Madison, James (1751 – 1836)

Summary Article: Madison, James
from The Columbia Encyclopedia

1751–1836, 4th President of the United States (1809–17), b. Port Conway, Va.

Early Career
A member of the Virginia planter class, he attended the College of New Jersey (now Princeton), graduating in 1771. Like George Washington and others, he opposed the colonial measures of the British. His distinctive contribution to the colonial cause was a deep knowledge and understanding of government and political philosophy—resources that first proved their value in 1776 when Madison helped to draft a constitution for the new state of Virginia.

He served in the Continental Congress (1780–83, 1787) and represented his county in the Virginia legislature (1784–86), where he played a prominent part in disestablishing the Anglican Church. During this time he watched the ineffectual floundering of Congress under the Articles of Confederation with apprehension and became convinced of the necessity for a strong national authority.

Master Builder of the Constitution
Madison played important role in bringing about the conference between Maryland and Virginia concerning navigation of the Potomac. The meetings at Alexandria and Mt. Vernon in 1785 led to the Annapolis Convention in 1786, and at that conference he endorsed New Jersey's motion to call a Constitutional Convention for May, 1787. With Alexander Hamilton he became the leading spokesman for a thorough reorganization of the existing government, and his influence on the Virginia Plan, which advocated a strong central government and served as a working model for the new U.S. Constitution, is evident.

At the convention his skills in political science and his persuasive logic made him the chief architect of the new governmental structure and earned him the title “master builder of the Constitution.” His journals of the period are the principal source of later knowledge of the convention, and were published after his death as Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787 as Reported by James Madison. (Madison's Notes, however, were apparently later edited by him in ways that sometimes obscure the positions he took during the convention.) He fought to get the Constitution adopted. He contributed with Alexander Hamilton and John Jay to the brilliantly polemical papers of The Federalist, and in Virginia he led the forces for the Constitution against the opposition of Patrick Henry and George Mason.

Congressman
As a representative from Virginia (1789–97), he had a hand in getting the new government established and was a strong advocate of the first 10 amendments to the Constitution (the Bill of Rights). Yet, although modern historians have demonstrated the conservative nature of the Constitution and its founders, Madison was an opponent of the policies of the conservative wing in the Washington administration, a steadfast enemy of Alexander Hamilton and his financial measures, and a supporter of Thomas Jefferson, with whom he organized the Democratic-Republican party. Madison especially deplored Hamilton's frank Anglophilia. After the passage of

https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/madison_james_1751_1836
the Alien and Sedition Acts, he attacked these measures as unconstitutional and dangerous to the Union, and he prepared the protesting Virginia resolutions (see Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions).

**Presidency**

When Jefferson triumphed in the election of 1800, Madison became (1801) his secretary of state. He served through both of Jefferson's terms, and he was Jefferson's choice as presidential candidate. As president, Madison had to deal with the results of the foreign policy that, as secretary of state, he had helped to shape. The Embargo Act of 1807 was in effect dissolved by Macon's Bill No. 2. The bill provided, however, that if either Great Britain or France should remove restrictions on American trade, the president was empowered to reimpose the trade embargo on the other.

Madison, accepting an ambiguous French statement as a bona fide revocation of the Napoleonic decrees on trade, reinstated the trade embargo with Great Britain, an act that helped bring on the War of 1812. This move alone, however, did not bring about the war with Great Britain; equally significant were the activities of the “war hawks,” led by Henry Clay and John C. Calhoun, who, hungry for the conquest of Canada and for free expansion, clamored for action. They helped to bring about the declaration of war against Great Britain on June 18, 1812.

The War of 1812 was the chief event of Madison's administration. New England merchants and industrialists were already disaffected by the various embargoes, and their discontent grew until at the Hartford Convention they talked of sedition rather than continuing “Mr. Madison's War.” Even the friends of the president and the promoters of the war grew discouraged as the fighting went badly. Victories in late 1813 and in the autumn of 1814 lifted the gloom somewhat, but disaster came in Sept., 1814, when the British took Washington and burned the White House. Nevertheless the war ended in stalemate with the Treaty of Ghent.

Madison's remaining years in office witnessed the beginning of postwar national expansion. He encouraged the new nationalism, which hastened the split in the Democratic party, evident in the rise of Jacksonian democracy. Through these later upheavals Madison lived quietly with his wife, Dolley Madison, after his retirement in 1817 to Montpelier.

**Bibliography**

Madison's writings were edited by G. Hunt (9 vol., 1900-1910).

APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA

https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/madison_james_1751_1836