Background for the Teacher

After the debacle of the one-party presidential campaign of 1824, a new two-party system began to emerge. Strong public reaction to perceived corruption in the vote in the House of Representatives, as well as the popularity of Andrew Jackson, allowed Martin Van Buren to organize a Democratic Party that resurrected a Jeffersonian philosophy of minimalism in the federal government. This new party opposed the tendencies of National Republicans such as John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay to invest more power in the federal government. Van Buren built a political machine to support Jackson in the 1828 election. Van Buren's skills helped give the Democrats a head start on modern-style campaigning and a clear advantage in organization.

The Democrats defeated the National Republicans in 1828 and 1832. The Democrats maintained their hold on the presidency when they bested the Whigs—a union of former National Republicans, Antimasons, and some states' rights advocates—in 1836. But a major economic depression in 1837 finally gave the Whigs their best chance to occupy the White House. They faced Andrew Jackson's political organizer, vice-president, and handpicked successor, President Martin Van Buren, who was vying for a second term.

By the time forces were readying themselves for the election of 1840, both Democrats and Whigs understood how to conduct effective campaigns. In an election that would turn out an astounding 80 percent of a greatly expanded electorate, the parties were learning to appeal to a wide range of voters in a variety of voting blocks, a vast change from the regionally based election of 1824.

The Democrats felt, despite hard times, that the issues were on their side. They published a fairly specific platform, the first document of its kind from a major national party.

> The Democrats re-nominated Van Buren and adopted a platform denouncing internal improvements at national expense, a protective tariff, a national bank, and any interference by Congress with slavery. The campaign, however, was not fought on these issues…Hard times and falling prices for wheat and cotton played a large part in the contest, but the main issue presented to the people was a manufactured one. …Portraying their candidate as an honest high-principled farmer who lived in a log cabin with the latch string always out, a coon skin nailed to the door and a barrel of cider (sweet cider in prohibition areas) for the refreshment of visitors… they contrasted this democratic simplicity with the… luxury that surrounded "Sweet Sandy Whiskers" Van Buren at the White House."
>
> This hullabaloo undoubtedly swayed thousands of voters, but more effective still was the Whig organization for the campaign., the outlines of which were set up at *Harrisburg* (site of the Whig convention) and developed by *Weed* (Thurlow Weed, 1797-1882, a New York journalist and founding editor of the Albany *Evening Journal*, a pro-Whig—

> and later, pro-Republican—newspaper, who worked behind the scenes as a political operative) and other party leaders… A Whig committee composed of members of Congress and with headquarters in Washington used congressional *franks* (the privilege of members of Congress to mail items free of charge) to distribute speeches, handbills, and a pamphlet entitled "The Contest" which told the voters they had to choose between "Harrison and Prosperity or Van Buren and Ruin." There were Whig state committees and county committees and a personal campaign committee to advise Harrison and handle his correspondence. And there were numerous ratification meetings, Tippecanoe clubs, Victory Ball marches and many *campaign papers* (most notably Horace Greeley's *Log Cabin*. At the height of the campaign, Greeley printed as many as 80,000 copies of the *Log Cabin*.).
> -- From Glyndon G. Van Deusen ("The Whig Party," *History of U.S. Political Parties, Volume 1*. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Ed. 4 vols. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1973. 343-344.)

The Whigs did not publish a platform—not surprisingly, as the practice was not yet an obligatory part of the nominating process. In fact, the Democratic platform was the first of its kind from a major party. But Van Deusen ascribes a different reason to the lack of a platform ("The Whig Party," *History of U.S. Political Parties, Volume 1*. Ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. editor. 4 vols. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1973. 343):

> With an eye to the… need for stressing different aims in different sections of the country, the convention agreed that it would be better not to have a platform and none was drafted.

Whatever the reason, no statement about positions came out of the nominating process. Whether or not issues were important to the campaign is a question on which students can reflect as they analyze campaign documents. Whether issue or image, the campaign combined traditional organizing with much that was new or on a much grander scale.

> The Democrats undertook a campaign in what had become a traditional style. They depended on organization, full use of their patronage platoons and a conventional propaganda barrage. They deplored the "demagoguery" of the Whigs and tried to deal with issues, although they also heaped abuse on Harrison. The total effect was rather staid and prosaic.
>
> The Whigs, on the other hand, elaborated their new-style campaign and made it as diverting as it was professional. They used organization to draw huge crowds… Whig propaganda included a panoply of visual devices like Harrison "Liberty Poles" as well as mottoes, songs, jokes, along with "efficient orators." …It was all drama and popular commotion mixed with slander and smears designed to destroy "Martin Van Ruin." It was a combination of merchandizing and militia styles, with all the stops pulled out (669-670).

William Henry Harrison spoke in public—unprecedented for a candidate for president. In at least one speech, he even addressed the accusation that he (and his party) took no stand on the issues. He vehemently denied this in a speech in Dayton on September 10, 1840:

> …I am fully aware, my fellow citizens, that you expect from me some opinion upon the various questions which now agitate our country, from centre to circumference, with such fierce contention. Calumny, ever seeking to destroy all that is good in this world, hath proclaimed that I am averse from declaring my opinions on matters so interesting to you; but nothing can be more false.
>
> Have I not, time out of mind, proclaimed my opposition to a citizen's going forward among the people and soliciting votes for the Presidency? Have I not, many a time and often, said, that in my opinion, no man ought to aspire to the Presidency of these United States, unless he is designated as a candidate for that high office by the unbought wishes of the people? If the candidate for so high an office be designated by a portion or a majority of the people. They will have come to the determination of sustaining such a man from a review of his past actions and life, and they will not exact pledges from him of what he will do and what he will not do, for their selection of him is proof enough that he will carry out the doctrines of his party, This plan of choosing a candidate for the Presidency is a much surer bar against corruption than the system of requiring promises. If the pledging plan is pursued, the effect will be, to offer the Presidential chair to the man who will make the most promises. He who would pledge the most, he who would promise most, would be the man to be voted for, and I have no hesitation in declaring my belief, that he who would subject his course to be thus tied up by promises and pledges, would not stop to break them when once in office…
>
> While then, fellow citizens, I have never hesitated to declare my opinions on proper occasions upon the great questions before the nation, I cannot consent to make mere promises the condition of obtaining the office which you kindly wish to bestow upon me. My opinions I am free to express, but you already have them, sustained and supported by the acts of a long and arduous life. That life is a pledge of my future course, if I am elevated by your suffrages to the highest office in your gift (737-738).

Your students can look at an annotated version of this excerpt to evaluate Harrison's defense.

How else was the campaign that followed conducted? According to William Nisbet Chambers ("Election of 1840," *History of American Presidential Elections, Volume 1*. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Ed. 5 vols. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1971.):

> …the Harrison campaign plan of 1840 exhibits important parallels with certain modern, highly professional campaigns… The Whig managers of 1840 were the new professionals of their party, and they made resourceful use of the proliferating mass media of the time. In the process, they created a political persona for William Henry Harrison that had little to do with actuality. They called it "Old Tip," surrounded it with various trappings such as log cabins and cider barrels, offered it as packaged charisma, as the representative and savior of the common man, and sold it to the masses (644).
>
> …"Old Hickory" was an authentic Military hero. …By contrast, Harrison was a minor military figure and a folk hero only as the result of the Whig campaign imagery…

One extension to this unit allows students to look at some primary sources to decide for themselves if Harrison was or was not a genuine hero.

The Whig publicists also successfully created a marvelously ingenious negative image of Martin Van Buren (644). If Van Buren were so easily tarnished, why did the Democrats nominate him?

> …There was no doubt that the Democrats would nominate Martin Van Buren again. Fifty-eight in 1840, nearly twenty years younger than Harrison, he had served his party well. He had also labored to maintain his position among the various blocs that constituted the party, and he could count on a national cadre of patronage officeholders. Short, round, and a bit dapper with his reddish side-whiskers, he was genial and urbane, a shrewd political manager who had been called the "Red Fox" and the "Little Magician." Yet he lacked flair, drama, the touch of charisma that makes for a strong popular image. It was all very well to dub him "Old Kinderhook," but his political persona was less than "O.K." for the times. In the face of depression and privation, the Whigs were nearer to the mark when they declared that "Matty Van" was a "used-up man" (Chambers, 666).

The contest between Martin Van Buren and William Henry Harrison marked the first truly modern presidential campaign, with methods today's students are sure to recognize. Lessons in this unit allow students to become familiar with the issues and personalities and to review an assortment of primary documents. As students analyze them, they reflect on the presidential campaign of 1840. How was it conducted? What was the role of campaign advertising? How crucial were issues to the election of William Henry Harrison? How crucial was image?

Democrats and Whigs, Side by Side

NOTE: Information for some categories may not be found in the Abraham Lincoln Historical Digitization Project essays and can be left blank.

	Democrats	Whigs
Origin/History		
Party Leaders		
Regions of Country Strongly Supporting		
Position on:		
American System (Internal Improvements)		
Federal Land Policy		
Indian Affairs		
National Bank		
Paper Money		
Slavery		
Tariffs		
Territorial Expansion		

Democratic Platform of 1840

1. Resolved, That the federal government is one of limited powers, derived solely from the constitution, and the grants of power shown therein, ought to be strictly *construed* (interpreted) by all the departments and agents of the government, and that it is *inexpedient* (not advantageous) and dangerous to exercise doubtful constitutional powers.

2. Resolved, That the constitution does not confer upon the general government the power to commence and carry on, a general system of internal improvements.

3. Resolved, That the constitution does not confer authority upon the federal government, directly or indirectly, to assume the debts of the several states, contracted for local internal improvements, or other state purposes; nor would such assumption be just or *expedient* (advantageous).

4. Resolved, That justice and sound policy forbid the federal government to foster one branch of industry to the detriment of another, or to cherish the interests of one portion to the injury of another portion of our common country – that every citizen and every section of the country, has a right to demand and insist upon an equality of rights and privileges, and to complete and ample protection of person and property from domestic violence, or foreign aggression.

5. Resolved, That it is the duty of every branch of the government, to enforce and practice the most rigid economy, in conducting our public affairs, and that no more revenue ought to be raised, than is required to defray the necessary expenses of the government.

6. Resolved, That congress has no power to charter a national bank; that we believe such an institution one of deadly hostility to the best interests of the country, dangerous to our republican institutions and the liberties of the people, and calculated to place the business of the country within the control of a concentrated money power, and above the laws and the will of the people.

7. Resolved, That congress has no power, under the constitution, to interfere with or control the domestic institutions of the several states, and that such states are the sole and proper judges of everything *appertaining* (relating) to their own affairs, not prohibited by the constitution; that all efforts by abolitionists or others, made to induce congress to interfere with questions of slavery, or to take *incipient* (beginning) steps in relation thereto, are calculated to lead to the most alarming and dangerous consequences, and that all such efforts have an inevitable tendency to diminish the happiness of the people, and endanger the stability and permanency of the union, and ought not to be countenanced by any friend to our political institutions.

8. Resolved, That the separation of the moneys of the government from banking institutions, is indispensable for the safety of the funds of the government, and the rights of the people.

9. Resolved, That the liberal principles embodied by Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence, and sanctioned in the constitution, which makes ours the land of liberty, and the *asylum of* (safe haven for) the oppressed of every nation, have ever been cardinal principles in the democratic faith; and every attempt to abridge the present privilege of becoming citizens, and the owners of soil among us, ought to be resisted with the same spirit which swept the alien and sedition laws from our statute-book.

Proceedings of the Whig State Convention

Since no national Whig platform was published, it cannot be said that this regional platform represented the entire party. However, it does reveal the political positions of the Whigs in one region. All of the language in the following excerpt is from the original (found on the EDSITEment resource **American Memory** [http://memory.loc.gov]) except as follows:

- Explanations for words in italics are in parentheses.
- Some punctuation and/or spelling may be standardized.

WorcesWora

Resolved, That in WM. H. HARRISON of Ohio, we recognize the selected instrument by whom relief is to be administered to the People--the destined agent of the People themselves, in restoring the country to the prosperity and purity of its best and brightest days;--that his honesty, his ability, his bravery, his patriotism, his true hearted democratic republicanism, having stood the test of more than forty years of service, in peace and in war, can now alike dispense with the praises of his friends, and defy the slanders of his enemies;--and that we pledge to him our unanimous support for the presidency.

Resolved, That we have entire confidence in the integrity and capacity of JOHN TYLER of Virginia, and that we cordially concur with the Harrisburg Convention, in associating his name with that of Gen. Harrison's, for the two highest offices in the gift of the People.

Annotated Excerpt from Harrison's Speech

William Henry Harrison spoke in public—unprecedented for a candidate for president. On at least one occasion, he addressed the accusation that he (and, by implication, his party) took no stand on the issues. He vehemently denied this in a speech in Dayton, Ohio, on September 10, 1840 (NOTE: All of the language in the following excerpt is from the original except explanations for words in italics are in parentheses, and some punctuation and/or spelling may be standardized.):

> …I am fully aware, my fellow citizens, that you expect from me some opinion upon the various questions which now *agitate* (stir up strong feelings in) our country, *from centre to circumference* (from one end to the other), with such fierce *contention* (debate). Calumny (Misrepresentation), ever seeking to destroy all that is good in this world, hath proclaimed that I am *averse from declaring* (reluctant to declare) my opinions on matters so interesting to you; but nothing can be more false.
>
> Have I not, time out of mind, proclaimed my opposition to a citizen's going forward among the people and *soliciting* (seeking) votes for the Presidency? Have I not, many a time and often, said, that in my opinion, no man ought to aspire to the Presidency of these United States, unless he is designated as a candidate for that high office by the unbought wishes of the people? If the candidate for so high an office be designated by a portion or a majority of the people. They will have come to the determination of *sustaining* (supporting) such a man from a review of his past actions and life, and they will not exact pledges from him of what he will do and what he will not do, for their selection of him is proof enough that he will carry out the doctrines of his party. This plan of choosing a candidate for the Presidency is a much surer bar against corruption than the system of requiring promises. If the *pledging* (making promises) plan is pursued, the effect will be, to offer the Presidential chair to the man who will make the most promises. He who would pledge the most, he who would promise most, would be the man to be voted for, and I have no hesitation in declaring my belief, that he who would subject his course to be thus tied up by promises and pledges, would not stop to break them when once in office…
>
> While then, fellow citizens, I have never hesitated to declare my opinions on proper occasions upon the great questions before the nation, I cannot consent to make mere promises the condition of obtaining the office which you kindly wish to bestow upon me. My opinions I am free to express, but you already have them, sustained and supported by the acts of a long and arduous life. That life is a pledge of my future course, if I am elevated by your suffrages to the highest office in your gift.
> -- From William Nisbet Chambers ("Election of 1840," History of American Presidential Elections, Volume 1. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Ed. 5 vols. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1971. 737-744.)

Questions:

1. How does Harrison characterize the accusation that he fails to take a stand on the issues?
2. Does Harrison deny or accept the accusations?
3. What is Harrison's opinion of a candidate actively seeking votes for the presidency?
4. What negative consequence does Harrison believe can result when a candidate makes promises about what he will do once elected?
5. What does Harrison suggest is the best way to judge a candidate for president?
6. Harrison says "nothing can be more false" than the claim that he is "averse from declaring [his] opinions." How would students characterize and evaluate his defense against such an accusation?

It should be noted that in the course of the speech, Harrison goes on to state opinions on some issues:

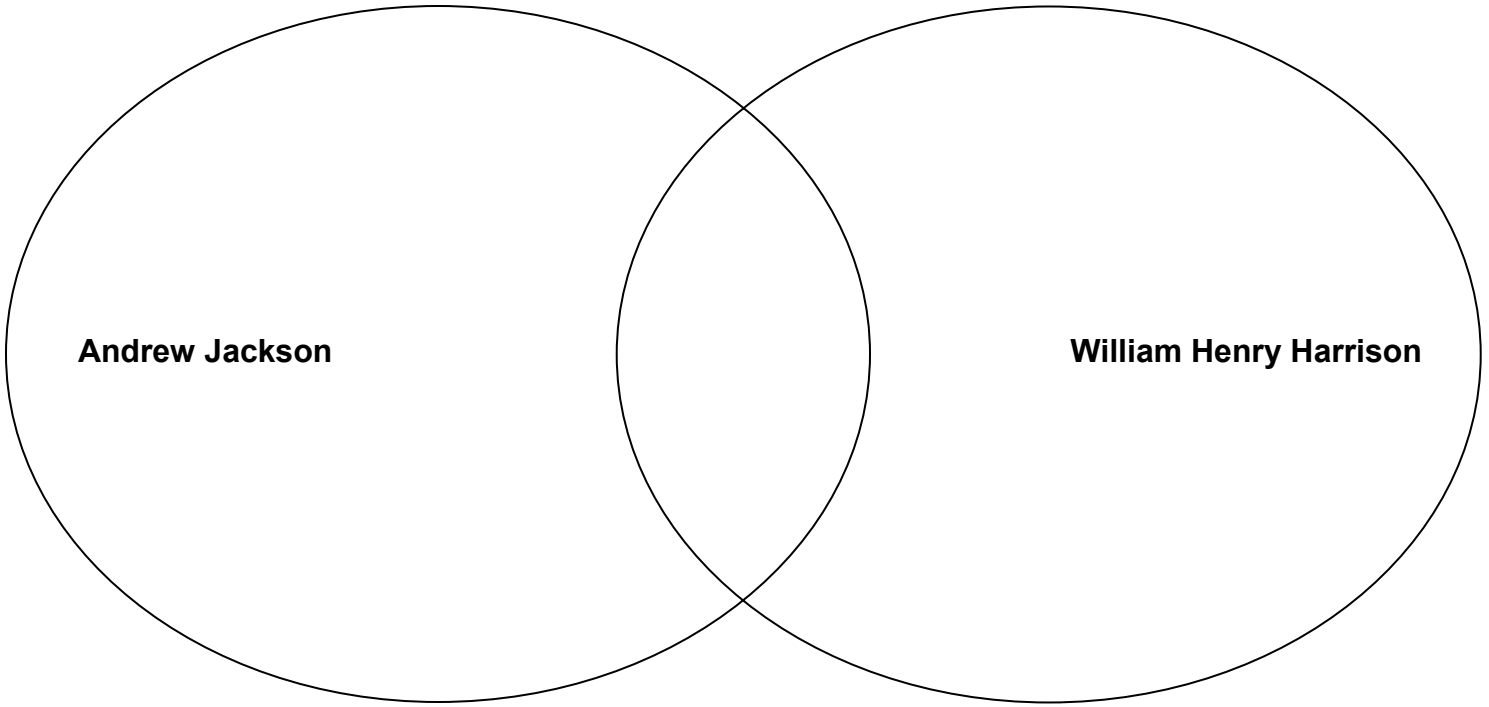
- He decries the degree of power now found in the executive saying, "The Government is now a practical monarchy."
- He seems to promise not to seek a second term, if elected, though his statement leaves open the possibility that the people could demand a second term. ("I pledge… to lay down at the end of the term… that high trust at the feet of the people.")
- Harrison declares himself in favor of paper money. ("Are you in favor of paper money? I am... If you would know why… I can only say it is because I am a democrat.")
- Of the national bank he says, "…of the power of Congress to charter a national bank… There is not in the Constitution any express grant of power for such purpose… if I was clearly of opinion that the majority of the people… desired such an institution, then, and then only would I sign a bill to charter a bank."

Harrison and Van Buren Compared

	Martin Van Buren	William Henry Harrison
Political Experience		
Military Experience		
Other Experience		
Personality		
Personal (birthdate and place, home, marital status, etc.)		
Political Positions		

Life Before the Presidency: Jackson and Harrison Compared

VENN DIAGRAM



From *Autobiography of Andrew Dickson White, Volume I*

Andrew Dickson White, 1832-1918

From Section II, Chapter III: "Political Life, from Jackson to Fillmore:"

> My recollections of American polities begin, then, with the famous campaign of 1840, and of that they are vivid. Our family had, in 1839, removed to Syracuse, which, although now a city of about one hundred and twenty thousand inhabitants, was then a village of fewer than six thousand; but, as the central town of the State, it was already a noted gathering-place for political conventions and meetings. The great Whig mass-meeting held there, in 1840, was long famous as the culmination of the campaign between General Harrison and Martin Van Buren.
>
> As a President, Mr. Van Buren had fallen on evil times. It was a period of political finance; of demagogical methods in public business; and the result was "hard times," with an intense desire throughout the nation for a change. This desire was represented especially by the Whig party. General Harrison had been taken up as its candidate, not merely because he had proved his worth as governor of the Northwestern Territory, and as a senator in Congress, but especially as the hero of sundry fights with the Indians, and, above all, of the plucky little battle at Tippecanoe. The most popular campaign song, which I soon learned to sing lustily, was "Tippecanoe and Tyler, Too," and sundry lines of it expressed, not only my own deepest political convictions and aspirations, but also those cherished by myriads of children of far larger growth. They ran as follows:
>
> "Oh, have you heard the great commotion-motion-motion
> Rolling the country through?
> It is the ball a-rolling on
> For Tippecanoe and Tyler, too,
> For Tippecanoe and Tyler, too;
> And with them we'll beat little Van;
> Van, Van is a used up man;
> And with them we'll beat little Van."
>
> The campaign was an apotheosis of tom-foolery. General Harrison had lived the life, mainly, of a Western farmer, and for a time, doubtless, exercised amid his rude surroundings the primitive hospitality natural to sturdy Western pioneers. On these facts the changes were rung. In every town and village a log cabin was erected where the Whigs held their meetings; and the bringing of logs, with singing and shouting, to build it, was a great event; its front door must have a wooden latch on the inside; but the latch-string must run through the door; for the claim which the friends of General Harrison

especially insisted upon was that he not only lived in a log cabin, but that his latch-string was always out, in token that all his fellow-citizens were welcome at his fireside.

Another element in the campaign was hard cider. Every log cabin must have its barrel of this acrid fluid, as the antithesis of the alleged beverage of President Van Buren at the White House. He, it was asserted, drank champagne, and on this point I remember that a verse was sung at log-cabin meetings which, after describing, in a prophetic way the arrival of the "Farmer of North Bend" at the White House, ran as follows:

"They were all very merry, and drinking champagne
When the Farmer, impatient, knocked louder again;
Oh, Oh, said Prince John, I very much fear
We must quit this place the very next year."

"Prince John" was President Van Buren's brilliant son; famous for his wit and eloquence, who, in after years, rose to be attorney-general of the State of New York, and who might have risen to far higher positions had his principles equaled his talents.

Another feature at the log cabin, and in all political processions, was at least one raccoon; and if not a live raccoon in a cage, at least a raccoon skin nailed upon the outside of the cabin. This gave local color, but hence came sundry jibes from the Democrats, for they were wont to refer to the Whigs as "coons," and to their log cabins as "coon pens." Against all these elements of success, added to promises of better times, the Democratic party could make little headway. Martin Van Buren, though an admirable public servant in many ways, was discredited. M. de Bacourt, the French Minister at Washington, during his administration, was, it is true, very fond of him, and this cynical scion of French nobility wrote in a private letter, which has been published in these latter days, "M. Van Buren is the most perfect imitation of a gentleman I ever saw." But this commendation had not then come to light, and the main reliance of the Democrats in capturing the popular good-will was their candidate for the Vice-Presidency, Colonel Richard M. John-son, of Kentucky. He, too, had fought in the Indian wars, and bravely. Therefore it was that one of the Whig songs which especially rejoiced me, ran:

"They shout and sing, Oh humpsy dumpsy,
Colonel Johnson killed Tecumseh."

Among the features of that period which excited my imagination were the enormous mass meetings, with processions, coming in from all points of the compass, miles in length, and bearing every patriotic device and political emblem. Here the Whigs had infinitely the advantage. Their campaign was positive and aggressive. On platform-wagons were men working at every trade which expected to be benefited by Whig success; log cabins of all sorts and sizes, hard-cider barrels, coon pens, great canvas balls, which were kept "a-rolling on," canoes, such as General Harrison had used in crossing Western rivers, eagles that screamed in defiance, and cocks that crowed for victory. The turning ball had reference to sundry lines in the foremost campaign song. For the October

election in Maine having gone Whig by a large majority, clearly indicating what the general result was to be in November, the opening lines ran as follows:

"Oh, have you heard the news from Maine -- Maine -- Maine?
Rolling the country through?
It is the ball a-rolling on
For Tippecanoe and Tyler, too."
&c., &c., &c.

Against all this the Democrats, with their negative and defensive platform, found themselves more and more at a disadvantage; they fought with desperation, but in vain, and one of their most unlucky ventures to recover their position was an effort to undermine General Harrison's military reputation. For this purpose they looked about, and finally found one of their younger congressional representatives, considered to be a rising man, who, having gained some little experience in the Western militia, had received the honorary title of "General," Isaac M. Crary, of Michigan; him they selected to make a speech in Congress exhibiting and exploding General Harrison's military record. He was very reluctant to undertake it, but at last yielded, and, after elaborate preparation, made an argument loud and long, to show that General Harrison was a military ignoramus. The result was both comic and pathetic. There was then in Congress the most famous stump-speaker of his time, and perhaps of all times, a man of great physical, intellectual, and moral vigor; powerful in argument, sympathetic in manner, of infinite wit and humor, and, unfortunately for General Crary, a Whig, -- Thomas Corwin, of Ohio. Mr. Crary's heavy, tedious, perfunctory arraignment of General Harrison being ended, Corwin rose and began an offhand speech on "The Military Services of General Isaac M. Crary." In a few minutes he had as his audience, not only the House of Representatives, but as many members of the Senate, of the Supreme Court, and visitors to the city, as could be crowded into the congressional chamber, and, of all humorous speeches ever delivered in Congress, this of Corwin has come down to us as the most successful. Long afterward, parts of it lingered in our "speakers' manuals" and were declaimed in the public schools as examples of witty oratory. Many years later, when the House of Representatives left the old chamber and went into that which it now occupies, Thurlow Weed wrote an interesting article on scenes he had witnessed in the old hall, and most vivid of all was his picture of this speech by Corwin. His delineations of Crary's brilliant exploits, his portrayal of the valiant charges made by Crary's troops on muster days upon the watermelon patches of Michigan, not only convulsed his audience, but were echoed throughout the nation, Whigs and Democrats laughing alike; and when John Quincy Adams, in a speech shortly afterward, referred to the man who brought on this tempest of fun as "the late General Crary," there was a feeling that the adjective indicated a fact. It really was so; Crary, although a man of merit, never returned to Congress, but was thenceforth dropped from political life. More than twenty years afterward, as I was passing through Western Michigan, a friend pointed out to me his tombstone, in a little village cemetery, with comments, half comic, half pathetic; and I also recall a mournful feeling when one day, in going over the roll of my students at the University of Michigan, I came upon one who bore the baptismal name of Isaac Crary. Evidently, the blighted

young statesman had a daughter who, in all this storm of ridicule and contempt, stood by him, loved him, and proudly named her son after him.

Another feature in the campaign also impressed me. A blackguard orator, on the Whig side, one of those whom great audiences applaud for the moment and ever afterward despise, -- a man named Ogle, -- made a speech which depicted the luxury prevailing at the White House, and among other evidences of it, dwelt upon the "gold spoons" used at the President's table, denouncing their use with such unction that, for the time, unthinking people regarded Martin Van Buren as a sort of American Vitellius (Roman emperor known for his lack of ability). As a matter of fact, the scanty silver-gilt table utensils at the White House have been shown, in these latter days, in some very pleasing articles written by General Harrison's grandson, after this grandson had himself retired from the Presidency, to have been, for the most part, bought long before; -- and by order of General Washington.