The president is expected to host congressmen in his home. George Washington and John Adams, or their wives, had hosted large social events. But Thomas Jefferson entertained much less, partly because his wife had died some years earlier, and partly because he wanted to maintain personal control and prevent lawmakers from collaborating. So he preferred to give small dinner parties for a few men, either Federalist or Republican, but never both at once.

The Madisons took a different approach when James was president. In addition to formal dinners for forty people or more, Dolley hosted regular Wednesday night parties in the Drawing Room. She published invitations in the newspapers, so all sorts of people appeared: male and female, Federalists and Republicans, elected officials and carriage drivers. Dressed to impress, Dolley presided over events packed so tightly they were called “squeezes.”

Regardless of their politics, people came to the squeezes because so much of the unofficial business of government happened there. Dolley understood this, and reinforced it. As Margaret Bayard Smith wrote:

“Every visitor left her with the pleasing impression of being an especial favorite, of having been the object of peculiar attention. She never forgot a name she had once heard, nor a face she had once seen, nor the personal circumstances connected with every individual of her acquaintance.” And frequently, she shared the tobacco from her snuff-box, which Mrs. Smith said was a “perfect security from hostility.”

In a letter to her sister, Anna, Dolley reported on a gathering at the White House as the War of 1812 approached. She was well aware of the political significance of her events.

Discussion Questions

What do you learn about Dolley Madison from this letter?

Why did the Federalists decide to end their boycott of the Madison family’s parties?

What does this episode reveal about Dolley Madison’s political influence?

NOTES

The Vice P. = Vice President George Clinton, who died April 20, 1812.

D. R. Will = David Rogerson Williams of South Carolina, a Republican member of the House of Representatives.

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