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Final Project

For my final class project I decided to write a book report of Catherine Allgor's biography of Dolley Madison titled "A perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation."

The book begins with the account of Dolley Madison during the British Invasion of Washington in 1814. Allgor places us with Dolley as she is preparing to flee the White House just slightly ahead of the invading British troops. Dolley is packing up and carting off official government papers and a portrait of George Washington. It is through the writing of Allgor, that we the reader can get a glimpse into a revealing picture of the real Dolley Madison. From this account, we can sense that Dolley truly understood the symbolic importance of keeping the famous picture out of the hands of the enemy. "I have ordered the frame to be broken and the canvas to be taken out" Dolley then exclaimed, "It is done".¹

The vivid scene that Allgor exposes to us is how many Americans know Dolley Madison. She will forever be remembered as the brave woman, who facing mortal danger rescued the portrait of George Washington from the invading British troops. From that day on, Dolley had become associated with this brave act and the ill fated War of 1812...

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From Catherine Allgor's writings, we get a sense of the indispensable contributions to the nation that Dolley made on behalf of the American people. In addition to her heroic act of saving a national treasure, she also acted as a social ambassador to her young nation and husband. Allgor stated that "Dolley provided valuable spaces in which men and woman of the Early Republic could socialize gossip and learn to deal with one another outside the formal halls of government." Allgor goes on to say "Dolley Madison constructed an alternative to the fragile government structure, one that provided the space for such discoveries." 2

From the book, Allgor gives us a glimpse into the dining hall at the weekly receptions referred to as "Mrs. Madison's Wednesday Nights." From the passages in the book, we see how easily male and females, elite and ordinary people mingled easily as Americans. James Madison had dreamed of the "Grand Federal Edifice" Allgor remarks that "Dolley built it brick by brick and one cup of tea, one favor, one connection at a time. No matter the event, guest list or the political issues, Dolley was always the center of attention." 3

As one reads this story of Dolley Madison, we recognize that Catherine Allgor has written a comprehensive biography of Dolley Madison. The writer does a wonderful job of highlighting the important roll that Dolley played in James Madison's presidency. Allgor has revealed a picture of early politics in America during this period of time.

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The readings stress how Dolley, an Early American wife, supported her husband and his political causes. Every week in her drawing room, Dolley eased political tensions by building coalitions and connections. This model of bipartisanship created the first modern democracy. Dolley with her Wednesday Night Dinners recognized the need for compromise and power sharing and would prove the foundation of a democratic government.

Along with the public vision of Dolley Madison, as the woman responsible for creating the White House as a social setting with deep American values, we are offered a more private view of Dolley. Allgor allows us to see Dolley Madison as someone who gambles, drinks, and remains stubbornly loyal to a family member who does not deserve her loyalty. In addition to these flaws, the book also goes on to expose us to a Dolley who after James' death, struggles to deal with the slave issue. The book points out that Dolley lacked empathy towards the enslaved people who served the Madison's. Dolley failed to follow President Madison's wishes to free his slaves upon her death. "Mrs. Madison had mentioned that her husband expected her to free his slaves at her death." 4 Allgor writes that Dolley's failure to act on her slaves behalf in accordance with the President's wishes sullied her reputation"

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As to why Dolley did not free the slaves, Allgor states that she may have wanted to protect her impoverished son, Payne. Payne had run up great debts in his life time and Dolley was trying to protect him from failure. “But any indictment of Dolley on this issue Of slavery soon faded from the public mind.” 5. Despite the talk, Dolley became famous as the woman who saved the portrait of Washington from falling into the hands of the advancing British soldiers in 1814.

The question should be asked “How did the daughter of Virginia Quakers become such a powerful political figure. It becomes evident to the reader that Dolley possessed what eighteenth century men valued the most. She had a solid reputation. Upon this reputation she became known as the “Republican Queen.” Allgor states that “while her culture could not openly acknowledge her political power, her association with charm, femininity, sociability, and Americanness proved so powerful and enduring, that her image and name became a commodity for business, corporations and organizations.” 6

Dolley’s true gift to the American people was her creation of the unofficial office of “First Lady.” Her style of leadership set the standard after which all future First Ladies were compared.

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When Dolley Madison passed away, the newspapers of the day called upon “all of our own country and thousands in other lands to mourn her passing.” Washington City gave her a state funeral. This act acknowledged her importance to the government and the people of the country. Allgor writes “All government business was canceled so members of the government could participate.” Dolley had the largest funeral every held in Washington. “The size of the crowd was a testament to the place that she held in their hearts.” 7

From the readings, you get a sense of the undeniable public woman that Dolley Madison had become. At a time in history when most women had no political power or legal rights of their own, Dolley became a national figure. She had proved her self a powerful political player. Under the cover of womanhood, Dolley gave legitimacy to her husband’s administration. Using her role of a lady motivated by loyalty to her husband and young country, Dolley created a sense of nationality and unity for new Americans.

In conclusion, I found the book to be a tribute to a woman that many Americans continue to view as a simple woman who liked to entertain and serve ice cream to important guests at the White House.

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Catherine Allgor has done extensive research on her subject. It was through her eyes that I viewed this vibrant and brave woman who helped form this democratic America that we live in today. Who knows if the political model of democracy that we practice today, would have survived those turbulent times that she lived, if not for the skills of Dolley Madison.

The following notes are all taken from the book written by Catherine Allgor titled

“A Perfect Union Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation”

Henry Holt and Company, New York Copyright 2006

Footnote # 1 Page 4

Footnote # 2 Page 187

Footnote # 3 Page 201

Footnote # 4 Page 404

Footnote # 5 Page 405

Footnote #6 Page 406

Footnote # 7 Page 398