

SOCIETY ANNOUNCES WINNERS OF ITS ANNUAL HIGH SCHOOL ESSAY CONTEST

The Society of the War of 1812 in the Commonwealth of Virginia announced the winners of its annual essay contest at its Annual Muster on June 25, 2022. The contest rules and regulations required that those who submitted entries must write about a Virginian who supported the War of 1812. Each entry had to be between 800 and 1,500 words along with footnotes and bibliography according to contest rules created by the Society. Top prize was \$1000 and second prize, \$500. After careful deliberations, the Society's two judges awarded the top prize to Jonas Konefal, Senior at Maggie L. Walker Governor's School, Richmond, Virginia, who submitted: "James Madison and the Second War for Independence." Second prize went to Ella Clingenspeel, Junior at Atlantic Shores Christian School, Chesapeake, Virginia, who submitted: "Role of Dolley Madison in the War of 1812." Winners, their families, and their schools are to be congratulated for their hard work and willingness to participate in our essay contest program.

Included here are the winning essays for this year's contest:

First Place

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James Madison and the Second War for Independence

The United States entered the 19th century with a new sense of national pride and identity. It had realized its sovereignty through the Revolution against Great Britain and created national heroes, most notably George Washington, along the way. It had produced the Revolution of 1800, marking one of the first times in history that opposing political factions had exchanged power peacefully.

But as the United States pecked out of its eggshell, war raged across the Atlantic, where Napoleonic France had much of continental Europe in a vise. The United Kingdom, under King George III, had been locked in a struggle with France for maritime domination. Initially, the United States profited from this conflict, as American ships had the ability to transport goods that would otherwise be subject to seizure. But both the French and British wanted to deprive each other of trade, and the two nations, in a series of escalating decrees, used similar methods to achieve this. The Berlin & Milan Decrees of the French and the Orders in Council of the British both prohibited neutral ships from trading in the enemy's ports, and justified the seizure of ships that did so.¹ Britain, because of its naval superiority, was the main belligerent against the United States, but both French and British ships seized hundreds of American vessels. America was caught in a crossfire between the two European giants. Other British actions provoked the ire of the U.S. as well. Americans living on the frontier despised British military support of Native Americans and coveted its Canadian holdings. In what amounted to perhaps the most outrageous "peacetime" act of war, Britain abducted American sailors and used them on its own ships. Yet by the time of Madison's presidency in 1808, the issue of trade restrictions on America as a

¹ Jeff Broadwater, *James Madison: A Son of Virginia & a Founder of the Nation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 152-153.

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neutral nation had taken center stage as the primary injustice committed against American sovereignty.

Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, then President and Secretary of State respectively, had by 1808 failed miserably at bringing the United States out of its conflict with Britain and France. The two men worked with Congress to pass several Non-Importation Acts and Embargo Acts, but these acts did more harm to the United States than to its European adversaries. When Madison succeeded Jefferson in 1808, he came to office with diplomatic aspirations, and throughout his presidency, he continued the efforts he had started as Secretary of State. He tried to achieve commercial peace with at least one of the two warring parties, as either Britain and France would present trading opportunities for American merchants. Yet he realized that should his administration fail to achieve free trade and relieve the United States of its maritime harassment, war would come. As historian Irving Brant expressed it, "Madison's foreign policy presented an olive branch backed by a sword."² Yet up until 1812, both Britain and France remained stubborn regarding their trade restrictions.

Madison's diplomatic prudence cannot be mistaken for inactiveness, however. His administration made numerous attempts to entice the Europeans to cooperate, even proposing solutions that would put U.S. neutrality into question. As Brant found in his research in the 1960s, "Two weeks after Madison became president, he secretly notified the British minister that if Great Britain would revoke her Orders in Council, so far as they applied to the United States, he would ask Congress to adopt measures of hostility against France." He simultaneously sent

² Irving Brant, "Madison Encouraged the War Movement," in *The Causes of the War of 1812. National Honor or National Interest?*, ed. Bradford Perkins (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), 106.

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the reverse offer to France. Such an offer certainly seems like an attempt to "pick a side," but neither of the European nations accepted.³

On April 7, 1809, after a series of negotiations, a British diplomat named David Erskine arrived in Washington with the alleged authority to put the whole Anglo-American conflict to rest. American diplomat Robert Smith negotiated an arrangement that Great Britain would repeal the Orders in Council and the United States would repeal its own Non-Intercourse Act. The deal was too good to be true. Madison found out that Erskine had apparently grossly dishonored his instructions as a diplomat, and the repealing of the Orders in Council was void.⁴ Another unsuccessful attempt at negotiating the trade war passed in Macon's Bill No. 2. Madison played an inactive role in the passage of this bill, which historian Jeff Broadwater attributes "more to his respect for the separation of powers than ... to an inherent passivity."⁵ The bill opened up American ports to British and French goods and offered to impose restrictions on the enemy of whichever power opened their ports to American goods. Napoleon duplicitously stated that France would repeal the Berlin and Milan decrees in hopes of sparking a conflict between Great Britain and the United States, and hopes of resolution were once again frustrated.

When George III relinquished his regal power because of his insanity, young Prince George IV succeeded him. Many Americans hoped that young George would replace his father's ministers and reconcile the current British position with American desires, but Augustus John Foster, a diplomat sent to Washington by George IV, refused to cooperate. He asserted that Great Britain would only repeal the Orders in Council when Napoleon opened French ports to British

³ Irving Brant, "Madison and the War of 1812," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 74, no. 1 (1966): 57. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4247179>.

⁴ Broadwater, *James Madison*, 154.

⁵ Broadwater, *James Madison*, 156.

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goods and restored true neutral trading rights.⁶ Of course, France did not agree to these terms, and Britain did not then repeal the Orders in Council. Madison's diplomatic patience expired here, and he summoned the Twelfth Congress to prepare for a declaration of war. The Declaration would come on June 1, 1812. In a cruel and unfortunate turn of events that reflected the problems of early 19th-century communication, Washington found out that Great Britain had repealed the Orders in Council just days after the United States declared war. As historian Bradford Perkins explains it, "The war came just when the United States might have enjoyed without a struggle the immense benefits of the neutrality in which so much Christian forbearance (or cowardice) had been invested."⁷ But the war had come, and neither side could extricate itself now.

Madison played a crucial role in steering the United States' entry into the War of 1812. But the caution and restraint that characterized his years as a founding father carried over to his years as a president. He only acted to push the United States out of neutrality and into a costly war after several years of treatment of the U.S. at the hands of both Britain and France that infringed on U.S. sovereignty as a neutral nation. Bradford Perkins asserts that Madison "was not cut in the heroic mold."⁸ It is true that in terms of executive decisiveness, Madison may have left something to be desired, but he did not ignore the reality that war with Great Britain could come. He could not reasonably have foreseen the about-face performed by Britain on the subject of its decrees, because up until that point Britain had maintained an utmost resoluteness on the matter. When American diplomatic options had been exhausted by European stubbornness, the Virginian

⁶ J.C.A. Stagg, "James Monroe, James Madison, and the War of 1812: A Difficult Interlude," in *A Companion to James Madison and James Monroe*, ed. Stuart Eric Leibiger (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 425.

⁷ Bradford Perkins, "Madison Was a Failure," in *The Causes of the War of 1812. National Honor or National Interest?*, ed. Bradford Perkins (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), 114.

⁸ Perkins, "Madison Was a Failure," 108.

was not averse to calling for a second war of independence to defend American sovereignty once again.

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Second Place

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Over the course of history, few First Ladies have made such a monumental mark upon the legacy of the White House as Dolley Madison. Serving as the fourth First Lady of the United States and the wife to James Madison, Dolley is perhaps one of the most highly revered First Ladies of all time. Her warm personality and spotless reputation earned her the respect of the people of her time, and her bravery and courage earned her lasting appreciation throughout the centuries to come. Having the role of First Lady during a time plagued by strife and warfare is not an easy feat; however, she managed it with grace and ease. As a result, Dolley Madison is the most influential woman of the early 1800s for the instrumental role she played during the War of 1812 through her social presence, creative plans, and heroic acts.

Contrary to the First Ladies who came before her, Dolley Madison had a profound social presence (Carosella 23). Instead of only serving as a figurehead, Dolley sought to connect personally with the people of Washington by addressing their qualms and concerns. In an effort to unite the different classes of people and the opposing political parties of Federalists and Republicans, Dolley would host huge receptions at the White House (Fleming). Members of Congress who would hurl insults at each other during the day would appear unusually relaxed around Dolley and would allow her to be a mediator for their disputes and a creator of compromises. Her gatherings also demonstrated that the White House was a place open to all people and rebuked the idea that the president's house was only accessible to the privileged few (Caroli). Elijah Mills, a Massachusetts senator, remarked that she mixed "all classes of people...greasy boots and silk stockings." Not only would Dolley invite the whole city to her house for parties, but she would go a step further and try to personally greet every single guest in attendance. People respected Dolley for this display of courtesy, and over time, she became immensely popular. She amassed quite a fan base that tried to imitate her actions and the way she

dressed. Her gatherings, which usually attracted around three hundred people, reached a new pinnacle of popularity amidst the War of 1812 and commonly had over five hundred guests in attendance (Fleming).

Despite her Quaker upbringing as a pacifist, Dolley had a personality illuminated by fire and determination, which motivated her to do everything in her power to aid her husband's presidency. She would frequently devise creative plans in order to boost President Madison's popularity. First, she renovated the White House by devising a redecoration and refurbishment plan so that it could be transformed into an elegant and comfortable place for her guests. Second, on various occasions, she would use her political sense to cultivate her husband's enemies as his friends (Caroli). When President Madison fired his secretary of state, Robert Smith, Dolley invited him to dinner to keep their relationship intact, and when he declined the offer, she went on to personally call him. Historians also believe that during the election of 1812, Dolley contributed to her husband's reelection by earning him favor through strategically sending out party invites to key voters. Additionally, Dolley would visit the home of every new representative or senator to welcome them and start the process of formulating a political friendship. President Madison appreciated Dolley's help and would keep her updated on political affairs so that he could get her advice on controversial matters (Kostyal 133). This was unusual for the time, but future Presidents would begin to model the actions of the Madison administration by involving their First Ladies in the politics of the presidency. Dolley Madison's work in the White House continues to influence our society today. The practice of collaborating with local charities and organizations to improve social issues is one of her ideas that the First Ladies of this generation still use.

Dolley Madison is most famous for her heroic display of patriotism during the War of 1812. As the British Army began to take the lead in the war and close in on Washington, Dolley continued to remain optimistic. Despite the dreary newspaper headlines and the derogatory comments that her husband received, she continued to host her parties with hopes of rejuvenating the American morale. However, as the British Army inched even closer, many of her friends fled the city, pleading for her to follow, but she willfully refused (McNamee 59). She was determined not to abandon her husband, and in a letter to her cousin, Edward Coles, she wrote, "I have always been an advocate for fighting when assailed" (Fleming). However, eventually, President Madison had no choice other than to join the militiamen to confront the British in Maryland. Once again, Dolley had the opportunity to flee to safety, but instead, she chose to stay in the White House and protect it by herself. To show her resolve, she even threw a dinner party later that night, but not a single person attended because the majority of the city had fled (Fleming). In the days that followed, Dolley spent most of her time sitting on top of the White House roof, scanning the horizon with a spyglass, while anxiously searching for evidence of an American victory. However, the British Army was steadily gaining ground and encroaching on the capital. On August 24, 1814, the enemy was within five miles of the White House, and two messengers ran straight from the battlefield to beg Dolley to flee. She stubbornly refused to leave for the third time, but after strong convincing by a close friend, Major Charles Carroll, she reluctantly consented. Dolley had already packed a wagon with the red silk velvet draperies of the Oval Room and the blue and gold Lowestoft china of the state dining room. However, on her way out the door, she noticed the Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington. She could not bear the thought of it being mocked and destroyed by the British soldiers, so she instructed her servants to take down the painting. Upon learning that the servants lacked the proper materials, Dolley's

determination prevailed, and she ordered them to break the frame in order to save the painting. At the last minute, she also seized a copy of the Declaration of Independence from a display case and pocketed it in her suitcase. Only a few hours after Dolley had been safely whisked away, the British Army raided the White House and set it ablaze. Later, Dolley reunited with President Madison, and after the British had left the city, a few days later, they returned to Washington together. The decimated sight of the city and the charred state of the White House devastated Dolley. However, she and President Madison moved into a temporary residence known as the Octagon House, where she was able to resume her parties and successfully revive the American spirit. The bravery that Dolley displayed during this time and the devotion she showed to the White House in its final moments have been greatly admired throughout the centuries. The portrait of George Washington that she rescued was returned to the White House in 1817 upon the completion of its rebuilding and is currently still on display in the East Room (Black).

Dolley Madison was the most prominent woman of her time. Her fervent social presence and the gatherings she orchestrated helped unite a deeply troubled nation. Dolley's determined personality led her to formulate creative ideas, which aided in the success of her husband's presidency. Many of her ideas have withstood the test of time and have established traditions and precedents that are still followed by the First Ladies of today. She is most remembered for her display of courage, determination, and composure throughout the War of 1812 and is praised as being the savior of Gilbert Stuart's famous George Washington painting. Throughout her eight years as First Lady, Dolley changed the stereotype. By giving the position a new meaning and purpose, she has inspired generations of women to follow in her footsteps. Dolley Madison has made a lasting mark on the history of the United States, and her legacy will never be forgotten.

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