

James Madison: A Tale of Two Presidencies

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Abstract

James Madison was one of the most influential figures in American politics and is known for his role in the ratification of the Constitution, but he is relatively unknown for his role as president. This essay reevaluates Madison's performance as president by closely examining the actions he took, his rationale for taking those actions, and the consequences that resulted. I conclude that, despite his above-average ratings in presidential studies, the decisions Madison made were flawed and almost resulted in disastrous outcomes for the nation.

Introduction

James Madison (1751–1836), one of the nation's founders, is well known for his role in helping to draft the Constitution of the United States. He served as a member of the first four Congresses from 1789 to 1797 and as secretary of state to Thomas Jefferson from 1801 until 1809. From 1809 to 1817 he served two terms as the fourth president of the United States following Jefferson, and he led the United States against Britain in the War of 1812 (Padover 1953; Wills 2002).

Despite his prominence in the founding of the nation, Madison's presidency is relatively unknown. A recent Siena Research Institute (SRI) poll ranked Madison as the sixth greatest president in the history of the nation based on 20 categories including intelligence, leadership ability, and relationship with Congress (Kelly and Lonnstrom 2010). In addition, the best-known polls of presidential performance, which were started in 1948 by Arthur Schlesinger Sr., have mostly ranked him as "near-great" (Schlesinger 1997). Although he was given very favorable ratings in these studies, Madison was a president who made many problematic decisions in various aspects of the office.

The purpose of this essay is to re-examine the Madison presidency by assessing his performance in office and long-term influence on American politics, as well as to contrast my findings with polls of presidential performance such as those by the SRI and Schlesinger. I argue that Madison's first six years as president were nothing short of a failure due to his misguided policies and strict adherence to a problematic political theory. The American people, however, overcame those flawed policies and claimed an unlikely victory in the War of 1812, which made Madison's final two years very successful. First, I establish criteria for determining what makes for good presidential

performance by adopting the works of presidential scholars. Next, I evaluate Madison's presidency in the first six years of his administration and then in the final two years as it relates to each of those criteria. Finally, I discuss the greatness of the Madison presidency.

Identifying Greatness

In judging an office as unique as the presidency, it is difficult to define greatness. Even the worst presidents were able to establish some measure of political success simply by being elected because it established legitimacy for the president as the leader of his political party. From that point, however, there are many differences in the leadership styles of each president. For example, some presidents such as Madison and Jefferson were legislative supremacists who believed that the real power of the government rested with Congress, not the president. In contrast, presidents like Andrew Jackson and Franklin Roosevelt established active roles for the executive office to use Congress as a political ally with which to gain power and influence policy (Landy and Milkis 2000).

Despite the immense differences in the way presidents have approached the office, any great president must be successful at influencing legislation and creating policy precedent. This can be done through a combination of constitutional powers such as the presidential veto or the State of the Union address, listed in Article II of the Constitution. Although the presidential veto was originally only used on bills the president deemed unconstitutional, "veto bargaining" has become an important tool for the president in the legislative process (Cameron 2000). While using influence in legislation as a criterion for greatness puts presidents like Madison with legislative-centric ideologies at a disadvantage, there are other ways to set policy precedent such as issuing executive orders, making proclamations, or persuading the people to influence their representatives in Congress (Neustadt 1955).

Another criterion for presidential greatness is the state of the nation before and after a president's term. A great president must be able to manage both big and small issues on a daily basis in order to ensure that the business of the nation runs smoothly. For many presidents, luck is a factor. George W. Bush gained a great amount of favor with the American public for his handling of the attacks on September 11, 2001, an event which was both unexpected and out of his control. While many issues may arise daily, a great president must manage those issues so that the nation is more prosperous socially, economically, and politically than the one that was inherited at the start of the term.

Marc Landy and Sidney M. Milkis propose that a great president is one who successfully leads his political party and undertakes a "conservative revolution" in which the Constitution or Declaration of Independence are reinterpreted to encompass a new liberal meaning (2000, 198). While I do not believe that a great president has to necessarily undertake a revolutionary reinterpretation of the Constitution, this theory is indicative of another quality of a great president: the power to appeal to "the better angels of our nature" (Nicolay and Hay 1905, 7). On this topic, Landy and Milkis say that "the president's task is not only to arouse public opinion but also to lead it toward the type of reform most compatible with fundamental constitutional principles" (2000, 234). In other words, a great president will be someone of great moral and

constitutional principle who is able to educate and persuade the American public toward those principles. For example, Abraham Lincoln's conservative revolution, which ended slavery and was epitomized by the Emancipation Proclamation, gave a new meaning to the most famous words of the Declaration, in which "all Men are created equal."

According to Samuel Kernell (1997), the aforementioned power to persuade the people assists presidents during periods of divided government. Because presidents operate outside of Congress, they frequently feel more able to influence public opinion than congressional opinion. No matter the audience, a great president must be able to achieve responsible policy goals that are often unpopular by using his reputation and powers of persuasion.

A final criterion for presidential greatness which is of particular importance to Madison is the ability of a president to solve his biggest issue (Renshon 1998). It is naïve to expect that every great president was always a strong leader who always had the right policy and was all-around perfect. A great president will not necessarily get everything right, but he should at least be able to manage the small issues that come up during the course of his presidency, and conquer the biggest issue outright. Madison's biggest issue was the conflict with Britain and France and the War of 1812.

In sum, the five qualities I have selected for determining presidential greatness include the ability to obtain the office and establish legitimacy among the political party, the ability to influence legislative policy, the power to persuade Congress and the people to engage in responsible and morally sound policy-making, the ability to successfully navigate everyday issues so that the nation will have improved over the length of the term, and, finally, the ability to conquer the biggest problem the president faced.

Madison Evaluated: 1809–1815

The Election of 1808 and Madison's Presidential Legitimacy

As the "father" of the Constitution, the secretary of state to President Jefferson, and the co-founder of the Republican Party, Madison had to do little to establish his claim to the presidency. In fact, Madison's biggest potential challenger in the election of 1808, Aaron Burr, had been politically destroyed by his own ambition eight years earlier when he ran against Jefferson. When the results of that election showed a tie between Burr and Jefferson, Burr broke his earlier promise to stand aside in the event of a tie, and continued to fight for the office. The result was a bitter battle between Jefferson and Burr, in which Jefferson's eventual victory led to Burr's loss of status within the Republican Party (Rutland 1990). The defeat of Burr, his subsequent removal from the vice presidency after four years, and the tradition of the secretary of state rising to the presidency meant that Madison was the most obvious choice for the Republican nomination. Congressional Republicans who were disgruntled with Jefferson tried to keep Madison from getting the nomination, but their choice of James Monroe mustered almost no strength. The resulting election between Madison and Federalist Charles Pinckney was more of a slaughter than a battle, as a strongly Republican electorate handed Madison the presidency (Rutland 1990).

As president, however, Madison's easy ride to the presidency created problems within the Republican Party in Congress. A group of anti-Jefferson Republicans in

the Senate, known as the Invincibles, was never satisfied with Madison's election and feared that he would be a vessel for a presidency run by Jefferson. The first conflict between Madison and the Invincibles set the stage for the next six years. This conflict was the appointment of Madison's most trusted adviser, Albert Gallatin, to the Cabinet as secretary of state. The Invincibles disliked Gallatin, "who was far too clever (and foreign-born to boot) to admire their schemes for patronage and power" (Rutland 1990, 16). Everyone in Washington at that time knew that if Gallatin became secretary of state he would hold an enormous amount of power in the party and would be in line for the presidency. However, rather than standing as the figurehead of the Republican Party and battling the Senate over the nomination, Madison gave in to the Invincibles, placing Gallatin in the position of secretary of the treasury. In the end, Madison was forced "to pay a high price so that he might begin his presidency in calm waters" (Rutland 1990, 17). This decision would come back to haunt him, as his attempt at moderation resulted in a Cabinet filled with incompetence.

In addition to the creation of a weak Cabinet, the Invincibles held the swing votes on many of Madison's initiatives during his first six years as president. The Invincibles and their anti-Jefferson allies in Congress would defeat measures such as additional appropriations for the army and navy just before the War of 1812, the foundation of a national bank which would have been used to pay for the same war, and crucial foreign policy legislation (Siemers 2009). While hindsight in policy is 20/20, perhaps if Madison had better established his legitimacy in Congress and in his party, his rate of success in the war and in his presidency would have been higher. Surely Madison is not completely to blame for the opposing factions within the Republican Party; after all, the Invincibles were anti-Jefferson and had written off Madison before he took the oath of office. He did not, however, strengthen his legitimacy as the head of the Republican Party in his first few years as president. His desire to come into office with a clean slate by pandering to the interests of a minority in his party resulted in a weak Cabinet and an opposing faction that was made more powerful by Madison's willingness to acquiesce.

Influencing Legislative Policy

While Madison's Cabinet and his control over his party were weak, his ability to influence legislation was perhaps worse. At the root of this problem was Madison's ideal that Congress was the predominant branch in lawmaking and that the president was simply there to carry out the orders of the legislative branch. Madison's devotion to those principles meant that he would often have to carry out foreign policy legislation that he did not support based on Article I, Section VIII, which gave Congress the power to "regulate Commerce with foreign Nations." Of course, the Federalists and rival Republicans had no misgivings about forcing Madison into such a foreign policy conundrum. Before the War of 1812, the Federalists and the Invincibles formed a ragtag coalition to defeat Macon's Bill No. 1, a piece of legislation aimed at reigniting trade with Britain by making transactions using American ships only. This bill would have countered British attacks on American vessels by essentially forcing Britain to choose between impressment and trade. Instead, the coalition created and passed Macon's Bill No. 2, which allowed *either* France or Britain the chance to trade with the United States again, so long as they stopped harassing American trade vessels

on the Atlantic. Napoleon jumped on the opportunity to draw the United States into conflict with Britain by promising to release the American vessels he had captured, thereby forcing the United States to cease trade with Britain (Rutland 1990; Siemers 2009). Madison was forced by his own convictions to uphold Macon's Bill No. 2, and he issued a presidential proclamation stating that France had "ceased . . . to violate the neutral commerce of the United States" and that "all restrictions imposed by [Macon's Bill No. 2] shall cease and be discontinued in relation to France" (Madison 1810, 1).

This legislation had some negative effects on the United States. First, it raised tensions between Britain and the United States to a whole new level. Britain had clearly been the intended beneficiary of Macon's Bill No. 2, but Napoleon's clever maneuvering left the United States and France in a trade alliance that neither of them particularly wanted. Second, the act effectually did nothing to ease the economic strain on American exporters because any ships coming to and from France would be stopped by the Royal Navy, the undisputed power of the seas (Siemers 2009). Finally, to add injury to insult, Napoleon went back on his word to Madison and began to sell the seized American ships docked in French ports, "with the proceeds (estimated at \$6 million) marked for Napoleon's treasury" (Rutland 1990, 65). In the end, Madison was left with a useless treaty with the French and a foreign crisis on the brink of war with the British.

Could Madison have prevented the end result? Perhaps. His political ideal to remain out of the legislative process during Macon's Bill No. 1 surely cost the bill votes that were vital to its passage, and his refusal to speak against Macon's Bill No. 2 surely made its passage inevitable. Aside from his self-imposed limitations, Madison's idea that only unconstitutional laws should fall under presidential veto meant that he would not even consider vetoing the second bill because above all things, he was a defender of the Constitution (Siemers 2009). Because Congress had the sole power to regulate foreign commerce, Madison continued the precedent and would not interfere with a bill that did not clearly violate the Constitution.

In sum, Madison almost completely removed himself from the legislative process because of both his legislative-centric and Constitutional ideals. He was a failure at influencing legislative policy in his first six years, though not for lack of desire to do so. Restricting his input on both Macon bills was the most noticeable instance of his hands-off approach to lawmaking, and it resulted in a failed policy for which he took much of the blame. His inaction allowed that failed policy to further hurt British-U.S. relations, even though he knew that it was seriously flawed (Siemers 2009).

Power to Persuade

Instead of being able to persuade the people of the United States or their representatives in Congress, Madison gave in to the demands of his constituents at large and to the members of Congress. The main instance in which Madison was unable to persuade the public came during the war. After Madison stood by idly while Congress went to war, he was unable to unite the nation against Britain. The result was a fracture so large that at one point during the war, Britain actually offered the New England states a deal if they would secede from the union. While this fracture was caused more by Federalist dissention than by the president's actions, Madison was rendered almost helpless in persuading New England to help in the war effort (Rutland

1990). Troop support from those states would have been vital to the attack on Canada and may have led to a quicker and less costly end to the war.

Madison was also unable to persuade the Southern and Western states to stand down on the foreign policy which had led to the war in the first place. As the demand for war increased, Madison was faced with a choice between either sticking to his largely unsuccessful embargo policy or going against his Republican Party ideals and declaring war to protect the sovereignty of the nation. With public pressure mounting, Madison and Congress gave in to hawks from the Western and Southern states just as businesses in Britain were beginning to feel the pinch of the embargo (Rutland 1990). While Madison surely could not have known what was happening across the Atlantic, hindsight indicates that if Madison had been able to convince the public to refrain from war, the embargo policy might have eventually succeeded and war might have been avoided altogether.

Overall, Madison found himself unable to alter public or Congressional opinion. Despite having the masses behind his war effort, his lack of personal control in the face of British insult, coupled with his inability to calm Southern and Western tempers, led to a devastating war that looked bleak in the opening weeks of 1815.

Improving the Well-being of the Union

There is little argument that the United States was in peril during the winter of 1814–1815. The government buildings of the capital had been burned to the ground the previous August, a full British blockade had devastated the economic prosperity of 1807, and a foreign army had not only stopped the American attack on Canada but had also crossed into the borders of the nation with little resistance (Rutland 1990). As commander and chief, was it Madison's fault?

To say that Madison was not a military leader is an understatement. He was surely at least a little familiar with the practices of the American Revolution, but he held the conventional view that war was a gentleman's game (Rutland 1990; Siemers 2009). He had no experience in leading strategic movements or planning attacks, and he deferred those duties to generals who turned out to be fairly incompetent. As a result, Madison's constitutional duty as commander in chief was executed poorly and with horrible consequences. As a new nation embarking on its first real war, the United States found out midway through that it lacked the leadership necessary to plan and coordinate a battle. Madison's generals launched expeditions against British-controlled Canada only to have them fall apart with little or no fighting. The best example is that of General William Hull, who led a force to Fort Detroit in an attempt to defend it against a force of British and Native American soldiers but instead surrendered without any bloodshed (Rutland 1990).

The economic situation of the United States was also much worse in the winter of 1814–1815. "Mr. Madison's War" had frozen all legal Atlantic trade and had caused a build-up of exports in New England ports that had no potential buyers. The growing American economy, which had reached its peak in 1807 under Jefferson, had become stagnant with no foreign consumers. Furthermore, the political party that Jefferson and Madison had created had become a highly factionalized entity that gave the president repeated nightmares (Landy and Milkis 2000). His Cabinet had been filled with incompetent men coming and going, and even his trusted adviser Gallatin was in Ghent

in 1814–1815 trying to negotiate a peace with Britain that seemed destined to fail. And, of course, there was the possible secession of the New England states, which Britain had been trying to coerce since the start of the blockade (Rutland 1990). Overall, Madison's nation at the beginning of 1815 was far worse than the one he inherited in March 1809.

Conquering the Major Issue: The War of 1812

The War of 1812 had taken its toll on the United States by the end of 1814. The most humiliating event of the war, the burning of Washington, D.C., had just taken place, and the militia that Madison had hoped would defend the nation ended up running in the opposite direction at the first sign of the Redcoats. Peace talks with Britain returned somewhat insulting and less-than-ideal results. As a whole, the nation and its fourth president had been completely unprepared for war, and, with the fall of Napoleon, it looked as though it might cost America dearly when Britain turned its full attention across the Atlantic. The bare-bones government that Madison and Jefferson had created resulted in a nation that was economically strong but militarily incapable of securing those economic gains. In two phases of the war, the events leading up to it and the fighting of the war itself, Madison had failed at both foreseeing and coping with the problems of a new nation. Robert Allen Rutland (1990) sums up the overall failure of the first six years of the Madison administration well: "Madison's ignorance of military strategy, his total dependence on generals who had not heard a shot fired in anger for over a generation, and his willingness to go along with public opinion rather than shape it all suggest that Madison had no firm policy that made the war inevitable. Instead, Madison fell into a trap shaped by British inflexibility, pressures from public opinion, and his own gullibility" (110).

Madison Evaluated: 1815–1817

Despite the darkness that had overtaken the nation in late 1814, the road ahead was paved with gold. A few strategic American victories in Baltimore and the surrounding areas in early 1815 seemed to convince the British that a war against the United States was going to be both difficult and non-beneficial. Furthermore, British business owners had finally convinced the Parliament that American goods were needed and that trade should be resumed (Rutland 1990). As the pieces fell apart for the British, they began to fall into place for Madison. The taste of victory near Baltimore and the fall of the British navy on the Great Lakes seemed to leave Americans with a hunger to win the war. Was Madison hiding a secret knack for foreign affairs?

It is hard to find evidence that Madison had any successful policy regarding the end of the war. His plan to starve British businesses by withholding American goods had been a dismal failure in 1807 and 1809. Once the British blockade began, Madison's Embargo Policy became redundant because the blockade ended any possibility of trade between the two nations. It was at that point that British business owners begged Parliament to end the war and re-establish trade with the United States, and all over Britain the anti-war sentiment grew (Rutland 1990). In essence, the success of the British navy was the cause of Britain's defeat in 1815, not Madison.

The arrogance of British negotiators at the bargaining tables in Ghent also hurt their own cause. Rather than offering the United States a fair peace, Britain approached

the negotiations as a conquering nation making demands of the conquered (Rutland 1990). After the United States had persevered for more than two years, American negotiators would have been foolish to accept such ridiculous terms. Once the tide of the war began to turn, the British were unwilling to continue without American goods, and they were forced to give in to many demands at the negotiating table. Once again, the British hurt their own cause more than the Americans did.

As the war ended, the political tides within the United States made a sudden shift in Madison's favor. The news of the positive terms of the peace treaty at Ghent, along with General Andrew Jackson's historic victory over the British at New Orleans two weeks later, had the dual effect of making Madison look like a genius and the New England Federalists look like traitors. Once again, Madison's opponents had dug their own graves. The result was the end of the Federalists and the ushering in of the Era of Good Feelings, an eight-year span in which the Republican Party was the only political party with power in the nation. Jefferson's party had ended all parties, at least for the time being.

Madison's biggest issue had been conquered, though little of it had to do with his actions. In essence, Madison had ridden a wave of faulty policy, poor governmental ideals, and divisive party organization and came out with a lucky victory. Once the war was over, the rest of Madison's legacy fell into place. The political suicide of the Federalist Party gave him instant legitimacy and influence in Congress, public opinion was behind whatever decision he made, and the day-to-day domestic governing could finally begin, free of the threat of European powers. Most importantly, Madison's unlikely victory over the greatest navy in the world gave the United States worldwide legitimacy overnight. America was no longer known as a former British colony, but rather as a truly sovereign state that had defeated the most powerful nation in the world. The final christening of the United States as a world power came in Madison's penultimate State of the Union address, in which he reported that the United States had defeated Algiers, or "someone their own size" (Rutland 1990, 192).

In the last two years of his presidency, Madison built a legacy that survives today. He continued the expansionist tendencies that he had supported in Federalist No. 10 and added to his earlier acquisition of the Louisiana Territory by finally annexing West Florida from Spanish rule and encouraging settlement of the Indiana territory, gained via the Battle of Tippecanoe. He also proposed a project to improve the roads and canals to the West, opening up more land to U.S. citizens (Madison 1815; Rutland 1990). His final State of the Union message addressed the need for a uniform currency, a national bank, an improved judicial system, a reduced army in times of peace, and a strong navy to protect American shipping interests abroad (Madison 1816).

Perhaps the most important contribution Madison made to the foreign policy legacy of the United States was the lesson that he learned during the War of 1812. His experience reminded future presidents about the benefits of being separated from European conflict by the Atlantic Ocean, a benefit first acknowledged by George Washington. In short, so long as American ships could protect their interests at sea, there was no need to get involved in European conflicts. This isolationist ideology kept the United States out of major European wars for almost an entire century.

Conclusion: Ranking the Madison Presidency

Madison's tenure as president was unique because few presidents had so much initial failure followed by so much success. If we base his success off of snapshots of the nation in 1809 and again in 1817, the Madison presidency was without question one of the most important. However, if we examine his entire presidency closely and base his greatness on the five criteria listed earlier, it is difficult to consider him better than average. His only true success was in his biggest issue, the War of 1812, and even that success came as a result of the perseverance of the American people and not as a result of Madison's presidential expertise. From this unlikely victory, Madison was handed legitimacy and power within his party, allowing him to better persuade and influence Congress. With the power of Congress behind him, he was able to present a united regime to the people and run the day-to-day functions of government. In the end, Madison satisfied all the requirements for greatness, but in many ways it was in spite of his decisions, not because of them.

I believe that this study has contrasted so greatly with the SRI and Schlesinger polls because it is difficult to give presidents a fair and consistent rating. Although the office of president is the most well-known position in the nation, there are no uniform criteria for judging presidential performance. While some may judge Madison's presidency as near-great for all that it accomplished, others who closely examine the rationale and background behind each decision, as I have done here, may hesitate to give him such favorable ratings.

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