James Madison And Thomas Jefferson: The Creation Of Democratic-republican Party

The men that formed the Democratic-Republican party were two of the most influential and inspiring leaders of the Federalist Period. Their extensive schooling, their impressive ability to be promoted through the ranks, and their large following, led them to earn their place in history. The perfectly balanced friendship between James Madison and Thomas Jefferson helped shape our country into what it is today.

They first met in 1776 at the Virginia Constitutional Convention where both men played an instrumental role in guaranteeing religious freedom in Virginia. Although politics was the driving force early in their friendship, their common fondness for natural science helped cement their unbreakable bond. While Jefferson was serving as the minister to France, it was well known that the two friends would send each other native treasures- Jefferson received from Madison a variety of American flora followed by Madison receiving different scientific gadgets from Jefferson (Peterson 62-64).

Their uniquely differing personalities also served as an important foundation of their friendship. Albert J. Nock observed Jefferson as “easy and delightful of acquaintance, impossible of knowledge” (Peterson 63). Unlike Jefferson, Madison did not like to be the center of attention. In his personal relationships, he let his larger and louder wife act as his surrogate. He worked best not as a commander or leader, but instead as a committeeman and, even more so, in secret. His best-known achievements were done covertly or pseudonymously at the time.

Fifty-five convention delegates served as inventors of the American presidency at the Constitutional Convention of 1787. The years between 1776 and 1787 were spent perfecting the new nation’s identity. Many Americans learned from their experience with and colonial governments that liberty is threatened by executive power and safeguarded by legislative power. As the blueprints to perfect a system that worked were laid, more problems arose. Of all the problems that plagued the new nation, none seemed more amendable to solution than those involving commerce among the states. In early September 1786, James Madison, a Virginia state assembly member at the time, called for a national trade conference to be held at Annapolis, Maryland, in late September 1786 (Bowen 3). He urged all the other states to send delegates; however, only three states sent full delegations. James Madison and Alexander Hamilton of New York issued a bold call to Congress to meet at an even more wide-ranging meeting. They wrote, “[Delegates from each state] to meet at Philadelphia on the second Monday in May next [1787], to take into consideration the situation of the United States, to devise such further provisions as shall appear to them necessary to render the constitution of the Federal Government adequate to the exigencies of the Union” (Cappon 19).

Shortly after the summons, Congress was forced to address a more urgent event in Massachusetts. Mobs of farmers, saddled with debt and unable to persuade the state legislature to ease credit, closed down courts and stopped sheriffs’ auctions in order to prevent foreclosure orders from being issued and executed against their land. The outbreak was dubbed “Shays’s Rebellion” after the revolutionary war hero, Daniel Shay (Collier 120). On February 21, 1787, Congress decided to act on the request of the convention for fear of further

rebellions in other states.

The Constitutional Convention was described by Jefferson as an “assembly of demigods” but, author Catherine Drinker Bowen described it as a “miracle at Philadelphia” (Isaacson 309). Despite the differing descriptions, the Convention was attended by fifty-five individuals, most of whom were prosperous political leaders that jumped at the chance to dramatically improve the system. Those political leaders complacent with the status quo, chose not to attend and, therefore, as political scientist, Clinton Rossiter, stated “[the convention] would have been much more perfectly representative of the active citizenry of 1787. It would also, one is bound to point out, have been crippled as a nation-building instrument” (Isaacson 312).

On Friday, May 25, 1787, the seven state delegations required to meet a quorum met in Philadelphia. The first order of business was to elect a president. It came as no surprise that George Washington was chosen by the delegates in unanimous vote. Washington spoke on only one minor issue, but, according to the Colliers, “during that long, hot summer, this gregarious man was constantly having dinner, tea, supper with people, and one must assume of course that he was actively promoting his position,” namely, a strong national government and a strong executive within that government (Collier 108).

After Washington’s election, a secretary was chosen, Major William Jackson of Pennsylvania, to keep the convention’s official journal. The journal, however, was little more than simply a record of motions and votes. Madison, being a quiet man that kept to himself but was very frustrated in his studies of other governments, kept extensive notes of the delegates’ debates and deliberations. Out of respect for the other delegates, he decided to keep his notes secret until the last delegate died. Congress eventually purchased Madison’s papers and his notes on the Constitutional Convention in 1840.

Shortly after the convention commenced, on May 28, 1787, the delegates adopted additional rules and procedures; none more important than the rule of secrecy. The rule was simple: no delegate was to discuss with anyone the convention’s discussions and deliberations. This rule appalled Thomas Jefferson, at the time the U.S. Ambassador to France. He wrote to John Adams that he was appalled by “so abominable a precedent…Nothing can justify this but the innocence of their intentions and ignorance of the value of public discussions” (Cappon 19). A letter to Jefferson from his good friend Madison explained the delegates’ decision. “It was thought expedient in order to secure unbiased discussion within doors, and to prevent misconceptions and misconstructions without, to establish some rules of caution which will for no short time restrain even a confidential communication of our proceedings” (Cappon 19).

On May 29, 1787, the Virginia Plan was introduced by Governor Randolph, but written mainly by Madison. The plan proposed to create a three-branch national government and to elevate it to clear supremacy over the states, partly by granting it the power to veto state laws that were in conflict with the Constitution. It also partly grounded the new government’s authority squarely in the people. The Virginia Plan was met with scrutiny and other plans were introduced to the delegates. After many long months of deliberations and debates, the delegates assembled on September 17, 1787 to sign a final copy of the Constitution.

Upon Jefferson’s return from France, the Constitution’s framers heeded his advice: “A bill of rights is what the people are entitled to against every government on earth, general or particular, and what no just government should refuse, or rest on inference” (Cappon 21).

Madison agreed and proceeded to write the first ten amendments to the Constitution which was then considered the Bill of Rights.

George Washington took on the responsibility to lead the new nation as President of the United States in 1789 (Zvesper 66). During his presidency, political leaders were still debating the role of the president. Adams and Hamilton believed that a strong executive was necessary, but other figures like Jefferson and Madison disagreed. Although Madison was an ally of Hamilton in the effort to strengthen the national government at the convention, he and Jefferson were both concerned that too much reliance on the presidency would undermine the delicate system of checks and balances. Differences such as this played an instrumental role in party factions.

Prior to Jefferson's election in 1800, the original constitution was written without political parties in mind (Goldstein 392). It provided that the candidate with the majority of electoral votes would be named president and the runner up would be declared the vice president. During the Adams/Jefferson presidency from 1796-1800, it became clear that each individual had very different views. Formal party organizations were fully in place in 1800 when Jefferson was officially elected as the first Democratic-Republican president.

The years between the two friends' early political days at the Virginia Constitutional Convention to their roles leading this great nation in the early 1800's, were filled with argument as well as compromise. Their unique personalities played an intricate role in creating America's blueprint. The United States of America is widely considered to be the greatest country on Earth, in huge part, due to James Madison and Thomas Jefferson.

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