

*The Last of the Fathers: James Madison & the Republican Legacy*

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Book Review

A More Perfect Union: The Origins and the Development of the U.S. Constitution

*The Last of the Fathers: James Madison & the Republican Legacy* by Drew McCoy is a partial biographical review of James Madison's legacy from the vantage point of his retirement from public office after his presidency. James Madison's life spans across the American Revolution, Confederation, the Constitutional Convention, and the early American republic. As a professor at Clark University, Dr. McCoy specializes in American political and intellectual history from the colonial era through the Civil War. By focusing on his retirement from public office in March 1817 to his death on June, 28, 1836, McCoy seeks to explore the transmission of republican values across generations in nineteenth-century America.

McCoy thematically illustrates Madison's conviction to preserve the republic from the disorders and injustices that afflict most popular government. McCoy begins with the presentation of Madison's character as recorded through other authors and politicians like Harriet Martineau. Then, he begins his partial biographical journey through Madison's retirement by examining the character of the republic, congressional power and perils, the nullification crisis, the American economy, and slavery between 1800 and 1830. McCoy's writing culminates with the political careers of a few of his mentees in order to examine Madison's lasting legacy on the American republic. McCoy purports that it is only through complete examination of Madison's life during and after public politics that, as one of the most influential leaders in the formation of a new nation, we can grasp James Madison's depth and contribution to our modern republic.

The author describes Madison as having an emotional urgency and commitment to preserving the republican dream he fought so hard to create during the Constitutional Convention. As McCoy highlights Madison's passion to maintain the American republic, he

frames Madison as having the impeccable ability to control his thoughts and reactions. According to McCoy, Madison is the projection of exemplary character and temperament. McCoy begins revealing Madison's character in an attempt to point out that the unfavorable image of Madison's presidency has obscured his contributions to the American republic, especially after his retirement, and additionally denied him the credit he is justly due. McCoy highlights that Madison led the nation through a second war for independence with Britain in the War of 1812 without violating the republican soul or expanding executive power, a feat rarely made by presidents during war.

The author also makes the claim that, arguably, no one has made a stamp on the American republic as great as Madison due to his high regard of the republic as an extension of himself. The same value of balance and stability he placed on his own life is the same he valued for the nation. McCoy frames Madison's heavy involvement in politics after his retirement in 1817 as a compulsion, exacting that Madison views many of the events of the 1820's and 1830's as parallels to his experience prior to the Confederation. In many ways, the Constitution framed by Madison and the founding fathers desperately needed interpretation during crises like the constitutionality of the national banking system, the tariffs dilemma, slavery, political parties, the nullification crisis, and many more. As the title of the book suggests, Madison stood as the last of the Fathers, urgently trying to preserve what he so intently fought to create.

McCoy outlines Madison's reactions to both predictable and unanticipated issues within American government and society after the Constitutional Convention. The formation of political parties served as one of the major issues confronting the retired Madison. According to Madison, injustice, factions, and instability in popular regimes are the diseases of most republican governments. The remedy devised at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia

was to extend government from the state level to the national level. Ironically, the very solution that created order following the Confederation Period creates disorder in Madison's later years. The book illustrates Madison's response to this disorder as he attempts to uncover the original interpretation of the Constitution. During his years in retirement, the nation looked for answers to what laws could be enforced and what decisions were constitutional. Madison refers to the Federalist papers, which he co-authored, in order to reveal the original intended interpretation of the Constitution as best he could.

McCoy's biographical approach to understanding Madison's legacy on the American republic makes this book helpful in understanding Madison's views on government, economy, and the dreaded slavery question. The author's use of Madison's own papers, letters, and publications, as well as other primary sources among prominent leaders of the time, makes this book a supplement to any study on James Madison and the formation of the Constitution of the United States. The author meticulously reveals how Madison's genius and acumen knowledge of the characteristics of a sound republic helps create a lasting government. No one apparently had more faith in the republic than Madison. Unfortunately, this same faith in the preservation of the republic causes Madison to never resolve the issue of slavery.

McCoy provides Madison's sound arguments and reasoning to every republican threat except slavery. This is the one area where McCoy fails to answer the popular question of slavery. He points out on various occasions throughout the book that Madison is highly opposed to the idea of slavery, even highlighting a letter in which Madison states that the Bible opposes slavery. McCoy reveals Madison's support of the recolonization of slaves to Liberia. Madison's undying faith in the constitution and republic made the answer to the slavery question irresolvable. In the end, McCoy never quite illustrated why Madison never addressed and publicly condemned

slavery in these years of retirement. As the slavery debate increased in intensity, Madison did not become as vocal about slavery as he did every other threat to the American republic. McCoy speculated about these answers, but to his credit, there is nothing more that he could conclude. The resources on Madison's views on issues of popular government, economics, and other debates throughout his retirement far exceed his notes and thoughts on slavery. Therefore, a critical analysis of Madison's complete views on slavery could be nothing more than speculation.

One of the most difficult task as a teacher is determining how to make past events and dead people relevant for the students because they wonder about the purpose for studying people like James Madison. After all, he is dead. This book does more than just provide a teacher biographical and primary sources on James Madison. It is a demonstration of the necessity of obtaining the wisdom of the past. Because James Madison lived across generations and through some of the most critical times in American history, he was able to use his informed judgment to guide the future of America. As a nation, as teachers, as students, we are continually revising and questioning the true "voice" of the Constitution. What did the founders really mean? What does it really mean to be an American?

The pedagogical approach I might use with this book is to compare and contrast what the country might look like if the founders were still alive and what it has truly become. In this way, students would be challenged to examine Madison's true interpretation of the Constitution he solely shouldered. "What is the role of government in the lives of its citizens" is a question that America has asked since the government was formed at the Constitutional Convention. Students might be challenged to answer this question using this book on Madison, as well as taking a look back to the Confederation period and the time after the Constitutional Convention. This book has

helped me answer this question for my students in regard to how the fathers would interpret the role of government.

According to Madison, the republic is “a partnership not only between those living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born” (59). In order to make this book relevant for my students, I might ask the following questions at the beginning of the year or unit: How do we impact history? How does history impact us? Politicians and citizens living during Madison’s retirement had two views on his advice and input: his advice was either necessary or obsolete. Madison’s decisions at the Constitutional Convention impacted everyone’s life in America to the present day. It shaped America as we now know it. As we study the origins and development of the U.S. Constitution, I might shape the lessons around the founders’ challenge to create a perfect union, the issues they faced, the decisions they made, and finally around how they impacted history.

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