to putting the national government on firmer footing.

In 1786, both attended a meeting in Annapolis on interstate trade. They seized the opportunity to call for a convention to rewrite the Articles. Working in lockstep, they maneuvered to get a majority of states to nominate delegates; the Constitutional Convention opened in May 1787. Madison and Hamilton complemented one another. One delegate called Hamilton's speeches "flowing and rapturous." And while Madison was no raconteur, he was "the best informed man of any point in a debate." Together they reached their mark: by September the delegates agreed a five-person Committee of Style to produce a final draft of a new Constitution, which included Madison and Hamilton.

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The resulting document gave no delegate, or his state, exactly what they wanted. Hamilton, especially, had wanted a strong federal core for the new America. The Constitution reflected compromise, including on critical matters such as the size and responsibilities of the government, and it contained no resolution on the question of slavery. Regardless of its imperfections, Madison wrote to Jefferson, “if the present moment be lost, it is hard to say what may be our fate.” They were “framing a system...to last for ages.” Hamilton gave a characteristically sharper assessment in a letter to Washington: they could not “let slip the golden opportunity of rescuing the American empire from disunion, anarchy and misery.”

In a race to get nine states to ratify the Constitution, the tipping point for its adoption, Hamilton came up with the idea of producing a series of essays to align public opinion. Hamilton and Madison shared the writing (with minor support from New York’s John Jay), producing 190,000 words known as The Federalist Papers. According to Jefferson it was “the best commentary on the principles of government.” By June 1788, they reached their quota when Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Georgia, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maryland, South Carolina, and New Hampshire had all ratified the Constitution; it would take until 1790 for all states in the union to do likewise. Amendments, which reflected trading between individual states, became the Bill of Rights in 1791.

Washington – gravitas of a hero

Stewart shows how Madison courted America’s first citizen. In 1783, General Washington moved his headquarters to Princeton to be closer to the temporary seat of the Continental Congress. He was respected for a “faculty of appearing to accommodate and yet carrying his point,” said Abigail Adams. “If he was not really one of the best intentioned men in the world he might be a very dangerous one.” That Washington and the young Congressman should become collaborators was not obvious but, Stewart says, as “a talent spotter, Washington had few peers.” Madison’s intelligence and diligence brought him a good reputation and despite differences in political and physical stature, they shared a love for their Virginia homesteads and both dreamed of Western territory.

Madison was taken with “a mind like [Washington’s], capable of grand views” and their correspondence was warm and free-ranging. He kept Washington informed of developments at the Annapolis Convention and liberally used Washington’s name to garner support for the Constitutional Convention. Few in states north or south, big or small, wanted to go against the wishes of the hero of the Revolution.

Washington was firm when he needed to be, including with his young protégé. When Madison complained of the personal cost of lobbying for the Constitution, Washington reminded him that “the consciousness of having discharged that duty which we owe to our country is superior to all other considerations.”

With the Constitution adopted, Washington agreed to become America’s first president. He entrusted Madison with drafting his inauguration speech; as a member of the first House of Representatives, Madison was charged with writing the chamber’s response to his own speech.

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Stewart illuminates how Madison's respect for Washington never wavered though ultimately, over the Hamilton problem, his political support did. Hamilton had shocked fellow delegates to the Constitutional Convention by claiming the people had an inability to "judge or determine right." Power was best placed in the hands of "the rich and well born." Jefferson told Washington that Hamilton's aim was to move "the present republican form of government to that of a monarchy."

Importantly, Hamilton's belief that the states should have "very limited powers" suffused his work, including as first Secretary of the Treasury. Madison and Jefferson opposed their colleague's key proposals, including for a central bank and assumption of government debt, which they believed would lead to speculation and corruption. Washington had to take sides – Hamilton's capitalist economy vs. Madison and Jefferson's agrarian democracy. Though Washington shared their traditions, it was Hamilton's vision he chose. No longer able to don Hamilton's Federalist mantle, Madison and Jefferson came to see themselves as Republicans.

Madison bore no grudges. On Washington's death in 1799 he remarked, "Death has robbed our country of its most distinguished ornament, and the world of one its greatest benefactors."

Jefferson – natural leader

Stewart sketches Thomas Jefferson as smart and tall, with "an air of relaxed command," while his friend Madison was "short, skinny, pale and reserved." You could immediately warm to Jefferson, while Madison's appeal took longer to appreciate. Eight inches taller but also eight years older, Jefferson personified the legend of American Independence (and was author of its Declaration with sage help from Benjamin Franklin). When envoy to France, he held his own among royalty and rebels. He returned home to serve as America's first Secretary of State under Washington, and in the election of 1796, served as Adams' Vice President after narrowly losing the presidency in an election that sparked controversy, but not insurrection.

Jefferson and Madison were close. "I long to see you," Jefferson wrote Madison when a long period had elapsed since they had met. But they were not afraid of being direct. When Madison objected to one of Jefferson's departures from public service, the latter responded tartly that the decision would "rest on my own feelings alone." During the Adams administration, they were united in their denunciation of the Alien and Sedition Acts, which, among other things, made criticising the government a punishable offense.

Stewart might have given a more prominent role to Adams whose steely intelligence did much to shore up the new nation. But he does allow Adams the book's best quote. Complaining about Jefferson and Madison's style of campaigning for high office by feigning disinterest, he offered: "Mr. Madison is to retire. It seems the mode of becoming great is to retire. Madison I suppose after a retirement of a few years is to be president or V.P.... It is marvellous how political plants grow in the shade."

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Monroe – military and diplomatic expert

James Monroe was a teenager when he enlisted in the Continental Army, crossing paths with those who would lead the United States, including Washington and Hamilton. Stewart cites his respectable war record and a genial “earnestness that inspired trust.” In 1783, when Madison returned to Virginia after serving three years in the Continental Congress, Monroe took his place as the state’s new delegate. A year later, Jefferson recommended Monroe to Madison saying “a better man cannot be,” thus initiating another lasting friendship among fellow Virginians.

Madison and Monroe shared enthusiasm and resources for acquiring Western land, and they held similar convictions on political matters, including that the Articles of Confederation should be superseded. But it was not all smooth sailing. Monroe worried about the negative effects of a dominant federal government. According to Stewart, he did not support ratification of the Constitution while in the Virginia legislature, but not so vehemently that he could not be forgiven.

Madison’s nemesis in Virginia politics, the Anti-Federalist Patrick Henry, had designs on Monroe, convincing him to run against Madison for a seat in the new House of Representatives. Madison won handily in 1789 and was gracious in victory. He wrote to Jefferson of the vanquished man, “I have no reason to doubt that distinction was duly kept in mind between political and personal views, and that it has saved our friendship from the smallest diminution.” The following year, Monroe was appointed to the Senate and went on to serve in France as Jefferson had done before him.

Inevitably there would be other clashes. During Jefferson’s second term as President, Monroe was envoy to Britain and France at a time when both states were fighting the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815). Jefferson declared neutrality hoping the conflict in Europe would not prevent the flow of American imports and exports. But the British – who stepped up impressment, often to reclaim sailors that had deserted to better paid American merchant ships in order to literally ensure enough hands on deck in their maritime battles – and eventually the French, would have none of it. In 1807, Monroe and William Pinkney, a Maryland lawyer also sent to negotiate with the British, opted to sign a treaty that did not include halting impressment which both deemed a point they could not win. The treaty had other things to recommend it, including a loosening of restrictions on American trade but Madison and Jefferson rejected it. Angry, Monroe left his post and returned to Virginia.

During Madison’s second term as President, a turn toward war prompted rapprochement and Monroe became his Secretary of State and eventually his Secretary of War. Monroe, Stewart quotes, was “happy to have restored” their “ancient relations,” while on “public affairs we confer without reserve...animated by a sincere desire to promote the public welfare.” While they could not avert the British burning of Washington once America declared war in 1812, they persevered, and the Americans won key battles, including the defence of New Orleans. A peace treaty followed in 1815. Not much had been gained but as Adams suggested during the conflict, “It is necessary against England: necessary to convince France that we are something: and above all necessary to convince ourselves that we are not nothing.”

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Dolley Madison – charm offensive

In the spring of 1794, Senator Aaron Burr introduced Madison, a bachelor in his late 30s, to the bright, vivacious 24 year old widow, Dolley Payne Todd, who had a two year old son. He was smitten. Disappointed in romance previously, Madison did not delay. He embarked on a brief but assiduous courtship and he and Dolley were married by the autumn. His modest appearance – she called him “the great little Madison” – did not concern her. In social gatherings, he might be branded timid, but she shone. “Everybody loves Mrs. Madison,” declared Kentucky legislator, Henry Clay. Self-aware Dolley responded, “That’s because Mrs. Madison loves everybody.”

She was a dedicated companion throughout their married life, providing her husband with soothing counsel. She also was a potent political asset. To positive effect, she might place a word here during a soiree, or send a charming note there. Stewart references a letter she sent in 1810, potentially to the self-exiled James Monroe, in which she declares that Madison had “necessity for your aid,” bidding her recipient to “Come then, as soon as possible to my husband who will not call, though he wishes for you every day.”

Madison’s Federalist challenger to the presidency in 1808, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, ruefully complained that he was “beaten by Mr. and Mrs. Madison. I might have had a better chance had I faced Mr. Madison alone.”

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Throughout his narrative, Stewart highlights the pall slavery cast on Madison’s legacy. Madison was prescient in recognising that more than Republican versus Federalist, the real divide was between the slave-holding south; he wrote, “the great danger to our general government is the great southern and northern interests of the continent being opposed to each other.” It was an irony not lost on America’s early observers that a nation which had won its independence over man’s right to liberty, denied it to others. Madison recognised the wrongs of slavery, yet his livelihood depended on maintaining slaves to run his plantation. Despite requests from family and former comrades to release his slaves, he did not (and made no provision in his will for Dolley to do so upon his death).

At the end of his life in 1826, Jefferson wrote Madison, “you have been a pillar of support throughout life.” It was a gift he gave all his partners. Not for Madison the solitary figure on horseback. As Stewart points out, “Madison’s heroic moments tended, like him, to be quiet ones.”

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