

Maryland Society Sons of the American Revolution

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James Madison: Big Intentions for a Historic Convention

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It was James Madison who said “all men having power ought to be distrusted to a certain degree.” Yet, it was also James Madison, though small in size and unimpressive in appearance, who held much of the power during the constitutional convention. Madison was an instigator; he knew that he didn’t have enough authority to command much respect, so he convinced people of importance and power, like George Washington, to participate. Through his influence on these people of power Madison had authority, and with this authority he ultimately brought the Constitution into existence, and kept it in existence with his ferocious lobbying for the Bill of Rights. Also, his extensive notes of the occurrences of the constitutional convention are extremely important to the understanding and interpretation of the Constitution today. All things considered, James Madison *is* the Father of the Constitution.

Many people say that George Washington’s presence at the constitutional convention was essential to the positive reception of the document. Madison was aware that the popular general’s presence was highly desired, and he worked his hardest to achieve Washington’s attendance. Madison was consistent in his plea for Washington to attend, and when word spread that Washington was attending, other political figures whose presence would prove crucial agreed to attend (Labunski 7). Washington was elected president of the convention, and Madison’s influence over Washington supplied him with authority as well. George Washington’s support was vital to the creation of the United State’s Constitution, and his support was given as a direct result of Madison’s efforts.

In this same way, Madison employed Governor Edmund Randolph to speak for Virginia at the convention (Cerami 125). He was aware that the Virginia Plan, his plan, was a matter of great importance, and that a person of great importance should introduce it. Even though he tricked Randolph into supporting the plan, Randolph proved to be a very competent vessel for Madison’s message. Though the Virginia Plan wasn’t received fully, many of Madison’s greatest objectives were achieved (Cerami 145). According to Kauffmann, “on the big issues....the ones that served as the foundation on which everything else was built, Madison’s handiwork has clearly been preserved in our modern government” (Archiving Early America).

After Madison achieved the ratification of the Constitution, he realized he needed to fight for a bill of rights to keep it. He wasn’t a supporter for a bill of rights at first, but he later decided it was necessary for the Constitution to be fully accepted by the American people who feared the infringement

of their rights (Bent, The James Madison Center). Bent says that Madison “clearly felt a need to control the amendment process by taking leadership of the effort” (The James Madison Center). Madison apparently was confident in his new authority because he single handedly introduced the amendments to Congress. He of course took advantage of his influence on Washington and got him to mention the amendments in his inaugural address (Labunski 188). Washington’s endorsement was invaluable to Madison even if it wasn’t a markedly enthusiastic endorsement, because Madison would later use the president’s letter of support to convince other members of Congress to follow his example (Labunski 189). The idea for a bill of rights wasn’t extremely popular with Congress, and the bill of rights discussion was postponed repeatedly, causing Madison to voice his concern that the public would think, “we are not sincere in our desire to incorporate such amendments in the constitution as will secure those rights, which they consider as not sufficiently guarded” (qtd. in Labunski 192). Eventually Madison’s amendments would receive the attention he wanted, and ten of his twelve proposed amendments would be approved and would create the Bill of Rights.

Another important part of Madison’s authority was his notes. The fact that he was the sole note taker of such an important convention gave him the power of interpretation and the knowledge that his notes alone would be essential to the future generations’ understanding of the Constitution. Jefferson once wrote in a letter, “do you know that there exists in manuscript the ablest work of this kind ever yet executed of the debates of the constitutional convention of Philadelphia? The whole of everything said and done there was taken down by Mr. Madison, with a labor and exactness beyond comprehension” (qtd. in Cerami 122). These notes gave Madison the last word, which is always a powerful tool. Also, Madison kept them secret for fifty years to make sure that “if anyone were to contest the legality of the Constitution on the basis of some allegedly improper argument found in the original notes, this opponent would have been attacking a document that was already hallowed by a half-century of existence” (Cerami 125).

James Madison played a more influential role in the constitutional convention than any of the other Framers of the Constitution. He operated quietly and through other people, but he accomplished much. He knew who to use and what to use them for, and this wisdom was important to his ability to get things done. His lobbying for the Bill of Rights is the reason it is included in the Constitution today, and his notes are widely responsible for the present-day interpretation of the Constitution. In an essay written by George F. Will he states, “if we really believed the pen was mightier, or even more dignified, than the sword, the nation’s capital would be named not for the soldier who wielded the revolutionary sword, but for the thinker who was ablest with a pen. It would be Madison, D.C.” (Archiving Early America).

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Biography

Jordan Stephenson is a senior and will graduate in June 2009. Jordan's extracurricular activities include the school music organizations and student government where she has held numerous leadership positions. Her community volunteer activities include those with her church and youth groups. She has received numerous academic awards and honors and has been an AP Scholar during her senior year.