



FROM THE BRAFFERTON

Monroe and the Era of Good Feelings

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EVERY FOUR YEARS WE, THE PEOPLE OF THE UNITED STATES, ELECT A president. At William & Mary, this quadrennial rite reminds us of the four U.S. presidents who attended or received a professional credential from the College. In two instances, they also served as our Chancellor. W&M had a brilliant run: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and James Monroe stand among the greatest presidents ever, and John Tyler accomplished more than often recognized. The country needs another leader with the brains, work ethic, civility and public spirit that characterize W&M people. I have taken to urging our students to get on the stick — get involved in politics, succeed and go for POTUS.

Since the beginning of the Republic, election season has not always brought out the best in us. The months (now years) leading up to a presidential election seem increasingly to elicit the worst in us, deepening the fissures that divide us. But there is hope. Consider the example of our alumnus James Monroe. In 2017, we will mark the 200th anniversary of his election to the U.S. presidency.

As a W&M undergraduate, the young Monroe was among the small band that in 1775 raided the Royal Governor's Palace, capturing hundreds of muskets and swords for the Williamsburg militia. He left the College early in 1776 to fight in the Continental Army. While in the forefront of the Battle of Trenton, Lieutenant Monroe was terribly wounded. He never lost the patriotic fervor that earned him a hero's reputation during the Revolutionary War.

Early in his political career, Monroe was a passionate anti-federalist, fearing incipient monarchy in the new republic and loathe to have any lingering

ties to Great Britain. Allied with Patrick Henry, he initially opposed Virginia's ratification of the U.S. Constitution. As Senator Monroe, he voted against a national bank. Writing as "Aratus" and "Agricola," he lashed out against the Hamiltonians and praised the French Revolution. So intense were those essays that Monroe's boyhood classmate John Marshall accused Agricola of making "the most foul and unwarrantable insinuations." So intense was Monroe's feud with Alexander Hamilton that the two nearly dueled on more than one occasion. Ironically, it was Aaron Burr (who eventually himself killed Hamilton in a duel) who kept Monroe and Hamilton from one another's throats.

For a time in his life, James Monroe was ferociously partisan. As he matured and grew in practical wisdom, however, he became a unifier, not a divider.

After service in Virginia's General Assembly and in the Commonwealth's constitutional ratifying convention, and after stint as minister to France, Monroe was elected governor of Virginia. President Jefferson later sent Monroe back to France to negotiate the Louisiana Purchase, where he was a prime force in winning crucially important, vast territories. He then became minister to Great Britain. Under President Madison, Monroe became first Secretary of State and later, simultaneously, Secretary of War.

Through these experiences and others, Monroe gained an enormous appreciation for the whole of the United States and for its emerging role in the world, as well as the need for Americans to stick together. By the time he was first elected President, he had learned how to build unity out of what was then, as it is now, fractious political parties. He crossed party lines in making political appointments, selecting John Quincy Adams, a Federalist, as his Secretary of State. His presidency ushered in an "Era of Good Feelings." Monroe was overwhelmingly supported for a second term as president. A single vote in the Electoral College stood between him and unanimous reelection in 1820. His eight years as president were extremely successful, both at home and abroad, despite a major economic crisis, the Panic of 1819. His 50 years of service both to his state and his country have never been equaled. He held more senior positions in American public life than any other person ever.

Monroe did, of course, have his clay feet, most grievously his support for the institution of slavery, despite recognizing its evils. He sought fecklessly to ameliorate it through the repatriation of freed slaves to Africa, where the capital of Liberia was named for him, Monrovia.

As noted, Monroe also had the clay feet of the ferocious partisan early in his political career. But he got over it. His presidency was an Era of Good Feelings because he sought unity, not division, and he reached beyond party and faction to seek solutions. Like the mature Monroe, William & Mary seeks to enable students to see complex, often divisive, issues from many perspectives and to work toward practical, unifying solutions in the public interest. This isn't easy to teach or easy to do, but it is essential to the national good.