From Words to Worlds

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Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

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From Words to Worlds: Exploring Constitutional Functionality.  
Project MUSE.  

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One of the notable highlights of the walking tour of Montpelier, James Madison’s stately home nestled in the foothills of Virginia’s Blue Ridge Mountains, occurs when one enters a small room on the second floor. It is here, we are told, that the principal architect of the American Constitution prepared for the Philadelphia Convention. Surrounded by books, newspapers, letters of correspondence, pamphlets, and other writings, Madison imagined a vision for government in that room, a vision of political order that would eventually form the core of the “Virginia Plan” and later, the United States Constitution. The story goes that the diminutive Virginia statesman sat, mostly alone, and pored over treatises of political theory, works of history, and descriptions of early democratic government. He put quill to parchment in that room and sketched out a plan. If you believe in the ubiquitous influence of the American Constitution, that room occupies an important place in the history and development of the modern world.

The image of Madison conceiving of a plan for order is stirring. He believed the process of bringing a world to life out of the power of words required a solitary period, followed by a collective dialogue in which his ideas would be tested. Much of the work that went into the final draft was undertaken alone; yet all the exploration, contemplation, and energy that characterize those months and years of intense reflection would have been fruitless without the help of Madison’s many colleagues and critics. Letters from friends sustained him; conversations before and during the Philadelphia convention influenced him; and eventually the draft of the Constitution that was signed on September 17, 1787, which can be traced directly back to Madison’s original vision, represented a collective expression of open dialogue and intense debate.

Even though the stakes are decidedly lower (are there any?) and the product is far less majestic, the process of writing this book mirrors Madison’s approach to constitutional construction. The crafting of this book was, most of the time,
a solitary exercise. And yet the pages that follow are the product of wonderfully stimulating collective conversations about the nature of constitutions and constitutional thought. The wisdom of several participants in that conversation—of George Thomas, Justin Crowe, Douglas Edlin, Ken I. Kersch, Wayne Moore, Gary Jacobsohn, Will Harris, and Austin Sarat—is, I hope, reflected in the pages that follow. Correspondence and dialogue with them has helped in so many ways to sharpen my arguments and energize my curiosity. A special thanks goes also to two of the most prominent members of that ongoing exchange: Sanford Levinson and Jeffrey Tulis, the editors of the Johns Hopkins Series in Constitutional Thought. In addition, I have benefited from the collective conversations and infinite generosity of many colleagues at Skidmore College. Thanks is extended in particular to Ron Seyb, Kate Graney, Steve Hoffmann, Bob Turner, Aldo Vacs, Natalie Taylor, Flagg Taylor, Roy Ginsberg, Dan Nathan, Chris McGill, Allie Taylor, Barbara McDonough, David Karp, Grace Burton, John Howley, Paula Newberg, and Muriel Poston. They too have helped me take my original ideas and transform them into reasonable arguments. Finally, Henry Tom, executive editor at the Johns Hopkins University Press, deserves my gratitude. As always, he was a model of professionalism and grace throughout the entire process.

My most important muse is my family. My parents, Jud and Wendy, and my in-laws, Jim and Mary Starke, represent the very best of a generation that acutely understood the importance of constitutions. My siblings and their spouses—Ned, Lindsey, Dave, Kristen, Matt, Jamie, Larry, Tina, and Jimmy—also deserve my profound gratitude. But in many ways this book was written with the next generation in mind. My daughter, Molly, and her cousins, Jane, Ben, Kimberley, Jemma, and Lucas, must now carry on the constitutional dialogue. It is a tall but essential task. Lastly, everything is insignificant in my life—and that certainly includes the contemplation of constitutional ideals and collective dialogues about political order—compared to my love for my wife, Martha. Even when I am alone in thought, because of her my life is never solitary.
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