Founding Father remains elusive in Cheney’s ‘Madison’

BY GLENN C. ALTSCHLULER

Before he arrived in Philadelphia for the convention that began on the second Monday of May, 1787, James Madison predicted, "The crisis has arrived, at which the good people of America are to decide the solemn question, whether they will by wise and magisterial efforts reap the just fruits of that independence which they have so gloriously acquired" or "renounce the auspicious blessings prepared for them by the revolution." Americans made the right choice, of course, ratifying the Constitution of the United States in 1787.

No one, Lynne Cheney reminds us, played a more important role than Madison in establishing the American republic. A caring and creative thinker, he helped draft the Constitution, wrote many of the essays in The Federalist Papers defending it and formulated many of the amendments in the Bill of Rights. A member of Congress between 1789 and 1797, Madison helped organize the political opposition to the Federalists and establish the Democratic-Republican Party. After a stint as Thomas Jefferson's Secretary of State, he became the fourth president of the United States in 1808, and took the country into war in 1812.

In "James Madison," Cheney, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, author of "We the People: The Story of Our Constitution" (2008), and wife of former Vice President Dick Cheney, provides a lively account of one of this nation's foremost political figures. Our constitutional framework, she emphasizes, is proof of "the righteousness" of his "unbounded faith in liberty."

The biography is more descriptive than analytical. Cheney examines Madison's seizures (whose symptoms strongly suggest epilepsy), but notes that he was often healthy and vigorous; and she documents his long and loving marriage to Dolley Payne Madison.

On more weighty matters, however, Cheney does not depart from the conventional wisdom or weigh in on historical controversies about him. Along with fellow historians, she focuses on his then novel theory in Federalist #10 that large republics could best secure individual rights and the common good because tyrannical majority "factions" were likely to coalesce in them.

Perhaps surprisingly, given the importance of "executive privilege" to her husband, Cheney does not go behind or beneath a brief narrative of the demand of the House of Representatives that President Washington turn over documents related to the Jay Treaty and his claim that he had a right to refuse to supply them.

She does not try to explain what most historians view as Madison's shift from support of a strong national government to a "strict constructionist" view of its powers (to charter a national bank, for example, or authorize "internal improvements").

And she does not adequately assess his performance as a wartime president.

Cheney's task, to be sure, was complicated by Madison's decision at the end of his life to destroy correspondence he considered personal. And so she leaves us with a man who was brilliant, often bold, and elusive, whose grave remained unmarked for 20 years, a founding father who we can and should revere, but may never really know.

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