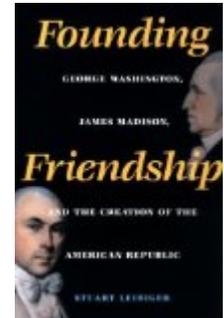


Stuart Leibiger. *Founding Friendship: George Washington, James Madison, and the Creation of the American Republic.* Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1999. x + 284 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8139-1882-2.



Reviewed by David B. Mattern

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Some years ago, thinking that it would make an interesting and attractive book, I did some research into the possibility of editing a volume of the George Washington-James Madison correspondence. The 150 documents exchanged by them had already been published in the first seventeen volumes of the modern edition of *The Papers of James Madison*, and it would have been a relatively simple and straightforward job to compile them in a single volume. But, as Stuart Leibiger notes in the epilogue to his impressive examination of the relationship between the two men, their correspondence "did not leave behind a body of literature comparable to that produced by the other Revolutionary pairings" -- the "lively and engaging" letters shared by John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, the *Federalist* essays produced by Madison and Alexander Hamilton, and the monumental fifty-year correspondence of Jefferson and Madison (p. 223). I reluctantly concluded then that, while important, the Washington-Madison letters, already available to scholars, would require too much in the way of contextual and

other annotation to make them useful and comprehensible to a general readership.

Leibiger has, however, done just that and much more in this thoroughly researched and engagingly written book, by filling in the holes, answering the questions, and providing the context for the collaboration between George Washington and James Madison, which he argues is "the most important and revealing pairing of all" (p. 1). One need not accept this claim *in toto* to appreciate that, in its consequences for the creation and adoption of the U.S. Constitution and the embryonic years of the Early Republic, the friendship was a vital and important one. And in the examination of the nature of that friendship, new facets appear that enrich the characterization of both men as well as the events they helped shape.

Madison and Washington met for the first time in August 1781 in Philadelphia, while Washington was on his way to Yorktown and Madison was serving in the Continental Congress. The younger Virginian, Washington's junior by nineteen years, had followed the general's career closely as a member of the Virginia Council of

State. But as a congressman -- and one of rising influence during the last two years of the Revolutionary War -- Madison was to impress Washington as a particularly "competent and dedicated public servant" on whom he could count as an ally (p. 12). They shared a genuine commitment to republicanism, and in that turbulent time, when it seemed as if, with victory won on the battlefield, the peace might be lost because of squabbling among the states, they joined forces to help preserve the union by supporting the movement to strengthen the Confederation government. As Leibiger rightly points out, Madison's 1783 "Address to the States," which explained Congress's plan to create a revenue sufficient to support the Confederation and which sought the approval of the states, and Washington's "Circular to the Governors," exhorting the states to adopt the plan, were written in tandem in the first of a series of shared attempts to solve the problem of an increasingly weak federal government.

In the postwar period, what began as a working relationship blossomed into an intimate friendship. With Madison working in the Virginia legislature, two projects that were dear to Washington's heart -- the improvement of navigation on the Potomac and James Rivers -- were launched. While Leibiger summarizes concisely the history of these projects, their real significance lay in the pattern this experience set for future collaborations between the two. For Washington, that meant a reliance on Madison's pen, advice, and legislative skills; for Madison, it meant the judicious use of Washington's prestige. This exchange bore significant fruit during the events of 1786-88, when the U.S. Constitution was framed and ratified. While the chapter devoted to this topic will be the most familiar to readers of this list, Leibiger's claim that "without the Washington-Madison collaboration, the 1787 Federal Convention might not have taken place" (p. 58) might seem overstated. The author persuasively argues, however, that Madison put pressure on the general, by placing him at the head of the Vir-

ginia delegation and by convincing him that if the convention were to have a chance, Washington would have to attend in order to ensure that other states sent their best men. Because of Madison's efforts, Washington's "name bestowed the legitimacy and popular approval vital to the convention's success" (p. 58).

Perhaps at no time during their friendship was Madison's influence on policy greater than during the First Federal Congress, 1789-91. By 1791 Madison had been a guest at Mount Vernon ten times in six years and there were few, if any, decisions of moment in which he did not have a hand. Madison advised Washington on constitutional matters, on the etiquette to be observed by the executive, and on appointments. More often he was called on by the president to draft important messages -- for example, Madison drafted Washington's inaugural address, the response of the House of Representatives, and, for good measure, Washington's reply to both the House and the Senate. It is no overstatement to call Madison in this period, as Leibiger does, Washington's prime minister.

But as the 1790s wore on, the friendship was sorely tested. Once Washington's cabinet was established, it was only natural for him to turn to it for advice and counsel. Consequently, Washington consulted Madison less and less. As Hamilton's influence grew, the two Virginians found each other on opposite sides of important measures -- they disagreed over discrimination and assumption of the national debt and over the creation of the Bank of the United States. Their common fight to establish a national capital on the banks of the Potomac River in 1790 merely postponed the end of a friendship that would sustain successive shocks -- controversy over the *National Gazette*, the Neutrality Proclamation, the Democratic Societies, and the Whiskey Rebellion -- before finally sundering on the rock of Jay's Treaty.

Washington initiated the breakup, just as he had initiated the relationship. Washington consid-

ered Madison's partisan activities a bitter personal betrayal. He so identified with his administration that he saw any criticism of it as a criticism of himself. Madison, Leibiger writes, did not become bitter. Was that because he was less emotionally invested in the relationship? Leibiger does not say.

This last indicates one of the few weaknesses of the book. As Leibiger points out in his introduction, there is a double meaning in the title *Founding Friendship*. The title suggests first the collaboration that helped found the Republic, and as I have already said, that meaning is quite impressively argued and described. But the title also suggests what it takes to found a friendship. And in this respect the book comes up somewhat short. Leibiger makes use of what written evidence he has -- the letters -- artfully culling from salutations and complimentary closes the stages of the friendship. But there is little or no attempt to capture the inner workings of the relationship. Granted, Washington and Madison are two of the most enigmatic public men of their time, but in all the ink spilled in pursuit of Washington's character, there should be some hint of his inner life and friendly relationships with others. Sure to be useful, for example, would be a look at his relationships with his numerous aides-de-camp during the Revolution.

And what about Madison? One could make the argument that for Madison this was a marriage of convenience that never moved far beyond politics and a shared interest in agriculture. Madison's emotional distance seems to suggest this at least. In any case, some greater attention to the psychological and emotional aspects of friendship might have been in order here.

There are also some tantalizing but undeveloped aspects to the story. Leibiger mentions without much elaboration that Madison influenced Washington's thinking on the relationship between church and state. If that is true -- and the evidence for it is sketchy -- then that idea needs to

be more carefully delineated. Leibiger also hints in the epilogue that the Washington-Madison collaboration "may have had a profound influence" on Madison's presidency (p. 225). That is an idea well worth pursuing, for it would go a long way toward filling out our picture of Madison's side of the relationship, besides offering us insights into both men's administrations.

Those caveats aside, *Founding Friendship* admirably fulfills its promise to highlight the underappreciated collaboration of these two important men. And if by recasting the events of our founding period in that light Leibiger has returned Washington "to center stage" as the "central politician of his age" (p. 224), that is a defensible, if not a wholly uncontested, position. At the very least, Leibiger has assured that the political partnership between George Washington and James Madison will no longer be overlooked.

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