



# If Men Were Angels: James Madison and the Heartless Empire of Reason

*Richard K. Matthews*

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"What is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary."

The ever wary James Madison viewed his fellow citizens as anything but angelic. In this radically new interpretation, Richard Matthews portrays a much less optimistic (and yet more liberal) Madison than we've seen before. Neither civic humanist nor democrat, this Madison is a distrusting, calculating, and pragmatic Machiavellian Prince.

Hardly an imposing figure, Madison was barely five-feet-six-inches tall, pale complected, a poor speaker, a perpetual hypochondriac and secret epileptic, pursued by bouts of depression and given to dressing in black. And yet his political achievements and intellectual legacy are monumental. Revered as the "Father of the Constitution," Madison was also architect of the "Virginia plan"; one of the two principal authors of *The Federalist*; leader of the inaugural House of Representatives; reluctant champion of the Bill of Rights; cofounder of the Republican Party, Washington's ghostwriter; Jefferson's Secretary of State; and president and commander-in-chief during America's second war of Independence.

Nevertheless, Madison's preeminence in the rise of the modern American state has not always been so widely recognized. And, Matthews contends, what has been written about Madison's political thought has been limited in scope and skewed in interpretation.

Unlike previous authors, Matthews goes well beyond Madison's work on the Constitution to reconstruct the complete range of Madison's political thought and intellectual development over the course of his extensive life. In the process, he provides a powerful critique of Madisonian politics. It is possible, he shows, to applaud the energy, design, and intellect that went into Madison's thought and simultaneously challenge the assumptions and values upon which that thought rests.

Matthews's Madison understood the potentially fatal problems of a weak, divided state; saw salvation in a strong central government astride an expanding commercial republic; drafted that government's fundamental charter; ran the infant regime as an advisor to two presidents before becoming president himself; and, in retirement, strove to control and manipulate historical interpretations of these efforts. From "The Legislator" to chief executive to keeper of the past and controller of the future, Madison adjusted his political posture to suit the moment. . . . just as Machiavelli's ideal Prince would have done. Madison's system achieved the stability he desired, but at a price Americans should have refused to pay.

Provocative and controversial, Matthews's study revises our understanding of this central figure in American history. It illuminates his profound impact upon the America imagined by the Framers, his ongoing influence on the nation we have become, and the tragedy of his success in foreclosing the possibility of a radical Jeffersonian America that never was, but might have been.

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