

## John Quincy Adams on the campaign trail, 1824-1828: Historical Context Essay

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### BACKGROUND ON JOHN QUINCY ADAMS

[John Quincy Adams](#) (1767-1848), son of John Adams and Abigail Smith Adams, served as the sixth president of the United States. A young child at the outbreak of the American Revolution, John Quincy accompanied his father to Europe in 1778 at age ten, living first in Paris and then Amsterdam. As a teenager, he traveled with Francis Dana to St. Petersburg, Russia, where he served as Dana's secretary and French interpreter. Returning to the United States in 1785, Adams attended Harvard University and trained to become a lawyer like his now famous father.<sup>1</sup>

After opening his law practice in Boston, John Quincy began writing essays in local newspapers under various pseudonyms ("[Publicola](#)," "[Menander](#)," "[Marcellus](#)," and "[Columbus](#)") to express his political views. Before long, though, a young but worldly Adams was back in Europe. In 1794, President George Washington appointed him resident minister to the Netherlands; in 1797, his father (now President Adams) sent him to Berlin as minister plenipotentiary to Prussia.<sup>2</sup>

Returning once again to the United States in 1801, John Quincy served in the Massachusetts state senate from 1802 to 1803 and the U.S. Senate from 1803 to 1808.<sup>3</sup> He was also named the first Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard University.<sup>4</sup> Soon he was abroad again, this time as minister plenipotentiary to Russia, where he lived for almost five years from 1809 to 1814.<sup>5</sup> Adams was sent to Ghent in 1814 to head the commission negotiating the [Anglo-American peace treaty that ended the War of 1812](#).<sup>6</sup> President James Madison then appointed John Quincy envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary to Great Britain, where he served from 1815 to 1817.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Quincy's birth through his college years are covered in *Adams Family Correspondence*, Volumes 1-8, available online in the [Adams Papers Digital Edition](#); the Introduction to each volume is a good starting point. Another primary source on his life and career is the [John Quincy Adams Digital Diary](#); entries begin in November 1779 and continue for the next 68 years. For a detailed overview of John Quincy's adolescence in Europe, see Phyllis Lee Levin, *The Remarkable Education of John Quincy Adams* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 33-131.

<sup>2</sup> *Adams Family Correspondence*, 10:xxix-xxxiii; 12:xxvi-xxix.

<sup>3</sup> *Adams Family Correspondence*, 15:xxiv-xxv; 16:xxiii-xxvii.

<sup>4</sup> *Adams Family Correspondence*, 16:171-172.

<sup>5</sup> *Diary and Autobiographical Writings of Louisa Catherine Adams*, ed. Judith S. Graham and others (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), 1:283-284.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Flagg Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Foundations of American Foreign Policy* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), 184, 188-189, 190-191, 195, 196-220.

<sup>7</sup> *Diary and Autobiographical Writings of Louisa Catherine Adams*, 2:784-785; Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Foundations of American Foreign Policy*, 221-243.

With decades of diplomatic experience, it was no surprise when President James Monroe appointed John Quincy Adams his secretary of state. Adams served in this role with distinction for eight years, from 1817 to 1825. His impressive accomplishments include the signing of the [Adams-Onís Transcontinental Treaty](#), which settled the boundary between the United States and Mexico and transferred Florida to the United States. Adams also developed the so-called [Monroe Doctrine](#), which established the Western hemisphere as a “sphere of interest” for the United States, warning European countries against future interference in the Americas.<sup>8</sup>

## ELECTION OF 1824

Five men sought the presidency in 1824. John Quincy Adams, now secretary of state—at that time a stepping-stone to the presidency—very much wanted to follow in his father’s footsteps and become president. Two other members of President Monroe’s cabinet, Secretary of the Treasury [William H. Crawford](#) and Secretary of War [John C. Calhoun](#), likewise sought the office. So did [Henry Clay](#), Speaker of the House of Representatives, and [General Andrew Jackson](#), a war hero remembered for his victory at the Battle of New Orleans during the War of 1812.<sup>9</sup>

All five presidential candidates called themselves Democratic-Republicans—the opposing Federalist Party was no longer influential at the national level. Though associated with the same political party, these presidential contenders did not share a unified ideology; in fact, each held slightly different views on tariffs, internal improvements, banking, public land policy, and slavery. There was no formal “platform” for the Democratic-Republican Party at the time.<sup>10</sup>

The presidential campaign was contentious. [John Quincy commented on it in his diary in August 1824](#): “The bitterness and violence of Presidential electioneering increases as the time advances. The uncertainty of the event continues as great as ever. It seems as if every liar and calumniator in the Country was at work day and night to destroy my character.” (*Source 1*) Adams rarely responded to accusations in newspapers, however. It would be “an endless task,” [he wrote, maintaining that](#) “the tongue of falsehood can never be silenced: and I have not time to spare from public business to the vindication of myself.” Instead, to promote his candidacy, Adams pioneered the use of the campaign biography, publishing (with his father’s help) “[Sketch of the Life of John Quincy Adams](#).” (*Source 6*) In it, Adams downplayed his extraordinary background, declaring himself “descended from a race of farmers, tradesmen, and mechanics.”

It was Andrew Jackson who received the most popular and electoral votes in the presidential election of 1824, but, with votes split between the candidates, he did not reach the necessary threshold to win. The [Twelfth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution](#) directs that in such instances the House of Representatives chooses the president with each state having one vote. As dictated in the Constitution, the House would consider the three candidates who received the

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<sup>8</sup> Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Foundations of American Foreign Policy*, 317-340, 363-408.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Flagg Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Union* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), 13.

<sup>10</sup> Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Union*, 24-27; Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 95.

most electoral votes: Jackson, Adams, and Crawford. Fourth-place finisher Henry Clay, who had support from western states as well as congressional friends across the country, could now throw his influence behind another candidate—which turned out to be Adams. And so, even though Jackson had the most public support, the [House of Representatives elected second-place finisher John Quincy Adams as the next President of the United States](#) on February 9, 1825.<sup>11</sup> [Adams was inaugurated the following month on March 4.](#)

Adams understood keenly that the way he ascended to the presidency, though constitutional, was not ideal and did not necessarily represent the will of the American people. In response to his election, [he wrote to members of the U.S. House](#), “All my Predecessors in the high station to which the favour of the House now calls me have been honored with majorities of the electoral voices, in their primary colleges.” (*Source 3*) Jackson and his supporters, for their part, felt that the election had been stolen and worked tirelessly to undermine John Quincy Adams and his agenda for the next four years.

## CORRUPT BARGAIN

Shortly after the 1824 presidential election, an anonymous letter in a Washington, D.C., newspaper sparked rumors about a “corrupt bargain” that allegedly had been struck between John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay in which Clay agreed to support Adams for president in exchange for being named secretary of state. While Clay likely did engage in behind-the-scenes political maneuvering to push support toward Adams, there is no evidence of corruption. Both men always denied that there was an explicit arrangement.<sup>12</sup> After Adams’s presidency ended, [Clay wrote to him](#): “So far was I, in voting for you as President, from being influenced by any personal or selfish consideration, that I felt and I stated, at the time, that, if I knew and *disapproved* every member of your Cabinet, I should still greatly prefer you to General Jackson.” [Adams likewise stood by his decision to nominate Clay as secretary of state](#), insisting in 1830 that he still “believed him the man of the Union best fitted for the place.”

Adams and Clay were not close allies—[Adams thought Clay an excellent and ambitious politician](#), if “only half educated” and having “loose” morals—but they were more similar ideologically than the other candidates, and it made sense that they supported one another politically. However, Jackson’s supporters were furious, attacking Clay in newspapers and even threatening him with violence. Though unproven, the widely-circulated and oft-repeated allegations of a “corrupt bargain” cast shadows on both Adams’s and Clay’s political careers and soured public perception of them for many years. When Clay ran for president against James K. Polk in 1844, [an elderly Adams referred once again in his diary to the](#) “old slander of a corrupt bargain between Henry Clay and me.” He lamented that “this stale and base columny, already abandoned and recanted” had been rekindled “into a flame to consume Clay’s election hopes and my honest fame.” (*Source 8*)

<sup>11</sup> Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Union*, 30, 47, 51.

<sup>12</sup> Howe, *What God Hath Wrought*, 247.

## PRESIDENCY

John Quincy Adams's one term as president was in many respects the low point of his political career. Intelligent and well-read, introverted and reserved, self-disciplined and principled almost to a fault, Adams excelled as a diplomat but struggled as president. Near the beginning of his administration he laid out an ambitious agenda: he wanted the federal government to support internal improvements and infrastructure, and he had plans for a national university, a naval academy, and the creation of a Department of the Interior.<sup>13</sup> In the end he accomplished very little, mostly because he faced overwhelming political opposition—especially after the 1826 midterm elections when Andrew Jackson's supporters took control of Congress. While Adams and Jackson had been on good terms prior to the 1824 election—[Adams even threw a ball for General Jackson](#) in early 1824 and [considered asking Jackson to be his running mate](#)—their relationship deteriorated quickly following the presidential race. [Less than a year into his presidency, Adams wrote in his diary that](#) “a great effort had been made in both Houses to combine the discordant elements, of the Crawford and Jackson and Calhoun men into a united opposition, against the Administration.” In 1826, Adams's vice president, John C. Calhoun, informed Jackson that he would support him—not Adams—in the next presidential election.<sup>14</sup>

## ELECTION OF 1828

The election of 1828, a rematch between John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson, proved to be an absolutely brutal campaign in which both candidates (and their wives, Louisa Catherine Johnson Adams and Rachel Donelson Jackson) were personally attacked by the opposing side. In addition to accusations of corruption surrounding the 1824 election, there was criticism of Adams being [“educated a monarchist”](#) and being [“hostile to popular government.”](#) Perhaps the most extreme political smear Adams faced was that he acted as a pimp for Alexander I while living in Russia, supposedly brokering a relationship between the czar and an Adams servant.<sup>15</sup> [Adams, shocked, declared this](#) an “infamous calumny” and a “new form of Slander.” [As he summarized February 1829 in his diary, he concluded that there was](#) a “combination of parties, and of public men, against my character and reputation such as I believe never before was exhibited against any man since this Union existed— Posterity will scarcely believe it.”

In 1828 Andrew Jackson won by a landslide, with 178 to Adams's 83 electoral votes.<sup>16</sup> Adams would be a one-term president, just like his father. [Adams grieved](#): “The Sun of my political life sets in the deepest gloom.” Exhausted and angry, he refused to attend Jackson's inauguration. Five years later, when Jackson received an honorary degree of Doctor of Laws from Harvard, Adam refused to attend that too. “The personal Relations in which President Jackson had

<sup>13</sup> Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Union*, 69, 74-76; Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 251-260.

<sup>14</sup> *The Papers of Andrew Jackson*, Volume VI, 1825-1828, ed. Harold D. Moser and J. Clint Clift (University of Tennessee Press, 2002), 177-178, 187-188. Volume PDF available for download at [https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk\\_jackson/12/](https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_jackson/12/)

<sup>15</sup> *Diary and Autobiographical Writings of Louisa Catherine Adams*, 1:332.

<sup>16</sup> Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Union*, 150.

chosen to place himself with me,” [Adams declared](#), “were such that I could hold no intercourse of a friendly character with him.”

## POST-PRESIDENTIAL CAREER

Two years after Adams’s defeat, Massachusetts sent him back to Washington D.C., this time as a congressman. John Quincy Adams went on to serve in the House of Representatives for eighteen years.<sup>17</sup> During this time he advocated for an end to the “gag rule” that prevented congressional discussion or consideration of antislavery petitions, [achieving its repeal in 1844](#).<sup>18</sup> [He also successfully defended the Africans of the \*Amistad\*, arguing brilliantly before the U.S. Supreme Court](#). Now in his early seventies, [he acknowledged](#), “More than 60 years of incessant active intercourse with the world has made political movement to me as much a necessary of life as atmospheric air. . . . And thus while a remnant of physical power is left me to write and speak, the world will retire from me before I shall retire from the world.” Adams had a stroke on the House floor on February 21, 1848, and died in the Capitol building two days later.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Diary and Autobiographical Writings of Louisa Catherine Adams*, 2:790-791; Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Union*, 206-210.

<sup>18</sup> Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Union*, 335-351, 367-383, 416-447.

<sup>19</sup> *Diary and Autobiographical Writings of Louisa Catherine Adams*, 2:793.