

The Making of a Nation – Program No. 42

James Monroe, Part 3:

The Election of 1824

From VOA Learning English, welcome to the Making of a Nation, our weekly program of American history for people learning English. I'm Steve Ember.

Last week we talked about slavery in new American states and whether Congress could set the conditions for statehood. The Missouri Compromise in 1820 settled the issue for a short time.

The compromise said that Missouri could enter the Union as a slave state, and Maine could enter as a free state. By approving these two states at the same time, Congress kept a balance of power in the Senate between slave and free states.

But the compromise also said no more states in the northern Louisiana Territory could be admitted as slave states. As a result, slavery could not enter the new areas of the United States.

Some people did not like the compromise. They said it limited the ability of slave owners to settle in the country's western territory. Others said the Constitution did not permit Congress to say that new states had to be slave or free. Even President Monroe did not believe the government had the power to make such decisions. Yet he approved the compromise. He was trying, he said, to avoid a civil war.

Monroe's decision to approve the compromise did not hurt his election chances in 1820. There was at this time really only one party—the Republican Party—and he was its leader. The opposition Federalist Party was dead. It was no longer an election threat.

So, Monroe was the only presidential candidate in the election of 1820. He received the vote of every elector, except for one. William Plumer of New Hampshire voted for John Quincy Adams. He explained later that George Washington had been the only president to get all the electoral votes. Plumer said he did not want anyone to share this honor given to Washington.

Monroe's first four years as president had been successful. He had increased the size of the United States. Florida was now part of the country. And the problem of slavery had been temporarily settled. There had been economic problems—some of the worst in the nation's history. But the situation was getting better.

And the nation was growing. As it grew, new problems developed between its different sections. There were really three separate areas with very different interests.

The northeastern states had become the industrial center of the nation. The southern states were agricultural with large farms that produced cotton, rice and tobacco. Much of the work on these farms was done by slave labor.

The western states were areas of small farms where grain was produced with free labor. It was a place where the land did not cost much and where

people could make a new start, and build a new life.

This division of the nation into different sections with opposing interests ended the one-party system of Monroe's administration. The industrial Northeast wanted high taxes on imported products to protect its industry from foreign competition. This part of the country also believed the national government should pay for roads and waterways to get their products to markets.

The South did not agree to high import taxes. These taxes raised the prices on all goods. And import taxes on foreign goods might cause foreign nations to raise import taxes on southern cotton and tobacco. The South also opposed spending federal money for roads and canals. The mountains through parts of the southern Atlantic states would make road-building difficult and canals impossible.

The western states supported government aid in building roads and canals. The Ohio and Mississippi rivers were the only inexpensive transportation systems for moving their products to markets. The westerners also supported high taxes on imports, because they believed such taxes would raise the prices of their agricultural products.

The separate interests of these different sections produced an exciting campaign in the next presidential election. Each section had at least one candidate. Several had more than one. The campaign began almost as soon as Monroe was elected for the second time.

At one time, as many as 16 men thought of themselves as presidential possibilities. By 1822, the number had been reduced to six men.

John Quincy Adams was the only northern candidate. He was an extremely able man. He was at the time secretary of state, and there were few jobs in government he could not do, and do well. But many people found him cold and questioning. His father was John Adams, the second president of the United States.

The West had two candidates. One was Henry Clay of Kentucky, popularly known as "Harry of the West." He was a great lawyer, congressman, speaker of the House and senator.

The other was Andrew Jackson—"Old Hickory"—the hero of the Battle of New Orleans during the War of 1812. Jackson knew little about government. He was a fighter, a man of the people.

In the election 1824, Jackson got the most electoral votes: 99. But he needed 130 to win a majority.

The secretary of state, John Quincy Adams, was second. Treasury Secretary William Crawford was third. And Henry Clay of Kentucky was fourth.

Because none of the candidates got a majority of the votes, the decision went to the House of Representatives. The House voted on only the three top candidates for president.

The most powerful man in Congress—Henry Clay—was not, therefore, a candidate. But Clay's support would be the greatest help any of the candidates could receive. All three wanted his support.

Treasury Secretary Crawford had suffered a serious illness before the election, and his health was bad. Clay felt he could not support him for that reason.

This left Adams and Jackson. Clay did not agree with all of Adams' policies. But he did believe Adams had the education and ability to be president.

Clay did not like Jackson, the hero of New Orleans. He knew Jackson was poorly educated and easy to anger. Clay did not think Jackson would be a good president.

So Clay decided to support Adams for president. He said nothing about this for a time. Several of Clay's friends visited Adams. They told him that Clay's supporters in the West would be pleased if Adams, as president, named Clay as secretary of state.

Adams told them that if the votes of the West elected him president, he would put a westerner in his cabinet. But he would not promise that the westerner would be Clay, or that the cabinet job would be secretary of state.

Clay had still not said publicly which candidate he supported. But late in January, a Philadelphia newspaper published an unsigned letter. The letter charged that Clay and Adams had made a secret agreement.

Clay, the letter said, would give his support to Adams. In exchange, Adams would name Clay as his secretary of state.

Clay was furious. He not only denied the charge, but offered to fight a duel with the letter-writer. But whoever wrote the letter to the newspaper refused to say anything. Clay was sure Jackson's supporters were responsible.

Snow was falling in Washington on the morning of February 9, the day that Congress would elect the president. At noon, members of Congress walked into the House of Representatives.

Each state had one vote for president. Adams was sure he would get the votes of 12 states. Crawford had the votes of four and Jackson seven. New York was the question. Seventeen of the New York congressmen were for Adams, and seventeen were against him. Adams needed just one of these votes to get the vote of New York and become president.

One of those New Yorkers opposed to Adams was a rich old man who represented the Albany area, Stephen Van Rensselaer. Although Van Rensselaer had supported Crawford or Jackson, he really was not sure now whom to support.

When the New York congressmen voted, Van Rensselaer was still not certain. He put his head down on his desk and asked God to help him make the right choice.

After this short prayer, he opened his eyes and saw on the floor at his feet a piece of paper with Adams's name on it. Van Rensselaer picked it up and put it in the ballot box as his vote.

This gave Adams the vote of the state of New York and made him the next president of the United States.

Two days later, Adams told President Monroe that he had decided to offer the job of secretary of state to Clay. He said he was doing so because of the western support he had received.

Clay accepted the offer.

Now, Jackson was sure that Clay had sold his vote to Adams for the top cabinet job. He wrote to a friend: "Was there ever before such bare faced corruption? What is this trade of vote for office, if not bribery?"

Jackson, himself a senator, showed his feelings when the Senate was asked to approve Clay as secretary of state. He voted no. And 13 other senators joined him against the nomination. But they were too few to prevent Clay from getting the job.

With Clay as his secretary of state, John Quincy Adams began his first term as president. His administration will be our story next week.

I'm Steve Ember, inviting you to join us next time for The Making of a Nation – American History from VOA Learning English.