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The Men Who Shaped America

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Anyone seeking to understand the tensions about the scope and size of government in modern democratic societies needs to have an understanding of the titanic struggle between Federalists and Republicans in the embryonic United States.

While there were many important characters in these battles, including Presidents George Washington and John Adams, no individuals were more crucial in these seminal debates than the leading Federalist, Alexander Hamilton, and the Republicans, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison.

Thus the recent publication of two separate books which, between them, study the careers of these three men is particularly welcome. Veteran historian of the period, John Ferling, has written a joint study of Jefferson and Hamilton, while Lynne Cheney, wife of former Vice President Cheney, has completed a biography of Madison.

In his preface, Ferling describes how the mantle of the founding fathers has been claimed by a variety of successors. The eventual evolution of the Republican Party of Jefferson and Madison into the modern Democratic Party is one obvious reason why twentieth century Democrat politicians like Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Bill Clinton might have tried to place themselves in the Jeffersonian tradition.

On the other hand, some modern Republican Party Presidents, such as Theodore Roosevelt, have venerated Hamilton. All of which only highlights the ongoing need to understand the legacy of Hamilton, Madison and Jefferson.

Ferling does not pass judgment on the appropriateness of these linkages, but what is striking about the story he tells is its demonstration of how far removed Jefferson would have been from either twentieth century party. The fact that Jefferson was instinctively on the side of the ordinary citizen against powerful vested interests does not mean he would have been a supporter of the New Deal or universal health care as some have claimed. It is quite clear that Jefferson believed that the best way to protect ordinary people was to ensure that government was as small as possible. Hamilton, on the other hand, would have been pleasantly surprised by the strength of the modern state.

Jefferson and Hamilton came into open conflict as members of George Washington’s Cabinet in 1791, when Hamilton’s proposal—as Treasury Secretary—to establish a national bank brought the philosophical differences between the two men into practical focus. Ferling explains that such a conflict was inevitable, since ‘at heart, this was a dispute about “their conflicting views of human nature.” Jefferson was an optimist; Hamilton was a pessimist’. Hamilton believed strong governments were required to handle the fact that people would always be driven by a selfish desire to accumulate as much as possible. Jefferson, on the other hand, believed that people were naturally good-natured and thus ‘social unrest was unlikely in republics with small, unobtrusive governments’. Jefferson saw the national bank as the first step towards increasing the power of the central government and returning to a monarchical style of government under a republican fig leaf.

While Hamilton’s support for banks and business has caused him to be regarded as a supporter of modern capitalism, Jefferson’s opposition to contemporary industrialisation has sometimes seen him depicted as anti-capitalist.

Yet Ferling explains that Jefferson did not object to industrialisation *per se*; only to government subsidising its growth. More significantly, Jefferson was vehemently opposed to the accumulated prohibitions and duties by which Britain controlled international commerce. He dreamt of the replacement of the regulated system by one where each nation was free ‘to exchange with others mutual surpluses for mutual Wants’.

The irony was that, while Hamilton wanted the United States to be closer to Britain, his Federalists were often likely to push towards war as an excuse to grow the fiscal-military state. As Jefferson remarked, the Federalists wanted ‘armies and debts’, whereas he argued that the ‘sum of good government was restraint in spending’. When the new larger army created by the Federalists was actually deployed, it was as likely to be against domestic tax protestors as actual foreign enemies.

It was Hamilton’s overreach in 1798-99, in particular the imposition of the Alien and Sedition Laws to stifle dissent, that led to the defeat of the Federalists in the 1800 Presidential election. The orderly transfer of power in early 1801, from one ideologically-based party to another, was in Cheney’s words ‘a turning point not just for the United States but for the world’.

It ushered in a period of the 24 years of rule by Republicans from Virginia, Jefferson being followed in office by his friends James Madison and James Monroe.

Understandably, given that the nature of his work is the comparative biography of two men, Ferling tends to underplay or even disparage Madison’s role, often presenting quite different interpretations to Cheney’s.

For instance, shortly after Jefferson lost the 1796 presidential election, he drafted a letter to the victor John Adams and then showed it to Madison. Cheney’s view is that the draft was ‘haughty and harsh’ and that it was wise of Madison to advise that it not be sent. In contrast, Ferling argues that the failure to send the letter meant that the prospect of a closer relationship between Adams and Jefferson was destroyed. To compound his error, at the start of the Adams administration, Madison declined to be part of a diplomatic mission to Paris.

In Ferling’s view, these ‘twin negatives’ comprehensively altered the course of the next four years, putting Adams more under Hamilton’s influence and sending the nation towards the extremes of the *Alien and Sedition Acts*.

There have only been a modest number of Madison biographies and the definitive work is usually still considered to be Ralph Ketcham's 1971 effort, *James Madison: A Biography*. One reason that Madison has perhaps been a less appealing subject for biographers than some of his contemporaries is that his private life was less colourful than either Jefferson's or Hamilton's—he did not sire children with a black slave like the former, or get killed in a duel like the latter.

Cheney tries to add interest to her subject's personal behaviour by providing little homilies linking Madison's life to universal feelings. For instance, when considering Madison as a suitor, his future wife Dolley realised he 'would treat her with kindness and thoughtfulness', something which she 'like many a woman before and since, might have found … the most essential point'.

Cheney is conscious of the fact that Madison has sometimes been portrayed as 'weak and shy' and an attempt to explain the contradiction between these alleged characteristics and 'the grandeur of his accomplishments' was part of her motivation for writing the book. A younger contemporary, Henry Clay , worried that nature had cast Madison 'in too benevolent a mold'.

However, Cheney argues that 'the genial manner Madison assumed with most members of Congress seems to have kept them on occasion from realizing the audacity of his decisions'.

Madison was one of the key figures in almost all the big debates for three decades from the 1780s onwards. He gave particular thought to the delivery of religious toleration and, as Cheney describes, 'upending the conventional wisdom of his time, he would argue that a large republic had a better chance than a small one' of achieving it, because the greater range of competing interests would make it harder for any single interest to impose authoritarian control.

In practical terms, it was he who secured passage through the Virginia legislature *A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom* which Jefferson had authored years earlier. The bill made it clear that 'all men shall be free to profess and by argument to maintain their opinions in matters of religion'.

Madison, along with Hamilton and John Jay, was also one of the authors of the *Federalist Papers,* one of the most important tracts in political history. This, and other, associations with Hamilton in the 1780s has been one of the main exhibits in some historians charging Madison with political and policy inconsistency.

Cheney provides a good explanation of why Madison was a strong nationalist in the 1780s, when the biggest threat to the new republic was that the states would be too strong, and a strong defender of states' and citizens' rights in the 1790s when the full extent of the centralising Hamiltonian agenda had become clear.

After the defining event of his Presidency, the War of 1812, it can be argued that Madison shifted again. Madison had an instinctive dislike of war as it led to the other threats to liberty, particularly debt and taxes.

However, in the aftermath of that war, he came around to the view that the United Sates required a stronger standing army to protect the nation’s security. He also decided that it needed a national bank to prevent another government financial default as occurred in 1814.

Right to the end of his presidency Madison retained a respect for the constitution. He vetoed an improvements bill for roads and canals, arguing that, until the constitution was amended to allow the federal government to do this, it should not occur. By then, the Federalist Party had largely faded from the political landscape, but its ideas have proved much more resilient.

In 1796, in the lead-up to the first contested presidential election in United Sates history, Jefferson wrote that there were now two American political parties, ‘one which fears the people most, the other [fears] the government’. In many democracies over the subsequent two hundred years the ability to discern that fundamental political distinction has become horribly blurred.

If people cannot appreciate why the Republican Party of Jefferson and Madison fought Hamilton’s Federalists so vigorously, then the threat of big government to ordinary citizens will remain misunderstood.