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The Ugly Election That Birthed Modern American Politics

One of the most bitterly fought elections in U.S. history saw a split electoral college and the winner decided by “corrupt bargain.”

BY **JAMES TRAUB**

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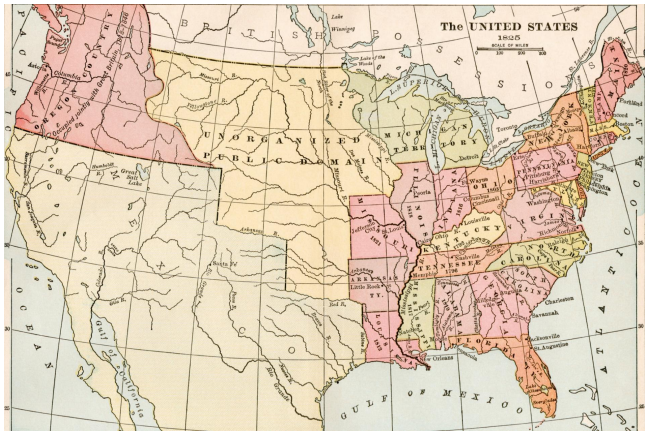
BEFORE THE ELECTION of 1824, the United States was at the tail end of the so-called Era of Good Feelings, a time when political partisanship was low and one party, the Democratic-Republicans, dominated U.S. national politics. The election of 1824 ended that era. Clashing interests on protectionism and trade, as well as sharply divided views on the role of government and America's place in the larger world, created lasting schisms. By declining to give the nod to a designated successor, President James Monroe allowed a wide-open campaign to develop. Four men—John Quincy Adams, Henry Clay, William Crawford, and Andrew Jackson—sought the presidency. The ensuing battles would transform politics, leading to a new democratic culture as well as to the Democratic Party.

AN EVER CHANGING NATION



According to the 1820 census, most Americans lived in the East. New York was the most populous state, with 1.3 million total residents. Illinois was the least populous; in 1820, slightly more than 55,000 people lived there.

PHOTOGRAPH BY NORTH WIND PICTURE/ALBUM

Eighteenth-century Americans would have hardly recognized the United States of 1824. Since 1789, the number of states had nearly doubled, growing to 24. The population roughly tripled from about 3.9 million in 1789 to 9.6 million in 1820. Despite the cessation of the international slave trade in 1807, the number of enslaved African Americans continued to grow, rising from just under 700,000 in 1780 to 1.5 million in 1820. Native American nations continued to hold their lands, but by 1824, through a series of treaties often negotiated by John Quincy Adams in conjunction with military campaigns spearheaded by Andrew Jackson, the U.S. was laying claim to their territories, expanding the nation's holdings from the Atlantic to the Pacific Northwest.

19th-Century Politics

The America of 1824 was recognizably a republic, in the sense that ultimate sovereignty lay with the people, but much less so a democracy, in which the people engage directly in the political process. Of the twenty-four states, six left the choice of president to the legislature, which chose the state's presidential electors. In the others, legislators set the terms of the statewide or district-by-district ballot that determined the outcome.

A presidential race was not a popularity contest, as it soon would become; a candidate succeeded by appealing to other professional politicians as much as to ordinary citizens. And the appeal itself remained oblique to the point of coyness. A presidential candidate of 1824 could no more afford to be seen openly campaigning than a candidate for the papacy can today.

Instead, candidates had proxies and campaign managers, politely known as "friends," who planted articles in the newspapers advancing their man and undermining rivals. They engaged in a ceaseless circuit of private talks with legislators and local power brokers. Candidates largely sat in one place and received reports from their friends, in person or by letter.

A CAPITOL VIEW

Painted in 1824 by Charles Burton, this watercolor of the U.S. Capitol shows what the building looked like almost two centuries ago. The trees in the foreground were planted during Thomas Jefferson's administration.

PHOTOGRAPH BY METROPOLITAN MUSEUM/SCALA, FLORENCE

Public addresses, either by candidates or their surrogates, were rare. If there were deals to be made, it was the friends who made them, allowing the aspirant himself to stand loftily above the fray. And as the fortunes of their candidate waxed and waned, these

proxies would quietly approach one another proposing to combine forces, with one serving as the designated vice presidential candidate of another. But precisely because the race was so fluid, these offers almost always came to naught.

And yet even as the candidates comported themselves in public according to a code of ethics inherited from the Founding Fathers, the nation's real political culture had changed radically. Looking back no further than 1812, which was the last time there had been a serious contest for the presidency, the number of states had increased from eighteen to twenty-four; the population of the country had almost doubled, to about eleven million; and the West, where five of the six new states were located, had gained vastly in power.

The 1824 election would thus be a strange hybrid: structurally, or organizationally, it bore the marks of an old-fashioned contest among political elites, but the traditional institutions were now subject to influences from new men and new places. And the collapse of the party system had created a vacuum that would be filled by representatives of regional or economic or cultural interests, all in search of a suitable candidate. For all these reasons, the election of 1824 was the most confused and wide-open national political contest America had ever seen.

TIMELINE: PATH TO THE PRESIDENCY

President James Monroe, portrait by Rembrandt Peale, circa 1820

PHOTOGRAPH BY GRANGER COLLECTION/CORDON PRESS

January 1824
Near the end of James Monroe's term, the leading presidential candidates include John Quincy Adams, Henry Clay, William Crawford, Andrew Jackson, and John Calhoun.

May 1824
Averse to public campaigning, candidates privately garner the influence of as many political "friends" as possible. Crawford is the favorite, while Calhoun has dropped out of the race.

December 1824
Andrew Jackson secures the most votes, but no candidate wins an outright majority. The House of Representatives will hold a vote with the top three candidates: Jackson, Adams, and Crawford.

January 1825
Adams may have given Clay assurance of his place in the new administration in exchange for his influence in the Kentucky vote in an unofficial deal that Jackson will dub the "corrupt bargain."

February 1825

The House elects Adams with 13 votes, Jackson gets 7, and Crawford takes 4. Jackson vows to unseat Adams in 1828, beginning an era of political rancor.

The Candidates

As of fall 1823, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, Speaker of the House Henry Clay, Secretary of the Treasury William Crawford, and Senator Andrew Jackson were the front-runners, each from a different region of the country.

As a son of one of the Founding Fathers, a diplomat who had brought a successful conclusion to the War of 1812, a secretary of state who had negotiated treaties that had immensely expanded American territory, and a supremely seasoned figure with a firm grasp on every issue that faced the nation, John Quincy Adams should have enjoyed a powerful claim on the presidency. Yet his most important jobs were ones to which he had been appointed by a president. As a state and national legislator he had sought electoral positions, but he had not shown much of a gift for attracting voters. He had lost his very first contest, for state assemblyman, and had been recalled as a U.S. senator by a state legislature outraged at his stubborn independence. He did not like appealing to voters, did not believe he should have to, and was not good at it.

Andrew Jackson was the wild card of the race. People all over the country knew his legend: He had killed a man in a duel after being shot in the chest, fought alongside Davy Crockett to decimate a force of Red Stick warriors from the Creek tribe, won millions of acres for settlers in treaties imposed on Indian tribes, and annihilated the British force at New Orleans while losing only thirteen men. Newspapers wrote lavish profiles; supporters compared him to “the immortal Washington.” Jackson was also the first candidate to “run against Washington.” He had the military man’s scorn for the pettiness and haggling of political life, to which he joined an unflagging faith in his own honor.

THE MONROE DOCTRINE, I PRESUME

The Birth of the Monroe Doctrine, replicates the painting by Clyde O. Deland. This detail shows John Quincy Adams (seated, far left) and James Monroe (standing).

PHOTOGRAPH BY GRANGER COLLECTION/CORDON PRESS

Holding office from 1817 to 1825, James Monroe was the last Founding Father to serve as U.S. president. His résumé was impressive: a soldier in the Revolution, delegate at the Continental Congress, U.S. senator, governor of Virginia, and minister to France and Great Britain, but his most enduring accomplishment was the Monroe Doctrine, a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy. In December 1823 Monroe announced the Monroe Doctrine, as it came to be known, in an annual address to Congress, which warned Europe that the United States would treat any external intervention in the politics of any independent nation in the Western Hemisphere as a hostile act. Future presidents, such as Theodore Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy, relied on this policy when European sabers began to rattle during their presidencies. Although Monroe's name is on the doctrine, many historians credit Monroe's secretary of state, John Quincy Adams, with the idea itself.

In the first months of 1824 the political odds favored William Crawford. Over the summer Crawford had suffered a debilitating stroke, but he was protected by the prohibition against public appearances by candidates. The Georgian was widely expected to carry the South, thanks in part to a tacit endorsement from Thomas Jefferson. However, when Crawford suffered another stroke, in May, Henry Clay wrote exultantly to a confidante that the Georgian would soon die. The stroke had left Crawford nearly blind and had so

impaired his circulation that he walked around with thick layers of cloth wrapped around his freezing feet. But Crawford, a huge, robust man, would recover once again and stay in the race.

PRESIDENTIAL PLATES

James Monroe's bold White House china service features a red band with symbolic illustrations representing Strength, the Arts, Commerce, the Sciences, and Agriculture.

PHOTOGRAPH BY 2000 WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

Clay was the one candidate who could be said to be "running" for president. He had a platform, and he gave long, impassioned speeches on his favorite topics. But he knew very well that policy, by itself, would not carry the day. He needed his friends to neutralize his rivals and influence prominent men. Adams, meanwhile, was, if not running, then at least unmistakably standing. His front door was spinning with friends, would-be friends, and friends of his rivals: At the end of March he recorded in his journal that he had received 235 visitors that month, or 8 a day, taking up at least four hours.

Adams increasingly found that he needed to offer reassurances not only about his views, which was second nature to him, but about his willingness to find a place for men whose support he needed, which violated his most deeply held principles. Adams was divided against himself, as men like Clay and Crawford were not. He played the game of politics because he wanted to be president far more than he could ever admit to himself. He wanted it, but he did not want to want it. Adams's parents had raised him both to expect great things for himself and to scorn the idea of ambition. His internal struggle was robbing him of the sense of self-mastery he always sought but rarely found.

By mid-October, the twenty-four states of the Union were poised to begin choosing a president. No one could confidently predict the winner.

THE HOUSE DECIDES

The House of Representatives, whose present-day chamber is shown here, has the power to elect the President if no candidate wins a majority of the Electoral College votes.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRENDAN HOFFMAN, GETTY IMAGES

The Results Roll In

When the first results began arriving in Washington, Andrew Jackson proved to be the only candidate with true national appeal. He won all of Pennsylvania's electoral votes, as well as those of New Jersey. And he surged as Clay faded in the West and Crawford in the South. Crawford won only in Georgia, Virginia, and Delaware. Clay carried only the three western states of Kentucky, Missouri, and Ohio. And Adams won nowhere outside New England, though he had picked up votes throughout the country.

In those states where citizens voted for president, Jackson had taken 153,544; Adams 108,740; Clay 47,136; Crawford 46,618. But it was the electoral votes that counted, and here the final tally read: Jackson 99, Adams 84, Crawford 41, Clay 37. The Constitution stipulated that, absent a majority, the House would choose the winner from among the three top finishers. Now only Jackson, Adams, and Crawford, a broken man, survived.

According to the Constitution, each state would have one vote, to be determined by a vote taken among the congressmen from that state. Balloting would continue until one man won thirteen or more of the twenty-four states. What this meant was that little Rhode Island mattered as much as giant New York. The House would convene for the vote on February 9, 1825.

Adams could have taken the position that the nation had spoken and thus withdrawn. Jackson's friends put it out that this would be the correct thing to do. There is no sign that this idea crossed Adams's

mind. And in any case, he had admitted to himself that nothing could cool off the fire of his ambition. Already he had allowed himself to offer the kind of veiled reassurances that once would have struck him as low political bargaining; now Adams would shred the fine tissue of his conscience.

HIS NAME IN LIGHTS

Active campaigning for office came to dominate 19th-century politics. Andrew Jackson's supporters may have carried this tin campaign lantern that spells out "Old Hickory for President."

PHOTOGRAPH BY DON TROIANI/BRIDGEMAN/ACI

THE BILLS, THEY ARE A' CHANGING

Adios Andrew! In 2020 Harriet Tubman will be the new face on the front of the $20 bill.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALAMY/ACI

The U.S. Treasury announced in 2015 a makeover for the $10 bill, but a resurgence in Alexander Hamilton's popularity scuttled that plan. In 2016 the Treasury decided to update the $20 bill instead: Freedom fighter Harriet Tubman will grace the front, and Jackson will move to the back. When chosen for the bill in 1928, many felt Jackson stood for the American ideal of the self-made man, but since then his stock has fallen, largely due to his forced removal of Native Americans from their lands, which resulted in thousands of deaths. Others felt that Jackson, who despised banks, would never have wanted to be on its currency. The new bill is set to debut in 2020.

Striking a Bargain

Every congressman would have a hand in determining the next president. On December 9, a full week before the final results were in, Adams began fielding a flood of visitors from the Congress, both at home and in the office. And he did something he had not done before: He went around to the rooming houses where almost all members of Congress stayed during the session. And he listened, if noncommittally, to suggestions about potential appointments should he become president. He met with Robert P. Letcher, a Kentucky congressman who was close to Clay and shared lodgings with him.

On December 15, Edward Wyer, a former diplomat whom Adams used on sensitive missions and who was obviously in his confidence, came by to say that "he had it from good authority that Mr. Clay was much disposed to support me, if at the same time he could be

useful to himself." Wyer returned the next day and repeated his story, refusing to disclose his source. On the seventeenth, Clay's friend paid another call.

Letcher explained that Kentuckians preferred Jackson to Adams, as Adams knew perfectly well. A faction of them were at odds with Clay himself; they were scarcely bound to one another by ties of loyalty. Clay wished to "stand with his friends"; his friends wished to stand with him. Then he got to the point: What were Adams's sentiments toward Clay? Letcher was obviously Wyer's source: He had reached out, friend to friend.

WINNING THE WHITE HOUSE

Andrew Jackson may have lost the election of 1824, but he rallied to win the presidency in 1828 and again in 1832. This bronze statue of Jackson was erected in front of the White House in Lafayette Square in 1853.

PHOTOGRAPH BY WIM WISKERKE/ALAMY/ACI

Adams understood that Letcher was telling him that if he could reassure Clay's friends that their man would have "a prominent share in the administration," they would be prepared to disregard the instructions they received from Kentucky, whose state legislature had voted overwhelmingly to endorse Jackson. Letcher "made no definite propositions," and Adams himself responded "in general terms." Their work was begun but not concluded.

Clay, enjoying his new role, wrote a letter to a confidante describing how friends of each of the three remaining aspirants had beaten a path to his doorstep to proclaim that he, Henry Clay, had always been the candidate's second choice for the presidency and then implore him to throw his support to their man. The truth was, Clay went on, that Crawford was too sick for the job, and as between "the two evils" remaining, Jackson would "give the military spirit a stimulus and confidence which could lead to the most pernicious results," whereas Adams would leave America's institutions as he had found them.

Jackson did visit Clay's rooming house, as did Adams, and Clay, who had been out, returned the favor—but he never dispatched an emissary to Jackson as he had to Adams. So much venom had passed between Clay and Jackson that nothing could put things right between them. And strictly as a matter of calculation, a President Adams might only last one term, while a President Jackson might prove impossible to dislodge. Clay would support Adams, but not without exacting a price.

THE ADAMS FAMILY

Mother and son. A statue of Abigail Adams with her son John Quincy Adams stands outside the Adams family's church in Quincy, Massachusetts.

PHOTOGRAPH BY NORTH WIND PICTURES/AKG/ALBUM

The eldest son of Founding Father John Adams and his wife Abigail, John Quincy Adams belonged to one of America's first political dynasties. Between the 18th and 20th centuries, the Adams family would produce no less than two presidents, seven prominent politicians, two prestigious military careerists, 17 Harvard graduates, with many more engaged in education and transportation industries. Each generation seemed to groom the next for political life. John Quincy Adams's reputation as a master negotiator had its roots in his father's diplomatic missions to Europe during his childhood. John Quincy Adams's dedication to the abolitionist cause was expanded by his son Charles Francis Adams, who served in Abraham Lincoln's Cabinet. His son Henry Adams became a celebrated historian and Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist. The legacy of the Adams family may reside in their navigation through a variety of political platforms from Federalist to Republican while always maintaining a dedication to public service.

On January 9, Clay paid a quiet visit to Adams at the latter's home. There he spoke of the advances he had spurned over the previous weeks. He observed, with splendid disingenuousness, that he had needed to reassure his friends that they should vote according to their own consciences. But the time had come for him to choose. As for the contest in the House, Adams recorded, "he had no

hesitation in saying that his preference would be for me." Clay later wrote in a letter to an ally that, though Adams had made no promises, he concluded from the interview that he could have whatever job he wanted. That may well have been true.

Adams might have installed Clay in his Cabinet under any circumstances. He admired Clay's judgment, if not his personal morals. But Adams understood that reassuring Clay and his followers would put Kentucky in his column, and probably Ohio and Missouri as well. Adams had not received a single popular vote in Kentucky—not one. Jackson was immensely popular there, and the state plainly would have gone for him had Clay not been a favorite son. Adams would never have to know how Clay would exert his influence, but he would know that the consequence was that the will of the people would be overborne. That was a grave violation of his own republican principles. Adams would have said that no price was worth paying for the sacrifice of principle, but there is no sign that he believed at the time that he had done any such thing. He was thinking about the goal, not the means.

HOME AND HEARTH

A national historical park today, Peacefield was the Adams family home for four generations from 1788 to 1927. It housed Presidents John Adams and John Quincy Adams, and
First Ladies Abigail and Louisa Adams.

PHOTOGRAPH BY VISIONS OF AMERICA/ALAMY/ACI

On January 24, the Kentucky congressional caucus announced for Adams. Clay had delivered his state. But Kentucky was hardly going to put Adams over the top.

By January 28, news of the "corrupt bargain" between Adams and Clay had gone public. It was an astonishing last-minute bonus for Jackson, for the story reinforced the central theme of his campaign—that politics was a rotten business pursued by rotten men. The *Columbian Observer* of Philadelphia printed an anonymous letter claiming that Adams had offered to make Clay secretary of state in exchange for his influence—which was more or less true—and that Clay's friends had then made the same offer to friends of Jackson,

who had refused to “descend to such mean barter and sale”—which was not true.

On January 29, the day after the story broke, Henry Clay, utterly unbowed, paid Adams another visit. The election was eleven days away; the outcome still impossible to predict. Now certain of his own position, Clay put aside his sidelong, insinuating manner. “He spoke to me with the utmost freedom of men and things,” Adams wrote, “intimated doubts and prepossessions concerning individual friends of mine, to all which I listened with due consideration.” Adams may have understood for the first time what an invaluable ally he had in Clay, who shared many of his views but was also a far more shrewd judge of men than he was.

ADAMS ARTIFACTS

This blue-and-white, porcelain salt-cellar was obtained by John Quincy and Louisa Adams when they lived in Europe. Prior to his presidency, Adams served as the minister to the Netherlands, Russia, and Great Britain.

PHOTOGRAPH BY 2000 WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

THE HOUSE VOTE

Held in the United States National Archives, the tally sheet from the election of 1824 reveals the breakout of the votes that put John Quincy Adams in the White House and kept Andrew Jackson and William Crawford out of office.

PHOTOGRAPH BY SMITH COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES

The Final Count

In the days before the scheduled vote, political enthusiasts began pouring into the nation's capital. By the day of the vote, not a bed was to be had in the city's lodgings. It was a cold and snowy day, and the session would not begin until noon, but spectators began lining up outside the House doors early that morning.

When the electoral votes were formally unsealed, the results were announced: John Calhoun had been elected vice president, while Jackson, Adams, and Crawford would contest for the presidency. The senators now returned to their own chamber, while members of

the House cast their votes. The results: “For John Quincy Adams of Massachusetts, thirteen votes; for Andrew Jackson of Tennessee, seven votes; for William H. Crawford of Georgia, four votes.” Adams had won, with the support of Kentucky and other western states which may have been influenced by Clay’s support. Upon learning the news, Adams uttered a prayer—“May the blessing of God rest upon the event of this day!” It was, he said in a note to his father, “the most important day of my life.”

That night, President Monroe held one of his rare social evenings. All of Washington was there—Calhoun and Clay and Webster, and of course Adams and Jackson. People pressed through the dense throng to get a view of the winner and loser of this unprecedented, and increasingly ugly, contest. The crowd parted, and General Jackson, with a lady on his arm, approached the president-elect. Always the master of the situation, Jackson said graciously, “I give you my left hand, for the right, as you see, is devoted to the fair. I hope you are very well, Sir.”

“Very well, Sir,” said Adams stonily. “I hope General Jackson is well.”

This courteous encounter would be one of the very last between the two men. It constituted the terminal point of the Era of Good Feelings—not so much because rancor supplanted a largely mythical period of consensus but because Jackson’s embitterment propelled the rise of a new political party and thus new forms of political contest. From that moment forward, Jackson went into opposition; the 1828 campaign began before Adams even took office. Adams had finally won the prize he had long sought, but he had won it under circumstances that would turn the next four years of his life into a terrible struggle.

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ONE-TERM WONDER

John Quincy Adams served a single term as president, but his political career continued after his defeat by Jackson in 1828. In 1830 Adams returned to Washington, D.C., serving in the House of Representatives.

PHOTOGRAPH BY NEW YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY/BRIDGEMAN/ACI