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Michelle Obama's "Wednesday Nights"and Someone Else's Too

As Amie Parnes of Politico reports today, the President and Mrs. Obama intend to make a custom of bipartisan gatherings at weekly cocktail parties on Wednesday night. It's another example of modern appropriation of a retro modus operandi - very retro.

Not the Roosevelts, Bushes, Clintons, Carters, Fillmores, - no, not even the Kennedys held regular weekly social cocktail hours where they gathered political figures from both sides of the aisle. You have to go back exactly two hundred years to Dolley Madison to find the First Lady who opened the doors to the White House once a week, midweek, with the idea of currying favor with members of the anti-Madison Federalist Party.

With Washington, D.C. being just a village society at the time, not only House and Senate members but also the general public was welcomed, even in their muddy boots and pedestrian clothes. The weekly event became something of an institution, known as "Mrs. Madison's Wednesday Nights," or "Wednesday Night crushes."

Dolley Madison was the center of all attention, her buffet tables groaning with what she called "native victuals" and the silver bowls filled with her wickedly intoxicating whiskey punch.

"Everyone loves Mrs. Madison," the impressed author and guest Washington Irving told her as one "Wednesday Night" was winding down. With a nod towards bipartisanship, she retorted, "Mrs. Madison loves everyone."

As rumblings of a second war with England increased in the capital, President Madison sought to keep New England Federalists from making good on their threat to secede, the prospect of a potential embargo on their goods devastating to their largely merchant constituency.

The shortest President, believed to be no taller than five feet, six inches, James Madison, described as a "withered apple john," was no social animal like Barack Obama. Instead

he would ensconce in a quiet corner of one of the smaller state rooms, holding quiet political conferences with his antagonists, each one discreetly invited and directed there by Dolley, who always worked in concert with the President.

Meanwhile, in her signature turban and with heavily rouged cheeks, the First Lady navigated the "crush," carrying a copy of Don Quixote to use as a conversation breaker. She asked guests if they'd read it. If they had, she asked about it. if they hadn't, she commiserated that neither had she. And if that didn't work, she pulled out her famous enamel snuff box which she offered a pinch from to her guests - and then took one herself.

Like President Obama, Dolley Madison did have a slight tobacco dependency, though she made no promises it would be a "pinch-free" zone.