

## Chapter 90. Jackson Sacks his Cabinet over the “Petticoat Affair” (1831)



Francis P. Blair (1791-1876), Member of Jackson’s New Kitchen Cabinet

### Sections

- The “Petticoat Affair” Captures The Spotlight in Washington
- Jackson Breaks with Calhoun and Names a New Cabinet

### Macro-Themes

- Politics
- Conflict Within Jackson’s Cabinet
  - Calhoun Vs. Jackson
  - End of Calhoun’s Presidential Hopes
  - Jackson’s “Kitchen Cabinet”

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Time: 1830-31

### The “Petticoat Affair” Captures the Spotlight in Washington

Midway into his first term, the short fuse on Jackson’s temper is ignited by turmoil within his cabinet.

The root cause is a developing rivalry between factions aligned with Vice-President John Calhoun and those backing the President and Martin Van Buren.

But the trigger for Jackson is a sustained backbiting campaign to shun Peggy Eaton, the wife of his Secretary of War, on grounds of questionable moral standards.

The charge particularly grates on the President because he and his wife, Rachel, suffered comparable smears throughout the mud-slinging campaign of 1828. In fact, Jackson remains convinced that Rachel’s fatal heart attack just prior to his inauguration resulted from being publicly labelled as an adulteress.

Rumblings about Peggy Eaton go back to her youthful days, working the bar at her father’s Franklin House inn near the Capitol. After several courtships, she is married at age seventeen to a 39 year old Navy man, John Timberlake. Among the couple’s friends is John Eaton, a Senator from Tennessee, close friend of Jackson, and an early widower.

When Timberlake’s personal finances collapse and he turns to alcohol, John Eaton helps out, both with funds and by securing a naval post for him in the Mediterranean fleet. With her husband away, Peggy returns to her job at the Franklin House, which now caters almost exclusively to Congressional members and their wives.

Gossip follows quickly – how can a married woman be considered respectable while working for a wage, and in a bar no less? This accelerates when Timberlake dies at sea in April 1828, and a rumor spreads that he killed himself after hearing that Peggy and John Eaton had become lovers. The rumor is supported eight months later when the two are wed – after receiving a blessing from none other than John’s mentor, Andrew Jackson.

Despite the couple’s connections in Washington, many in the social elite choose to boycott the wedding, on the grounds that, in violating the traditional year-long mourning period, Peggy’s conduct is unseemly.

When Jackson names Eaton as his Secretary of War, the social knives are bared among other cabinet wives – the most notable and vocal being the aristocratic Floride Calhoun, who initiates a series of slights aimed at humiliating the new couple. She asserts that Peggy is “a promiscuous woman” and convinces her allies to refuse to attend social events, especially at the White House, where the Eatons are present.

After enduring almost two years of this, Jackson decides he has had enough of the foolishness. Surely the wives of his cabinet cannot be allowed to undermine Eaton’s role as War Secretary, and surely it is time for him to step in and protect Peggy’s honor. As he says at the time:

*I would rather have live vermin on my back than the tongue of one of these Washington women on my reputation.*

Early in 1831 he decides to act.

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Time: 1831

### **Jackson Breaks with Calhoun and Names A New Cabinet**



The venom he feels is directed particularly at John Calhoun.

He knows that the Vice-President has been plotting behind his back to nullify the 1828 Tariff, and that Floride Calhoun is the ring-leader hoping to defame Peggy Eaton. But he also learns in February 1831 that Calhoun is behind the public disclosure of letters critical of Jackson’s actions in Florida in 1818 during the Seminole War.

In response he makes it clear that he intends to support Van Buren for Vice-President in 1832.

This message reaches Calhoun, who recognizes that his chances now of ever winning the White House have all but vanished. Instead he will henceforth dedicate his political career to convincing the South to face the existential threats he says is building in the North.

Van Buren, who has backed the Eatons all along, sees the so-called “petticoat affair” as another attempt by the “Calhounites” in the cabinet – Ingham, Berrien and Branch – to undermine both Jackson’s administration and his own future political aspirations. After he convinces Eaton to resign, the President goes further, requesting that all his appointees step aside.

Which they do by August 31, 1831, the only exception being Postmaster Barry, who stays on at Jackson's request. Van Buren quickly assumes the post of Ambassador to Great Britain.

In turn, Jackson names a new cabinet, including several members who will play prominent public roles for years to come. Attorney General Roger Taney will succeed John Marshal as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and preside for 28 years. Lewis Cass, who fought in the War of 1812 and opened the Michigan territory as governor, will go on to run for President in 1848, and lead the "popular sovereignty" wing of the Democratic Party from then on. Levi Woodbury will eventually become Secretary of the Treasury and then Associate Justice on the Supreme Court. Louis McLane becomes both Secretary of the Treasury and of State, then president of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad Company.

#### **Andrew Jackson's Cabinet in September 1832**

<b>Position</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Home State</b>
Vice-President	John C. Calhoun	South Carolina
Secretary of State	Edward Livingston	New York, Louisiana
Secretary of Treasury	Louis McLane	Delaware
Secretary of War	Lewis Cass	Michigan
Secretary of the Navy	Levi Woodbury	New Hampshire
Attorney General	Roger Taney	Maryland
Postmaster General	William Barry	Kentucky

As impressive as this replacement cabinet is, Jackson, like many future presidents, decides to rely on a tight circle of long-time trusted advisors to debate and decide on policy and political matters.

Van Buren and Taney are part of this informal "kitchen cabinet." So too is Jackson's nephew and "adopted son," Andrew Jackson Donelson. The rest tend to be long-time friends from Nashville or newspapermen who have helped shape and disseminate his agenda and messages.

#### **Jackson's "Kitchen Cabinet" of Informal Advisors**

<b>Members</b>	<b>Connections</b>
Martin Van Buren	Campaign manager, protégé, chosen successor
Amos Kendall	Speech/policy writer for AJ, editor of KY <i>Argus</i> paper
Roger B. Taney	Early AJ backer and legal advisor
Francis P. Blair	Editor of pro-AJ <i>Washington Globe</i> , main party organ
Andrew Jackson Donelson	Nephew and adopted son of AJ, Hermitage roots, private secretary
John Overton	Nashville pal, AJ dueling "second," judge, planter, business partner
Isaac Hill	Editor <i>New Hampshire Patriot</i> , politician, early AJ backer
William B. Lewis	Nashville pal, army quartermaster for AJ