

James Madison and the Extended Republic: Theory and Practice in American Politics

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In March 1789, the duly elected members of the First Federal Congress began to assemble in New York City. Like other eighteenth-century legislators, they were a remarkably unpunctual group. Although the new government under the Constitution was supposed to begin operation on March 4, fully five weeks elapsed before both houses of Congress were able to muster a quorum.

In the wake of the intense political maneuvering that had accompanied the ratification of the Constitution and the first federal elections, this delay in the organization of the new government both embarrassed and alarmed its supporters. Many of them were not entirely sure what they wanted the federal government to do, but they knew very well what they wanted it to be a collection of enlightened and responsible men who could be counted upon to discharge the public business with a degree of sobriety and wisdom that both the state assemblies and the Continental Congress had seemed sorely to lack. It was this expectation that made the slow convening of the First Congress so painful to witness. Americans wanted to be ruled by governments of law rather than of men--but the Federalists who had battled for the Constitution also understood that good laws could be framed and executed only if the right men were in office.

No one had thought more deeply about the problem of how one elected such men to office, and maintained public confidence in their performance, than James Madison, who was about to play as influential a role in the debates of the First Congress as he had at the Constitutional Convention. These issues had been very much on his mind during the months preceding the Convention, which Madison had spent examining both the history and theory of federal government. The results of his research took their first concrete form in a memorandum which he completed only weeks before the Convention met. It was in this working paper, "The Vices of the Political System of the United States," that he first developed the ideas that would receive their classic statement in his Tenth *Federalist* document now generally regarded as the cornerstone of American political theory.

The Mischiefs of Faction Madison's concern in both texts was to refute one of the great commonplaces of eighteenth-century political thought: the belief that republican governments could survive only in geographically small, socially homogeneous societies, where a rough equality of condition and similarity of interests would enable the citizens to maintain the virtue upon which all republics rested. Virtue, as contemporaries understood it, meant a willingness to subordinate private interest to public good. In a republic, obedience to law rested on neither the coercive powers of a vigorous monarchy nor the social stability provided by a capable aristocracy. Only the self-restraint of the individual citizen could prevent the descent into anarchy that classical political theory held was the fate of an unruly republic. Since virtue often failed to render men immune to the dangers of passion and self-interest, it seemed wiser to limit the republican form of government to those societies which were relatively simple and homogeneous--where, in other words, the absence of clashing, competing interests would help citizens to preserve the virtue they needed.

Imbued with such assumptions as these, many Americans in the 1780s doubted whether it would be possible to create a government that would be both faithful to republican principles and capable of managing the affairs of a country so large in extent and diverse in interests as the thirteen newly independent United States. Madison's great contribution was to allay such reservations by turning the received wisdom of his age on its head. Since "the latent causes of faction are sown in the nature of man," he argued, clashing interests were inevitable in any society. The great problem was to explain how these divergent interests could best be adjusted and regulated without violating

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republican principles. One part of his answer--the more familiar part--argued that an extended republic would "cure the mischiefs of faction" more effectively than a small one. The larger and more diverse a society was, Madison argued, the more difficult it would be to organize durable coalitions intent on pursuing their various private interests at the expense of the larger public good.

In pushing his analysis even this far, Madison had already gone a long way toward adding classical political theory to other European legacies the Americans were eager to discard. He had not only suggested that a republic could rest on vice as easily as on virtue, but he had also substituted a recognizably modern image of a fluid and diverse society for the traditional categories of the few and the many, the aristocracy and the democracy. Yet this was not enough. In arguing that "factious majorities" could not exist in a society as diverse and extensive as America, Madison had only posited what would happen; he had not identified the positive principles on which the government would actually operate.

One reading of Madison's theory--usually described as the "pluralist" model--has held that government would somehow constitute an arena within which the various interests of the larger society would be represented, with public policy formed as the outcome of the conflicts and compromises, the push and pull of legislative politics. We now understand that this was not Madison's idea at all. As modern as Madison may have been in understanding the fluidity of society, he still held to an older notion of representation.

The Filtration of Talent

In his view, the second great advantage of the extended republic was that it would permit the election to office of more conscientious and capable leaders than the petty politicians and local demagogues who had dominated the state assemblies during the 1780s. Representatives to the new national government would be chosen from constituencies far larger than those which elected state legislators. Within these districts, Madison assumed, politicians of merely local reputation and little talent would cancel each other out; only men possessed of genuine reputation and ability--one suspects Madison was thinking of himself--would be able to command the allegiance of large numbers of voters. Once in office, they would act with a broadmindedness that would elevate the very quality of public life. They would think not in terms of the immediate interests of their constituents, but of the larger public good which was synonymous with the concept of the public itself. The virtue which could no longer be expected to reside in the populace might still be found, he hoped, in its rulers.

It is this aspect of Madison's theory which has, in recent years, commanded the attention of such scholars as the late Douglass Adair, Gordon Wood, and even Garry Wills. Yet with all that has been written about this idea of "the filtration of talent," it is striking that we rarely stop to ask whether it bore any correspondence to the reality of early national politics. Madison's theory was, after all, very much a leap of faith, nothing more than a prediction of what he hoped would happen if a vigorous national government replaced the "imbecile" confederation of the 1780s.

Was Madison more nearly right or wrong in hoping that the framing of the Constitution would release new ambitions and draw better men into public life? Of course, it would be extremely difficult to decide whether those who actually gained office were a "better" group of men--better than whom, and in what respect?--or whether they possessed the traits Madison wanted them to embody. The fact is that for this as for other periods of American history, we know all too little about the range of private motives and public concerns that have worked to bring men (and later women) into public life.

We can, of course, speak confidently about a few prominent individuals who did indeed seem to embody the refined political virtue Madison envisioned. The ninety-odd members of the First Federal Congress included such veteran leaders as Roger Sherman, Richard Henry Lee, Elbridge Gerry, William Paterson, and (perhaps most notably) Madison himself, and it is difficult to deny that a

deeply principled commitment to public life was far from being the least important consideration that had led them to seek office under the new regime.

But when one examines the entire roster of membership for this smallest and most celebrated of federal congresses, it also becomes apparent that the process of election was not working only to "extract from the mass of the Society the purest and noblest characters which it contains." Thomas Sumter of South Carolina was elected to the House of Representatives in 1789 not because he had demonstrated any great legislative skills but on the basis of his reputation as a ruthless but daring commander during the vicious warfare that had plagued the Carolina backcountry. Benjamin Contee of Maryland may have hoped that election to Congress would help him stave off the demands of his creditors. If so, he was disappointed: a Philadelphia merchant kept insisting that Contee take a leave from Congress so he could put his affairs in order. Personal considerations of another kind encouraged the young Fisher Ames to accept his friends' urgings to run for the Boston seat in Congress. His father had been a self-educated Yankee almanac-maker whose struggle for prosperity had begun with a bitter legal battle to retain the tavern he had inherited from his first wife. Ames himself knew what it meant to use native intelligence, a Harvard education, and the political connections of a young lawyer to make his way from the status-conscious atmosphere of a small New England town into more elite circles.

Once elected, Ames proved a valuable member of Congress indeed. His success there reminds us that the personal concerns that helped to bring men into public life need not be confused with the sense of responsibility they felt once they were in office. It was entirely possible to pursue election to Congress for reasons of ambition and self-interest, and still act with the kind of political virtue that Madison hoped the Constitution would foster. Yet when one explores the variety of motives that actually worked to bring men to Congress, it is difficult to resist concluding that his vision was naive. Even in a body as small as the First Congress, there was room for a wide range of ambitions to come into play-and not all of these were consistent with the hopes Madison entertained for the operation of the extended republic.

Political Parties

His theory also proved deficient on other grounds. Madison had designed the extended republic to "cure the mischiefs of faction," but by the mid-1790s, no one could claim that when Congress assembled, its members acted in the disinterested and truly patriotic fashion that Madison had envisioned. Sharp disputes arose over both the financial and the foreign policies that Alexander Hamilton had persuaded President Washington to pursue. The divisions within Congress were so severe that Madison himself and Thomas Jefferson undertook the novel task of organizing a genuine political party. In increasing numbers, candidates for both Congress and the state assemblies were running as recognized adherents of Federalist or Republican policies, and, when elected, voting accordingly. The parties became increasingly sectional in character. Madison still resisted the idea that organized parties ought to be a permanent part of the American political system; like Jefferson and James Monroe, the two friends who preceded and followed him in the Presidency between 1801 and 1825, he hoped that their Democratic-Republican party could wither away as soon as the Federalist menace was finally eliminated. But in accepting the existence of parties even as, a temporary and necessary evil, Madison was effectively admitting that legislative politics were being conducted along lines different from those which he and the other framers of the Constitution had hoped to lay down.

Although partisan politics did seem to be on the road to extinction during the presidency of James Monroe (1817-25), with the election of Andrew Jackson and the controversies which his administration witnessed, active political parties were again organized. They now dominated both electoral and legislative politics with a vigor that the earlier struggles of the Federalists and Democratic-Republicans had not attained.

Had the Democratic and Whig parties of the Jacksonian era not been so vigorous, still the framers' vision would have foundered on another shoal. The emergence of militant abolitionism in the 1830s

demonstrated that unless the slavery issue could be either resolved or neutralized, the sectional loyalties of Congressmen would always sharply limit their ability to elevate some broad notion of the national interest over more parochial concerns.

Madison's theory of the extended republic had sought to cure the mischiefs of faction within the states by creating a national political arena in which merely local interests could never hold permanent sway. What his theory did not anticipate--or could not avert--was the possibility that "factious majorities" might form within each of the new republic's major regions, each one dedicated to pursuing a vision of the national good that the other could only interpret as deeply threatening to its own vital interests. By the 1850s, Southern spokesmen were convinced that if the authority of the national government were not used to protect the expansion of slavery into the western territories, the "peculiar institution" which was the basis of their civilization would be doomed. Northern Republicans believed with equal fervor that if the national government did not act to halt the extension of slavery, the free institutions and free labor of their own region would be gravely endangered. Two "factious majorities" had coalesced at the regional level within America, and their definitions of the national good were no longer compatible with the preservation of the union. The fact that a greater sense of political virtue and justice lay with the supporters of antislavery does not prevent our recognizing that James Madison's brilliant contribution to American political theory ultimately failed to surmount the central contradiction in American history: the persistence of slavery in a society otherwise committed to liberal ideals. Yet if the Civil War must always be regarded as the greatest and most tragic failure of the framers' work, the rending of the union in 1861 has not led later generations to reject the Madisonian argument. In fact it has only been in the twentieth century--and not the nineteenth--that the richness and originality of his theory have come to be appreciated. Modern critics of the Constitution may fault Madison and his colleagues for creating a regime with too many checks and balances, a government divided (like Lincoln's union) against itself. But Madison's theory of the extended republic remains central to the American science of politics, for at least two reasons. He was convinced, in the first place, that a vigorous national government could protect individual liberty, a belief which the history of the struggle for civil rights in our own time amply supports. Second, and perhaps more important, Madison understood that republican government could, indeed had to be, reconciled with a realistic theory of human nature. Rather than conclude that evidence of enduring human frailty justified a resort to less popular forms of government, he and his colleagues struggled to create a government by consent that would work even if electors and the elected proved less virtuous than one might hope. From the perspective of the twentieth century, the novelty of their achievement may be difficult to perceive. But in the founders' time, it was a revolution indeed.

Suggested Reading:

Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (1969).

Richard Hofstadter, *The Idea of a Party System* (1970).

Daniel P. Jordan., *Political Leadership in Jefferson's Virginia* (1983).

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