

SCRIPT

FORGED BY FIRE

Dolley Madison, the White House, and the War of 1812



ACT I, Scene 1 1865

Paul Jennings is standing in front of the portrait of George Washington

Jennings: Why hello! I didn't see you there! Allow me to introduce myself, my name is Paul Jennings. I was just reflecting on this painting. I'm working on my autobiography you see, and this painting of George Washington was part of an important event in my life. I've seen a lot of things in Washington, D.C., from my time as President Madison's servant, to a free man with a government job. Why, I was at the White House before it was burned by the British in 1814! But, I'm getting ahead of myself.

It all started in June of 1812 when Congress voted to declare war on Great Britain. During the war I watched the men and women of Washington society come to Mrs. Madison's Wednesday night drawing rooms to talk politics and hear the latest news.

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ACT I, Scene 2

December 1812

Dolley Madison, Anna Cutts, Margaret Bayard Smith, and Maria Mayo are gathered around Mrs. Madison in what is today known as the Blue Room of the White House. It is a Wednesday night in December and Mrs. Madison is hosting one of her famous drawing rooms, where all guests, regardless of political party or beliefs, could come and enjoy the White House.

Mrs. Madison: Ladies, I'm so glad that you could make it to my drawing room tonight. You are my greatest allies when it comes to lifting spirits in these uncertain times.

Mrs. Cutts: But we have much to celebrate after last night's Navy Ball for Captain Hull. Not to mention the news we received of Commodore Decatur's daring capture of the Macedonian! ("Mass-seh-doan-ian")

Mrs. Madison: Darling sister, this is true. We must do our best to encourage everyone to stay friendly in their conversations tonight. I'd like everyone to feel welcome at the President's House. Now if you'll excuse me, I must begin my rounds.

Mrs. Madison moves upstage

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ACT I, Scene 3

Miss Mayo: *(Looking around the room)* Why, there must be over 300 people here this evening! Now I understand why they call these events “squeezes.” You have to squeeze by many people to get from one end of the room to the other! Are they always this crowded, Mrs. Smith?

Mrs. Smith: Yes dear, there are seldom less than two or three hundred guests.

Miss Mayo: Do you think Captain Hull will be here tonight? There’s something so exciting about meeting a real war hero!

Mrs. Smith: It’s very likely. Everyone comes to Mrs. Madison’s Wednesday night drawing rooms. Congressmen, soldiers, Cabinet members, even people who disagree with President Madison! They’re all welcome.

SCRIPT

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ACT I, Scene 4

Mrs. Madison: Good evening, Mr. Calhoun, Mr. Quincy, and Mr. Taggart. Now, I know we have our different opinions about the war, but I'm sure you can work together and find a way to support our brave soldiers and sailors. Please excuse me; it is nice to see all of you.

Mrs. Madison moves upstage

Calhoun: Gentlemen, with the recent naval victories, you must agree that the construction of new ships is worth supporting.

Quincy: I have been in favor of more ships in American ports. But I don't see how defending free trade and sailor's rights led us to invade Canada!

Taggart: Mr. Calhoun, I worry that the expense will push us deeper into debt. Not a single Federalist voted for "Mr. Madison's War," but we all have to pay for it.

Calhoun: We War Hawks and Federalists may never agree on the war, but the fact remains that we're in it together and must work together to defeat the British.

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ACT I, Scene 5

Randolph: Clay! What was that you were saying in Congress? That the militia of Kentucky could place Canada at your feet? Well what do you think now after all of these losses?

Clay: Mr. Randolph, the surrender of Detroit was bad, but I still believe Canada is the key to victory over Great Britain. The time will come when the American name will be respected throughout the world.

Randolph: (*getting more and more angry*) Ha! You have made war. You have finished the ruin of our country!

In the background Mrs. Madison has noticed that the discussion between Henry Clay and John Randolph is getting heated, she makes her way to the table, holding a book

Mrs. Madison: (*Trying to lessen the tension*) Why Mr. Clay! Mr. Randolph! How very good to see you both on this day of good tidings! Mr. Clay, I've found a passage in this book you will find most interesting! Mr. Randolph, do try some of the ice cream while you are here.

Mrs. Madison leads Henry Clay away

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ACT I, Scene 6

Guests have gathered around Captain Hull

Hull: *(telling a story)* ...And then one mast knocked over the other mast, and I knew, at that moment, she was ours!

(light applause)

Hull: When we boarded the ship, we found 10 Americans impressed and forced to work for the British Navy!

(gasps)

Hull: I was outraged! And more convinced than ever that this war is the only way to stand up to the British and demand their respect!

Mrs. Madison: Captain Hull, I'm honored that you were able to join us this evening. The daring deeds of the crew of *Old Ironsides* will live on for years to come!

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ACT I, Scene 7

Mrs. Van Ness: Good evening, Mr. President!

Madison: Um, Good evening ladies, I'm looking for Mr. Seaton, pardon me.
(*Madison exits*)

Mrs. Seaton: Mr. Madison has no time for the ladies; every moment of his time is taken by the crowd of male visitors who seek his time and attention.

Mrs. Smith: He must be very busy with the war. Personally, I have never been able to realize our being in a state of war. There is so little worry of danger in this city.

Mrs. Seaton: It's true. I try to stay composed and spend each day doing the usual things. Although, last night's Navy Ball was very exciting!

Mrs. Van Ness: It was a thrilling event! And the President's House looks lovely tonight! It's all thanks to Mr. Latrobe's decorations and Mrs. Madison's elegant taste.

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ACT I, Scene 8

Madison: Mr. Seaton, will there be an announcement in tomorrow's paper about Commodore Decatur's capture of the *Macedonian*? (“Mass-seh-doan-ian”)

Seaton: Yes, Mr. President. You shall find an account of his brave actions under the headline “Another Brilliant Naval Victory!”

Madison: Very good. I thank you for your newspaper's support for the war and my campaign for re-election.

Seaton: It's my pleasure, Mr. President.

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ACT I, Scene 9

Coles: What's on your mind Mr. President? You look as though we do not have cause to celebrate this evening.

Madison: I'm worried about the war, Edward. Congress is divided on nearly every issue. Tecumseh ("Teh-come-seh") and his Indian warriors have joined forces with the British. I've also heard reports of New England soldiers refusing to cross the border into Canada.

Coles: I understand, Mr. President. At the same time, the nation is coming together over our victories at sea. And with our new ships, we will gain control of the Great Lakes!

Madison: Thank you Edward. You're right. The way to make this war both short and successful would be to convince the Enemy that he has to contend with the whole, and not part of the Nation.

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ACT 2, Scene 1
1865

Paul Jennings is standing in front of the portrait of George Washington

Jennings: And so the war continued. Throughout the next two years Americans experienced both great victories and terrible losses. The British extended their blockade along the Atlantic coast. During the summer of 1814, The British held the nearby Chesapeake (“Chess-a-peek”) Bay with a powerful fleet and army. The people of Washington became alarmed for the safety of their city. The war that had once seemed so far away now seemed to be much closer. President Madison met with his war council in July of 1814 to discuss the situation.

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ACT 2, Scene 2

July 1, 1814

A War Council Meeting in President Madison's White House. Madison's Cabinet is gathered in the East Room of the White House. They sit around a conference table.

Madison enters holding a letter in his hands.

Madison: Gentlemen, thank you for meeting with me today. I have just received a letter from our peace representatives in Europe. The British have defeated the French leader Napoleon (“Na-pole-ee-on”). They now have more troops to send to America. I am worried that Washington may be in danger of an attack.

This meeting today is a chance for us to discuss our military strategy. The Army and Navy are not prepared to defend Washington from a British invasion. I propose that we gather two thousand troops to defend Baltimore and Washington and call on soldiers from our neighboring states to help in case of an emergency.

Rush: I agree with you, Mr. President. I think we should take all steps necessary to ensure the safety of our nation's capital.

Campbell: This news is of great concern, but I think we must be cautious. Money is not easy to come by these days since Congress did not renew the First Bank of the United States. How do you expect us to feed, clothe, and pay thousands of additional troops?

Madison: I have considered this worry, Mr. Campbell. I understand that managing the cost of war has been hard for the Treasury Department. But if the British attack Washington, the whole country is at risk. We must defend the capital.

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ACT 2, Scene 3

Armstrong: Mr. President, I think you are overreacting. Why in the world would the British come here?! Baltimore is the place! Washington is of little concern to them. Wouldn't you say so, Mr. Jones?

Jones: As Secretary of the Navy, I must agree with General Armstrong. The British Navy has been sailing along the Chesapeake (“Chess-a-peek”) Bay for a year now and has not tried to attack our shores. Why should they start now? Besides, I believe our army could easily stop their troops.

Van Ness: (*Frustrated*) The British are now familiar with the land along the bay, which places us at greater risk of attack. For months I have asked the army to strengthen defenses around Washington, but you have done nothing, Armstrong! I will not sit and watch as Washington falls into enemy hands. We must do something.

Monroe: I agree with General Van Ness. There is much at stake if the British invade Washington. The British could overturn our government! Our rights and liberties will be taken away and our property destroyed. Think of all the slaves who will flee to the British in exchange for the promise of freedom. There will be madness!

Armstrong: I firmly believe that an attack on Washington is unlikely.

Rush: Gentlemen, gentlemen! Calm down. Now is not the time for our Cabinet to be divided. We must work together to ensure the safety of Washington.

Madison: Thank you, Mr. Rush. I fear that the British threat is greater than we think. I hear all of your concerns and you have given me much to think about.

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ACT 2, Scene 4

Immediately following the War Council Meeting. Madison and Monroe meet privately to discuss military strategy.

Monroe: Mr. President, I think you are right to be worried. General Armstrong is lazy and has done nothing to defend Washington. You must put a stop to his terrible command!

Madison: I agree. I will ask the War Department to create a military district and place General Winder in charge. He'll command troops from Maryland, Northern Virginia, and Washington. I really hope that the British will not come.

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THE WHITE HOUSE
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

ACT 3, Scene 1

1865

Paul Jennings is standing in front of the portrait of George Washington

Jennings: They came. The British troops met American soldiers at Bladensburg, just outside Washington on August 24, 1814. It was a crushing defeat for the Americans. From there, the British began their march to the capital. I was with Mrs. Madison at the White House when we received the news.

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ACT 3, Scene 2
August 24th, 1814

Dolley Madison is seated at a table in the White House, writing a letter

Mrs. Madison: Dear Sister. My husband left yesterday morning to join General Winder. The last message I received from him is alarming, because he wants me to be ready at a moment's notice to leave the city. He said the enemy seems stronger than reported and they may reach the city with intention to destroy it.

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ACT 3, Scene 3

Sukey, James Smith, and John Sioussat enter

Sukey: Mrs. Madison, James Smith has arrived with a message for you!

Smith: Clear out, clear out! General Armstrong has ordered a retreat! The British soldiers may enter the city at any moment. You'll need to leave the President's House immediately for your own safety.

Sioussat: Mrs. Madison, I think we can defend the President's House If you'll let me ready the cannon at the gate.

Mrs. Madison: No, John. The president said I should be ready to flee immediately if the battle ends badly. Please ask Paul to bring my carriage here at once. We must save what we can; all of the important papers, the silver, and the velvet curtains if we can manage.

Sukey, James Smith, and John Sioussat exit

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ACT 3, Scene 4

Paul Jennings and Jacob Barker enter

Jennings: Mrs. Madison, we have found a wagon and are loading it with the most valuable objects in the house. Charles Carroll has arrived to escort you and the Cutts to safety. Jacob Barker and a gentleman from New York are also here to offer their assistance.

Barker: It is my pleasure to help you. Please tell us how we may be of service.

Mrs. Madison: I am very anxious to save the portrait of George Washington. However, if it cannot be saved, I would rather that you destroy the painting than allow it to fall into the hands of the enemy.

Barker: We will take good care of the portrait for you.

Jacob Barker exits, Charles Carroll enters

Carroll: Mrs. Madison, we must leave this instant. Let these gentlemen and your servants handle the rest.

Mrs. Madison: I'll only be another minute. Paul, find John and take down the portrait of Washington. Give it to the gentlemen from New York for safekeeping. You should leave the dinner on the table. Nobody will be here to enjoy it but the British soldiers.

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THE WHITE HOUSE
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

ACT 3, Scene 5

Paul Jennings enters

Jennings: I'm glad I found you! Mrs. Madison has requested that we remove the portrait of Washington and she doesn't want to leave until she knows that it's safe. I'm afraid Mr. Carroll is growing impatient with her.

Paul Jennings, John Sioussat and Sukey exit

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ACT 3, Scene 6

Sioussat: Mrs. Madison, the portrait is screwed to the wall. I'm afraid it will take us too long to get the frame down. With your permission, I'd like to break the frame to see if we can save the portrait.

Mrs. Madison: If that is the only way to save the portrait, proceed. Break the frame!

John Sioussat exits

Carroll: Good. If that's settled, we must depart and leave Washington before the British arrive.

Mrs. Madison: Of course. I'll meet you outside at the carriage.

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ACT 3, Scene 7

Dolley Madison is seated at a table, writing a letter

Mrs. Madison: And now dear sister, I must leave this house or become a prisoner in it. When I shall write, or where I shall be tomorrow, I cannot tell.

Paul Jennings, John Sioussat, and Sukey carry off pieces of frame, papers, and curtains in the background as Mrs. Madison finishes her letter

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ACT 3, Scene 8
1865

Paul Jennings is standing in front of the portrait of George Washington

Jennings: And so the British burned the White House, the Capitol, and the Treasury Building. It was a huge blow to the Americans. However, less than a month later, American soldiers defended Fort McHenry and Baltimore against a British attack. In January of 1815, Andrew Jackson defeated the British at the Battle of New Orleans. The news of this battle reached Washington right before the news of the peace treaty from Ghent.

The peace treaty restored the conditions before the war, with no clear winner. Yet there was a new energy in the country, a new sense of pride in being an American. When the news of peace arrived, we were crazy with joy. We went to work in Washington. We rebuilt the capital city. And eventually the painting of George Washington was returned to the White House, where it still hangs today.

THE END