

The election of 1808: Battle of neighbors

By Lewis E. Lehrman

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By the time Thomas Jefferson prepared to retire from the presidency after two terms in 1808, James Madison had served for eight years as secretary of state. Madison was a close friend, advisor and Virginia neighbor of Jefferson. The president clearly wanted the younger Madison to succeed him in the White House, which Jefferson was anxious to vacate.

But Jefferson had another close friend and neighbor who was still serving as an American diplomat in Europe at the beginning of 1808. James Monroe was not as intellectually gifted as Jefferson or Madison, but he had considerable experience as a legislator, governor, and diplomat. And, unlike Jefferson and Madison, Monroe had real battlefield experience in the American Revolution, where he had been badly wounded at the Battle of Trenton on Dec. 25, 1776.

More than three decades after the battle, Monroe's considerable pride was wounded by his friends' unilateral decision to cut him out of the presidential succession. Conflict with Britain was intensifying as the 1808 election approached, so Monroe's credentials as a former ambassador to Britain and France might have proved useful. Madison's own background in diplomacy had never extended to Europe. He was to become the first American president never to have travelled beyond America. Madison, however, had a powerful weapon -- his effervescent and indomitable wife Dolley, who was more skilled in dealing with political gossip and criticism -- even false allegations of her promiscuity - - than most men of the day.

Madison and Monroe had squared off before -- in 1788 when they were candidates for the first Congress under the new federal Constitution. The previous summer of 1787, Madison had been a prime architect of that Constitution in Philadelphia. Virginia opponents of the Constitution targeted him for defeat. They pushed forward Monroe, a mild anti-Federalist, as a potential victor over Madison. The contest was close. Monroe was not a great speaker. Neither was Madison a charismatic personality. The margin of victory in the congressional election was provided by local Baptists, who appreciated Madison championing their religious freedoms.

Monroe subsequently served as a Virginia senator and as the American minister to Paris under President Washington. Upon Monroe's return to Virginia, he was elected governor in 1799. When Monroe was leaving office in January 1803, President Jefferson suddenly appointed him to a special diplomatic post -- to arrange for the purchase of New Orleans from the French government. Shortly before Monroe arrived in Paris, Napoleon had

decided to sell all of Louisiana to the Americans. When the deal was concluded, Monroe stayed in Europe to take on diplomatic duties in France, Spain and England.

By the time Monroe finally returned to America in December 1807, the Federalist Party had largely fallen apart. The Republican Party of Jefferson, Madison and Monroe was split into factions. It was clear that Jefferson and Madison had firm control of the caucus that would choose the party's presidential nominee. They had less control of the politics of their home state where many "Old Republicans" preferred Monroe. The Jeffersonian members of Congress met on January 23, 1808 to select their party's candidate for president. There were about 90 members in attendance and Madison won the votes of 83 members -- to just three for Monroe.

Monroe probably understood that the Jefferson-Madison machine would defeat him in both Washington and Richmond, but he wanted to demonstrate his popularity and refused to withdraw his presidential candidacy. Sensing danger, Jefferson wrote Monroe in February 1808 that he "viewed Mr. Madison and yourself as two principal pillars of my happiness. Were either to be withdrawn, I should consider it as among the greatest calamities which could assail my future peace of mind." In the ensuing correspondence, Jefferson declared that "I never, one instant, lost sight of your reputation and favorable standing with your country."

Monroe's dignity may have been partially restored by these exchanges, but he was not mollified enough to drop out of the race. When Virginia voted, Madison defeated Monroe by more than a 4-1 margin. In the national popular vote, Madison defeated his Federalist opponent by a 2-1 margin. The defeated Federalist candidate, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, quipped that he had been defeated by "Mr. and Mrs. Madison. I might have had a better chance if I faced Mr. Madison alone."

Monroe's continuation in the presidential contest hurt his standing among Republicans. President Jefferson declined to send him back to England. Madison, who easily won election, decided not to nominate Monroe for secretary of state -- the logical stepping stone to the presidency.

Lewis E. Lehrman is co-founder of the Gilder-Lehrman Institute of American History and author of "Lincoln at Peoria: The Turning Point" (Stackpole Books, 2008).