They were "founding fathers" - and friends. Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence and served as the third president of the United States. James Madison, the architect of the U.S. Constitution and co-author of the Federalist Papers, succeeded him in the White House. Together, they created the Democratic Party.

In "Madison & Jefferson," Andrew Burstein and Nancy Isenberg, professors of history at Louisiana State University, get inside the political culture of the Revolutionary generation in a richly detailed account of the relationship between the two great leaders during the formative years of the American republic.

Both men, they remind us, were "inner-directed, exacting and self-demanding" Enlightenment intellectuals - and practical politicians. Both fought tenaciously to preserve the new nation's independence and expand the territory controlled by the United States. Both tended, however, to ask "How will this play in Virginia?" and failed to apply Enlightenment ideals to slavery and race relations.

Despite shared purposes, "Tall Tommy and Little Jemmy" were profoundly different. Jefferson was extravagant. Madison was circumspect. Jefferson celebrated natural rights, the sovereignty of the individual, and opposition to oppressive governments. Madison, predisposed to structures that bent but did not break, sought to uphold civil institutions.

Acknowledging that Madison "lacked swagger" and the skill to rally the public, the authors rescue him from his reputation as a "book politician," the "sickly heir apparent" to his inspirational mentor and an inept commander-in-chief forced to flee the White House during the War of 1812. As a political operative and an office-holder, they demonstrate, Madison was principled, pragmatic and effective. In fact, Burstein and Isenberg claim, he was often the senior partner in the "Virginia Dynasty," serving as Jefferson's "handler," "political crutch" and "campaign manager," setting the "tenor of the debate" and helping his "enthusiastic friend" avoid the missteps to which he was "prone."

This thesis is provocative but problematic, given the available sources. In his correspondence, Jefferson often expressed himself hyperbolically, giving voice to "impressions of the moment." He frequently solicited opinions even when he had already made up his mind. And, well, he didn't always tell the truth. Jefferson protested much too much, for example, when he told Madison in 1795 that, at age 52, "the little spice of ambition, which I had in my younger days, has long since evaporated" and that the question of another campaign "is forever closed with me."

These reservations notwithstanding, "Madison & Jefferson" is an informative and engaging work that humanizes its subjects - and sets their thoughts and actions in the context of the gritty, sometimes topsy turvy, often hierarchical, invariably racist, wait-and-see reactive social and political world of the late-18th and early-19th centuries. By no means unwilling to make judgments, Burstein and Isenberg remind us that "our expectations from past historical actors are ultimately irrelevant." And that we don't learn all that much when we hasten to label Madison and Jefferson "loathsome" or "weak" because they "attended to the needs of their own color and class."

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