

Lessons Learned



Gilbert Stuart, *Dolley Madison*, 1804. Oil on canvas. White House Historical Association / White House Collection, Gift of the Walter H. and Phyllis J. Shorestein Foundation in memory of Phyllis J. Shorestein, 1994, 994.1737.1.

society. And in this setting, Dolley learned to apply her significant skills to the harsh partisanship of early Washington. Her early parties were her training ground.

Dolley Madison succeeded in part because she did not violate the strict unwritten rules about what women should and should not be. She was beautiful, dressed

fashionably, behaved as the perfect hostess, and greeted everyone with “mildness.” (Today, we might say she was “nice to everyone.”) In cases where she did break or bend the rules—dressing a bit too extravagantly, or offering a pinch of snuff to her male guests—she won over people who were, as Mrs. Smith wrote, “almost at daggers drawn.” Sometimes the target of the “cruel warfare” was James himself, and sometimes it was Dolley. James’s opponents said she was too seductive and lacked “delicacy.” They brought up the death of her first husband, John Todd, and accused her of abandoning him, leaving him to die alone. How could a woman like this, they pondered, possibly love her country?

And yet Mrs. Madison filled her house with guests and moved through the crowd smiling. It was probably no accident that Mrs. Smith used the word “disarmed” to describe the effect Dolley had, even on her husband’s enemies. She was acknowledging her friend’s characteristic strengths, and her essential role in what both Madisons hoped would be James’s election to the presidency.

Discussion Questions

- ★ How did Dolley Madison use her sphere of influence to affect the political landscape?
- ★ What personal characteristics aided Dolley Madison in her endeavors?
- ★ Are Dolley Madison’s efforts important to the story of American history? Why or why not?

Sources: Catherine Allgor, *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006); Margaret Bayard Smith, “Mrs. Madison,” *The National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans*, Vol. III, 1836, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=yale.39002007779425;view=1up;seq=44> (accessed by M. Waters, 9-23-2016).

Frank and Cordial Manners

[Second only to the home of President Thomas Jefferson himself,] the house of the secretary of state was the resort of most company. The frank and cordial manners of its mistress, gave a peculiar charm to the frequent parties there assembled. All foreigners who visited the seat of government; strangers from the different states of the union; the heads of departments; the diplomatic corps; senators, representatives, citizens, mingled with an ease and freedom, a sociability and gayety, to be met with in no other society. Even party spirit, virulent and embittered as it then was, by her gentleness was disarmed. . . .

[Later,] when the term of Mr. Jefferson’s presidency drew near its close, the spirit of political intrigue which had lain dormant, was again roused into activity. A new president was to be chosen, and there were several competitors for the people’s favor. Each had partisans, zealous and untiring. . . . Amid this cruel warfare of conflicting parties, so calculated to excite angry feelings, Mrs. Madison . . . met these political assailants with a mildness, which disarmed their hostility of its individual rancor, and sometimes even converted political enemies into personal friends, and still oftener succeeded in neutralizing the bitterness of opposition. . . . [Mr. Madison] continued his social intercourse with persons of all opinions; the chiefs of different parties met at his house with perfect good humor; and the frank and polite attentions of Mrs. Madison were paid, without distinction, to all who joined her social circle.

Margaret Bayard Smith, “Mrs. Madison,” *The National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans*, Vol. III, 1836. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=yale.39002007779425;view=1up;seq=44> (accessed by M. Waters, 9-23-2016).