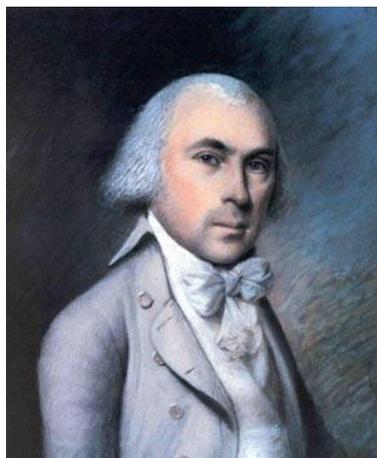


James Madison

1751–1836



The word *hero* implies a man who is tall, powerful-looking, and conveys a dynamic presence. James Madison certainly did not fill that description. Slightly built, pale, and often sickly, James Madison stood about five feet, two inches tall. In 1772 when he was 21, he doubted he would live very long or accomplish much, claiming, “As for myself, I am too dull and infirm now to look out for any extraordinary things in this world, for I think my sensations for many months past have intimated to me not to expect a long and healthy life; though it may be better with me after some time, [but] I hardly dare expect it, and

therefore have little spirit and to set about anything that is difficult in acquiring and useless in possessing after one has exchanged time for eternity.” Madison could not have predicted in 1772 what was about to happen and how he was to become one of our nation’s most influential leaders. Madison was to serve his country long and well, remaining an active force in the nation until his death at 85.

Though Madison may have had physical problems, he had other advantages. Coming from a wealthy Virginia family, he had money and status. His family could afford a college education at Princeton University. Although many residents of Virginia attended the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Madison feared that the college had a reputation for drinking and frivolity. He chose Princeton instead where he was an excellent student, and followed his interests in history, government, and the law.

Madison got over the period of pessimism following graduation, and as the American Revolution began to unfold over the next few years, he became actively engaged in the conflict. His poor health ruled out service in the army, but he soon put himself at the heart of the political struggle in Virginia. He was elected to the County Committee of Safety in December 1774. In April 1776, he was elected to the Pennsylvania Constitutional Convention. Madison voted with the rest of the convention delegates in favor independence from Britain.

The convention selected George Mason to write a declaration of the rights of Virginians. Madison helped to write the section on religious freedom. Madison had strong views regarding freedom of religion. He wrote a statement on the right of all people to free exercise of their religion according to personal conscience. Phrases from Madison's writings on religious freedom from the Virginia Declaration of Rights later appeared in the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights of the United States Constitution.

In October 1776, Madison was elected to the House of Delegates of Virginia, where he served with Thomas Jefferson. He was not reelected, due to his shy and aloof personality, but the other members recognized his abilities. They elected him to the Virginia Council of State in January 1778. It was here he became closer friends with Jefferson and was selected to attend the Continental Congress in Philadelphia in March 1780. Madison was its youngest member.

As a delegate to the congress, Madison supported a strong, central government but with the constitutional restraints necessary to preserve the independence of the states and individual rights. He supported an alliance with France. When the war ended successfully for the Americans, thanks to the aid of the French, Madison was proven right.

Madison was involved in negotiations with France over navigation rights on the Mississippi River and requiring states to give up their western land claims. This paved the way for the creation of new states to enter the Union.

In 1784 Madison was back in the Virginia legislature involved in a struggle against Patrick Henry over support of the Anglican Church as the official state church. Madison was strongly opposed. Citing a history of abuses by government and church leaders in countries that had established churches, he said, "During almost fifteen centuries has the legal establishment of Christianity been on trial. What have been its fruits? More or less in all places, pride and indolence in the Clergy, ignorance and servility in the laity, in both, superstition, bigotry and persecution." While this comment may not have made Madison popular with church leaders, it was successful in defeating Henry's bill.

Madison was not always successful. His support for a revised Virginia constitution, free public school education, and the gradual abolition of slavery were all unsuccessful. It was from here, however, that Madison was sent to the scene of one of his greatest accomplishments. He went to Annapolis to explore the idea of

revising the Articles of Confederation and was picked as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787.

At the convention, Madison served a double role. He served as the convention's unofficial secretary, taking voluminous notes on all the convention's activities. He was the only delegate to do so, and historians are in his debt for the details of this monumental meeting. Madison persuaded Washington to attend this convention. Washington became the President of the Convention, and his presence was sometimes what kept the convention going. It was Madison and Alexander Hamilton who pressed the idea that revising the Articles of Confederation would not be enough to solve the problems of the federal government, and the delegates should start planning a new constitution.

All through the meetings, Madison was the voice of reason and moderation, winning the confidence of delegates on all sides of the issues. When the constitution was finished, Madison was not completely satisfied; yet he began immediately advocating for it. He helped to write *The Federalist Papers*, a brilliant series of essays in support of the constitution. When the large states of New York and Virginia showed signs of resistance, Madison promoted the idea of including a Bill of Rights in the Constitution. He then wrote those amendments himself. New York and Virginia voted to ratify the United States Constitution.

Name: _____ Date: _____

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Discussion Questions

1. What disadvantages did James Madison have growing up?
2. What advantages did he have growing up?
3. Why was Madison opposed to a state-supported church?
4. What two other Virginians served as president and were also Madison's friends and mentors?

