

## **The Electoral Savvy of John Q. Adams (1824) – continued**

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Although it is likely true that Adams was not as savvy as some of his opponents, the notion that he was politically naïve, which scholars frequently claim, makes little sense given Adams' background, experience, and achievements. Not only was Adams the son of a president and one of the luminaries from the Founding Era, John Adams, but he had also been exposed to high-level diplomacy from the time he was fourteen years of age. When he ascended to the presidential chair at fifty-seven, he had already served the country as personal secretary to Francis Dana, the first envoy to Russia; minister to the Netherlands; ambassador to Berlin; state senator in Massachusetts; United States senator for Massachusetts; minister to Russia; special envoy (along with four others) to Britain, which resulted in the Treaty of Ghent; minister to Great Britain; and secretary of state. Further, when he served as secretary of state in James Monroe's administration, Adams was no shrinking violet. He single-handedly defended Jackson when the latter's aggressive attack on the Seminole Indians in Florida caused an uproar, convincing Monroe and his cabinet to not rebuke Jackson.<sup>1</sup> He then used the occasion to negotiate the Adams-Onís Treaty, which allowed for the United States to acquire Florida from Spain. He also persuaded the administration to adopt what became known as the Monroe Doctrine, "one of the most basic and fundamental precepts of U.S. foreign policy," based on "the ideas of noncolonization and nonintervention by Europe...in the New World."<sup>2</sup> According to noted political historian Robert Remini, "John Quincy Adams is arguably the greatest secretary of state to serve that office."<sup>3</sup> Thus, he was not a political novice.

Beyond his experience, Adams's behavior during the 1824 presidential election suggests that he possessed ample political instincts. Prior to the election, in his role as secretary of state,

he “sought to rid himself of possible rivals, suggesting to Monroe at various times that Jackson, Clay, and Calhoun be sent off on foreign missions.”<sup>4</sup> He supported Monroe’s decision to appoint Jackson the territorial governor of Florida in 1821, placing him in the southern hinterlands far away from Washington.<sup>5</sup> After Jackson resigned his Florida post and joined the U.S. Senate in the autumn of 1823, Adams changed tactics and befriended Jackson. In January of 1824, he hosted “an enormous ball to honor the general on the approaching ninth anniversary of the victory over the British” and attempted to persuade him to serve as vice president on his ticket, but Jackson was not interested.<sup>6</sup> As the election neared, Adams penned several “anonymous” editorials extolling his virtues, giving them to newspaper editors to publish to advance his presidential boom. Throughout 1824, Remini also notes, Adams “began socializing at every opportunity, hardly missing an event in Washington.”<sup>7</sup>

In the six states where legislative choice prevailed and in the 18 states where the popular vote determined the allocation of the electoral votes (12 at-large and six by district), Adams’ friends (with his blessings) worked dutifully to ensure his support. They fought for Crawford’s vote and forged alliances with Jackson’s boosters. In New York, they offered a deal to Clay’s backers in the legislature, but it was declined. Still, his friends continued their sophisticated maneuvering eventually securing Adams 26 of New York’s 36 electoral votes.<sup>8</sup> While Adams’ base was New England, he drew more votes than Clay, “the Great Compromiser,” in more states across the country, including Virginia, Mississippi, Alabama, Maryland, and New Jersey. Further, he won the popular vote in Illinois, beating both western candidates (Jackson and Clay) in their own backyard. With Crawford largely incapacitated from the stroke he had suffered in 1823, Adams’ only remaining competitor was Jackson who while popular among the people, had few friends in Washington. Thus, Adams, through the popular vote and the electoral balloting,

had eliminated his most daunting rival – Clay – and had situated himself to take advantage of the insider politics that would attend a House decision, which most observers had long believed would occur because of the number of candidates in the race.<sup>9</sup>

When it became clear in December that no candidate had received a majority of the electoral votes cast and the House of Representatives would select the president, Adams, unlike Jackson, did not stop his politicking.<sup>10</sup> Adams realized “like so many men who succeeded him, that if he really wanted the prize he had to reach for it.”<sup>11</sup> As House Speaker, Clay relished the role of kingmaker.<sup>12</sup> Even though Clay preferred Adams, he kept him on tenterhooks for weeks, entertaining the pleas from Jackson’s and Crawford’s supporters, until he discerned what he might “expect of him [Adams], in the event of his success.”<sup>13</sup> Adams, however, was no victim in this bargain. Over the course of three meetings with Robert Letcher, Clay’s emissary in these negotiations, Adams agreed that Clay would have “a prominent share in the Administration.”<sup>14</sup> While it was never specified, it was understood that Adams would appoint Clay secretary of state (his likely presidential successor). On Sunday, January 9, 1825, Clay met with Adams under the pretext that he wished to learn more about Adams’s views “with regard to some principles of great public importance, but without any personal considerations for himself.”<sup>15</sup> By the end of their conversation, Adams knew that Clay would support him, “even in the face of instructions” from the Kentucky legislature to support Jackson.<sup>16</sup>

Though not often discussed, Adams engaged in other “bargains” to ensure his selection in the House. John Scott, who was the sole representative from Missouri and would cast the only ballot on the state’s behalf, asked Adams to appoint a list of printers he recommended as the official printers in Missouri. Scott also requested that his brother, a judge in the Arkansas territory who had killed a man in duel, not be removed from his seat (by law, those participating

in duels were not allowed to hold public office). Adams agreed to the printers and “made no move to unseat the brother.”<sup>17</sup> Henry Warfield, a representative from Maryland who would likely provide the tie-breaking vote in that state’s delegation, feared that Adams would exclude Federalists from patronage positions and made his concerns known to the aspirant. Adams promised, “that I never would be at the head any Administration of proscription to any party – political or otherwise.”<sup>18</sup> Warfield was not the only person requiring reassurance. Both Daniel Webster of Massachusetts and Stephen Van Rensselaer, the “Patroon,” of New York also sought assurances on patronage issues from Adams. When the House voted on February 9, 1825, Adams won on the first ballot with the minimum number of states required – thirteen – including Kentucky, Missouri, Illinois, and New York.<sup>19</sup> Thus, Adams won the presidential chair by defeating Clay in the states and Jackson in the House.

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<sup>11</sup> Brands, *Andrew Jackson*, 338-40; Remini, *John Quincy Adams*, 54-7.

<sup>2</sup> Remini, *John Quincy Adams*, 50, 60.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>5</sup> Moser, Hoth, Hoemann, *Papers*, vol V, 113. In October of 1821, an anonymous supporter wrote to Jackson explaining the situation in Washington: “The President to revenge himself on you for your popularity, has united himself with the bitterest of your enemies...When you were appointed Governor of florida, they told your friends it was to Compliment you – amongst themselves they said it was to get rid of you – at the head of the Army you were still formidable...as a Govr. of a Territory – a mere colonial prefect without voice or influence in the Government of the Union he will soon be forgotten; or in that unsettled Country he may do some act of violence or irregularity for which we can put him down” (*ibid.*, 113). While this letter did not get to Jackson until January of 1822 (it went first to Florida and then followed him to Tennessee), the editors of his papers wrote that, “it reinforced the General’s suspicions about James Monroe’s attitude and intentions, pushing him [Jackson] to the verge of an outright break with the president” (*ibid.*, 112). For further discussion, see also Burstein, *Passions*, 149.

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<sup>6</sup> Remini, *John Quincy Adams*, 65. Reportedly, there were a thousand people at the reception hosted by John Q. Adams. See Moser, Hoth, Hoemann, *Papers*, vol. V, 341; Remini, *Election*, 108; Brands, *Andrew Jackson*, 381.

<sup>7</sup> Remini, *John Quincy Adams*, 66.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 67; Remini, *Henry Clay*, 240, 244-50. Scholars are in agreement that had Clay been among the top three vote getters whose names went to the House, it is likely that Clay would have engineered his own election to the presidency. In fact, this was his strategy for winning the presidency all along.

<sup>9</sup> Remini, *John Quincy Adams*, 64. As discussed in chapter two, the election results were as follows: Jackson earned 151,271 votes (99 electoral votes); Adams garnered 113,122 votes (84 electoral votes); Crawford won 40,856 votes (41 electoral votes); and Clay had 47,531 votes (37 electoral votes). See CQ, *Presidential Elections*, 112, 183.

<sup>10</sup> Brands, *Andrew Jackson*, 384.

<sup>11</sup> Remini, *John Quincy Adams*, 65.

<sup>12</sup> Remini in *Henry Clay* relates an amusing anecdote. At a dinner given in honor of the Marquis de Lafayette, Adams and Jackson were seated near the fireplace, but there was an empty chair between them. Clay “walked over to the two men, and plopped himself into the vacant chair,” and said: “Well, gentlemen since you are both so near the chair, but neither can occupy it, I will slip in between you, and take it myself” (*ibid.*, 257).

<sup>13</sup> Remini, *Henry Clay*, 253.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 255-6.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 262, 271.

<sup>18</sup> Remini, *John Quincy Adams*, 71-2.

<sup>19</sup> While Adams won the popular vote in Illinois, its House delegation voted for Adams “by the action of its single representative, Daniel Cook, who may or may not have been bribed” (Remini, *Henry Clay*, 264). Van Rensselaer, a devoutly religious man, had pledged his vote to Van Buren (for Crawford), but as he went to vote, he spotted a ballot on the floor inscribed with Adams’s name and believing it was a sign, he picked it up and “thrust it in the ballot box” (Remini, *John Quincy Adams*, 73).