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Book Review

The Three Lives of James Madison: Genius, Partisan, President
By Noah Feldman, Random House, $35, 773 pp.

An advocate of minority rights who protected slavery

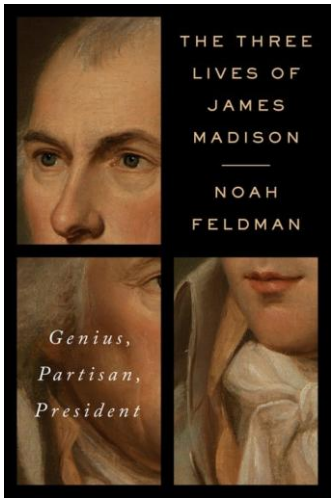
by Pamela Newkirk

While drafting the Constitution, James Madison strove to ensure the protection of minority rights but also proposed that a slave be counted as three-fifths of a person. The contradiction, etched into the Constitution, would come to define Madison and a nation irreconcilably founded both on slavery and the ideals of liberty and justice.

This paradox lies at the heart of "The Three Lives of James Madison," by Harvard law professor Noah Feldman, who charts Madison's life as the "father of the Constitution," a political partisan, and ultimately a statesman in his roles as secretary of state and president. Throughout his lengthy book, Feldman maps Madison's evolution from a bookish and idealistic social theorist to a pragmatic political operative who fully recognized the immorality of slavery and the humanity of the enslaved but proceeded, out of the economic interests of his class, to stamp it into the nation's DNA.

Born on a 4,000-acre Virginia plantation that had more than 100 slaves, Madison set off to Princeton in 1769 and delved into his studies with abandon, completing two years of study in one. Stirred by the Boston Tea Party and rising rebellion against Britain's infringement on individual liberties, Madison became a passionate advocate of dissent and religious freedom. He believed that religious diversity in the North fueled the kind of protest that was uncommon in the South, where the Church of England, and persecution of other religions, reigned supreme.

Feldman painstakingly renders the deliberations over the drafting of the emerging nation's Constitution in granular detail, as if to mirror the onerousness of the task. So vividly are the debates recounted that they seem to play out in real time.



"The Three Lives of James Madison," by Noah Feldman (Random House)

Feldman captures the remarkable extent to which the drafters agonized over how slavery would blemish the character of the Constitution and indeed of the drafters themselves. Luther Martin of Maryland argued that slavery was "inconsistent with the principles of the Revolution and dishonorable to the American character." And George Mason of Virginia, who owned some 300 slaves, nonetheless appealed to the fellow founders to stop the "infernal traffic," fearing slave revolts and the adverse impact on white productivity. Predicting the strife that lay ahead, he warned, "By an inevitable chain of causes and effects providence punishes national sins by national calamities."

Though Madison recognized the immorality of the institution, he was less concerned with propriety than public perception of the new nation. He offered that he "thought it wrong to admit in the constitution the idea that there could be property in men." But rather than argue for the end of slavery, he instead couched it in coded language, rewriting the text to read that "a tax or duty may be imposed on such importation not exceeding $10 for each person."

Writes Feldman: "Madison's position reflected the contorted moral logic of slaveholders enacting a slavery-protecting constitution while claiming to oppose that very institution."

Feldman argues that while some of the drafters were ashamed of their association with slavery, which many civilized nations had already begun to abandon, "they just did not feel sufficiently ashamed to do anything about it, at least not while their livelihoods and those of their families depended on the labor of enslaved persons."

While Feldman highlights the irony of the founders' efforts to create a nation on ideals of liberty, along with Madison's commitment to preserving the rights of minorities, he at times appears not

to notice the elephant in the room. Feldman writes that Madison's arguments in favor of a bill proposed by Thomas Jefferson establishing religious freedom applied to all Virginians, not just dissenters, but fails to note the trampled rights of the enslaved. And although he notes that Madison recognized the humanity of enslaved Africans, he seems to accept at face value Madison's uncharitable view of Native Americans. Without elaboration, Feldman writes: "He called the Shawnees a 'perfidious people' and considered all Indians to be savages." However, Feldman appears not to have considered the possibility that Madison simply chose to deny the humanity of Native Americans as they valiantly resisted the white settlers' invasion.

Still, Feldman goes further than many other scholars to insert slaves into the narrative, at times providing their names, circumstances and movements as he assiduously traces Madison's evolving ideas about the political system he created and the institution that forever stained its legacy.

Feldman also closely examines Madison's friendships with Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton and George Washington. And we're afforded glimpses of his romantic life: of the socially awkward 32-year-old courting 15-year-old Kitty Floyd, who breaks off their engagement. Feldman later humorously recalls how Madison, 46 and still unmarried, pursued the affections of 23-year-old Dolley Payne Todd, a widowed mother of a young child who had recently lost her husband and another child to yellow fever. The 5-foot-4 Madison enlists a friend to convey his affections for the sought-after 5-foot-7 widow, who becomes his wife and political partner.

For much of his political career, Madison eschewed Washington social life, preferring letter-writing over face-to-face contact. However, after Jefferson appointed him secretary of state, his wife assumed a central role in Washington, where she often hosted dinners at their home or the White House. The sociable Dolley proved a valuable asset for her husband. "Under Dolley's tutelage," Feldman writes, "Madison developed what would become a lifelong habit of telling witty stories after dinner, the ideal venue for his particular brand of dry wit."

After James Madison was elected president, the couple held the first inaugural ball, and Dolley would become the first of many first ladies renowned for their fashion savvy.

"The Three Lives of James Madison" widens the window on the character and outsize vision of Madison and the men who founded America. Like the nation they willed into being, their brilliance and idealism were irrevocably dimmed by their moral shortcomings.

Pamela Newkirk is a professor of journalism at New York University and author of "Spectacle: the Astonishing Life of Ota Benga."

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