
Review Essay

The Papers of James Madison

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The Papers of James Madison: Secretary of State Series. Volume 8: 1 September 1804–31 January 1805. Edited by Mary A. Hackett and others. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007. Pp. xxxix, 644.)

The Papers of James Madison: Secretary of State Series. Volume 9: 1 February 1805–30 June 1805. Edited by Mary A. Hackett and others. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011. Pp. xxxii, 575.)

The Papers of James Madison: Presidential Series. Volume 7: 15 October 1813–30 June 1814. Edited by Angela Kreider and others. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012. Pp. xxxvii, 649.)

The Papers of James Madison: Retirement Series: 1 February 1820–26 February 1823; Volume 2. Edited by David Mattern and others. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013. Pp. xxxiv, 727.)

In the 1950s, six comprehensive projects were begun, to edit and publish the papers of six leading founders: Thomas Jefferson (edited by Julian P. Boyd); Benjamin Franklin (Leonard W. Labaree); John Adams (Lyman Butterfield); Alexander Hamilton (Harold C. Syrett); James Madison (William T. Hutchinson); and George Washington (W. W.

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Abbot). All but the Hamilton project are still underway, altogether totaling more than 200 volumes to date. The only finished project is the Hamilton, twenty-three volumes; editor Syrett once remarked that he considered dedicating his project “to Aaron Burr who made its completion possible.”

The volumes of *The Papers of James Madison* here under review document some months of his busy, stressful, public-spirited years in executive office. They provide evidence that, after sixty years of extraordinarily skilled work, the high and exacting standards of the founding editors prevail yet. The full publication, careful evaluation, and provenance of the original documents, and the learned and concise editorial context of these volumes, make them a unique and central contribution to our understanding of the foundations of American government and public life. The study of the early republic has been immeasurably enriched.

In volumes 8 and 9 of the Secretary of State Series of Madison’s papers, we have for the first time easily accessible documents showing how Madison, in close consultation with President Jefferson, faced what seemed a propitious moment in American history: Louisiana had been acquired, republican government was flourishing, Jefferson had been reelected overwhelmingly (Madison at his right hand), the depredations of the Barbary powers were under control, and the renewed war between France and Britain seemed less threatening to the United States. Furthermore, it appeared possible to the president and secretary of state that continuing disputes with Spain over the boundaries of Louisiana might be settled amicably. Even the quarrel with Britain over impressment and the overbearing use of her huge naval power seemed amenable to active, carefully guided diplomacy.

Volume 8 begins, though, with Madison and Jefferson ending weeks of late summer visits to Monticello and Montpelier to face increasingly perplexing problems at home and abroad as they prepared Jefferson’s fourth annual message to Congress. Madison received hundreds of reports from American ministers, consuls, merchants, and ship captains across the world, and wrote long, carefully worded instructions in reply (often in code). He averaged one reply to every dozen or two dispatches received. He dealt with applications and recommendations from individuals for positions at home and abroad, and settled quarrels over the posting and finances of his subordinate officers. He tried, finally, to respond to the reports and requests of the first governor of Louisiana, William C. C. Claiborne, as he sought to bring stable government there

in the presence of continuing and recalcitrant French and Spanish influence in New Orleans and elsewhere. Of about 700 documents printed in volume 8, nearly 600 are to Madison and only 100 or so are by him. Many of these are formal, routine letters; perhaps 500 are abstracts of incoming letters provided by the editors to shorten and clarify what would otherwise be dozens of pages of trivia, formality, and repetition.

Madison's most immediate concern was to complete the Louisiana Purchase by enforcing provisions for the departure of Spanish authorities from the newly acquired territory. But Spanish officials and forces delayed leaving New Orleans for more than a year, while remaining in Baton Rouge, Mobile, Pensacola, and elsewhere along the Gulf. They claimed the strategic territory was not, as Madison held, part of the Louisiana Purchase, but belonged instead to the Spanish province of West Florida. Spain claimed further that the western border of Louisiana was the west bank of the Mississippi River rather than the River Bravo or some other ill-defined place in "Texas" as Madison insisted. The general editor of the Madison Papers, John Stagg, tells the full story of these complicated negotiations and actions in *Borderlines and Borderlands: James Madison and the Spanish-American Frontier, 1776-1821* (New Haven, CT, 2009).

Madison received fifty-four dispatches from the earnest Governor Claiborne concerning his efforts to finally get rid of the Spaniards and settle disputes among armed groups of slaves, Indians, and American frontiersmen in the territory. At length, he reported that the yellow fever raging in New Orleans had carried off his wife and "little daughter." Despite his "heavy affliction," the governor soldiered on, as he reported, with "fortitude and Resignation" (Claiborne to Madison, Sept. 27, 1804; 8: 95).

In a joint letter to Madison, diplomats James Monroe and Charles Pinckney reported from Madrid of their failure there to keep Spain, under increasing pressure from France, from declaring war on England. "Both Britain and Spain ought to see," they asserted, "that the destiny of the Western world is in our hands" (Mar. 1, 1805; 9: 80). As Napoleon abandoned plans to invade England in the spring of 1805, and moved his armies to Germany, British Orders in Council blockaded the coast of Europe from Cadiz to the North Sea. Madison agreed with his diplomats that this development offered opportunities to take advantage of Spain's vulnerability to British sea power, and yet he was less willing than they to "draw near" to England. Her practices of impressment and capture of

American ships on the high seas and in American waters, Madison thought, were far more dangerous to American interests, self-respect, and even independence, than anything an increasingly land-locked Napoleon and his weakened Spanish ally could do.

On April 12, 1805, Madison received British Minister Anthony Merry's assertion that Madison's legalistic arguments condemning both impressment and confiscation of American ships misunderstood international law, and in fact were "extremely prejudicial to His Majesty's Service and to the Interests of His Subjects at Large" (i.e., likely to heighten British hostility to the United States). That same day, Madison urged Monroe in London to double-down on the impressment and seizure issues, "and urge redress, . . . which is equally due to private justice, to the reasonable expectations of the United States, and to the confidence and harmony which ought to be cherished between the two nations" (from Merry, and to Monroe, Apr. 12, 1805; 9: 244, 238–39). Madison remained sanguine, telling his congressman brother-in-law, John G. Jackson, that "time will adjust everything to our satisfaction. To gain time therefore without losing our character or peace is to gain much tho' not all" (to Jackson, May 4, 1805; 9: 318).

With the Chesapeake affair, the Embargo, and the War of 1812 lying ahead, one wonders how Madison might have reevaluated his prediction, when he thought back, in October 1813, as volume 7 of the Presidential Series begins. He put the best possible face on the war in his Annual Message to Congress in December of that year. Though the British, "mistaking our desire for peace for a dread of British power," had rejected the mediation of a "distinguished sovereign" (the czar of Russia), the president nonetheless had reasserted his primary focus: to "stop the effusion of blood" by prevailing on the battlefield, and thus persuade Britain to make peace. The president noted "the success with which it has pleased the Almighty to bless our arms" in Oliver Perry's capture of a British fleet on Lake Erie and in General Harrison's vanquishing of a British and Indian force on the Thames in upper Canada. The way was clear, Madison hoped, for American ships to control Lake Ontario and "set on foot operations against the possessions of the enemy on the St. Laurence" (Dec. 7, 1813; 7: 82–83).

In an excellent preface—the best concise account we have of Madison's conduct of the War of 1812—the editors point out that in the period covered by volume 7, "a bleak war outlook for the United States became even bleaker" (xxi). Madison's correspondence with his military

leaders, cabinet, and diplomats, along with support and advice from friends of the war effort and complaints and threats from opponents, show in painful, frustrating detail how complicated it was to fight a war for justice and national survival without backtracking on republican principles and institutions.

While many citizens were full of “ardour for the honor and glory of the country,” and for its “constituted authorities,” publisher Matthew Carey wrote the president, others were “hostile to the best interests of the Country, & basely devoted to a foreign foe; . . . fraud, falsehood, perjury, smuggling” (Dec. 15, 1813; 7: 106–107). Madison responded positively to a British offer for “instituting negotiations for peace,” but he knew as well that Napoleon’s impending defeat would free powerful, battle-tested British forces for vengeful attacks on the United States. Should the nation “relax” in the face of this ominous development, Madison warned Congress, it “would necessarily have the most injurious consequences” (to Congress, Jan. 6, 1814; 7: 78).

The “faltering” war effort became worse with Secretary of War John Armstrong’s disloyalty and ineptitude in the spring of 1814. Secretary of State Monroe charged that Armstrong “wants a head fit for his station, Indolent except for improper purposes, [and] incapable of that combination and activity, which the times require.” Monroe baited Madison, claiming that Armstrong had “seduced officers of the army . . . [by] teaching them to look to him not to you” for preferment, and placed “in office . . . his tools & instruments, & the sons of influential men under them as clerks, etc.” If he remained in office, Monroe warned, he “will ruin not you and the adm[inistration] only, but the whole republican party and cause” by corrupting, bungling, and finally losing the war effort (Monroe to Madison, Dec. 27, 1813; 7: 139–40).

In the first months of 1814, Napoleon’s exile to Elba freed Britain’s seasoned forces for more massive attacks on the United States. This extended moment, perhaps the most critical and least edifying of Madison’s presidency, is covered poignantly and ominously in volume 7. Though he was aware of Armstrong’s incompetence and disloyalty, seemingly irresistible political considerations kept Madison from replacing him for months. Lack of funds and wrangling over military leadership further weakened the war effort.

In June 1814, noting an “overwhelming force” off the Virginia coast ready to “strike any part of our atlantic frontier with impunity,” Virginia Governor James Barbour begged the president to pay attention to the

situation. Madison's reply was unhelpful, even pathetic. Whistling in the dark, he thought Britain might decide against attack; but as uncertainty prevailed, he reckoned the nation must prepare "to meet the augmented force which may invade us." Regular American forces, the president wrote, would likely not be available to help Virginia defend the entrance to Chesapeake Bay. He regretted "that it is not in my power to give you either more information with respect to the plans and purposes of the Enemy, or more satisfactory views of our means of frustrating them" (Barber to Madison and Madison to Barbour, June 13 & 16, 1814; 7: 555-56, 561-62).

When Madison arrived back in Washington in June 1814 after two months at Montpelier, he knew that three powerful British forces were gathering on their way to attack the United States: along the St. Lawrence to New York State, up Chesapeake Bay past Norfolk toward Washington and Baltimore, and at the mouth of the Mississippi toward New Orleans. Volume 7 ends with testy, cross-purposes letters between the president and secretary of war, and Madison's notes on desperate cabinet meetings seeking to provide for the defense of Washington and Baltimore.

The second Retirement Series volume continues to record how twenty-four years of Republican leadership (1801-1825) were a deliberate, self-conscious, and unified effort to work out in leadership and in practice a republican ideology of self-government. Nineteen letters to Madison from President James Monroe, twenty-two letters from ex-President Madison to Monroe, twenty-six letters exchanged between ex-Presidents Jefferson and Madison (many not previously published), plus arrangements made for at least semi-annual visits among the neighbor republican presidents combine to show their continued collaboration.

During the Missouri crisis that erupted in 1819, Madison and Monroe both refused to acknowledge the earnest, morally directed intentions of northerners to exclude slavery from the Louisiana Territory. Instead they saw the exclusion effort as a ploy to entrench northern political dominance over a weakened South. Missouri, the two Virginians insisted, had as much right to allow slavery as any other state. This would "diffuse" slavery in the nation, they argued (ineffectively), supposedly making easier its ultimate demise.

In facing the growing threat of the "Holy Alliance" powers in Europe to arrest the spread of independence among Spanish colonies in South America, Jefferson warned Madison that Czar Alexander had "become the watchman of tyranny for Europe, as dear to its oppressors as detestable to

the oppressed.” He hoped Russia’s impending “war with the Turks” would distract the Czar and his allies enough to “give opportunities for the friends of liberty [in South America] to proceed in their work” (May 12, 1822; 2: 519). Madison congratulated Secretary of State John Quincy Adams for his “rich, . . . excellent thoughts” in expressing America’s sympathy for Simon Bolivar’s independence campaigns in South America. “The progress of reformation on your Continent,” Madison wrote Lafayette, as well as “propagated . . . new States . . . on this side of the Atlantic” made it unlikely for “Despotism . . . to reign any where, as it has heretofore done almost every where.” Monroe and Adams moved slowly, confidently, toward the Monroe Doctrine, with cordial support from Monticello and Montpelier (to Lafayette, Nov. 25, 1820; 2: 158).

The real richness of this Retirement Series volume, though, lies in its broad commentary on the events of Madison’s long public career, and on his political and constitutional thought more generally—institutions, laws, proposals, and ideas marking the maturity of Madison’s republic. The federal system provided for “the cultivation of law as science,” Madison explained, and took “a comprehensive view of the local codes” in order to “diminish local prejudices, to cherish mutual confidence, and to accommodate the intercourses of businesses between citizens of different states.” After recommending a course of history reading to the husband of one of his many nieces (he had thirty-some nieces and nephews), he observed that “no studies seem so well calculated to give a proper expansion of the mind as Geography and History, and . . . are as beneficial & becoming to the one sex as to the other” (to Peter S. Du Ponceau, May 1821; to Reynolds Chapman, Jan. 25, 1821; 2: 312, 323).

This volume does something that the secretary of state and presidential series do less often: It exposes thought process and provides sharper explanations of the active life of a seasoned public servant, republican philosopher, and honored elder statesman. The editors of the several volumes reviewed here have republished important public letters concerning Madison’s conduct in office, greatly adding to historical knowledge. They also contribute little known texts—some very recently discovered; plus a goodly number of “private” letters that reveal personal views previously unknown. With learned, helpful footnotes, the editors work to contextualize clearly. As historians and citizens we can be grateful for their labors, wishing the editors, now in their second and third “generations,” Godspeed in their finely executed work.