

Chapter 82 -- Run Up To The Presidential Election



Dates:
1828

Sections:

- JQ Adams And Henry Clay Are Determined To Defeat Jackson
- Mudslinging Mars The Race

Time: 1828

JQ Adams And Henry Clay Are Determined To Defeat Jackson



The White House from the North Lawn

As the election of 1828 approaches, it's clear that Andrew Jackson intends to revenge his prior "corrupt bargain" loss to Adams.

Meanwhile, Adams, the forever determined child of his domineering parents, decides to run for a second term, despite the four years of frustrations already suffered.

His most committed supporter in the race will be Henry Clay – who is dead set on becoming his successor, and must find a way to derail Andrew Jackson candidacy for that to happen.

As a wizened political strategist, Clay immediately recognizes that Adams is vulnerable.

With help from Martin Van Buren, Jackson has already taken over firm control over the internal workings of the Democratic-Republican Party.

To counter this reality, Clay must build an Anti-Jackson Party of his own. His first attempt will be called the "National Republican Party," which Adams heads in 1828. But it is short-lived, and will morph into the "Whig Party" by 1832.

The roots of this new party trace to Washington, Hamilton and the Federalists with their core beliefs that a strong national government is needed to harmonize the often competing interests of individual states or regions, and to realize America's potential as a global power.

Foreign policy differences between Adams/Clay and Jackson will be relatively minor.

Both support enough military force to defend the nation, should the need again arise. Both hope to eventually expand America's borders across the entire continent. Both wish to avoid foreign entanglements, although Adams and Clay are more inclined to build diplomatic bridges into Latin America.

It is therefore domestic policy which sets the two camps apart.

The "National Republican" platform which Adams and Clay craft in 1828 calls for:

- A strong national government dedicated to advancing interests common across all citizens;
- More infrastructure projects – roads, bridges, canals, railroads – to support the domestic economy;
- Educational upgrades (more universities) and "cultural and scientific advancement;"
- Continued exploration and acquisition of land west of the Mississippi;
- A 50%+ tariff on select foreign imports, to support domestic manufacturers, and fund spending.
- A powerful central US Bank, to insure available credit and a stable currency.
- Caution around issues related to Indian affairs and the future of slavery.

Sitting Vice-President John C. Calhoun abandons Adams to run with Jackson, while Treasury Secretary Richard Rush joins the President.

Despite residual tensions from the 1820 Missouri Compromise and a smattering of early reform rhetoric from the Second Awakening, the issue of slavery is largely ignored in the campaign.

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Mudslinging Mars The Race

Predictably the race quickly erodes from policy debates to vicious personal attacks.

Jackson's campaign is run by Senator Martin Van Buren of New York, an organizational genius who, between 1826 and 1828, turns the Democratic Party, initially called "The Democracy," into the well-oiled election machine it becomes. In backing Jackson, Van Buren lays the groundwork for succeeding him down the road.

Van Buren's strategy is clever. The goal lies in linking the old and eroding Virginia political junta with the new and upcoming New Yorkers to form a South-North base that will be unbeatable – especially when the Westerner Jackson is added to the mix.

His tactics are raucous in character and efficient in execution.

Democratic Party newspapers paint Adams as part of an elite eastern clique, out of touch with the common man, and intent on lining their own pockets. His strait-laced moral character is then called into question. First for wasting taxpayer money on "gambling devices" for the White House – a charge which boils down to Adams' purchase of a chess set and a billiards table. Then for "procuring" an American woman for Tsar Alexander I to secure his friendship while serving in Moscow.

Van Buren also makes widespread promises of federal patronage jobs, mirroring his successful patronage tactics in New York.

Needless to say, the staid Adams is no match for the garrulous Van Buren and Jackson. He even continues to view public campaigning as beneath the dignity of candidates for high office.

Nonetheless, his surrogates are eager to assail Jackson, and they do so with no holds barred. Their goal is to paint him as temperamentally and morally unfit to be president. His long record of violent behavior is cited:

- 1806 kills James Dickinson in a duel over a horse racing wager
- 1806 attempts to stab his former business partner on the street in Nashville
- 1813 wounded in saloon shoot-out with Jesse and Thomas Hart Benton
- 1814 accused of murdering Indian non-combatants at Battle of Horseshoe Bend
- 1815 approves execution of six American militiamen for stealing food during campaign around Mobile;
- 1818 executes two British nationals in Florida accused of selling guns to local tribes

Several of these incidents are disseminated by one John Binns, a Philadelphia newspaperman, in what become known as “Coffin Handbills” – poster boards headed by hand-drawn caskets meant to represent the General’s murdered victims.

The attacks turn even uglier from there.

Jackson is first pictured as a wanton slave-trader, and then as an adulterer.

The latter charge stems from his marriage in 1791 to Rachel Donelson Robards, after she had applied for a divorce from her first husband. When court records show that the decree was not officially granted until 1793, Jackson and Rachel are labelled adulterers. Again it is a journalist, Charles Hammond of the *Cincinnati Gazette*, who publicizes the story, with his own editorial take:

Ought a convicted adulteress and her paramour husband be placed in the highest offices of this free and Christian land?

Jackson responds publicly to the slander, but Rachel feels that her reputation is lost for good and her health deteriorates. She dies of a heart attack on December 22, 1828, before her husband is inaugurated.

The presidential vote in 1828 takes place between October 26 and December 2. By that time civil discourse between the two parties has given way to outright mudslinging.