



HISTORY DEPT.

## The Father of Partisanship

James Madison launched the two-party system. We should thank him for it.

By LYNNE CHENEY | May 05, 2014

Partisanship gets a bad rap these days, taking the blame for many problems in government, including turning citizens away from politics. A system wherein the Democratic Senate majority leader labels opponents “un-American” doesn’t exactly invite participation. Republican lawmakers are guilty, too. They could barely contain their glee when a journalist recently claimed that President Barack Obama has “a manhood problem in the Middle East.” Small wonder that even partisans feel obliged to denounce party spirit: Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said last month that partisanship is pushing the United States “backwards instead of forward.”

But James Madison, our fourth president and the father of the Constitution, thought partisanship had something to be said for it—a good deal, in fact. The American Republic hadn’t been in business long when Madison became concerned that it was losing its way. In 1791, President George Washington, over Madison’s objections, signed a bill chartering a national bank. It wasn’t that Madison, who was leading the House of Representatives, objected to such a bank. He thought one might well be useful. But the members of the Constitutional Convention just a few years earlier had decided not to give Congress the right to grant charters. If laws could be enacted in the absence

of such authority, Madison wrote to a friend, “The parchment”—that is, the Constitution—“had better be thrown into the fire at once.”

The problem, as Madison saw it, was that President Washington had fallen under the sway of Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton, who interpreted the “general welfare” clause of the Constitution to mean that Congress could undertake a wide range of activities that the Constitution did not delegate to it. That way lay disaster, in Madison’s view. “If Congress can apply money indefinitely to the general welfare and are the sole and supreme judges of the general welfare,” he declared on the floor of the House, there was no end to what the central government could do—from taking control of religion to taking “into their own hands the education of children.”

Madison’s solution was to lead the way in establishing an opposition party—the first in American history. This was no easy task, since parties had an even worse reputation then than they do now. They were decried as a refuge for the weak-minded and a threat to the common good. Madison’s friend Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson had even declared that if going to heaven required him to join a party, he would choose not to go. The nation’s having only recently won its independence from England added to the animus against parties, as did the multitude of difficulties that had been overcome to create a Constitution and establish a government in accordance with it. An opposition party seemed to threaten what had been achieved with much blood and toil, and was therefore easy to regard as treasonous.

Madison’s key insight was that the Washington administration, dominated by Hamilton, itself represented a party. He urged Jefferson to bring Madison’s college friend Philip Freneau to Philadelphia (then the nation’s capital) to start a newspaper that would present a competing point of view. Madison himself sought to influence public opinion by writing for Freneau’s paper, describing what was wrong with the Federalist government and making the case for what he dubbed the Republican Party. (To the confusion of generations of students afterward, Madison’s party was not the predecessor of the Republican Party today, despite certain common policy goals, such as low debt and limited government.)

There followed one of the most tumultuous decades in American political history. Longtime relationships were severed, with Madison, Jefferson and James Monroe taking up the Republican mantle and becoming estranged from George Washington. The politics of personal destruction were on full view with the publication of an article by scandalmonger James Callender saying that Hamilton had been giving a shady character named James Reynolds money to speculate for him. Hamilton fought back, publishing a pamphlet in which he indignantly declared that he was not a speculator but an adulterer; he had been paying Reynolds to keep quiet while he slept with Reynolds’ wife.

In 1798, the Federalists, clinging to the idea that as the government they were above party politics, passed the Sedition Act, which made it illegal to criticize high federal officials. They threw an obstreperous Republican congressman and several Republican newspaper editors in jail. A fellow drinking in a New Jersey bar was arrested when he informed the barkeep that he didn't care if cannon fire struck President John Adams, a Federalist, in the arse.

Political attacks were at least as abusive as they are now. Hamilton insulted his opponents' manhood, declaring that Madison and Jefferson had a "womanish attachment to France." Madison's wife, Dolley, was the target of a whispering campaign. She was said to be sexually insatiable—and who was to blame? Madison, of course, for having failed to impregnate her.

But by 1800, the Republican Party was strong enough to put Jefferson, an advocate of limited government, in the White House, and the principle of legitimate opposition had gained a firm foothold. Madison's conviction that we can challenge those in power without being subversive of the nation has kept us going ever since—though not perfectly, to be sure. Today, some Americans still regard those on the other side of the political aisle as traitors and, just like the Federalists of old, are intent on criminalizing political differences. But at least now there is a public consensus that such behavior is wrong.

Partisanship can be offensive, nasty and worse. Trust me, I know. But it also keeps us from being a nation where there is no effective opposition—as in Russia, for example. It would be pleasant to be rid of the worst of it, though I suspect that won't happen until voters declare their disgust at the polling place. The noise and the name-calling are not going to go away—at least so long as we are a republic.

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