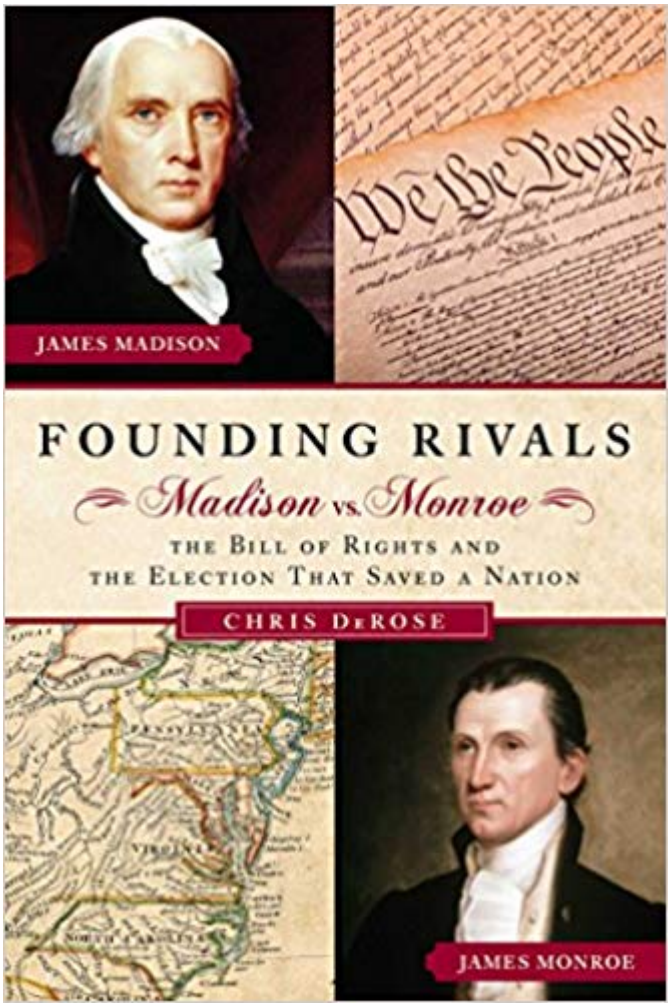
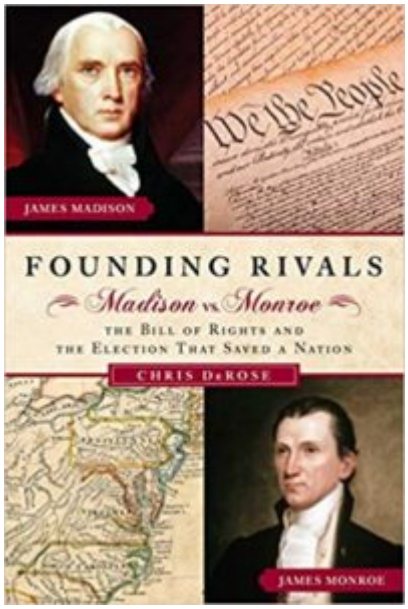
Outsourced History



In 1789, when Virginia held its first congressional election under the recently ratified Constitution, residents of the state’s Fifth Congressional District experienced what may still be the greatest contest for a seat in the House of Representatives in American history. James Monroe, a distinguished veteran of the Revolutionary War and an accomplished politician, faced off against James Madison, chief author of the Constitution and a political powerhouse in his own right. The election did more than pit two renowned and eminently qualified candidates against one another. The candidates also offered two competing visions of America’s future. Madison supported a vigorous federal government, while Monroe represented the Anti-Federalist cause of decentralization. The voters had to decide which direction they thought the nation should go.



Madison faced an uphill climb. Anti-Federalists dominated the statehouse in Virginia, and they wanted to keep Madison out of Congress. They drew the Fifth District with just that purpose in mind. They made sure that Madison's congressional district contained a particularly large Anti-Federalist contingent including James Monroe, a popular figure who had recently allied with the Anti-Federalists and who could give Madison a strong challenge. The shy and socially awkward Madison remained undaunted, however, and engaged in a protracted political campaign that taxed his abilities. Both men traveled throughout the district in the midst of a particularly bad winter trying to stir up support for their respective causes. They also engaged in long public debates in churches and public squares. The power of the new federal government to levy a direct tax on states seemed to be the key issue that divided the men. In the end, Madison prevailed by 336 votes, thanks to Baptists and other dissenters who rewarded him for his earlier support for religious freedom.

Later in life, Madison joked that he was lucky to win. Poor weather on Election Day had deterred a large contingent of his opponents from traveling to the polls, he said. The story may be apocryphal. Although 336 votes implies a razor-close margin to our modern senses, in reality, Madison received 57 percent of the total vote—meaning that the election was not quite as close as it might appear. True, Madison remained uncertain of the election's outcome until the very end, and many believed he might lose. Historians have largely affirmed his anxieties in their retelling of the race, but the results suggest he enjoyed a decisive victory, perhaps more than he recognized at the time or historians have since. Indeed, as Monroe reported to Thomas Jefferson after the election, Madison "prevail'd by a large majority of about 300."

Still, the story of this election is compelling in its own right, and its significance to the early national period makes it even more so. In Philadelphia, Madison became a leading figure in the first Congress. He played a central role in establishing the protocols and procedures by which the new government and its branches would operate. He began as a close confidante of

Washington before spearheading the formation of the first party system in opposition to the policies of the Washington administration.

It is fair to say that had the election in Virginia's Fifth District gone the other way, the nation's early political history would have been considerably altered. Many assumed that if Madison lost the congressional election, Washington would have appointed him to an office within the executive branch. That would have made for a substantially changed Madison and First Congress. Serving in Congress freed Madison to chart his own political path, to help pass the Bill of Rights, and to organize an opposition to Washington. Madison would have been in a far different political position had he served directly under Washington, and Congress would have operated much differently without Madison among its leaders.

Chris DeRose sets out to tell the story of this pivotal election in *Founding Rivals: The Bill of Rights and the Election that Saved a Nation.* DeRose, a political consultant and attorney, brings his professional background to bear in his analysis of the Madison-Monroe congressional contest. The book, however, devotes remarkably little time to the election or to the personal rivalry between Madison and Monroe. The election and its aftermath, ostensibly the subjects of the book, receive only about fifty pages of attention in the book's strongest two chapters. Given DeRose's insider experience with partisan politics, one imagines he could have provided much insight on how early party machinations shaped the growing rivalry between Madison and Monroe in the years that followed 1789. Unfortunately, the full story of this rivalry and its reconciliation remains untold. Instead, DeRose spends over half the book tracing out the family and personal histories of both men and detailing their activities in the Revolutionary era. DeRose never delves deeply into the minds or personalities of either man, and his analysis lacks the sophistication of similarly themed books like Stuart Leibiger's *Founding Friendships* and Joseph Ellis's *Founding Brothers.* That is unfortunate, because the Madison and Monroe relationship is complicated, important, and overlooked.

The bulk of DeRose's analysis focuses on the minutia of their correspondence, providing what seems to be an almost letter-by-letter account of what each man said to the other. Although DeRose argues that this correspondence reveals a deep personal friendship, his evidence suggests that their connection before 1789 stemmed from political expediency. They wrote to one another with regularity, but they rarely, if ever, met. Their correspondence often relayed important political information, but it seldom turned personal.

Indeed, what is most remarkable about their early relationship is how their paths diverged. Monroe served as a lieutenant during the Revolutionary War; Madison served in the Continental Congress. Monroe studied law and traveled to France after he left the service, while Madison served in the first session of the Confederation Congress. When Madison left Congress because of term limits and returned to the Virginia House of Delegates, Monroe left the House of Delegates and headed off to Congress. Madison attended the Constitutional

Convention, while Monroe stewed in the Virginia summer heat. Although DeRose speculates on when the two men may have met for the first time, the only time he actually puts them in the same room was when they campaigned against one another in 1789.

Though DeRose tends to treat the two as equals, his evidence often makes Madison appear the more powerful of the two before 1789, and Monroe seems to try to use Madison's greater stature for his personal benefit. Monroe initiated their correspondence in 1784, when Madison was in Congress and Monroe was just entering the world of politics as a member of the Virginia House of Delegates. Monroe doubtless knew that such a connection would help ingratiate him in more elite circles. Monroe's sense of the relationship as one of political opportunism comes through in a letter he wrote to Thomas Jefferson after learning that Virginia's governor, Edmund Randolph, excluded Monroe from the state's delegation to the Constitutional Convention. He confided to Jefferson that he held Madison at least partly responsible for the snub: "Madison, upon whose friendship I have calculated, whose views I have favored, and with whom I have held the most confidential correspondence since you left the continent, is in strict league with him [Randolph]" (147).

DeRose ends his book with the First Congress. Unfortunately, this choice omits the most interesting part of the Madison-Monroe relationship, which became more profound and complicated as early national politics increasingly drew them together. For instance, after Monroe lost the congressional election, Virginia's legislature sent him to Congress as their senator in 1790 when a vacancy occurred. There, he worked with Madison to help form an opposition to Washington and his Federalists backers. In Jefferson's administration, Madison served as secretary of state, while Monroe served as a diplomat. The rivalry first forged in the congressional election reemerged at moments throughout these years, even though (or perhaps because) they often worked toward common political ends. The rivalry reached a new height in 1808 when Monroe supporters in Virginia tried once again to foil Madison's rise by asking Monroe to run for president against him. Only in 1810, at Jefferson's behest, did the two men reconcile. Monroe then served under Madison as the secretary of state and became Madison's heir apparent. In other words, the real rivalry—and better story—comes after the 1789 election, not before.

In the end, this book's enormous potential is unrealized. DeRose reveals a limited knowledge of the era and indeed of his two subjects. He offers scant analysis of events. We learn little of the inner workings of Madison and Monroe. DeRose's narrative too often consists of paragraphs containing a single introductory sentence followed by a long quotation. His footnotes do not cite many of the major recent works on the era. Lance Banning, Drew McCoy, Stanley Elkins and Erick McKitrick, all specialists in this era who have published extensively on its political culture, are not mentioned. As Richard Labunski has pointed out elsewhere, though, DeRose may have relied on some recent books without proper citation. Instead, the sources DeRose does cite are mostly an odd assortment of older books. There are also occasional incorrect

transcriptions; for instance, DeRose quotes a “country” when it is in fact “county.” (241) In matters large and small, then, there is room for improvement.

As I came to terms with the shortcomings of this book, I found that I thought less about America’s founding and more about the current state of the discipline. Regnery History, a new publishing venture of the prominent conservative publishing house Regnery, produced this book. To its credit, the book does not carry any overt agenda. It aims, instead, to tell a good story, which seems to be Regnery’s main purpose with this new venture. Regnery’s investment in this imprint (at a time when most university presses are cutting back) and DeRose’s relative success suggests that there is an audience hungry for books on this subject matter. And, as someone who teaches political history, I can attest to the need for such books.

Even if this book will never find its way into my curriculum (I had hoped that it might), there are nonetheless important lessons learned from reading it. DeRose shows a passion for storytelling and a desire to find and share largely overlooked stories that will appeal to general readers. But he comes up short in his execution. Perhaps in his next book DeRose can integrate more recent scholarship to realize his work’s full potential.

If DeRose would benefit from learning the methods of and knowledge produced by scholars, then perhaps some professional historians can embrace DeRose’s ambition to reach wider audiences. Professional historians often ignore, if not outright dismiss, such works of popular history. In the process, we, as a discipline, have essentially outsourced such storytelling to non-professionals. This is unfortunate, because compelling stories deserve to be told well, and poorly sourced history is not really history at all.