America's Most Consequential Founder

Washington built a nation. Jefferson inspired it. Madison designed it.



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As I walked the streets of Colonial Williamsburg this week, I found myself asking a question I had never seriously considered before.

Who was America’s most consequential Founder?

After my visit to Williamsburg, I am still in awe that I walked in the footsteps of some of the greatest men in history. They inspired a nation and helped create a Constitution that remains the envy of people around

the world who yearn for freedom and self-government. Standing where they once walked led me to ask a simple question: Which of them had the greatest lasting impact on the American republic?

Most Americans would probably answer George Washington or Thomas Jefferson.

It would be difficult to argue with either choice.

George Washington was the Father of the Nation. Without his leadership during the Revolution and his willingness to surrender power afterward, the American experiment might never have survived its infancy. He gave the presidency legitimacy and demonstrated that a republic could endure without a king.

Thomas Jefferson was the Inspiration for a Nation. His words in the Declaration of Independence remain among the most powerful ever written. They gave voice to the principles upon which America was founded and have inspired people around the world for nearly 250 years.

But as I walked where these men once lived and debated, another name kept coming to mind.

James Madison.

Madison rarely receives the public recognition given to Washington or Jefferson. He did not command armies. He did not write the Declaration of Independence. He was soft-spoken, physically unimposing, and often worked behind the scenes.

Yet no single individual did more to design the system of government that has preserved American liberty for more than two centuries.

Madison came to Philadelphia with a plan. Much of the Constitution grew from the Virginia Plan that he carefully prepared. He defended the Constitution through The Federalist Papers. When many Americans demanded stronger protections for individual liberty, Madison drafted what became the Bill of Rights.

His greatest contribution, however, was not any single document.

It was his understanding of human nature.

Madison did not believe government should depend upon finding perfect leaders because he knew such leaders do not exist.

In Federalist No. 51 he wrote:

“If men were angels, no government would be necessary.”

Those few words capture one of the deepest insights in political history.

Humans are imperfect.

Every generation produces capable leaders. Every generation also produces ambitious leaders, flawed leaders, and leaders who sometimes place political interests above constitutional principles.

The Framers understood this reality. They did not design a government that relied upon the virtue of those in office. They designed one that divided power among competing institutions.

Congress would govern.

The President would execute.

The courts would interpret.

The states would retain important powers of their own.

Each branch would restrain the others because no individual could be trusted with unchecked authority.

That insight remains as relevant today as it was in 1787.

The question is not whether today's leaders are more flawed than those of the Founding generation. They are not. Human nature has not changed.

The real question is whether our institutions still provide the balance Madison intended.

Over many decades, Congress has delegated increasing authority to the executive branch. Presidents of both parties have accumulated powers that earlier generations would have considered extraordinary. Each administration inherits authorities created by its predecessors and often expands them further.

The problem is not one president.

It is the office.

Constitutional government should never depend upon electing extraordinary people. It should function because it assumes ordinary people—with all of their strengths and weaknesses—will occupy positions of power.

That is Madison's enduring gift to America.

Washington gave us a nation.

Jefferson gave us its ideals.

Madison designed the constitutional framework that has allowed both to endure.

If I had to choose the most consequential Founder, I would choose James Madison—not because he was the most famous, but because he best understood the timeless truth upon which our republic still depends:

Humans are imperfect.

That is precisely why the Constitution was written.