

Lewis E. Lehrman: Election of 1824: The Battle of the Giants

Thursday, June 21, 2012

Editor's note: In this presidential year, this is the fourth of four pieces by Greenwich's Lewis E. Lehrman looking at notable presidential elections from our history.

Taking office in 1817, President James Monroe had been very careful to construct his Cabinet in such a way as not to show favoritism to potential successors. Since he and two other presidents had previously served as secretary of state, that post was considered a stepping stone to the White House. Monroe's reelection in 1820, virtually without opposition, had been a celebration of political "good feeling" in the country. Americans awaited a "Battle of the Giants" in 1824.

Rather than choosing one of the leading presidential contenders for secretary of state, Monroe selected John Quincy Adams, a veteran diplomat who seemed to lack the requisite political base or personality to contend for the presidency. Adams had served one term as a Massachusetts senator, but he seemed unlikely to follow his cranky father into the White House. Further, he was an unlikely ally of Monroe – having been harshly but privately critical of Monroe's diplomacy in Paris in the 1790s.

In picking Adams, Monroe alienated William H. Crawford, the affable Georgian who served as secretary of war at the end of the Madison Administration. Because Crawford had been the runner-up in the congressional caucus that chose Monroe as the Republicans' presidential candidate in 1816, Crawford thought he should be the heir-apparent to Monroe. To maintain his position in line, Crawford accepted nomination as secretary of the Treasury.

Crawford did not stay close to President Monroe, however. The Federalists had been reduced to a faction by this period of American history, so Crawford's supporters effectively became the not-very-loyal opposition in Congress. Monroe at one point considered dismissing Crawford from the Cabinet, but the president desisted because he was convinced that he might martyr Crawford straight into the presidency. Crawford's congressional backers bedeviled not only Monroe, but Secretary of State Adams, who grew increasingly antagonistic to Crawford. Late in Monroe's presidency, Crawford confronted the president at the White House and called Monroe an "infernal scoundrel." The president was rightly incensed and a brawl almost ensued before Crawford apologized.

Kentucky Congressman Henry Clay had earlier disdained Monroe's offer to become secretary of war, considering the job beneath his stature as speaker of the House. The war portfolio went instead to South Carolina's John Calhoun, who developed his own presidential interests. Clay

went on to fight a subdued war against Monroe from his position as House speaker. Clay nurtured his own agenda.

Effectively, the previously united Democratic Party was now divided into three competing sub-parties with four candidates for president. A major wrench was thrown into the Crawford-Adams-Clay-Calhoun fight in 1823 when, in September, Crawford was stricken with an infectious disease. The drug used to cure the disease proved worse than the disease itself. Crawford appeared to suffer a stroke that left him virtually without mobility, sight, or speech.

Crawford was the leading presidential candidate so supporters of other candidates boycotted the February congressional caucus that was convened to select a candidate. A shrunken “King Caucus” was denounced and ignored. The candidates launched their separate campaigns. Crawford’s candidacy continued although Crawford was only able to assume its direction in the spring of 1824 – before suffering a major physical relapse.

Calhoun saw his own potential slipping. He dropped his ambitions to the vice presidency, correctly reasoning that no one else of stature wanted the job. Calhoun also threw his support to a fourth candidate – whose prickly personality rivaled all the others: General Andrew Jackson.

In the fall election, Crawford would only win Virginia and Georgia. Clay took only three states. Adams swept the Northeast and Jackson won the rest of the states, especially in the South and Mid-Atlantic. The Electoral College tally was Jackson 99, Adams 84, Crawford 41, and Clay 37.

Although Jackson was the leader in both popular and electoral votes, he did not have a majority and the election between the top two candidates was thrown into the House of Representatives for the second time in American history. House Speaker Clay, who ran fourth, was out of the race and threw his support to Adams. Voting by state, Jackson won only seven delegations while Adams took 13.

Jackson and his supporters were incensed. They called the Adams’ victory “corrupt” – especially when Clay accepted Adams’ nomination to be secretary of state. Neither Adams nor Clay would fully recover from the allegations. In 1828, Andrew Jackson, the hero of the Battle of New Orleans, would cruise to victory in a race marked by bitter allegations.

John Quincy Adams, like his father before him, would refuse to attend the inauguration of his successor.

Lewis E. Lehrman is co-founder of the Gilder-Lehrman Institute of American History and author of *Lincoln at Peoria: The Turning Point* (Stackpole Books, 2008).