

## AMERICAN LIVES James Madison Quiet Politician

*"Every person seems to acknowledge his greatness. He blends together the profound politician, with the Scholar. In the management of every great question he evidently took the lead in the Convention."—William Pierce, Georgia delegate to the Constitutional Convention, on James Madison (1787)*

James Madison was an unlikely politician. Frail, a hypochondriac, and shy, he was a private person who did not like campaigning and spoke so softly he was not always heard. Yet he served more than 40 years in public office, impressing people with his learning and careful preparation.

An eager student, Madison (1751–1836) read every book in his father's library by age eleven. After studying with a tutor, he attended the College of New Jersey (now Princeton) and completed a three-year course in two years. After one more year of study, he returned home, suffering a physical or emotional breakdown.

He was energized to enter politics when he met some Baptists imprisoned for their religious beliefs. Madison vowed to help them. In 1776, he joined the Virginia Convention and won approval of a call for the "free exercise of religion."

From 1776 to 1787, Madison served either in Virginia's revolutionary government or the national Congress. He won another victory for religious freedom, persuading the Virginia assembly to pass a law that ended the Anglican Church's status as an official religion. Throughout this period, he concluded that the Confederation government was too weak to be effective.

Madison prepared for the Constitutional Convention by reading the history of other confederations. He listed their weaknesses and drafted the outlines of a new constitution. His ideas formed the basis of what was submitted as the Virginia Plan. Madison attended virtually every minute of the sessions, taking notes of the proceedings. He spoke often, always in defense of a strong central government. He also argued strongly for direct election of the legislature, which he called vital "to every plan of free government."

Madison wrote about a third of the *Federalist Papers* urging ratification of the new Constitution. Critics argued that the document gave the new government power to tyrannize over individuals. Madison tried to reassure them: "Justice is the end

of government. . . . It ever has been, and ever will be pursued, until it be obtained or until liberty be lost in the pursuit." During June 1788, he debated Patrick Henry, using his greater learning to combat Henry's more passionate appeals. Madison won, and Virginia ratified the Constitution. Yet Henry, who controlled the Virginia Assembly, succeeded in denying Madison either of the state's seats in the new Senate. He also tried to draw a district boundary that would prevent Madison from winning a seat in the House, but Madison did win election.

The Constitution was approved in part because of the promise to enact a Bill of Rights. Some wanted a new convention to draft these amendments, but Madison feared that such a meeting would rewrite the whole Constitution, undoing all the careful work. So, he wrote the necessary amendments and pushed the first Congress to pass them and send them to the states for final approval. Thus, a new convention was not needed.

Madison went on to serve as his friend Thomas Jefferson's secretary of state for eight years and as president for another eight. He left office in 1817 scarred by divisions in the country caused by the War of 1812. In his remaining 19 years, Madison grew alarmed at the increasing divisions between sections. When he died, a brief message called "Advice to My Country" was discovered. It said: "The advice nearest to my heart and deepest in my convictions is, that the Union of the States be cherished and preserved." It was a union that he had done much to build.

### Questions

1. Is a person of Madison's shyness likely to succeed in politics now? Explain your answer.
2. What did Madison do to promote religious freedom?
3. In what sense is it fair to call Madison the "father of the Constitution"?