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THE PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN OF 1828

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"How the Election of President may result is impossible to tell. The rumor of Barter of office, intrigue and corruption still afloat, which I hope for the honor of our country there is no truth in." 1

It was February 7, 1825, and Andrew Jackson was writing to a friend in the news of the capital city. Since the day when the presidential election had been thrown into the House, and that body had been faced with the prospect of choosing among the three highest candidates, Jackson, John Quincy Adams, and William H. Crawford, Washington had been filled with a wild surmise. Henry Clay, though he had run a bad fourth in the race, yet controlled enough votes in the House to make or break either of his more successful competitors. The political pot was boiling furiously as the friends of these gentlemen bethread themselves. There were rumors that Clay had sold his strength, first to one candidate and then to another. Then from Georgia the news leaked out that Crawford, in spite of his desperate efforts at concealment, was seriously ill, probably a hopeless paralytic. The contest narrowed down to Jackson and Adams, and now rumor declared that Adams and Clay had made a bargain, the former to be President and the latter to have the first office in the Cabinet as the price of his support.

On February 9, 1825, the election was held. Clay voted for Adams. Jackson, so far, appeared "altogether placid and courteous" and that evening congratulated his successful rival. But a few days later Adams offered Clay the nomination as Secretary of State. Thereupon Jackson flew into a rage. "So you see," he exclaimed, "the Judas of the West has closed the contract and will receive the thirty pieces of silver. . . . Was there ever witnessed such a bare faced corruption in any country before?" 2

To the end of his days Jackson firmly believed that he had been cheated out of

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3 Jackson to Lewis, Feb. 14, 1825, in Correspondence of Andrew Jackson, III, 276.
the presidency in 1825, and that the will of the people, as expressed by the fact that he had received a plurality of electoral votes, had been deliberately flouted by Adams and Clay. It was intolerable that such an insult to democracy should be perpetrated through his own person. Heretofore not unduly anxious for the presidency, he now turned all his energies to achieving it.

Eight months later Jackson, having been renominated for President, gave up his seat in the Senate and, leaving his affairs in Washington in the capable hands of his party managers, retired to the Hermitage. The next three years he wisely remained at home and played a part of seeming supineness. A voluminous correspondence, however, shows evidence of much quiet activity as he kept in constant touch with the leaders of his newly-forming party both in the capital and in the various states. Through Martin Van Buren in New York, Buchanan in Pennsylvania, Caleb Atwater in Ohio, Blair and Kendall in Kentucky, Edward Livingston in Louisiana, Calhoun and Hayne in South Carolina, as well as many others he kept his finger on the pulse of the nation.

At the same time he developed a streak of diplomacy and refused to commit himself on controversial subjects. No one ever retained a nicer balance on the political fence than did this heretofore impetuous and outspoken old soldier. Quite often we are diverted with the spectacle of Robert Y. Hayne trying to pin him down to definite statements or of John C. Calhoun maneuvering for his own advancement, but Jackson was not to be cajoled by flattery, and he either ignored questions of an incriminating nature or referred to his congressional record—and the latter gave scant information indeed. "My real friends," he declared, "want no information from me on the subject of internal improvements and manufactories, but what my public acts has afforded, and I never gratify my enemies." Jackson knew only too well the varied composition of his party and the widely contradictory opinions to be found within it. He was aware that his supporters favored him on personal grounds alone and he picked his way accordingly.

But on matters of more intimate concern this mantle of diplomacy wore thin. All through the campaign Jackson inwardly seethed, muttered dire threats of retribution, and occasionally broke out into print whenever he felt some particularly opprobrious slander had been directed at him by the "coalition", as he scornfully characterized the Adams-Clay party. Several times his friends were forced to intervene, and quiet, pointing an accusing finger at the hands of his "coalition" "take," begged him to restrain his temper. One man can only take a stand and the main themes of his oratory were applied with unusual force.

This attitude during the winter of 1826, he believed, would be beneficial to the cause of the "coalition" and their schemes for a new Bible society, an American Anti-slavery Society, the "coercion" of the "coercionists" of the South, and the like. Jackson was himself an ardent believer in the "American System." He refused the title of "Czar" and would not tolerate the idea of the creation of a great Southern Confederacy. He was one of the greatest leaders of his country, and his devotion to his cause was unswerving.

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4 Jackson to George W. Campbell, Feb. 14, 1826, in Ibid., III, 300.
of the people, as expressed by the majority of electoral votes, had gone to Clay. It was intolerable that such a perversion be perpetrated through his agency for the presidency, of which he was the most prominent figure.

The people gave him a second term of renomination for President, leaving his affairs in the hands of his party managers, who wisely remained at home. They prosecuted this campaign with quiet activity as he pursued his newly-forming party doctrines. Through Martin Van Buren, Caleb Atwater in New York, and Senator Livingston in Louisiana, as well as many others, he stimulus to the cause was given.

The war of diplomacy and reprimand continued. No one ever sought to gain the advantage of him more than Van Buren, who jayned trying to pin him down. Clay was mostly interested in improvising for himself a life to be jayed by flattering combinations, and incriminated nature or politics as the latter gave scant inducement to declare, "want of internal improvements and no executive muscle." He was engaged, and I never supposed so well the varied contradictory opinions to be the bringing of his supporters into array accordingly.

In this mantle of diplomacy and sneering, Jackson inwardly seethed, and occasionally broke out in a vitriolic, opprobrious slander, as he scornfully characterized his friends as "traitors." This temperament of his friends were forced to intervene, and we know that they constantly urged him to keep quiet, pointing out that a display of temper would be a weapon in the hands of his enemies. "For Heaven's sake, for your country's sake," begged Caleb Atwater from Ohio, "do remember that but one man can write you down—his name is Andrew Jackson.

In the main these exertions were rewarded, for Jackson comported himself with unusual restraint.

This, however, was as far as the influence of his friends went. It is true that much of the actual course of events was directed by his managers, but that was only a part of the game, and the charge that Jackson was their tool is ridiculous. There is nothing in the correspondence—and it is amazingly large—to show that Jackson was the tool of anybody. In his apparent quiescence he was merely conforming to the conventional standards of behavior, for, however much a candidate may have desired office, the people liked being cozened in public. And the higher the office, the greater the degree of coyness. Presidential nominees could not with dignity be openly active in their own behalf; they must comport themselves as though the candidacy were forced upon them by overwhelming popular sentiment rather than by their own choosing.

This attitude Jackson maintained with only an occasional lapse during the whole of the campaign. He often reiterated (and probably believed) the sentiment that he neither sought nor declined office and was particularly scathing in his denunciation of his opponents' methods as "a travelling cabinet ranging over the continent." He refused to go to a Kentucky health resort on the grounds that it would be construed as electioneering; he would not furnish anecdotes for a biography; and he even declined to address a local Bible society, fearing that he might be charged with "having come forth hypocritically under the sacred garb of religion thus to electioneer." Yet strangely enough Jackson willingly lent himself to one of the most spectacular and effective campaign devices which this country has ever seen. At the invitation of the Louisiana legislature he journeyed down the Mississippi to New Orleans to celebrate the anniversary of his famous victory. It was a triumphal

Some of Jackson's friends in Washington intercepted an insulting letter which he had written to Samuel L. Southard, then in Adams' Cabinet. Another time Jackson was about to become involved with ex-President Monroe when Calhoun patched things up.


Jackson to Richard M. Johnson, Sept. 28, 1828, in *Correspondence*, III, 431.

progress all the way. At New Orleans the river was full of steamboats, flags were waving, and crowds were cheering. Friends from all over the country met him, and there were four days of festivities, dinners, and speech-making. Coached by Arthur P. Hayne, Jackson's speeches created favorable comment, being eloquent and mostly of a military tenor. Throughout the country there were other celebrations of a like nature on this eighth of January, and the newspapers were generally enthusiastic, excepting, of course, the Adams papers. Adams himself was not without scornful words for the man who would travel hundreds of miles in the dead of winter “to exhibit himself in pompous pageantry”.

In the meantime the Jackson party had been slowly forming in Congress. Composed of many discordant elements and united on but one policy—to oust Adams and Clay—the new party might have died and Jackson's popularity have waned before 1828 had it not been for the exceeding wariness and energy of his managers. One of the most unwearyed of these managers was Martin Van Buren of New York, a former Crawford man. Crawford's elimination turned Van Buren to Jackson, upon whose personal popularity he depended for success, trusting that “favorable associations” would remove the rust from the hero's Republican principles. Van Buren worked untringly both in Congress and in the state of New York. He played an intricate game of politics with the powerful and ambitious De Witt Clinton, who for the better part of the campaign kept both candidates guessing. Early in 1828 Clinton suddenly—and not inopportunely—died, and most of his followers then lined up for Old Hickory. Another firm Jackson supporter was James Buchanan of Pennsylvania, who accomplished wonders in that state and modestly characterized himself to Jackson as "your efficient friend".

A third leader in the fight against Adams and Clay was none other than the Vice President himself, John C. Calhoun. Calhoun had his own presidential aspirations and was one of those who had visions of using Jackson as a tool. Whatever claims to statesmanship he may have acquired in later life, at this stage of his career his part was hardly heroic. Hated by the Adams-Clay group and distrusted, though necessarily accepted by the Jackson camp, he

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9 Adams, Memoirs, VII, 479.
wended a devious way through the politics of this era. A few days after Adams was elected one of Calhoun’s friends warned the new President that if Clay was chosen Secretary of State an opposition would be organized under Jackson. Of this interview Adams wrote in his diary, “It is to bring in General Jackson as the next President, under the auspices of Calhoun. To this end the Administration must be rendered unpopular and odious, whatever its acts and measures may be, and Mr. Calhoun avows himself prepared to perform this part.” And shortly afterward Calhoun began to fulfill his threat, for the committees he appointed as presiding officer of the Senate were decidedly hostile to the administration.

After a few skirmishes the first real battle began in Congress when the young Jackson party united in opposition to the Panama Mission. The administration proposed to send delegates to a congress of the South American states which was meeting at Panama for the purpose of discussing mutual problems. The Jacksonians immediately raised the cry of unconstitutionality and quoted with great gusto that part of Washington’s Farewell Address which warns against entangling alliances. Jackson himself described the Panama Mission as “a hasty unadvised measure, calculated to involve us in difficulties, perhaps war.” John Randolph raved in the Senate in speeches ten hours’ long, and his words were so intransigent that Calhoun was severely censured in the press for not calling him to order. Thereupon the Vice President resorted to metaphysical subtleties and declared he had no power to call a member to order! In this instance the Administration won a victory, though a barren one, as neither of the delegates ever reached the Panama Congress.

The next session of Congress was even more stormy. The Jackson party was now so strong that it controlled both houses by actual majority. The Adams man was ousted as Speaker of the House and a new Speaker elected who now proceeded to choose the committees with the same partiality Calhoun had used in the Senate. So high was the feeling between the two parties that we find Adams recording in his diary that “there are about six Senators and forty members of the House whose rancorous spirits have withdrawn from all intercourse of civility with me.” Challenges to duels were not uncommon, and an actual fistic encounter took place between Adams’ son, John, and a Senate printer in the rotunda of the capitol.

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12 Adams, Memoirs, VI, 506-507.
13 Jackson to Buchanan, April 8, 1826, in Correspondence, III, 300.
14 Adams, Memoirs, VII, 374.
Such was the state of affairs while the tariff bill was being prepared, and it inevitably became a pawn in the game of politics. The Jackson managers faced a particularly thorny dilemma. They had to retain the good graces of the South who hated the very thought of the tariff, and at the same time please such states as New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio who desired the tariff and whose votes were urgently needed. At length they hit upon a brilliant scheme and early in 1828 laid before the House a bill embodying not only high general duties but excessive rates on raw materials as well. This latter provision would satisfy the western and middle states who were the producers of raw materials, but it was a blow at industrial New England who needed cheap raw materials and high protection for manufactured goods. The Jackson men, both of the North and South, would unite in preventing amendments to this bill, but when it came to the final vote the Southerners would vote "Nay." New England, which meant the Adams party, of course, would have to reject the bill, and thus the Jacksonians would have their double triumph. For the bill would fail; the South would then be content, while the western and middle states would turn their anger against the Adams forces who would be to blame for the failure of the bill, and the Jackson men of those states could still pose as the true friends of the tariff. It was a very clever scheme indeed; the only trouble was—it didn't work. For when the final vote came the New Englanders did not behave as expected. Webster and his adherents accepted the detestable bill, partly from political motives and partly because any tariff looked better to them than none at all. In such a way did the South find itself saddled with the famous Tariff of Abominations.16 One Southern member indignantly wrote to Jackson, "The truth is that this infamous Administration has pressed this most iniquitous Tariff against the South with I believe the express hope of driving us into Rebellion..."16 But another member, more frank, admitted that they had all been influenced by political considerations, but declared that it was better that their votes be so influenced than that Adams and Clay succeed.17

Opposition of so determined a nature had early put the administration on the defensive. Clay, realizing that his own presidential

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16 Maj. James Hamilton, Jr., to Jackson, May 25, 1828, in Correspondence, III, 494.
17 John Branch to Jackson, May 23, 1828, in ibid., 403.
prospects were tied up with the coming election, fought, tooth and nail, grimly every inch of the way; but Adams' efforts were strangely half-hearted. One may indeed wonder what might have been the result if Adams had fought as hard as Clay, or even half as hard as his opponents declared he did. He was, however, despondent from the start. The manner of his election was not satisfactory to his pride and he felt that he was more unpopular than he actually was. From the very first he spoke of preparing for retirement, and as the years wore on that retirement seemed to him more and more a certainty—though a most distasteful one. General Jackson would be elected, he knew, "without an interposition of Providence." 18

This fatalistic state of mind must have affected his conduct in the campaign even more than his much-heralded Puritan principles, for the latter had not prevented his serving well in Europe. There is no other way to reconcile Adams' experience at foreign courts and long training in diplomacy with his unconciliatory attitude and sometimes utter disregard of tact. His belief in the uselessness of the struggle seems to have permeated his every action. For example, when dealing with the controversy between Georgia and the Creek Indians Clay urged discretion, pointing out that otherwise Georgia would be forced to vote for Jackson, but Adams replied that he did not care whom Georgia supported. Nor would he do anything to influence the course of Clinton in New York who dallied for so long between the two candidates. He also discouraged the most loyal of his followers, for they could hope for neither present nor future gain. To the editor of one of the Adams papers who complained that the administration did not support its friends, he declared sententiously, "I have observed the tendency of our electioneering to venality, and shall not encourage it." 19 To be sure, Adams possessed a strict Puritan conscience, but it is not unreasonable to suppose that his refusal to contribute money for the Kentucky campaign was motivated not so much by that conscience as by the belief that the money would do no good anyway. Certainly his despondency tended to emphasize his natural austerity of character, whereas a happier frame of mind would have softened it.

Yet this was the man, who of all persons, was accused of misusing the federal patronage. Jackson firmly believed that the officeholders under the government were being intimidated and loudly berated such a system! As a matter of fact, most of the office-holders were at that time appointees of McLean or of Crawford—both

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19 Ibid., 262.
unfriendly; Adams did not replace them, and thus he himself furnished his enemies with many of their local managers. McLean of the post-office department carried on a long and veiled hostility, and Clay constantly urged that he be removed, but Adams refused at first because of McLean's efficiency and later for political reasons. Whatever else he may have done, Adams did not inaugurate the spoils system. He saw clearly the evils that would result from removing office-holders because of their political preferences and sought earnestly to avoid them.

It was Clay who carried on the actual campaign. Adams did not go among the people except on his journeys to and from his Massachusetts home. It was Clay who attended the dinners, made the speeches, wrote the pamphlets, and went traveling in doubtful sections of the country. He fought vigorously and at first hopefully, but he, too, finally succumbed to the prevailing pessimism. His health and spirits were both failing, and toward the end he even talked of resigning from the Cabinet. This, however, Adams was loath to permit, privately attributing it to Clay's desire to save himself from the sinking ship. 20

No account of the campaign of 1828 is complete without some mention of one especially deplorable feature—the circulation of slander and calumny to influence the voters. The country was flooded with handbills, and the newspapers were full of such stories that to believe them was to believe that both candidates were abandoned criminals! Jackson, whose colorful career invited numerous such attacks, once exclaimed in exasperation that "every virtuous and patriotic act of my life is charged upon me as a crime." 21 He was called a murderer, a traitor, an adulterer, a thief, a liar. He was ignorant, cruel, bloodthirsty, tyrannical—even insane! He was accused of everything from Burr's conspiracy to trafficking in negro slaves. All the regrettable squabbles of his early life were brought up; the trouble with Sevier and Benton and the duel with Dickinson found wide publicity. His connection with Masonry was exploited. 22 The unfortunate circumstances of his marriage were flung far and wide as he was accused of running away with another man's wife. His Seminole Campaign received severe criticism. One of the stories to assume greatest notoriety was that of the execution of six militiamen at Fort Jackson early in 1815. John Binns, editor

20 Ibid., 525.
22 The Morgan affair had thrown this order into disrepute.
of an Adams paper in Philadelphia, printed the so-called Coffin handbill which played an important part in the campaign. This handbill, embellished with heavy black coffins, told the whole story of the execution in lugubrious verse. The

O! Did you hear that plaintive cry
Borne on the southern breeze?
Saw you John Harris earnest pray
For mercy, on his knees?

And so on in complete and gory detail to the sixteenth stanza.
All six militia men were shot;
And O! it seems to me
A dreadful deed—a bloody act
Of needless cruelty.

There was just enough truth in most of these stories to make Jackson squirm. He had, indeed, confirmed the death sentence of the militiamen, but that sentence was justified by the circumstances. His invasion of Florida was unauthorized or, at best, the result of misunderstandings and poor communication with Washington. He had been connected with Burr, though innocently. And through ignorance of the law he had married his wife before she was divorced from a former husband. This latter episode has come in for much sentimentalizing on the part of certain historians. When the tongues started wagging about Rachel, Jackson is said to have carefully shielded her from this knowledge. After the campaign was over and they were preparing to go to Washington, she chanced to come across a particularly scurrilous article in a newspaper and was prostrated. From that moment she sickened and in three weeks was dead of grief and shame. This is a good story, but it lacks truth. There is positive proof that Mrs. Jackson knew of these stories at least five months before her death. We may infer from one of Jackson's letters that she also had heard these stories in May, 1827. Jackson was especially enraged at any attack on his wife, but the advice of his friends and a streak of caution—as strong as it was belated—kept him from too rash a course. Committees of correspondence had been formed all over the country to repel these accusations and otherwise further his prospects of election, and he was kept busy furnishing them with information.

23 The Coffin Handbill is reprinted in Jackson, Correspondence, III, 455-464.
24 Mrs. Rachel Jackson to Mrs. Elizabeth Watson, July 18, 1828, in ibid., 415-416.
Sworn testimony was collected and published, revealing the truth about the marriage as well as certain other episodes in his life.

Adams was also the victim of much abuse and slander, although his life offered no such fertile field for the play of imagination. "I write few private letters," he declared, "and those under irksome restraints. I can never be sure of writing a line that will not some day be published by friend or foe. Nor can I write a sentence susceptible of an odious misconstruction but it will be seized upon and bandied about like a watch-word for hatred and derision." These attacks centered mainly about the charges of "bargain and corruption" and misuse of patronage. The latter assertion has no basis in fact. Of the former we have little proof. There probably was an understanding between Adams and Clay, and if so, it was not unconstitutional nor unethical. The constitution expressly provided that in case of no candidate receiving a majority the House should vote upon the third highest, and this in no way obligated the House to choose that candidate with a plurality of electoral votes. If the will of the people was defeated, the constitution permitted it. Nor was it so strange that Clay should have supported Adams regardless of any bargain. Crawford's health put him out of the race, and the softly-stepping Clay had always been hostile to the rash impetuous Jackson. Then, too, Jackson's political principles were extremely vague, while Adams stood foursquare for Clay's own American system. People thought that the appointment of Clay as Secretary of State sealed the corrupt bargain, but, bargain or not, Clay was the most natural selection Adams could have made for the office, and several years later when faced with the prospect of Clay's resignation he knew not where to look for a successor.

Adams was also accused of the misuse of public funds. Early in 1828 a member of the House introduced the so-called retrenchment resolutions. These resolutions proposed a reduction in governmental expenditures and were the signal for a furious political onslaught. Not only was the administration charged with wasteful extravagance, but Adams' old accounts dating back to his years in the foreign service were reopened for discussion and pronounced fraudulent—and this in spite of the fact that Adams, like most American diplomats, had found his career a heavy strain on his private purse.

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27. *Ibid.*, VI, 465. Adams' account of his interview with Clay is tantalizing in its omissions. He was not unaware of the probability that this diary would sometimes be published.

Then there is the classic story of the billiard table which Adams bought (with his own money) for the President's house. It is difficult to tell whether the Jacksonians were more horrified at the extravagance or the immorality of such a purchase!

But probably the most absurd story of all was published by Isaac Hill, editor of a newspaper in New Hampshire. It related that while in Russia Adams "attempted to make use of a beautiful girl to seduce the passions of the Emperor Alexander and sway him to political purposes". This drew a complaint from the Russian Minister in Washington, but no redress could be obtained.

The end was not unexpected. Slowly though the returns trickled in, it was soon evident that Jackson had won. In all he received 158 electoral votes to Adams' 83; he got every vote south of the Potomac and west of the Alleghenies plus all of Pennsylvania, part of New York and Maryland, and even one vote in Maine! While this was not quite the popular landslide it seemed to be, neither is it fair to charge that Jackson was elected entirely by the over-representation of the South in the electoral college, for the number of the southern electors could have been considerably reduced, and he would still have won. Moreover, so careful a scrutiny of the federal ratio and its operation would to some extent change the aspect of almost any other election. At any rate, Jackson did apparently achieve an overwhelming victory; certainly no one questioned it at the time.

The election of 1828 was one of those periodic phenomena of democracy which have from time to time enlivened the American scene. Jackson was a popular hero, his appeal rested on his great military renown as well as to a certain extent on those very qualities which his opponents decried, but which nevertheless made him appear human and understandable to the masses. The common man thrilled to his deeds of military prowess and was not especially alarmed if he fought cocks or raced horses. On the other hand, Adams, whose battles had been unspectacular and whose delights were in Tacitus and Juvenal, elicited no such warm response. Jackson's cause became most effective when transmitted through the camp-meeting oratory of the backwoods and country districts. It took a certain amount of education to understand Clay's American system, but any man could respond to Jackson's battle-cry of "bargain and corruption" and feel that it was up to him to help send those rascals packing. The victory of Jackson meant to the

28 Ibid., 415.
29 Basset, Life of Jackson, 404-405.
people who elected him a veritable snatching of the nation from the jaws of destruction and the beginning of a golden age for mankind. On March 4, 1829, when Jackson was sworn in as President of the United States, Daniel Webster wonderfully described the event thus: "To-day we have had the inauguration. A monstrous crowd of people is in the city. I never saw anything like it before. Persons have come five hundred miles to see General Jackson, and they really seem to think that the country is rescued from some dreadful danger".

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81 One of the best interpretations of Jacksonian democracy may be found in Frederic L. Paxson, History of the American Frontier (Boston, New York, etc., 1924), 250-297.

82 Daniel Webster to Mrs. E. Webster, Mar. 4, 1829, in Fletcher Webster (ed), The Private Correspondence of Daniel Webster (Boston, 1857), I, 473.