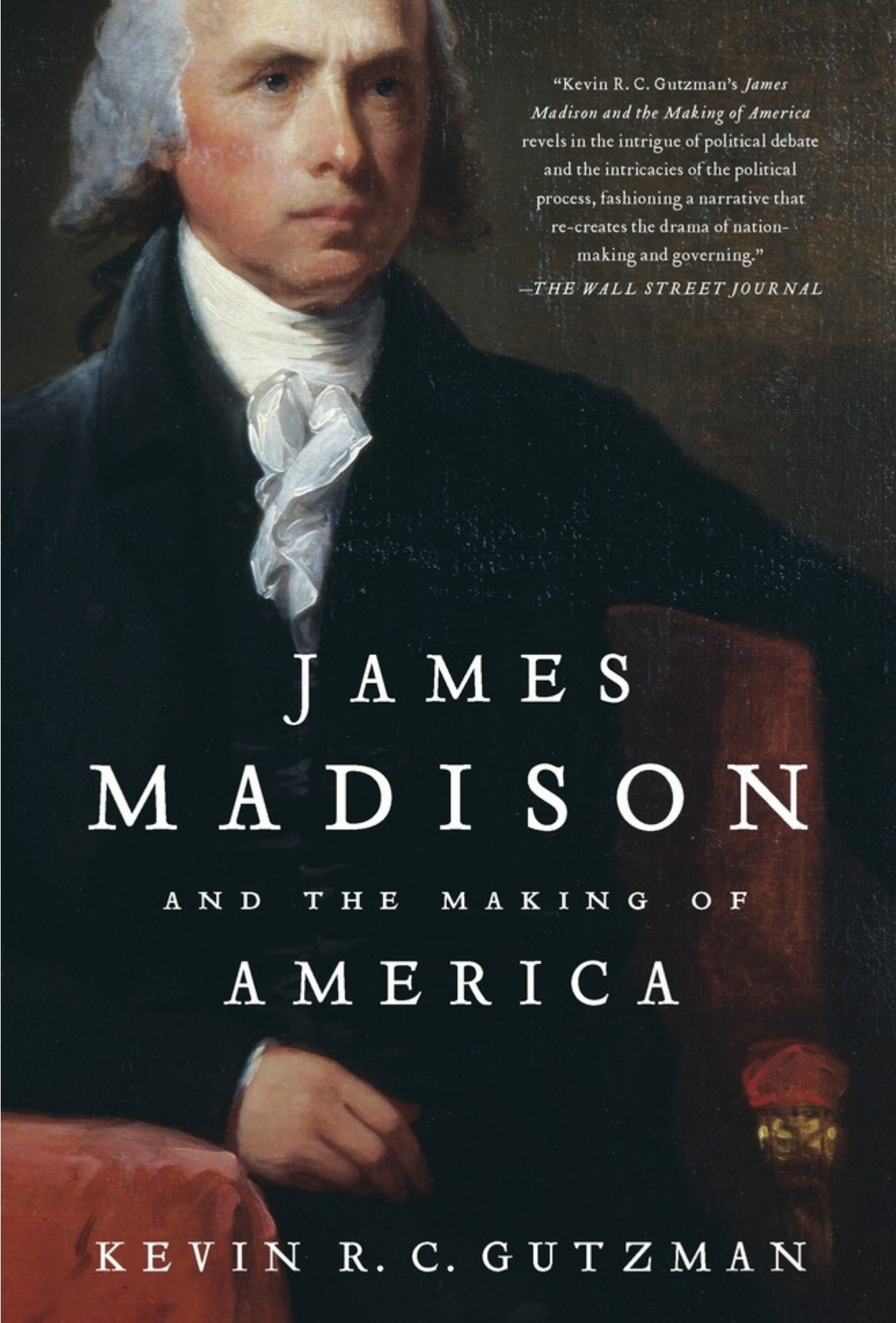


# {essays in history}

The Annual Journal produced by the Corcoran Department of History at the  
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## James Madison and the Making of America

A detailed oil painting of James Madison, showing him from the chest up. He has white powdered hair, a serious expression, and is wearing a dark blue coat over a white cravat and a white ruffled necktie. He is seated in a red upholstered chair. The background is dark and indistinct.

“Kevin R. C. Gutzman’s *James Madison and the Making of America* revels in the intrigue of political debate and the intricacies of the political process, fashioning a narrative that re-creates the drama of nation-making and governing.”  
—THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

JAMES  
MADISON  
AND THE MAKING OF  
AMERICA

KEVIN R. C. GUTZMAN

Volume 47 (2014)

### Reviewed Work(s)

*James Madison and the Making of America*. By Kevin R. C. Gutzman (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2012). Pp. 416. \$16.99.

*James Madison and the Making of America* by Kevin Gutzman is a beautifully written narrative that focuses on the political life of James Madison. This book attempts to create a complex and realistic portrait of this influential Founding Father. Gutzman has written numerous books about the Constitution, but none that dealt with a person of this much intrigue. While this book examines the entire life of James Madison, a majority of it focuses on the Constitution and the battle to ratify it. The book has been called a biography, yet it lacks focus on the daily life of James Madison; it focuses too heavily on the Constitution instead, and it lacks depth on any other aspects of his political career.

Gutzman reveals the intrigue of the political debates and the intricacies of the political process that occurred after the Framers wrote the Constitution's text. The ratification of the Constitution takes center stage. The scholarship on this event is enormous, which is why Gutzman focuses on Madison's role in writing the *Federalist* essays and the Bill of Rights. He meticulously recounts Madison's efforts to secure ratification of the Constitution in several obstinate states, working in concert with the redoubtable Alexander Hamilton, who later became an adversary not just of Madison but also of Jefferson.

Gutzman argues that Madison was more radical than history recounts:

“He favored the federal veto, and the federal appointment of governors, but doubted the public [would] accept such provisions” (140). This was Madison's genius. He understood the new America was rooted in democracy and the people wanted power, so he suppressed his ultimate desires for the nation for objectives that would be universally accepted. Yet, Gutzman fails to follow this thread into Madison's presidency. By the 1808 election, did Madison still favor the veto? Did he use the veto?

These types of questions would probe into a portion of Madison's Presidency that is continually overlooked. Gutzman points towards Madison being more radical, yet he never provides more relevant examples throughout Madison's political career. The lack of depth into Madison outside of the ratification of the Constitution is the downfall of this book.

Fewer than one hundred pages describe the last four decades of Madison's life. After such a thorough and detail oriented approach to the Constitutional Convention and the ensuing ratification process, the latter events in Madison's life are portrayed with much less attention. Gutzman proceeds quickly through the election of 1800 and into Madison's Presidency, yet the synopsis of the War of 1812 is incredibly detailed. He recreates the events that led up to the war quickly and distinctly. Gutzman openly criticizes Madison for his handling of the War of 1812. He argues that due to Madison's small standing army, America was unprepared for war on the home front. Outside of that point, James Madison's presidency comes and goes with little more than notes on key events.

The title of this book is misleading. While it does focus on Madison, it seems to focus more on the Constitution. Gutzman tends to get bogged down with the ratification process of the Constitution. He does not provide any new information that will advance the historiography. It is not fair to suggest that Madison is not the central actor in the book, yet neither is this quite a biography of his life. Gutzman relies more on the actions of the state ratifications than any personal aspects of Madison's life.

*James Madison and the Making of America* is an impressive book that anyone interested in American history should read. Scholars in the field of Virginian or Constitutional history should find this book to be an excellent study. Yet, one question still lingers: is the focus truly about Madison, or is the Constitution and its struggles through the New Nation years the main focus? This book falls short of making a new revelation into the understanding of James Madison. Gutzman's research and extensive bibliography provide ample resources for future works on the subject.

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