

Martin Van Buren and Andrew Jackson Organize a Tea Party

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This is part one of a three-part series.

In 1832 Martin Van Buren helped Andrew Jackson decide precisely when he would end the charter for the Second Bank of the United States – the only American central bank of issue before the establishment of the Federal Reserve. Over the next five years, by legislation, executive order and political precedent, the two men would carry out the rest of their plan for the application and enforcement of uniquely American rules for government finance: All net borrowings, payments and tax collections by the national Treasury would be made in gold and silver coin.

The 1821 elections in New York State were a triumph for Martin Van Buren. Over the previous decade and a half, Van Buren had been able to organize his upstate allies into a political party and extend their reach to control New York City's, Tammany Hall. In doing so, they not only took over America's first and most enduring city political machine; they also changed its politics.

The Sons of St. Tammany (the original name of the organizers of Tammany Hall) would stop demonstrating against and sometimes physically attacking the people getting off the ships in New York harbor; instead, they would welcome the newcomers as future naturalized citizens and New York State voters. In 1820, Van Buren's party had proposed a reform that would have easily doubled (or more) the number of people eligible to vote. Governor DeWitt Clinton had vetoed the legislation, and Van Buren's men (there were, of course, no women in the legislature) had been unable to override the veto. However, the Bucktails (wearers of Tammany hats with their deer tail ornaments) had been able to place on the ballot a reform referendum to amend the New York State constitution. The amendment would remove all property qualifications for adult white males. (It would retain them for free blacks. Before the Civil War Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire were the only states whose laws gave black men the equal right to vote. Every state admitted to the Union between 1820 and 1865 had a constitution that included racial disqualifications for blacks and Native Americans.)

Van Buren's reform enabling "free" voting for white working men was hopelessly racist and sexist; and it was for Americans in 1821 an extraordinary and controversial democratic reform. It was also brilliant politics. Van Buren's expansion of "the vote" gave his party an electoral lock that even DeWitt Clinton, the state's most famous and popular politician, would find nearly impossible to break. The Irish immigrants whom Tammany Hall had once feared had become the Bucktails' most loyal supporters; for the next 16 years they would help get out the votes that made Van Buren's coalition the political majority for the Empire State.

Clinton and his coalition of conservative Republican-Democrats and Federalists would fight back. They would use the most enduring tactic in American politics: They would accuse Van Buren of being against the populist changes he had initiated. Within months of being elected, Van Buren's coalition was being labelled "the Albany regency." King George III had died in 1820, after decades of suffering from severe mental illness. In calling Van Buren's populist Republican-Democrats the "regency," Clinton and his allies were comparing Van Buren to the Prince of Wales, who had acted as his father's regent during his incapacity. The nickname said Van Buren was anything but a populist; he was a sneaky royalist.

Andrew Jackson's opponents would later use the same tactic and the same analogy to British politics. They would name themselves "the Whigs" in honor of the 18th century Britons who had supported the American colonists in their revolution. Andrew Jackson, the American Whigs would argue, was not a populist at all but a Tory tyrant like George III. In 1821, Andrew Jackson was a long way from becoming either king or president. If for Van Buren the year was an electoral triumph, for Jackson it would become a political disaster. His close friend and comrade would decide to run for governor.

In Tennessee, William Carroll was almost as much of a war hero as Andrew Jackson. Carroll had been Jackson's second-

in-command and had directed the Tennessee militia in the center of the line of battle at New Orleans. After the war ended, he became what in our day would be a venture capitalist; he and his partners would invest in the revolutionary technology of the day – the river steamboat. In 1819, Carroll would command the first steamboat to travel from New Orleans up the Mississippi, Ohio and Cumberland rivers. The journey past the snags and shoals was full of risk and technical difficulty, but it ended in a spectacular success. Carroll's boat, named The General Jackson, arrived safely in Nashville to universal applause and acclaim. It was also a complete financial failure. Carroll would face bankruptcy, along with many others, in the Panic of 1819.

Andrew Jackson had experienced his own financial bust. He had been caught in the squeeze of the Panic of 1797 and had to resign as Tennessee's first U.S. senator in 1798, a year after he had been appointed. In 1804, he would lose his plantation in a forced sale. The money men of the Republican-Democrat Caucus in Tennessee – the Blount brothers and Joseph McMinn – helped Jackson rebuild his personal fortune and his reputation. When Jackson led the Tennessee militia to defeat at the Creek at Horseshoe Bend and the British Army at the Battle of New Orleans, his supporters' political and financial bet paid off spectacularly. By the end of the war, Jackson had become the Jefferson-Madison-Monroe party's favorite son in a new and growing state. Thomas Jefferson had invited Jackson to visit Monticello, and President Monroe had taken Jackson on his inspection tour of the South during Monroe's re-election campaign.

What made the election of 1821 difficult for Jackson was that he could not support his friend William Carroll. He was committed to support another friend and neighbor, Edward Ward, who was the Republican-Democrat party's choice. Carroll, like Martin Van Buren in New York, was committed to a populist reform agenda; Ward represented the establishment. The election presented a further complication for Jackson because his candidate was against the Second Bank of the United States but for all the wrong reasons. Jackson was a supporter of the state-chartered banks and had his doubts about the wisdom and constitutionality of a nationally-chartered central bank. But Ward and the establishment Republican-Democrats were opposing the Second Bank because it wanted to add to the number of banks in Tennessee by opening a branch office in Nashville. Ward opposed the idea because it might threaten the duopoly enjoyed by the two Tennessee-chartered banks that were his party's principal financial backers.

Carroll was campaigning for more lenient debtor laws (he wanted to end corporal punishment for bankruptcy) and more lending by more banks. Carroll was seeking the approval of the same populist voters who had supported Van Buren's Bucktails. In the election, Ward was crushed, losing 32,290 votes to 7,294. After the election, Jackson was still Tennessee's most famous politician; and he was still Carroll's close friend. In July of the following year, the Tennessee Carroll would have the Tennessee general assembly nominate Jackson for president. In the next election, they would appoint him to the U.S. Senate. But these victories came at a great cost; in accepting his second election to the Senate, Jackson lost all backing from the establishment Republican-Democrats, both in his home state and in the country at large. When Jackson arrived in Washington, D.C. in December 1823 to take his seat, he was now a complete outsider as far as the Jefferson-Madison-Monroe party was concerned.

Since Jefferson's election in 1800, the Republican-Democrats had established two reliable rules for governing the country. They would use a party caucus of the House of Representatives as their system of choosing nominees for president and vice president; and the president's appointment of secretary of state would be his recommendation for his successor. Jefferson had chosen Madison; Madison had chosen Monroe; Monroe had chosen John Quincy Adams. Not only had Jackson been elected by the Tennessee establishment's opponents, but Jackson's presidential candidacy violated all the orderly rules of the caucus system. It was yet another reason to wonder if Jackson was not a hopelessly crude upstart.

By 1823, Jefferson would withdraw his endorsement of Jackson. Jackson, Jefferson warned, lacked the ability to be chief executive and was a dangerous man. Martin Van Buren had been in the Senate for two years when Andrew Jackson arrived at the Capitol. Van Buren had not been ostracized; on the contrary, he had been elected by the caucus as chairman of the judiciary committee. But Van Buren had been questioning the political judgment of the Monroe administration's congressional caucus. He had already quarreled with the president over the patronage appointment of a postmaster for Albany. Still worse, he had serious reservations about the party's choice of a successor.

In Van Buren's view, there were two national issues of paramount importance: the tariff and the need for more investment in the country. Like his father, John Quincy Adams seemed to think that taxes and capital spending had no necessary relation to one another. Adams shared Henry Clay's Hamiltonian belief that improvements could come from federal government expenditure. That meant, as it always did, that Congress would want to borrow and spend in addition to the funds it would raise from tariffs. The spending might reward Van Buren's manufacturing constituents; but its greatest profits would go to the Massachusetts textile producers. What the New England merchants had lost from the war and trade embargoes would be made up from the protections against competition from British and French imports.

For Van Buren the only sound policy was George Washington's economic model – hard money, free banking and tariffs for revenue first and protection second. That was not going to be John Quincy Adams' agenda. Once he had decided to

oppose the Monroe caucus' choice of Adams, Van Buren might have been tempted to consider Jackson, but Tennessee's new senator's ideas about government finance were unclear, at best. Was Jackson for or against the expansion of bank credit in the United States? Did he separate the Second Bank of the United States' ability to issue legal tender from state-chartered banks' ability to issue their own notes? It was hard to know where Jackson stood and if he even understood the issues involved.

In any case, Van Buren was already committed to support Monroe's Secretary of the Treasury William Crawford. Crawford had been secretary of war during the War of 1812 and then secretary of the treasury during Madison's last year in office; he had stayed on at Treasury under President Monroe. By the time Van Buren and Crawford met at Crawford's home in Georgia in the spring of 1823, Van Buren had decided that Crawford was his best choice. Van Buren's hope was that Crawford could work with the new president of the Second Bank of the United States, Nicholas Biddle, to return the relationship between the national and state banks to what it had been under Thomas Willing and the First Bank of the United States. Crawford had supported the renewal of the First Bank's charter; and he remembered that it had been Henry Clay's vote that had defeated the renewal. Above all, Van Buren wanted the next president to oppose Clay's plan for infrastructure spending by the federal government. On that question, there had been no uncertainty about where Andrew Jackson stood. He was against anything that Henry Clay would ever propose.

Both Jackson and Van Buren's hopes for a victory in 1824 would be disappointed. When Crawford had a serious stroke in the summer of 1823, Van Buren privately hoped that his candidate would withdraw; but he knew that Crawford was as stubbornly determined a man as Jackson ever was. (Crawford and Jackson shared the extraordinary distinction of each having dueled with Thomas Hart Benton, the senator from Missouri.) Crawford did not withdraw his candidacy; he would, with his serious disability, continue to seek the presidency, even threatening to run against Van Buren himself in 1836. Van Buren's Albany regency was not able to sell a disabled candidate to its voters; and Jackson's enormous personal popularity was not enough, by itself, to win him the election.

Van Buren's failure in his home state was particularly notable; in the Electoral College, aside from two in Louisiana, one in Illinois and three in Maryland, the 26 votes in New York were the only votes John Quincy Adams won outside of New England. Had those New York votes gone to Jackson, he would have been elected outright as the winner. Instead, the result would be determined under the 12th Amendment by a count of the state delegations to the House of Representatives. In the final tally, with each state delegation having one vote, Adams won 13, Jackson seven and Crawford four. Henry Clay, as the fourth-place candidate in the general election, was not eligible to be chosen.

When he learned the results of the House ballot, so the story goes, Andrew Jackson lost his famous temper and raged at the betrayal of Henry Clay. Henry Clay had lobbied the House delegations in the states that he had won outright – Kentucky, Ohio and Missouri – to give their support to John Quincy Adams. “The Corrupt Bargain,” Jackson allegedly raged, would give Clay the appointment of secretary of state. The problem with the story is that Jackson and Clay were political enemies long before the 1824 popular election. Clay had been a consistent advocate of what we today would call “infrastructure investment” by the federal government, and the New England old guard federalists could hardly be expected to oppose him. Jackson and Van Buren both knew that they might have blown the chance to elect a Tennessee populist as president. Between them, Jackson and Crawford had won 52.5% of the popular vote and nearly 59% of the electoral votes. If they had been on the same ticket, if Crawford instead of John Calhoun had been Jackson's vice presidential running mate, Jackson would have won in a landslide.

Throughout his life, Martin Van Buren enjoyed a taste for fine clothes. People argued about exactly how he acquired the nickname of “the magician.” Some accepted the notion that Van Buren was being praised for his ability to maneuver legislation through the New York Assembly. Others said the name was the proper ridicule for Van Buren's habit of carrying the silk scarves performers found so useful for magic tricks. Van Buren's actual upbringing was anything but luxurious. He grew up in Kinderhook, N.Y., a town 20 miles south of Albany on the Post Road to New York City. Van Buren's first language was Dutch; he is still the only president for whom English was a second language. His father owned a tavern where Van Buren worked as a serving and pot boy. “Little Van” (as an adult he was, at most, 5'6”) grew up listening to the gossip of the customers, which was almost entirely about politics. In that Dutch community, the discussions would be as much about the struggles of the old country for independence as they were about General Washington and the new federal government in New York City. At age 14 Van Buren was apprenticed as a clerk to Peter Silvester, who was the town's state senator. Silvester had been a member of the provincial congresses that led the revolt against British rule in upstate New York; and he was a passionate supporter of George Washington. It is from Silvester that Van Buren learned the importance for a lawyer of proper dress and appearance.

Silvester also taught his pupil the importance of political tolerance. Silvester was a Federalist; but, at the end of Van Buren's five-year apprenticeship, Silvester arranged for him to finish his training by clerking for William Van Ness in New York City. Van Ness was a Republican-Democrat and an ally of Aaron Burr.

From his days as a young soldier, Andrew Jackson literally modeled his life on Washington's – in his personal courage as a soldier, his relentless work to improve his plantation lands, and in his devoted marriage. Van Buren had the same admiration for President's Washington's domestic virtue; like Jackson he was a faithful and devoted husband. Neither man would remarry after becoming a widower. But Van Buren's particular appreciation for Washington came from Peter Silvester's tutoring and Van Buren's own study of the art of politics. As Washington served as chair of the Constitutional Convention and then as president, Van Buren would learn first-hand about the maneuverings of Congress and the New York legislature. At the same time, he would read the reports from Holland of the failed Batavian revolution by the Dutch patriots.

By 1824, it was clear that Washington had created for Americans what no leader had been able to achieve for the Dutch: a country in which citizens, provinces and national government were united within a single political union of separate popular sovereignties.

If Jackson was to have another chance, he and Van Buren would have to build a party with a platform that united the "planters of the South and the plan Republicans of the north." Washington had been the only American "founder" who had seen the colonies, both north and south. He had seen that the only "complete antidote for sectional prejudices" was "counteracting feeling" of the shared attachment of principles. Those principles had to be clear statements of the rights of personal liberty, property and political union. Washington's Farewell Address had been quite clear: "For the preservation of your government, and the permanency of your present happy state, it is requisite, not only that you steadily discountenance irregular oppositions to its acknowledged authority, but also that you resist with care the spirit of innovation upon its principles, however specious the pretexts. One method of assault may be to effect, in the forms of the Constitution, alterations which will impair the energy of the system, and thus to undermine what cannot be directly overthrown."

Washington's genius was to understand that the key to preserving such a union was to put the citizens' individual interests first. Madison and Jefferson were absolutely right to focus on the question of individual rights; but they were absurd to think that a Bill of Rights would be sufficient protection. No piece of paper would ever restrain official sovereignty. The French, Dutch and English might disagree about the source of government's ultimate power (was it God, nature or the people?), but their constitutions all accepted the premise that the national government was supreme and legally immune from challenge. They shared without question the presumption of total authority that John Locke had written into the fundamental constitutions of Carolina.

This was what Americans had fought for in the Revolution; their motto had been, "Don't tread on me." The only practical protection for Americans' liberties would come from the balances of power within governments but also between them. If the words, "we the People," that began the constitutions of Tennessee, New York and the United States were to be more than rhetorical flourishes, they had to be declarations that the state and national governments had equal sources of authority and both were limited by their charters. As long as popular sovereignty was actively exercised in the individual states and the United States, individual liberties would be able to flourish. Individual liberties would come from being free of "the law," not from being protected by it.

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