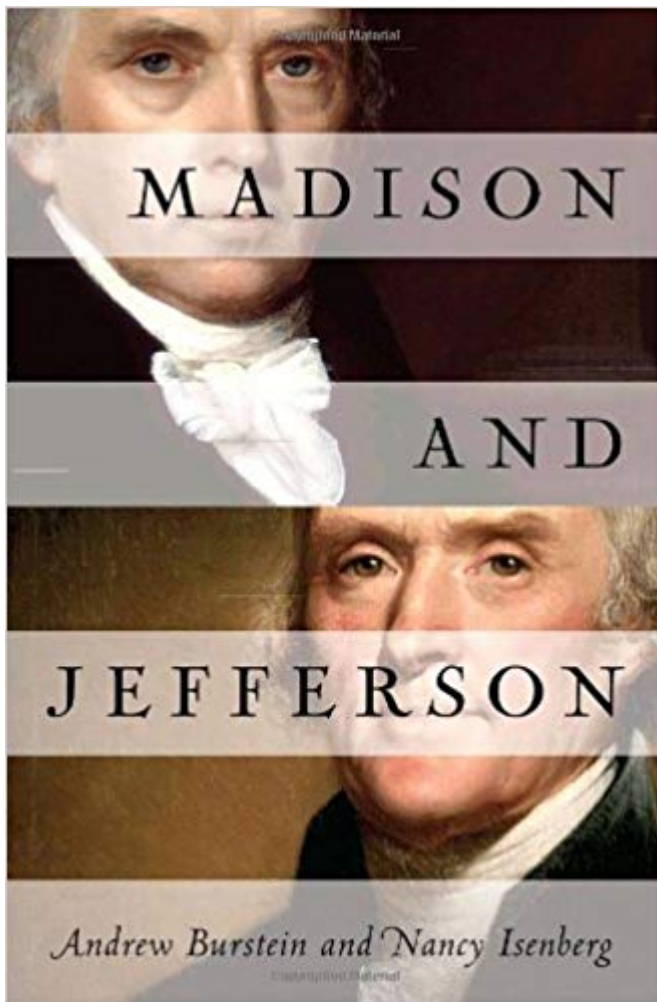
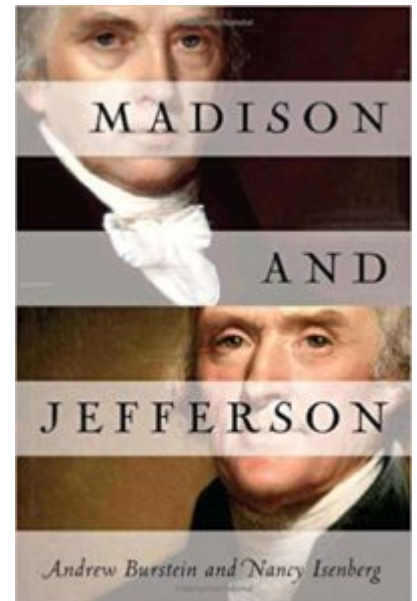


# An Enduring Partnership



Andrew Burstein and Nancy Isenberg have written a monumental work, detailing the lives of two men—James Madison and Thomas Jefferson—whose careers are inextricably intertwined with one another and with the birth of the American Republic. *Madison and Jefferson* analyzes the separate experiences and achievements of both its subjects as well as the personal and political partnership the two maintained throughout their long and fruitful lives. Mildly revisionist, the book reminds readers that Madison and Jefferson were not the revered icons that history has too often made of them. They were politicians, flesh and blood men who fought to turn their vision of the new nation into a reality. Indeed, neither would have recognized themselves in the pages of either their most admiring hagiographers or their most vicious debunkers. Jefferson was not hailed as the author of the Declaration of Independence for decades. When he did begin to emphasize his authorship of the document, nearly a quarter of a century after he wrote it, he did so for political reasons. Madison was not, as most people—even historians—assume, the diminutive second fiddle to the eloquent Jefferson. Nor was he merely “the father of the Constitution” or the author of the “brilliant” Federalist papers. Indeed, he



would often flee from the implications of both documents.

Burstein and Isenberg are determined to give Madison his due, to bring him out of the shadows where he has largely remained over the years.

We first meet Madison and Jefferson as provincial men on a provincial stage. They were both talented to be sure—but at the time they seemed to be no more talented than many of their friends and neighbors. They were “prominent but not heralded” (6). After all, Virginia had more than its share of bright and ambitious men who would lend their pens, their tongues, and occasionally their bodies, to the cause of American independence.

We encounter them, as well, before they knew each other. Even when they finally did meet, when Jefferson was governor of Virginia and Madison was one of his most influential advisors, neither “could have predicted that their intimacy ... would have long-lasting implications” (63). Still, from the beginning, the two worked well together. Both were thinkers; both were practical politicians. If Jefferson was more inclined to abstractions, he was also a shrewd political animal. If Madison was more inclined to search for practical solutions to practical problems without trying to fit those solutions into a pre-conceived category, he was as much a child of the Enlightenment as Jefferson.

Burstein and Isenberg are determined to give Madison his due, to bring him out of the shadows where he has largely remained over the years. They point out that as late as 1789 Madison had a greater national reputation than Jefferson, and until 1800, Madison, not Jefferson, was at the center of national politics, a “one man political force” and the leader of the opposition to the Federalist agenda (291). It was Madison who talked Jefferson out of retirement in 1800. Often as not, Madison acted as Jefferson’s “campaign manager” (350) and his “handler” (319). Even after Jefferson’s death, Madison continued to shape his friend’s legacy, somewhat disingenuously claiming, for instance, that Jefferson would have abhorred John C. Calhoun’s “nullification” policy and that the Kentucky Resolutions were designed to keep the union together rather than to destroy it.

Nevertheless, the authors concede that even in these two men's own lifetimes, Jefferson seemed to attract more attention, more personal loyalty, and more enemies than Madison. Early on in Madison's presidency, most observers assumed that "the retired president was still calling the shots." They did not seem to recognize that "Madison scripted Jefferson's political ascendancy in the 1780s and 1790s." But they did know that it was Jefferson who operated on a grander scale. It was he, more than Madison, "who conceived and built the Virginia Dynasty of presidents" (478).

*Madison and Jefferson* is a big-but never tedious-book, chock full of fascinating insights. While it is impossible to do justice to its authors' mastery of the details, a few points stand out. Especially important is the commitment that both men shared to their native state; they always "acted out of an attachment to Virginia as much as a desire to defend the Union" (620). If both men eventually played their role on a national stage, neither shed the provincialism they had imbibed in their youth. Indeed, the entire book seems to call into question any notion that the "united" States existed at this time. Jefferson, in particular, found that his "Virginia interest prevailed over the unifying interest" (371). But Madison also saw national affairs through a provincial lens. He attended the Constitutional Convention "as a Virginia partisan" and his arguments there and for the rest of his life never strayed far from a perspective that Virginians would find acceptable (165).

If Madison and Jefferson were both loyal to the land of their birth, they were also zealous proponents of American empire. They saw westward expansion as essential to national greatness, and as a way to fend off British meddling in American affairs. Above all, they saw it as a way to extend and reflect Virginia's interests and character, as they acted upon their "southern-directed lust for land" (442). Theirs would be a nation whose power and material well-being rested on an agrarian culture. It would, moreover, be a slave-based society. The Louisiana Purchase was obviously a central component of the Jefferson-Madison vision. But their ambitions were much more far flung. Jefferson championed a "manly" defense of American honor in Tripoli. Both men set their eyes, not only on Canada and Louisiana, but on Cuba and the Floridas. Clearly, "manifest destiny" was not a product of the mid-nineteenth century.

Finally, Burstein and Isenberg do a fine job of tracing Jefferson and Madison's changing views of the Constitution. Neither-but especially Jefferson-was quite comfortable with the Constitution and thus neither was a proponent of "original intent." Far from being the document's author, Madison left Philadelphia as a "frustrated composer whose grand symphony has been left unfinished" (150). And he, more than Jefferson, constantly altered his interpretation of the Constitution. Both men's views were hardened by their opposition to Alexander Hamilton. Indeed, Hamilton's views moved the two closer together, making their own differences seem less important. Their distrust of England and their sense that the Treasury Secretary was creating an economy based on the British model, serving the interests of bankers and merchants, fed their fears. Moreover, they were convinced that Hamilton was tipping the balance of power toward an

executive whose influence might lead to the creation of an American monarchy.

The value of this book is obvious. Its lucid prose will be easy for the non-specialist to appreciate, yet it has plenty to attract professional historians. Its command of the intricacies of the new nation's economy and its foreign policy is formidable. Organized as a straightforward, chronological narrative, it often hops from one subject to another and back again. In the middle of an analysis of the challenges Madison faced as a war time president, for instance, comes a seemingly unrelated discussion of Jefferson's and Madison's views on race. And then we return to a discussion of the war (532-536).

But while it is occasionally disconcerting, this approach helps readers see events unfold as Madison and Jefferson might have experienced them. These men were living in the moment; they were wrestling with a wide array of practical issues that arose on a daily basis. Although their response to those issues might be shaped by an overall perspective, in the real world they had to deal with problems as they happened. This book discusses the past as people actually encountered it, reminding us that for contemporaries, the world appeared to be little more than a series of contingencies.

Some readers will be disappointed by the short shrift this book gives to Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings. We actually hear more about Maria Cosway than we do about Hemings. This omission is due in part to the fact that the book is completely source-driven, and for obvious reasons Jefferson did not discuss his relationship with his slave. Moreover, Winthrop Jordan and Annette Gordon-Reed have already provided brilliant analyses of Jefferson's relationship with Hemings. Still, the authors' astute observations about Jefferson's views of race and gender do beg for some analysis, or at least an acknowledgement of the contradictions with which Jefferson lived.

Generally speaking, Burstein and Isenberg are remarkably even-handed, striving not to favor one man over the other. Still, it is hard to shake the feeling that Madison often emerges as the better of the two men, the more sympathetic, the more open minded, especially where matters of race are an issue. On occasion, the authors appear to adopt the prejudices of their own subjects. Thus, Hamilton was a self-aggrandizing meddler who was not a "team player" and "did not understand boundaries" (267). Patrick Henry was a "militant" and a "sensation-causing oracle" whose intellect was superficial at best (15).

This is a book about two men—at times it seems as though these are parallel biographies of men whose lives periodically intersected. It is also a "life and times" book, and on more than one occasion the "lives" seem to take a back seat to the "times." Above all, it is the story of a partnership, one that stood the test of time, one that both Jefferson and Madison deeply valued. Neither man, Burstein and Isenberg argue, would have been the same without the other.