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IRVING BRANT

IN a recently published magazine article on the life portraits of James Madison, the following statement is quoted from the biographer of Charles Willson Peale: "Peale painted Jefferson in December, 1791. He tried to paint 'coming men' for his gallery, and in selecting them relied mostly on the advice of those whose judgment he trusted. It is a fairly safe supposition that Jefferson recommended Madison for this honor."¹

Why should it be assumed that Jefferson was the one who recommended Madison? The Philadelphia painter had many contacts with Frenchmen. Might he not have heard that French Minister Luzerne, seven years earlier, had described Madison as the foremost member of the Continental Congress?² Could he not have heard, from almost anybody in public life, that Madison was at least the godfather of the new Constitution? As a Philadelphian, Peale might have heard the complaint of Senator Maclay of Pennsylvania in 1789 that Madison "already affects to govern" President Washing-

¹ Quoted by Theodore Bolton in "The Life Portraits of James Madison," *William and Mary Quarterly*, VIII (January, 1951), 28-29.

² Chevalier de la Luzerne, "Liste des Membres du Congrès depuis 1779 jusqu'en 1784," Archives des Affaires Etrangères, Mémoires et Documents, Etats-Unis, vol. 1, ff. 253-87.

ton.³ The recommendation might even have come from Madison's principal adversary in Congress, Fisher Ames, who wrote of him in that same year: "He is our first man."⁴

In rejecting the supposition that Madison needed sponsorship in 1791, I do not mean to disparage Mr. Sellers, the author of the very excellent life of Peale. The biographer of an artist, when he deals with statesmen, naturally relies on the verdicts of historians and political biographers. Why should he not suppose that Jefferson was responsible for Madison's inclusion in the portrait gallery, when everything else in his life—his education, his political and constitutional opinions, his career in public office; everything you can think of, except, perhaps, his birth—has been placed to Jefferson's credit? In making this comment, I should at once point out some conspicuous exceptions. There is nothing like this in Dumas Malone's life of Jefferson, nor in Miss Koch's studies of the philosophy and letters of Jefferson and Madison. I might add that according to some reports, Douglass Adair's doctoral thesis at Yale was so favorable to Madison that it almost paralyzed some of the examining professors.

Pick out at random a dozen histories of the double decade ending in 1800. In how many of them will you find a factual basis for the statements of Luzerne and Fisher Ames? In how many will you find that Madison laid the foundations of the Democratic party, by his opposition to Hamilton's funding system, while Jefferson was still on his way from the American legation in France to the cabinet of President Washington? In how many will you learn that, as late as 1795, Federalists in Congress were calling their opponents "the Madisonians"?⁵

For an example of the way history has been perverted to support a preconception, consider this extract from Beveridge's *Life of Marshall*, dealing with events of 1793: "Jefferson was keeping pace with the anti-Nationalist sentiment of the masses—drilling his followers into a sternly ordered political force. 'The discipline of the [Republican] party,' wrote Ames, 'is as severe as the Prussian.'"⁶

Compare that with what Ames actually wrote: ". . . the discipline of the party is as severe as the Prussian. Deserters are not spared. Madison is become a desperate party leader, and I am not sure of his stopping at any ordinary point of extremity."⁷

³ *The Journal of William Maclay*, ed. Edgar S. Maclay (New York, 1890), July 1, 1789, p. 97.

⁴ Fisher Ames to George R. Minot, May 3, 1789, *Works of Fisher Ames*, ed. Seth Ames (Boston, 1854), I, 36.

⁵ Ames to Minot, Jan. 20, 1795, *ibid.*, I, 165.

⁶ Albert J. Beveridge, *The Life of John Marshall* (Boston, 1916-19), II, 81.

⁷ Ames to Thomas Dwight, January, 1793, *Ames*, I, 127.

Beveridge, I am sure, did not intend to distort. He merely reshaped the material to fit the distortions of earlier writers. These he brought to a magnificent climax of his own, brilliantly epitomizing a hundred years of error, in the statement that Madison was the valley between the mountain peaks of Jefferson and Hamilton.⁸

To a great extent this impression reflects the interplay of hero and devil worship. Until the American people subscribe to Confucianism, there is no possibility that they will deify James Madison. As long as half of them look upon Jefferson as a god and Hamilton as a devil, while the other half sees them in opposite roles, there is little likelihood of building a really commodious American Pantheon. What has actually happened is that a fairly level Jefferson-Madison-Hamilton plateau has been converted into two mountains and a valley by the unremitting activities of cairn-builders and rock-throwers. Some political geologists are beginning to suspect that this plateau, instead of being depressed in the middle, may originally have had a few bulges upward there.

Disparagement of Madison as a supposed satellite did not begin with historians. It began as a defense mechanism of Federalist politicians. During the formation of the new government, Madison and Hamilton were linked in the public mind. They were the outstanding advocates of the Constitution, and a few close friends knew them as joint authors of the *Federalist*.

When the great political cleavage came, in 1790, it was a direct break between Madison and Hamilton. Madison delivered his opening speech against Hamilton's financial system on February 11, 1790. On that day, in that speech, the wheels of Hamiltonian federalism and Jeffersonian democracy started rolling down the political highway.

Jefferson did not even know this was going on. The debate was over, the vote was taken, the fundamental cleavage in American politics was indelibly recorded, four weeks before he arrived at the capital to enter Washington's cabinet. Now that implied no defect in Jefferson's principles or in his perception. It was no reflection on him that a letter telling him of Hamilton's report on public credit took nineteen days to reach Monticello.⁹ But there were reasons, deep in human nature, why neither Federalists nor Jeffersonians could admit that Madison laid the cornerstone of the Democratic

⁸ "He [Madison] was easily influenced by such lordly wills as Hamilton, easily seduced by such subtle minds as Jefferson. Thus his public service was a series of contradictions, compromises, doubts and fears. . . . Between those tremendous mountain peaks of power, Hamilton and Jefferson, standing over against each other, Madison was the valley." Albert J. Beveridge, quoted in the Madison volume of "Autographs of the Presidents," Morgan Library, New York.

⁹ Madison to Jefferson, Jan. 24, 1790, *The Writings of James Madison*, ed. Gaillard Hunt (New York, 1900-10), V, 434; received February 12, Epistolary Record, Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress.

party and continued to be an independent, creative force in its development.

During the ensuing years, it became apparent that between Jefferson and Madison there existed perfect harmony of feeling and a close correspondence of political views. Each time the basic issue arose in some new form, Madison took the lead in Congress, Jefferson in the cabinet, both working to the same end. The Federalists, tied up with rich speculators, were under constant compulsion to deny the moral flaws in their own position. They must see themselves, they must be seen, as the representatives of morality, intelligence, and respectability. On that score, Madison's opposition was far more distressing than Jefferson's. It was easy to endow Jefferson with diabolical traits, especially after the six years he had spent in Paris, the devil's paradise. But Madison was beyond the reach of ordinary attack. The principal architect of the new Constitution could not be suspected of a malicious desire to tear it down or to ruin the national credit which he had been working for ten years to establish. How could it be explained to the public that a man of his acknowledged wisdom, stability, and integrity was on the wrong side? That proved quite easy. He had gone over to please Jefferson. A good man had been seduced by Satan.

So said Hamilton, though he knew it was not true. So said a hundred others, and believed it.¹⁰ But that was just the beginning. Once this explanation was given, Madison's character had to be reshaped to make it credible. A little earlier, he had been accused of twisting George Washington around his fingers. Jefferson was still in transit when Madison's challenge of the money power inspired a Massachusetts newspaper writer to exclaim: "Happy there is a Madison who fearless of the bloodsuckers will step forward and boldly vindicate the rights of the widows and orphans, the original creditors and the war worn soldier."¹¹

Bold? Fearless? That did not fit the new story. What sort of man would change his political convictions to please a friend? Only a soft-willed man, a weak and timid man. So Madison was pictured as the submissive errand boy of Thomas Jefferson, perverting his intellectual genius to political purposes alien to his mind. Federalists dared not admit that Madison had sacrificed his dominant position in Congress, sacrificed his influence over President Washington, for the sake of principle. So they made a double assault—an assault on Jefferson for political immorality and on Madison for weakness and timidity.

¹⁰ Alexander Hamilton to Edward Carrington, May 26, 1792, *The Works of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Henry Cabot Lodge (New York, 1904), IX, 528-29.

¹¹ *Columbian Centinel* (Boston), Feb. 24, 1790.

The technique of the big lie, the big smear, was not invented in our day. It was brought to perfection against Jefferson and Madison, but with differing results. Madison was admired, for his mental endowments, by friends and foes alike, and he made warm friendships. But he had no political glamour. Jefferson, a symbol as well as a leader of democracy, had personal qualities which made people either worship or hate him. His admirers threw back the slanders against him. Did they likewise reject the perverted picture of Madison? On the contrary they made it their own, and thereby placed Jefferson on a still higher pedestal. So there you had both Federalists and Democrats, for totally different reasons, agreeing on a characterization of Madison which was not only unsupported by the record but was refuted by it at every turn.

At this point, historians and biographers took over from the politicians. The big lie became the lasting misconception. The historians had testimony from both sides that Madison drew his ideas from the master of Monticello and did what he was told to do. If everybody said it, it must be true.

Let us see how this operated in the fight over federal assumption of state war debts. The conventional story is that about June 20, 1790, Hamilton and Jefferson made a trade. Jefferson agreed to assumption in exchange for the national capital on the Potomac, and induced Madison, his henchman, to help it through Congress. Apply the chronological test to that story of events in 1790, and what do you get?

March, 1783—Madison, in the Continental Congress, proposed federal assumption of state debts.¹²

July, 1783—Madison proposed a national capital on the Potomac.¹³

February, 1790—Madison spoke against *unqualified* assumption.

March 2—Madison proposed a qualified assumption, which the Hamiltonians rejected.

March 20—Jefferson returned from his diplomatic exile.

June 17—Madison wrote to a friend that to save the whole funding bill from defeat and national credit from destruction, assumption probably would have to be admitted in some form, and the Potomac might show up in the business.

June 20—Hamilton and Madison, brought together by Jefferson on Hamilton's initiative, agreed to a compromise—the national capital on the Potomac,

¹² Irving Brant, *James Madison*, II: *The Nationalist* (Indianapolis, 1948), 233; Papers of the Continental Congress, No. 26, pp. 438-40; Notes of Debates, Mar. 7, 1783, *Writings of James Madison*, I, 399.

¹³ Brant, II, 300; Madison to Edmund Randolph, July 28, 1783, *Writings of James Madison*, II, 4.

in exchange for qualified assumption, which Madison had offered three months before without a *quid pro quo*.¹⁴

In other words, both of the basic policies originated with Madison. Both features of the compromise came from him and so did the idea of linking them. All he got out of it was a reputation for weakness and timidity. The valley travailed and brought forth two mountains.

Next came the great conflict over the power to create a national bank. I quote from Beveridge: "Jefferson was already opposing, through the timid but resourceful Madison and the fearless and aggressive Giles, the Nationalist statesmanship of Hamilton. Thus it came about that when Washington asked his cabinet's opinion upon the bill to incorporate the Bank of the United States, Jefferson promptly expressed with all his power the constitutional theory of the Virginia legislature." To this Beveridge affixed a footnote: "and see Madison's argument against the constitutionality of the Bank Act in *Annals*, 1st Congress, February 2, 1791."¹⁵

What would have been the effect if Beveridge had omitted the Virginia legislature, which had no more to do with it than the parliament of Timbuktu, and had stated the simple, chronological truth? This was that Madison launched the attack against the national bank on February 2, and Jefferson, thirteen days later, paraphrased Madison's speech in a report to the President. That couldn't be told. It would have ruined a preconception.¹⁶

Madison was Secretary of State throughout the two Jefferson administrations. You can imagine how contemporary politicians and many historians have treated these eight years. The prevalent practice has been to credit Jefferson with every policy, every action, every document of any importance that came from the State Department. If Madison is mentioned at all, he is the errand boy, the amanuensis, obeying implicitly every order handed to him. One of our standard diplomatic histories does not even mention that Jefferson had a Secretary of State. Another mentions him only once.

Now it happens that a very different appraisal of Madison was recorded in 1806 by a Federalist senator, along with his own conventional one. Senator Plumer of New Hampshire, in his diary, quoted Senator Adair of Kentucky, a Democrat, as saying: "The President [Jefferson] wants nerve—he

¹⁴ Brant, *James Madison*, III: *Father of the Constitution* (Indianapolis, 1950), pp. 306-18. The June 20 date is approximate.

¹⁵ Beveridge, *John Marshall*, II, 71, n. 2.

¹⁶ Feb. 2, 8, 1791, *Annals of Congress* (Washington, 1834), II, cols. 1944-52, 2008-12; "Opinion against the Constitutionality of a National Bank," February 15, 1791, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. A. A. Lipscomb and A. E. Bergh (Washington, 1903-1904), III, 145. Jefferson enlarged Madison's argument by contending that the "necessary and proper" clause of the Constitution restricted Congress "to those means without which the grant of power would be nugatory"—a test which would invalidate any action to which there was a possible alternative.

has not even confidence in himself. For more than a year he has been in the habit of trusting almost implicitly in Mr. Madison. Madison has acquired a complete ascendancy over him." To this the New Hampshire Federalist replied: "I observed that I considered Mr. Madison as an honest man—but that he was too cautious—to fearful and too timid to direct the affairs of the nation."¹⁷

Here, it would seem, was a sharp challenge to historians, especially to those equipped with the instruments of modern scholarship—in this instance, the writings of Jefferson and Madison and their associates and the diplomatic archives of the United States, Great Britain, France, and Spain. That brings us to Henry Adams, the first historian who tapped these rich sources of information. Adams wrote nine volumes whose effect is to sustain the negative side of both appraisals. His history sustains Senator Adair's conclusion that Jefferson lacked nerve and confidence in himself, and Plumer's opinion that Madison was fearful and timid. Henry Adams leaves it uncertain which of these two weaklings ruled the other, but, employing endless condemnation and an irony far more deadly, he created the impression that between them, in their successive presidencies, they reduced the United States to the depths of national degradation. And what shape was the country in at the end of this period of humiliation? Its area and population, Adams noted, had doubled, and it was on a tidal wave of prosperity and confidence. I quote from his ninth volume:

These sixteen years set at rest the natural doubts that had attended the nation's birth. . . . Every serious difficulty which seemed alarming to the people of the Union in 1800 had been removed or had sunk from notice in 1816. . . . Not only had the people during these sixteen years escaped from dangers, they had also found the means of supplying their chief needs. . . . The continent lay before them, like an uncovered ore-bed.

That was the economic picture. And the national character? I quote once more from Adams:

In 1815 for the first time Americans ceased to doubt the path they were to follow. Not only was the unity of the nation established, but its probable divergence from older societies was also well defined. . . . The public seemed obstinate only in believing that all was for the best, as far as the United States were concerned, in the affairs of mankind.¹⁸

This mighty material and spiritual advance had been brought about, if we may believe Adams, not with the aid of Jefferson and Madison but in spite

¹⁷ William Plumer, diary, Apr. 8, 1806 (Library of Congress), quoted by Charles E. Hill in *The American Secretaries of State and Their Diplomacy*, ed. Samuel F. Bemis (New York, 1927-29), III, 7.

¹⁸ Henry Adams, *History of the United States*, IX, 173, 220, 240.

of their blundering and cowardice. It was the communal product of Mother Nature and the Goddess of Luck, with a little timely assistance from Albert Gallatin, John Armstrong, and John Quincy Adams, Henry's grandfather.

One would suppose that the grotesque inconsistency between Adams' premises and his conclusions would raise suspicion in the minds of his more critical readers. But the magnitude of his research was enough in itself to discourage skeptical inquiry. His conclusions as to Jefferson and Madison were in line with contemporary Federalist verdicts, while the historian himself, though plainly a Federalist in his sympathies, drove away the thought of bias by damning the Essex Junto with a violence he never employed upon the chiefs of administration. So the Adams history has become the accepted classic, virtually unchallenged by historians, biographers, journalists, or statesmen, except in the emotional resentment of admirers of Jefferson. That emotional rebellion, plus the Louisiana Purchase, was enough to lift Jefferson into the lists of great Presidents. Madison was left buried under 750,000 disparaging words, marked with the same stamp of goodness, weakness, timidity, and blundering that was originally placed on him by Federalist politicians to fortify their own self-esteem.

The Adams history, as most people know, is a compendium of documents as well as an interpretation. The factual material has been selected with very little bias, and the interpretations are honest. But isolate the documents from the interpretation and strange results ensue. The documents will support, nay they are likely to demand, a drastically different set of conclusions.

As I read Henry Adams, he was neither partial nor impartial. He was just a solid mass of conditioned reflexes. His Federalist leanings conditioned him against Jefferson and Madison. His family descent conditioned him against every President not named Adams, and against every enemy of President John Adams—against Hamilton and Wolcott, against Pickering and the whole traitorous gang who sabotaged the War of 1812. His life in his father's American embassy during the Civil War conditioned him against British diplomats—against Canning, Castlereagh, and Wellesley. He needed no conditioning against Napoleon and Talleyrand. Among these objects of his dislike, Henry Adams played no favorites. He hit them all whenever their heads came up, and thus achieved the air of magnificent impartiality, with devastating effect upon the capacity of many later historians for independent judgment.

I shall come back to Henry Adams, but first let us pursue a more basic inquiry. Was Madison weak and timid? To what extent was he Jefferson's errand boy, and to what extent did he direct policy, during his eight years as Secretary of State?

The errand-boy assumption runs up against some curious facts. In the summer of 1801, British Chargé d'Affaires Thornton complained to Madison that a certain action by French seamen violated the Anglo-American treaty of 1794. Madison and Jefferson were at their homes in Virginia, and the policy adopted would be put into effect by Gallatin. Madison wrote to Jefferson that the circumstances admitted an easy reply "that the case is not considered as within the purview of the treaty." Jefferson replied that he thought the vessel "must fairly be considered as a prize made on Great Britain to which no shelter is to be given in our ports according to our treaty." But he wanted Madison to feel free to revise this opinion and act as he thought best. Madison wrote at once to Gallatin: "It was readily decided that the treaty of '94 is inapplicable to the case." The President, he said, "has thought, as I do," that the ship should be sent away under a different sanction. And when Madison communicated the decision to Thornton, the British diplomat replied that he found himself "entirely at a loss to comprehend the ground on which the President is pleased to regard the cases . . . as in no manner falling within the provisions of the treaty of 1794." Here you have not only an instantaneous reversal of Jefferson's judgment by Madison, but a total concealment from Gallatin and Thornton that there had been any difference of opinion.¹⁹

There was in fact no basic difference. Thornton was trying to give British prizes a preferred position over French prizes in American ports. Madison realized this. Jefferson did not, but Madison knew that the President would approve in retrospect. This was a minor incident, but consider what it means when applied to Madison's position, character and conduct. Was there weakness? Was there vacillation? Was there timidity? Was there subordination of intellect and will? Was there inferiority of judgment?

Turn now to the most important event and greatest achievement of the Jefferson administration—the Louisiana Purchase. Historians have tried for generations to decide how Louisiana was won. From Henry Adams we hear that Madison invited France to build an empire west of the Mississippi, and that Jefferson had no means of preventing it until the French military downfall in San Domingo made American hostility troublesome to France. "President Jefferson [I quote from Adams] had chiefly reckoned on this possibility as his hope of getting Louisiana; and slight as the chance seemed, he was right."²⁰ From various other commentators, we hear of the diplomatic skill

¹⁹ Madison to Jefferson, Aug. 12 (received), 18, 27, 1801, Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress. Jefferson to Madison, Aug. 22, 1801, Madison Papers, Library of Congress. Madison to Gallatin (private), Aug. 29, 1801, Gallatin Papers, New-York Historical Society. Edward Thornton to Madison, July 23, Nov. 11, 1801, National Archives, General Records of the Department of State. Notes from the British Legation, II (1796-1803).

²⁰ Adams, II, 54-55.

and relentless pressure of Minister Robert Livingston or of the shrewd and forceful guidance of Jefferson. And we are told by Professor Channing that Napoleon "suddenly . . . threw the province" at the American government, with no credit to anybody else except for catching and holding it.²¹ As to Madison, the only question raised would seem to be: Was he an absolute nonentity, or did he surrender to France, failing even to discern, as Jefferson did, that French defeat in San Domingo held the hope of American success?

There can be no doubt that the wiping out of General Leclerc's army, in the war with Toussaint Louverture, was the crucial factor in the cession of Louisiana. It destroyed the fulcrum of French power in the Western Hemisphere. Now let us trace the American attitude toward Leclerc. His army reached San Domingo in February, 1802. He carried instructions which included this sentence: "Jefferson has promised that the instant the French army arrives, all measures will be taken to starve Toussaint and to aid the army."²²

That promise was made to the French chargé d'affaires, Pichon, in the summer of 1801. Reporting this joyously to his government, Pichon said it relieved him of fears derived from a prior talk with Madison. The Secretary of State, he said, had seemed ready to support Toussaint, and in the same talk had given warning that collision between the United States and France would be inevitable if the latter should take possession of Louisiana from Spain. That, please observe, was in July, 1801, seven months before the French opened their campaign to reconquer San Domingo and nearly two years before Napoleon offered Louisiana to the United States. One month later, Pichon wrote that Madison's San Domingo policy still seemed to be in effect. Six months later he reported that he had complained once more to Jefferson about it, and "I found him very reserved and cold, while he talked to me, though less explicitly, in the same sense as Mr. Madison."²³

Here we have a repetition of the Thornton incident, this time at the highest level of national policy. Madison realized instantly what San Domingo meant. Jefferson did not, but swung over to Madison's policy when the realities were placed before him. The result? The United States allowed American ships to go on trading with the Negro rebels while guerrilla warfare and yellow fever wiped out the army of occupation. That was tough power politics—brutal politics. It did not come from a weak and vacillating errand boy.

²¹ Edward Channing, *History of the United States*, IV, 319 n.

²² *Lettres du Général Leclerc*, Appendix I, 269; Carl L. Lokke, "Jefferson and the Leclerc Expedition." *American Historical Review*, XXXIII (January, 1928), 324, 327-28.

²³ L. A. Pichon to Talleyrand, July 22, Aug. 11, 1801, Feb. 24, 1802, Arch. Aff. Etr., correspondance politique, Etats-Unis, vol. 53, f. 179; vol. 54, f. 161.

Let us jump a year or two. On April 10, 1803, Easter Sunday, Napoleon sent for his finance minister, Marbois. Before Marbois left the palace Napoleon said to him: "I renounce Louisiana. It is not only New Orleans that I mean to cede, it is the whole colony without reserving any of it." It is well known that Napoleon made this decision two days after he read the resolutions of Senator Ross of Pennsylvania authorizing military occupation of New Orleans. But that was not the latest news he had from America. In the course of the talk with Marbois, Napoleon remarked: "The London cabinet is informed of the *resolutions taken* at Washington."²⁴ That means that Napoleon had received the London diplomatic pouch of April 7. He sent for Marbois after reading, in the *London Times* of that date, that the United States Senate had passed a bill to construct fifteen gunboats for use at the mouth of the Mississippi and that Congress was about to authorize the raising of 80,000 men for invasion purposes. Napoleon renounced Louisiana a few hours after he read the following London summary of American policy:

Whether Spain continues in possession of Louisiana, or possession is taken by France, it is no longer doubtful that the deliberations of Congress are in unison with the feelings of the people. . . . The government and people seem to be aware that a decisive blow must be struck before the arrival of the expedition now waiting in the ports of Holland.

This was no thunderclap out of a clear sky. For two years the French legation in Washington had been describing the clouds that were rolling up, and here was evidence that there was lightning in them. It was not merely the danger of British seizure of Louisiana that Napoleon faced—he could have sidestepped that by leaving the country in the hands of Spain. The prospect that confronted him was both a danger and an opportunity—the certain prospect that some day the United States would take the country away from either Spain or France, and the reassuring certainty that they would never let it pass into the hands of Great Britain. These considerations were decisive, provided they were enforced by evidence of American strength and determination. Did Livingston provide that evidence? I quote from his letter of January 18, 1803, to Talleyrand, urging the cession of Florida and part of Louisiana to the United States:

Under any other plan, sir . . . the whole of this establishment must pass into the hands of Great Britain. . . . France, by grasping at a desert and an insignificant town, and thereby throwing the weight of the United States into the scale of Britain, will render her [Great Britain] mistress of the new world.²⁵

²⁴ François Barbé-Marbois, *Histoire de la Louisiane* (Paris, 1829), pp. 298, 301; R. R. Livingston to Madison, Apr. 11, 1803, *American State Papers, Foreign Affairs*, II, 552 (hereafter cited as *State Papers*). The italics in the quotation are added.

²⁵ Livingston to Talleyrand, Jan. 18, 1803, *State Papers* II, 531. This letter is dated January

Madison had instructed Livingston to assure France that American self-interest forbade either a "voluntary or compulsive transfer" of these provinces from Spain to Great Britain.²⁶ Instead, the minister pictured the United States as supinely submitting to encirclement and domination through a compulsive transfer from France to Britain.

Was it from Jefferson that Napoleon heard of American strength and determination? The President wrote many forceful letters which did not go to the First Consul, and at times made threats which did, but observe what he said at the moment of highest crisis. I quote Pichon's report of what Jefferson said to him on January 12, 1803, explaining the decision made two days earlier to send Monroe to France:

That Mr. Monroe was so well known to be a friend of the Western people that his mission would contribute more than anything else to tranquillize them and prevent unfortunate incidents; that he will be authorized jointly with Messrs. Pinckney and Livingston to treat with France or Spain, according to the state of things, in order to bring the affairs of the Mississippi to a definite conclusion. That the administration would try peaceful means to the last moment and they hoped that France would be disposed to concur in their views for the preservation of harmony.²⁷

Livingston described the effect of this conciliatory attitude upon a promise just given him to confirm American treaty rights at New Orleans: "Unfortunately, dispatches arrived at that moment from Mr. Pichon, informing them

10, 1803, in *State Papers* and "20 Nivose an XI (Jan. 10, 1803)" in the State Department copy (National Archives, Diplomatic Dispatches, France, VIII, enclosure to Livingston dispatch of Jan. 24, 1803) from which it was taken for publication. It is dated January 18 in Livingston's letterbook (New-York Historical Society) and January 18 in a copy in Monroe Papers, VII, Library of Congress. At the end of the original letter (Arch. Aff. Etr., Etats-Unis, Supp., vol. 7, ff. 310-13) is the date 20 Frimaire an XI (Dec. 11, 1802). This cannot be correct because the letter opens with a reference to the closing of New Orleans to American commerce by Spain, news of which did not reach France until January. Arthur B. Darling (in *Our Rising Empire, 1763-1803* [London, 1940], p. 447), observing no signature to the letter, concluded that this was Livingston's December 11 memoir to Joseph Bonaparte, wrongly addressed to Talleyrand by somebody who transcribed it in the foreign ministry. The letter is actually in the handwriting of Livingston's usual copyist, and is signed "Robt R. Livingston," but the faded ink of the signature is almost invisible in the photographic reproduction in the Library of Congress. News of the New Orleans closure reached Livingston on or just before January 7 (Livingston to Joseph Bonaparte, Jan. 7, 1803, *State Papers*, II, 536). Talleyrand learned of it between January 10 and 14 (Talleyrand to General Bernadotte, Jan. 10, 14, 1803, Arch. Aff. Etr., Etats-Unis, vol. 55, ff. 164, 170). The original letter is indorsed as received on 30 Nivose (Jan. 20), which confirms the date of January 18 found on two manuscript copies of it. What happened, apparently, was that Livingston wrote a paragraph about New Orleans and directed his clerk to add the Bonaparte memoir of December 11 to it. The clerk copied it date and all, then noticed the error while preparing a copy for Madison and changed 20 Frimaire to 20 Nivose, both wrong. Minus the opening paragraph, it is, as Darling concluded, the only known text of the memoir to Joseph Bonaparte.

²⁶ Madison to Livingston, Sept. 28, 1801, National Archives, General Records of the Department of State, Instructions to Consular Representatives, I (1800-1806). In the published instructions (*State Papers*, II, 510), the words "from Spain to Great Britain" appear as "from Spain to France," making the whole sentence nonsensical.

²⁷ Pichon to Talleyrand, Jan. 21, 24, 1803, Arch. Aff. Etr., Etats-Unis, vol. 55, ff. 184v,

that the appointment of Mr. Monroe had tranquillized everything . . . they determined to see whether the storm would not blow over."²⁸

Six days later more dispatches arrived, giving Madison's far different account of the reasons for sending Monroe—reasons which "imperatively required that this mission should have a prompt conclusion." Instead of quoting from his veiled threats of war, I present Pichon's comments upon them:

The implicit language of Mr. Madison . . . brings to light ideas too general to be neglected. . . . Louisiana in the first moment of war will answer for the behavior of our administration. . . . The crisis grows greater every day, and we cannot push it into the distant future. . . . I should fail in my duty if I did not tell you that these feelings of concern which Mr. Madison expressed to me are generally felt and that public opinion in the latest circumstances expresses itself at least as strongly and energetically as the government.²⁹

That was the last diplomatic word from Washington before Napoleon read about the fifteen gunboats and 80,000 men. Who put the heat on Bonaparte?

Now let us come back to Henry Adams. I spoke of his charge that Madison invited France to build an empire west of the Mississippi. That amounted to nothing. Adams merely failed to recognize a threat of war in thirteen-letter words like "circumstances" and "eventualities."³⁰ But he was well aware that for two years Madison had been working incessantly against French occupation of the trans-Mississippi country. Ignoring all that, he relied on one cryptic passage in one letter to brand the Secretary of State as a blundering nincompoop.

That was the way Adams operated. Without a particle of mental dishonesty in his makeup, he always searched for the worst and never failed to find it. A British diplomat wrote: "Madison is now as obstinate as a mule."³¹ A man cannot be obstinate as a mule without having that trait show up again and again. It does not show up in Adams' history, even though he quoted that particular statement. There you find that Madison was fretful, he was irritable, he had "a feminine faculty for pressing a sensitive point."³² Always the adjectives imply weakness. There is nothing to account for the fact that, as one foreign diplomat after another took him on, those who were hostile went home in discomfiture. Consider, as the most extreme case, the man who described Madison's obstinacy. Francis James Jackson—"Copen-

²⁸ Livingston to Madison, Mar. 24, 1803, *State Papers*, II, 549; Talleyrand to Livingston, 1 Germinal an 11 (Mar. 22, 1803, misdated Mar. 21), *ibid.*, II, 550.

²⁹ Pichon to Talleyrand, Jan. 24, 1803, Arch. Aff. Etr., Etats-Unis, vol. 55, ff. 196-98v.

³⁰ *Ibid.*; Adams, II, 54.

³¹ Francis James Jackson, Oct. 26, 1809, quoted in Adams, V, 130.

³² Adams, II, 74; V, 187.

hagen Jackson,"—was the hatchet man of the British Foreign Office. On his arrival at Washington he wrote to Canning that his predecessor had told him "of the most violent things said to him" by President Madison. Erskine, he observed, had turned the other cheek, but "I shall give blow for blow."³³ Jackson delivered one blow and was ordered out of the country.

Let us examine the most damning characterization of Madison to be found in the Adams history—an account by French Minister Turreau of his protest to Madison against the filibustering expedition of General Miranda. General Turreau was a tough guy. He hammered his wife with a club while his secretary played on the French horn to drown her screams³⁴ and he aspired to be just as brutal in diplomacy. "I have never yet beheld a face so cruel and sanguinary as his," wrote a United States senator. On the occasion told of by Adams, he was acting as the agent of Spanish Minister Yrujo, with whom Madison had refused to have any more dealings. I quote from Adams' translation of Turreau's letter to the Spaniard: "I was this morning with Madison. . . . He was in a state of extraordinary prostration while I was demanding" etc., etc.³⁵

It is a vivid picture—Madison collapsing with weakness and fright before the terrible Turreau. Let us look now at the French text. Turreau wrote: "*Il était dans un abattement extraordinaire.*"³⁶ I asked two Frenchmen on the Library of Congress staff to translate that. The first one said: "He was in very low spirits." The second: "He was very dejected." I showed the Adams translation to Ambassador Bonnet and he exclaimed: "How could anybody make a mistake like that?" It could be done, quite readily, by anybody who would also say that to hold a man in suspense means to hang him by the neck. For sixty years, this false picture of James Madison has blackened the canvas of history.

Adams' favorite technique against Madison was the left-hand, right-hand, left-hand punch—condemnation first, then quotation, then condemnation. In 1805, when England was at war with France and Spain, American Minister Armstrong in Paris sent home the "well-considered suggestion," as Henry Adams called it, that the United States take Texas away from Spain by force. Jefferson, Adams writes, "seized Armstrong's idea, and uniting it with his own, announced the result to Madison as the true solution." The United States should first obtain a promise from England not to make peace without

³³ Francis J. Jackson to Canning, Sept. 14, 1809, Foreign Office 353, vol. 60.

³⁴ Register, I, 181, William Plumer Papers, Library of Congress. Ordinarily, Turreau needed no provocation to beat his wife, but in this instance she had just hit him with a flatiron.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, I, 105; Adams, III, 192-95.

³⁶ General Turreau to the Marquis d'Yrujo, Feb. 7, 1806, Archives Hist. Nac. Madrid, leg. 5544 pt. 1.

American consent, then Congress should grant the President discretionary authority to make war on Spain. "Here at length," Adams commented, "was a plan—uncertain indeed because dependent on British help, but still a scheme of action." And then Madison knocked it on the head by observing that England was unlikely to bind herself positively not to make peace unless the United States bound itself positively to make war. Madison, Adams commented, "had nothing to propose except negotiation without end."

At this moment news reached America of William Pitt's second coalition against Napoleon. The whole continent of Europe was flaring into battle. International alignments were melting like wax. Madison's reaction opened the way for a one-two-three. Adams began with condemnation: "Upon Madison's mind this European convulsion acted as an additional reason for doing nothing."

Then quotation to prove it. Madison to Jefferson: "I think it very questionable whether a little delay may not be expedient," but meanwhile the United States should order Morales, Casa Calvo, and Yrujo out of the country.

Then final condemnation based on the quotation: "Madison's measures and conduct toward Europe showed the habit of avoiding the heart of every issue, in order to fret its extremities."³⁷

All this because Madison thought a little delay would be expedient before jumping into the Napoleonic wars. Adams' specific complaint was that Madison "disregarded Armstrong's idea of seizing Texas." But when Madison, as President, seized West Florida on the same theory advanced by Armstrong for Texas, that it had been paid for in the Louisiana Purchase, Adams described it as "filching a petty sandheap," an action imbued with force and fraud, and he quoted at length the protesting preachment of a British diplomat against "wresting a province from a friendly power . . . at the time of her adversity." In brief, Madison was damned if he did and damned if he didn't.³⁸

³⁷ Adams, III, 69-74.

³⁸ Adams, V, 309, 315. One's belief that Henry Adams did not distort intentionally is put to quite a strain at finding three distortions on one page (II, 69), all designed to prove that Minister Robert R. Livingston did not think that the portion of West Florida lying west of the Perdido River was included in the Louisiana Purchase until several weeks after the treaty negotiated by him and James Monroe had been signed. Adams wrote: (1) "In the preceding year one of the French ministers had applied to Livingston 'to know what we understand in America by Louisiana'; and Livingston's answer was on record in the State Department at Washington: 'Since the possession of the Floridas by Britain and the treaty of 1762, I think there can be no doubt as to the precise meaning of the terms.'" This alleged answer was actually a comment by Livingston upon a letter from John Graham at Madrid, and concerned ancient French claims to the Ohio country as part of *Louisiane Orientale*. On the query of the French minister Livingston merely wrote: "You can readily conceive my answer." Where would Adams have been if he had quoted what Livingston wrote only two weeks later on the subject really at issue: "I find all the old French maps mark the river Perdido as the boundary between Florida and Louisiana." Livingston to Madison, July 30, Aug. 16, 1802, *State Papers*, II, 519, 524. (2) "He had himself

All through the controversy over West Florida, Adams supported Spain with a zeal which cannot be accounted for by his conviction that there was no merit in the American position. The glee with which he upheld the foreign side of international disputes was in exact proportion to the opportunities they gave him to pillory Madison and condemn Jefferson. Early in 1804, Congress authorized the President to make Mobile Bay part of a customs district. The Spanish minister, Adams writes, sent Madison "a note so severe as to require punishment, and so able as to admit of none. . . . Madison could neither maintain the law nor annul it; he could not even explain it away. . . . The President came to Madison's relief. By a proclamation," he limited the district to places lying within the United States. The proclamation—which Adams condemned as a perversion of a perverse law—was based entirely on the reply Madison already had written to Yrujo, that Section 11 (on Mobile) was subordinate to Section 4, which set up a more inclusive customs district but contained the limiting words, "lying within the United States." If anybody came to anybody's relief, Madison came to the President's, and in doing so, did just what Adams said he could not do—explained away what Yrujo had objected to.³⁹

My final impression is that Henry Adams did not understand the policies of Jefferson and Madison at all. He saw weakness and national humiliation in their failure to go to war over this or that outrage—to war with England over impressment, or to avenge the attack on the Chesapeake; to war with France because of the Berlin and Milan decrees. Jefferson and Madison saw three choices—war, submission, or economic pressure and negotiation while the fast-growing nation gathered basic strength. They chose this third course,

drafted an article which he tried to insert in Marbois' *projet*, pledging the First Consul to interpose his good offices with the King of Spain to obtain the country east of the Mississippi." The article actually covered all Spanish territory "on the continent of North America laying to the east of the river"—a description which did not make the Mississippi the boundary (Monroe Papers, VII, 1270v). Livingston and Monroe jointly asked aid in obtaining "so much of his [the king of Spain's] territories as lay to the east of the ceded territory. . . ." Livingston and Monroe to Marbois, May 2, 1803, Arch. Aff. Etr., Etats-Unis, vol. 55, f. 416. (3) "As late as May 12, Livingston wrote to Madison: 'I am satisfied that . . . if they [the French] could have concluded with Spain, we should also have had West Florida.'" This did not refer to the negotiations of Livingston and Monroe, nor to the treaty they signed on May 2, 1803, but was a speculation about what the French might have been willing to do in the previous year, when Livingston made a bid for West Florida and the country above the Arkansas River.

³⁹ Adams, II, 257-63; the marquis of Casa Yrujo to Madison, Mar. 7, 1804, National Archives, General Records of the Department of State, Notes from the Spanish Legation, II; Madison to Yrujo, Mar. 19, 1804, Monroe Papers; *Annals of Congress*, XIII, col. 1253 (the "Mobile Act"). Adams' methods of creating adverse impressions find an illustration (II, 262) in the way he quoted from Madison's letter to Livingston, March 31, 1804, about the belatedness of Yrujo's protest: "The Act had been for many weeks depending in Congress with these sections, word for word, in it; . . . it must in all probability have been known to the Marquis d'Yrujo in an early stage of its progress." The statement would have sounded less like an unsupported conjecture if Adams had not omitted part of it: "as two copies are by a usage of politeness always allotted for each foreign minister here it must in all probability" etc.

well knowing that war was the ultimate and probable alternative. Adams and a host of other writers have construed this course as submission, and have treated the War of 1812 as evidence of its failure.

Go back ten years. Go back to July 7, 1802, and read what Pichon wrote to Talleyrand on that day about the purposes of Jefferson and Madison: "They fear exceedingly to be forced to war, as they go on the principle that they ought not to try their strength within ten years, by which time they count on diminution of debt, growth of population and riches."

This was said in telling of an interview in which "Mr. Madison talked to me with much coolness, much method, and as if he had been prepared." The subject was Louisiana. It should be recognized, said Madison, "that France cannot long preserve Louisiana against the United States." As for other colonies of the European powers—in South America, the West Indies—the United States had no desire to possess them. But, said Madison, by joining England in the next war, they could throw all these distant territories into her hands, and "could without difficulty, in ten years, divide with her . . . all the export and import trade of these colonies."⁴⁰

He was saying, in effect, that England and the United States could handle France at any time, and that in ten years the United States by itself would be strong enough to compel England to abandon its system of colonial monopoly.

For two reasons, and two only, the compulsive system which Madison threatened against both France and England was put into operation against England alone. France escaped it by ceding Louisiana. England brought it on by the blundering obstinacy of Canning, Wellesley, and Castlereagh. And the war started just three weeks short of the ten years Madison allowed for postponement of a showdown.

There is plenty to criticize in the presidencies of Jefferson and Madison. But their weaknesses were in general the weaknesses of the American people. Their major difficulty was one that we can appreciate today—that of living and working in a power-mad world dominated by lunatics. Study the work of Madison in that light, without the distorting shadows of political prejudice, and you will find the clear-cut lines of greatness in it.

I began writing the life of Madison without the slightest suspicion that the prevailing estimates of him were incorrect. Not in the remotest fashion did I suspect that in their political symbiosis, Jefferson might owe as much to Madison as Madison to Jefferson. My interest was in Madison the political philosopher, the architect of the Constitution, the author of the Bill of Rights

⁴⁰ Pichon to Talleyrand, July 7, 1802, Arch. Aff. Etr., Etats-Unis, vol. 54, f. 410.

—fields in which his primacy was universally acknowledged. Everything after 1789 was expected to be anticlimax. That has not proved true. The ultimate verdict upon Madison depends in part upon the future of the American people—upon their continued devotion to liberty, self-government, and personal honor. But, granted this fidelity, I have no doubt of the final verdict. Madison the diplomatist, Madison the President, will be found to measure up to the father of the Constitution. Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, Wilson, Roosevelt. Move over a little, gentlemen.

Washington, D. C.

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[Footnotes]

¹ **The Life Portraits of James Madison**

Theodore Bolton

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²² **Jefferson and the Leclerc Expedition**

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