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THE PRESIDENT IN PERIL

WASHINGTON, D.C., JUNE 1813

James Monroe to Thomas Jefferson

The pale and delicate James Madison—"Little Jemmy" to his detractors—was never an imposing figure. He was five foot four, weighed only a hundred pounds, and was prey to worry and depression. (When Washington Irving met Madison in January 1811, he remarked in a letter to a friend: "Ah! poor Jemmy!—he is but a withered little apple-john.") His near-fatal illness of the summer of 1813, possibly mosquito-borne malaria from the Washington swamps, occurred at the height of the year's military campaigning and congressional activity, and further compromised his image as a capable chief executive. Thomas P. Grosvenor prayed for a speedy end to the President, that he might "soon appear at the bar of Immortal Justice" and be judged for his "bloody crime." Major John Lovett wished good riddance to both him and his vice president, the "scant-patterned skeleton" Elbridge Gerry, then sixty-nine and struggling back from a stroke. On June 28th, Secretary of State James Monroe informed Thomas Jefferson of the President's illness and lamented that the administration's adversaries in the Senate were capitalizing on it by blocking two of Madison's diplomatic appointments, John Russell to Sweden and Albert Gallatin to the Russian peace mission.

WASHINGTON June 28th 1813

DEAR SIR,—From the date of my last letter to you the President has been ill of a bilious fever; of that kind called the remittent. It has perhaps never left him, even for an hour, and occasionally symptoms have been unfavorable. This is I think the 15th day. Elzey of this place, & Shoaff of Annapolis, with Dr. Tucker, attend him. They think he will recover. The first mention'd I have just seen, who reports that he had a good night, & is in a state to take the bark, which indeed he has done on his best day, for nearly a week. I shall see him before I seal this, & note any change, should there be any, from the above statement.

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The federalists aided by the malcontents have done, and are doing, all the mischief that they can. The nominations to Russia, & Sweden, (the latter made on an intimation that the Crown prince would contribute his good offices to promote peace on fair conditions) they have embarrassed, to the utmost of their power. The active partizans are King, Giles and (as respects the first nomination) S. Smith. Leib, German and Gilman, are habitually in that interest, active, but useful to their party by their votes only. The two members from Louisiana, Gailliard, Stone, Anderson, & Bledsoe, are added to that corps, on those questions. They have carried a vote 20. to 14. that the appointment of Mr. Gallatin to the Russian mission, is incompatible, with his place in the treasury, & appointed a committee, to communicate the resolution to the President. They have appointed another committee to confer with him on the nomination to Sweden. The object is to usurp the Executive power in the hands of a faction in the Senate. To this, several mention'd are not parties, particularly the four last. A committee of the Senate ought to confer with a committee of the President, that is a head of a dept. and not with the ch: Magistrate, for in the latter case a committee of that house is equal to the Executive. To break the measure, & relieve the President from the pressure, at a time when so little able to bear it, indeed when no pressure whatever should be made on him, I wrote the committee on the nomination to Sweden, that I was instructed by him to meet them, to give all the information they might desire of the Executive. They declin'd the interview. I had intended to pursue the same course respecting the other nomination, had I succeeded in this. Failing, I have declined it. The result is withheld from the President. These men have begun, to make calculations, & plans, founded on the presum'd death of the President & Vice-President, & it has been suggested to me that Giles, is thought of to take the place of the President of the Senate, as soon as the Vice President withdraws.

Genl. Dearborn is dangerously ill, & Genl. Lewis doing little. Hampton has gone on to that quarter, but I fear on an inactive command. Genl. Wilkinson is expected soon, but I do not know what station will be assign'd him. The idea of a comr. in

Ch: is in circulation, proceeding from the War dept., as I have reason to believe. If so, it will probably take a more decisive form, when things are prepar'd for it. A security for his (the Secys.) advancement to that station, is I presume the preparation desir'd.

Your friend, etc.