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James Madison Would Take All Sides of Shutdown

By: Richard Brookhiser- October 3, 2013

Everyone is talking about the president, even though he is a cerebral, aloof guy. His wife is glam (her enemies say, too glam). There are troubles abroad, and deadlock on Capitol Hill.

This is President James Madison, of course, who was in the White House two centuries ago but is still making news.

In the last few weeks, Doug Bandow of the Cato Institute wrote that Madison wouldn't let President Barack Obama bomb Syria without authorization from Congress; Lyle Denniston of the National Constitution Center and Bloomberg View columnist Cass R. Sunstein each wrote that Madison would deplore the factionalism that has shut down the federal government; William Bennett and Christopher Beach wrote in the Wall Street Journal that Madison would scorn Congress and its staff members for exempting themselves from the provisions of the Affordable Care Act; and Jeffrey Anderson wrote that the health-care measure, though it is the law of the land, hasn't been ratified by what Madison called "the cool and deliberate sense of the community."

For a man who died in 1836, Madison gets out and about.

We care about Madison, not for his 1809-17 presidency, which had some notable failures (for instance, the British overran Washington in the War of 1812 and torched Congress and the White House), but for his role as Father of the Constitution.

Constitutional Convention

The 36-year-old was only one of 55 delegates who attended the 1787 Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. He lost as many arguments as he won (he hated state equality in the Senate). But he was in his seat for every meeting; he kept the most complete notes; he defended the finished product in the Federalist Papers (a series of op-ed articles published in New York newspapers, written along with Alexander Hamilton and John Jay); and as a representative from Virginia, he shepherded the Bill of Rights through the first Congress under the new system.

Better call him Mother of the Constitution: He was present at every stage of its conception, delivery and post-natal care. If he isn't the authority on what the document means, who is?

That Madison was a believer in structural balance. The size and diversity of the nation covered by the new Constitution -- Maine to Georgia, the Atlantic seaboard to Daniel Boone's Kentucky -- and the internal divisions within the new government -- federal versus state, president versus Congress versus courts -- would present too many hurdles for demagogues or villains who wished to take power.

When we wring our hands over deadlock in Washington, we fail to consider that deadlock was, to a degree, what Madison and his fellow Constitution makers labored to achieve. The people would ultimately get their way, but stupid or oppressive schemes should be deadlocked.

There was a second Madison, however, less well known now, but equally important: the Father of Politics. In 1791-92, Madison and his lifelong friend Thomas Jefferson founded America's first political party. Madison gave it its name -- the Republican Party -- which was changed to the Democratic Party in the 1820s. (Today's Republican Party is a later, different organization.) It is the second-oldest political party in the world, after Britain's Tories.

He assembled the first national coalition: Virginians like himself and Jefferson, plus New Yorkers like Aaron Burr. He helped start the first partisan news media: the National Gazette, a political newspaper published in Philadelphia, then the nation's capital, and edited by Philip Freneau, a friend of his from college (Fox News and MSNBC are its descendants). And he and Jefferson constructed the first political machine: the Virginia Dynasty, which put three neighbors and soul mates, Jefferson, Madison and James Monroe, in the White House for six consecutive terms (1801-25).

Political Sideshows

That Madison would recognize the political sideshows that characterize Washington deadlock now. Partisan advantage, spin, media yak-in-the-box: These, too, are his children.

Even his old political party, the Republicans-turned-Democrats, is the same in one crucial respect. Although its base has changed beyond recognition, from Southern slave owners to modern multiculturalists, it still presents itself as the party of the little guy against the rich (whom Madison called "the opulent").

In his day, the rich his party labored to frustrate were Hamilton and his banker buddies. In our day, they are Tea Party conservatives unconcerned with the uninsured.

Madison would be right at home in our political fights -- and he would be equally at home on many sides of them.