CONTENTS

Editors' Foreword ix
Acknowledgments xi
1 Myth and Reality 1

PART I: Candidates and Constituents
2 The Virginia Candidate 25
3 A Northern Man 49
4 The Dread of Apollo 72
5 The Western Interest 94
6 Enter the General 113

PART II: Campaigns and Coalitions
7 A Season in Washington 137
8 Popular Battlegrounds 169
9 Legislators Take a Hand 201
10 The Corrupt Bargain 229

Epilogue 258

Appendix 1: Electoral and Popular Votes 279
Appendix 2: John Quincy Adams’s Inaugural Address, March 4, 1825 283
Notes 289
Bibliographic Essay 327
Index 341
Old interpretations, like old habits, die hard. Of these, few have been more conspicuously long-lived than the conventional wisdom concerning the presidential election of 1824.

We know, or think we know, the story. A five-way race (that becomes a four-way race) for the presidency decisively ends the “era of good feeling” and slays “King Caucus.” A four-way race becomes a two-way race as the Electoral College is deadlocked. Candidates three and four (William Crawford, by then disabled, and Henry Clay, eliminated) hold the key to whether candidate one or two shall be chosen by the Congress. General Andrew Jackson, hero of the battle of New Orleans, has won a plurality but not a majority of either the popular or the electoral vote. Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, occupying what up until 1824 has been the Cabinet stepping-stone to the presidency, has come in a close second.

Both candidates attempt to persuade Clay and his supporters. In the end, a “corrupt bargain,” in which Clay (“the Judas of the West” in a colorful Jacksonian formulation) gains the secretaryship of state in return for supporting Adams, almost immediately launches the campaign of 1828 and renders the New Engander, like his father before him, a one-term president.

All very exciting—and all so appealing to those historians of a Jacksonian persuasion, and others besides, who too often shape their understanding of what comes before by their knowledge of what comes after. In this reading, 1824 takes on meaning as a prelude to 1828 and what one historian has called Andrew Jackson’s “search for vindication.” Exciting and appealing, but—as George Gershwin once wrote, and as Donald Ratcliffe’s stunning reexamination of the election of 1824 clearly demonstrates, it “ain’t necessarily so.”

Beginning with an introductory essay that is, by itself, a gem, Ratcliffe tells us why this election is significant, explains how it has so often been either overlooked or misunderstood, and prepares readers for the narrative to follow. That narrative is at once succinct, comprehensive, and provocative. It is also persuasive in its fresh and fundamentally different take on the “corrupt bargain.” This interpretation ought in time to find
its way into textbooks, course lectures, and subsequent studies of the emergence of the Second Party System. In cautioning us, as we need so often to be cautioned, not to read our knowledge of the future back into the past, Ratcliffe takes these men and issues as they were and for what they said and did, and not for what they would in time become. So simple to say. So hard to do.

At the same time, we get a clear sense of character and temperament, of setting and color. Ratcliffe makes us feel as though we are there, even as he systematically demolishes the conventional wisdom. That this reconsideration has been so long overdue adds to its value. With this volume, Donald Ratcliffe invites readers on a journey of twists and turns, and of surprises aplenty. There could not be a more congenial, or credible, guide.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I was first introduced to the 1824 presidential election fifty years ago. Charles Sellers asked me the pertinent question: how did an election that historians conventionally typified as a purely personal contest lead on to a party system that became as issue-oriented as the Second Party System had by the early 1840s? The immediate result was an essay on the 1824 election in Ohio that appeared in the *Journal of American History* in 1973. Though my work became increasingly obsessed with medium-term political development in Ohio—among a variety of other things—my interest in this election has never dimmed, and I must acknowledge my gratitude both to Sellers for his lasting intellectual stimulus and to Kenneth Stampp for godfathering that invaluable year of graduate study at Berkeley. Inevitably the long gestation of this book means that I have acquired so many debts over half a century that this brief note cannot possibly express my gratitude to all who deserve it.

The University of Durham provided consistent support throughout a full career there, culminating in a Christopherson Research Fellowship. The university’s financial assistance was generously and decisively reinforced at critical moments by the American Council of Learned Societies, the American Antiquarian Society, and the British Academy and its grant-making successor, the Humanities Research Council. Ohio State University gave me employment for a year in 1980, and the friends I made there continued to provide hospitality and stimulus over many years following. I have spelled out my gratitude in two previous books on the political history of Ohio, and I continue to benefit from the after-effects of their kindness.

The American Antiquarian Society has been an important source for my research ever since I was awarded a short-term fellowship in 1984. Its excellent staff have for over a generation been an unfailing source of advice and assistance on a number of research trips. In particular I have benefited from many conversations with Philip Lampi, whose amazing collection of voting returns (now available at http://elections.lib.tufts.edu) and extraordinary detailed grasp of their significance have been far more important in developing my understanding of 1824 than may appear from the text and notes.
In 2004 the University of Oxford appointed me to a departmental lectureship that led on, in retirement, to a fellowship at the Rothermere American Institute. This good fortune transformed my research and publication through the combination of the stimulus of an excellent set of colleagues, the support of the institute under Nigel Bowles, the wonderful resources of the Bodleian’s Vere Harmsworth Library, which the institute houses, and the commendable helpfulness and advice of the library staff. I could not have written this book without Oxford’s resources—or, indeed, without its many visiting American historians. Chief among them must be Joel Silbey, who suggested the first sentence of this book, though he may not approve of the direction in which I have taken it.

Some material and ideas in this book have appeared previously in articles in the *Journal of American History*, the *Journal of the Early Republic*, and *Ohio History*, as well as in my *The Politics of Long Division, 1818–1828*. For encouragement to reuse some of that material, I am grateful to the *Journal of American History* and the Organization of American Historians, to the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic and the University of Pennsylvania Press, to the Ohio Historical Society, and to the Ohio State University Press. In the course of my long preparation, I have run up some important intellectual debts, notably to John Ashworth, Daniel Feller, Ronald Formisano, Howell Harris, Michael Heale, Michael Holt, Daniel Walker Howe, Philip Lampi, Peter Onuf, Daniel Peart, Daniel Preston, Andrew Robertson, William Shade, and David Waldstreicher, as well as to many other friends in BrANCH and SHEAR and to numerous anonymous critics. This present work has been read for me by several good friends who blessed me with constructive criticisms, for which I am deeply grateful: Richard Carwardine and Jay Sexton in Oxford, Daniel Peart, who has been most generous with his time and his research, and the ever pertinent, independent, and vigorous Daniel Feller.

I must in particular also thank the staff of the University Press of Kansas for making the process of production so comparatively swift and painless. I am grateful for the professionalism and thoughtful help of Larisa Martin, my production editor; the copy editor, Karen Hellekson; Marketing Director Michael R. Kehoe and Art Director Karl Janssen (who designed the dust jacket); Sara Henderson White; and no doubt countless others. But above all I must thank Director Emeritus Fred Woodward and the two editors of the series, John McCardell and Mi-
Michael Nelson, for showing the most extraordinary patience and humanity in enticing me along to the completion of the project through difficult and, I hope, unusual circumstances.

Halfway through writing this book, I was laid low by a mental illness that for more than a year submerged me in a world of paranoia, hallucination, and nightmare. The people who helped me get through that slough of despond contributed more than they can know to the completion of this book. I owe most to my wife and my sister, to whom in particular I dedicate this book; to my children and their partners; to village friends and distant relations; to my family doctor and psychiatrist (both of them dedicated professionals freely provided by our National Health Service); and to many friendly souls scattered from the University Press of Kansas to Durham University. Much support came from within the American history community: from colleagues in Oxford, notably Nigel Bowles, Richard Carwardine, Gareth Davies, Jay Sexton, and, by affiliation, Michael Heale and David Turley; from partners in BrANCH, especially Martin Crawford and Dan Peart; from many friends in SHEAR, including Dan Feller, Craig Hammond, Dan Howe, Matt Mason, Andy Robertson, and Stacey Robertson; and no doubt others whom I cannot, regretfully, bring to mind at this moment. All of them in some measure contributed to my restoration, to my rediscovery of confidence, of memory, of critical faculty, of my pen. I hope they think it was worth it.

Donald Ratcliffe
Hook Norton, Oxfordshire
So at last it had come to this. Stephen Van Rensselaer knew how he acted in the next few minutes would determine not just the sixth president of the United States, but whether there would be a safe and sure transition to a new administration. For only the second time in American history, the result of a presidential election had to be decided by the House of Representatives; on the previous occasion, in 1801, much uncertainty had surrounded a prolonged contest, threatening chaos. A result on the first ballot this time depended on how the New York delegation voted, and that now depended on Van Rensselaer. The silver-haired Patroon bowed his head in prayer, seeking guidance. When he opened his eyes, he saw a ticket lying at his feet. It bore the name of John Quincy Adams. Seizing on what he took to be a sign from God, the devout Van Rensselaer slipped it into the ballot box. In so doing, he determined that Adams, and not Andrew Jackson, would be the next president of the United States.¹

This well-known story offers useful reminders as well as important warnings. This was the one occasion since George Washington retired when the presidential election worked the way the Founding Fathers had envisaged. Because they assumed that there would normally be more than two candidates, they did not expect that any candidate would usually win a majority in the Electoral College, because only one ballot was held by the Electoral College’s various branches in each state; therefore, the final decision would normally be taken by
A “contingent election” in the House of Representatives, with each state delegation casting a single vote. Only if one candidate stood head and shoulders over his rivals—as Washington did in 1788 and 1792—would the Electoral College normally be able to make the decision. The Founding Fathers had not anticipated the emergence of two national party formations in the 1790s that effectively reduced the number of candidates to two in every election between 1796 and 1816, and so guaranteed that (barring a tie) one of them would have a majority in the Electoral College. The 1800–1801 election had gone into the House because at that time, the presidential and vice presidential candidates competed on the same ballot and the two Democratic Republican candidates had tied in the Electoral College. That quirk could not be repeated after the Twelfth Amendment of 1804 separated the two elections.

The presidential election of 1824–1825 thus stands as a warning of what might happen if ever a third candidate were to win enough Electoral College votes to prevent a decision on the first round. In 1948, 1968, and 1992 commentators openly debated what would happen if the intervention of Strom Thurmond, George Wallace, or Ross Perot forced the election into the House. They saw that it could extend the election far longer than the disputed Bush–Gore election would in 2000. Today, if the contingent election extends beyond the date prescribed for the retirement of the existing head of state, the newly elected vice president acts as president until one is properly elected. Even if the House election produces a speedy result, the rules governing it would, as in 1824–1825, enhance the power of the small states—every state, regardless of size, has in this instance only one vote—and place the final outcome in the hands of critically situated individuals, like Stephen Van Rensselaer.

The story of divine intervention in February 1825 also warns us that much myth surrounds the accepted understanding of this confused election. According to New York’s master politician, Martin Van Buren, Van Rensselaer had promised to vote for Van Buren’s favored candidate, William Harris Crawford of Georgia. After the event, the Patroon told Van Buren his tale of divine guidance as an explanation for his change of mind. Van Buren did not repeat the story until “a long time afterwards” and first recorded it in the autobiography that he wrote in the 1850s. Quite apart from the egregious factual error it contains (see chapter 10), the story looks suspiciously like Van Buren’s effort to emphasize that in 1825 the election was stolen from General Jackson, though the “theft” (as one modern historian calls it) succeeded only because of Van Rens-
selaer’s spur-of-the-moment decision. Thus Van Buren emphasized that Adams was elected by chance, in denial of the popular mandate that Jackson had won, and so justified the subsequent Jacksonian campaign against the Adams administration.  

In fact, the greatest myth surrounding this election is the belief that General Jackson was the most popular candidate across the twenty-four states of 1824. It is true that he won a plurality of the popular vote cast in eighteen states, but what of the other six states where members of the Electoral College were chosen by the state legislature? While two of them were indecipherable but too small to make much difference, in the other four states the voters made it amply clear in the elections to the legislature which presidential candidate they expected their representatives to vote for. One of those states was New York, which in 1824 contained one-seventh of the nation’s population and cast more votes in its state election in November than even the most successful candidate had won in the popular-vote states. All the indications are that Adams had the backing of about 40 percent of the votes cast in New York, while Jackson had failed to register any significant popular support there at all. That is sufficient to have given Adams a nationwide lead of at least 34,000 votes. In no way was Jackson the clear choice of the people in 1824.  

The election out of which this final competition between Jackson and Adams arose has gained the reputation, in historian Roy F. Nichols’s words, as being “formless, unorganized, chaotic, and confusing.” Others have seen it in terms of premodern politics; as Morton Keller has told us, “From 1788 to 1824, presidential selection was steeped in the deferential political world of the eighteenth century.” Thus choices were essentially made by insiders, who were absorbed by the personal aspect of political advancement. Edward Stanwood in 1884 thought “all the arguments used [in the election] . . . were purely personal, and added nothing to political history”; it was, according to a historian writing ninety years later, “the personalist election beyond compare.” This stress on personality is sustained by the continuing popularity of political biographies, which often disappoint in their weak sense of the political circumstances that dictated so much of their protagonists’ careers.  

At the same time, historians have perceived that the mold of the old aristocratic republic was cracking. They tell how a newly enfranchised electorate was beginning to assert itself as a new breed of professional politicians strove to devise popular appeals and invent partisan tech-
niques appropriate to the newly emerging democratic political culture. Thus 1824, for two political scientists writing in 1998, became the “watershed election in American history,” marking “a break between elite-driven politics and the modern era of mass electorates.” For H. W. Brands in 2005, it sounded “The Death Rattle of the Old Regime.” Fifty years earlier, George Dangerfield had seen it as “the beginnings of the invasion of American history by ‘the people,’ not as rebels but as voters,” in an election “devoted to the overthrow of an old and oppressive political structure.” In General Jackson they found the ideal candidate, one who came from nowhere to win the popular vote. This view tells how the old elite of political insiders in the House of Representatives decided they knew what was best for the republic (and themselves) and cheated Jackson out of the election. The 1824 contest gave the Jacksonians the grievance they used to rouse the public and finally gain victory for the people in 1828.7

This is the tale told in many modern accounts of the election, including some of the most impressive works on the Jacksonian period.8 It recurs in the many brief accounts that have appeared in anthologies and encyclopedias devoted to presidential elections or in broad surveys of political development or in brief biographies; too often, these summaries are tainted by gross factual errors by writers who should do better.9 A fresh look not only confirms that Jackson’s extraordinary popular appeal was restricted in its reach in 1824 but also hints at other, perhaps surprising, perspectives.

First, while the 1824 election was certainly “the first contested presidential election to be decided largely by popular vote,” democracy was far from being a new phenomenon in the early 1820s. Popular votes among white men had long decided the course of American political life, and for at least twenty years, politicians had been mastering the arts of mobilizing a mass electorate. Through the Jeffersonian era, politicians had been campaigning for votes among an aroused electorate in most states, and they had at some periods roused high levels of voter turnout. Already a strong “electoral connection” existed between politicians and voters, who punished representatives who betrayed their promises. The right of the people to vote and determine government policy was not at issue in 1824—at least, not outside New York.10

Second, the arguments in 1824 were not about democratic rights but about the role of political parties in a democracy. For a quarter of a century, national politics had been dominated by the division of the
electorate into two party formations, Federalist and Democratic Republican. Since 1815, partisan passions and popular interest had declined, replaced by sharp differences of opinion as to whether party processes were inherently beneficial to the republic’s democracy or deeply corrupting and destructive of the people’s will. Traditionally, the Democratic Republican presidential candidate had been nominated in a meeting, or caucus, of the party’s elected representatives in Washington. In the run-up to the 1824 election, the practice was widely condemned as an aristocratic device for depriving the people of their right to choose a president, but it was defended at the time—as it well might be in a modern parliamentary system—as a democratic means of agreeing on the party’s nominee. Indeed, its advocates justified it as the best means, in the circumstances of 1824, of ensuring the triumph of the popular will.11

Third, coming in the wake of a many-sided and deeply divisive crisis, the election revealed the fracture lines within the young republic. The most tangible were those created by the Panic of 1819 and Missouri’s application for admission to the Union as a slave state. The South’s growing anxiety over retaining and controlling its slave population was matched by a similar concern on the side of New Englanders to reduce the South’s command of national politics. Equally, the eager support for positive national economic policies by people in Western and Middle Atlantic states confronted the determination of many Southerners and their allies to reinforce the traditional protection of states’ rights and strict construction ideology. Complicating these cleavages lay the discontents and grievances of the lower classes in the great commercial cities and their hinterlands—grievances often expressed in terms of ethnic tensions or ideological differences. The Jackson campaign exploited those grievances, but they cross-cut each other to an extent that prevented an all-commanding popular movement.

Fourth, the attitude of the candidates on these issues was not quite what many historians have assumed. The heightened ideological issues of the Second Party System after 1837 cannot be read back into the early 1820s. Andrew Jackson did not stand for states’ rights or the destruction of strong federal institutions and economic policies. John Quincy Adams was not “the most centralizing of the presidential candidates”12 or an uncritical enthusiast for Henry Clay’s American System. Attitudes to the major issues of the day were not yet rigidly set, and those of political leaders and voters would be formed essentially by the force of events, of which the 1824 election itself would prove one of the more decisive.
Fifth, the need to win votes without the support of an established party forced most candidates in many states to develop campaign techniques not previously seen in a presidential election. The election of 1828 is often seen as a moment of great innovation, the first occasion when politicians tried to excite a mass electorate about the election of chief executive. However, historians who have looked more comparatively have found 1824 to be the moment when innovation began, ranging from campaign biographies to straw polls and statewide delegate nominating conventions. Even the practice of selling political cartoons celebrating the candidates began in this election.  

Sixth, complex lines of division and a multiplicity of candidates ensured that no one emerged with an absolute majority in the Electoral College. The resulting election in the House of Representatives encouraged those dissatisfied by the result to shout “bargain and corruption!” with great effect, but that cry has effectively obscured what actually happened. By the end of January 1825, most observers believed that Adams would probably emerge as the winner, and the real issue became the nature of the coalition that elected him. According to veteran Federalist Rufus King, the bitterness of Crawford leaders after Adams’s election derived not from his election but from their disappointment at not being the ones to elect him. Objecting to Adams’s policies, they would in time concentrate on seducing Jackson to their viewpoint as the only possible hope for preventing Adams’s reelection. Thus the maneuvers behind the House election helped determine the ideological shape of the future party division.  

Finally, the election of 1824 marked the beginnings of the process by which a new and lasting system of two-party conflict would be created in the United States. Although the so-called First Party System had generated deep popular roots before 1815, after the events of 1824–1825 the old distinction between Federalists and Democratic Republicans disappeared, and new political persuasions and voter commitments slowly evolved into what became the bodies of support for the Democratic and Whig parties. The political confusion that marked the 1824 election was the essential first stage in the most complete voter realignment in United States political history, even if initially it had the appearance of just a contest of fascinating characters.
ENTRANTS IN THE RACE

All the candidates who won votes for president in the Electoral College were celebrities of considerable political appeal. All could point to significant public achievements that made them deserving of the highest honors; all attracted admiration, if in some cases reluctant admiration. In July 1823 one Tennessee newspaper published an anonymous article comparing the presidential election to a horse race—“a splendid political sweepstakes”—and each of the candidates was characterized in equine terms. Entrance to the race was free, it announced, and open to “any horse or gelding, mares being excepted.” The weights to be carried were to be “nothing more than the obloquy which the respective riders of each could throw upon the nags of the others.” The “magnificence” of the prize “produced great interest and excitement” and rather more horses were expected than “the five nags which were entered.”

The “horse of horses,” according to his friends, was the Jackson, “a tall slim horse . . . ‘of mighty bone and bold emprise’ . . . exceedingly spirited and high mettled,” famous for his “splendid victory . . . over the noted British horse the Packenham on Orleans turf.” According to his backers, “he was always at the service of the Jocky Club; . . . he required no keeping; and . . . he was always ready if the people should think fit to start him”; and he “came upon the ground full and rough—relying on his native strength, unaided by the skill of the jockies [sic].” Jackson’s victory over the bloody British at the battle of New Orleans in January 1815 had indeed made him a national hero and a popular icon. As the first presidential candidate since Washington to arise from outside the ranks of established national politicians, he would achieve in 1824 some extraordinary popular successes that overthrew the expectations of most seasoned political participants. But Jackson was not taken seriously by most observers, at least not before February 1824, and many believed the election of a military hero could be fatal to the future of the republic.

The Adams was treated less kindly by our horse-racing expert. Though “a horse of illustrious ancestry,” he was “an obese, stout buttocked animal . . . much addicted to bolting.” Born in Massachusetts, he was “trained in Europe . . . under the guidance of some royal grooms.” Since then he had been frequently sent back to Europe “by the American jockies,” but “the expenses attending the outfits, etc., always amounted to more than the winnings.” John Quincy Adams would not have enjoyed the parody: the verdict of history is that he was a humorless, stiff-necked, distant patrician; he described himself as “reserved, cold, austere, and forbid-
Yet he was also widely admired for his uprightness, his grasp of complex issues, his experience, and his dogged determination. His career was one of unequalled distinction, as U.S. senator for five years under Jefferson, as minister to various European courts under Madison and negotiator of peace in 1814, and as secretary of state through Monroe’s two terms. Despite his Federalist origins, he was widely regarded as a committed Democratic Republican who had risked infamy in Massachusetts to support Jefferson’s embargo in 1807. His national stature was undeniable, and in 1824 the sixty-year-old Adams was the only candidate to win votes in every state in which there was a popular election.

Equally respected was William Harris Crawford. In 1816 many politicians had considered him a better candidate for the presidency than Secretary of State James Monroe, but Crawford refused to split the party and supported Monroe’s candidacy. As Monroe’s secretary of the treasury, Crawford had worked effectively to restore the financial system after the War of 1812 and struggled to protect the nation’s credit as the economy crashed after 1818. In the process he had built up a core of political support across the nation. Our horse-racing expert saw the Crawford as a “tall, majestic figure, with wonderful bone, muscle, and sinew. His tread was firm and indicative of great strength and activity.” He chose this horse, in July 1823, to win the race.

Sadly, in September this formidable candidate would suffer a dreadful illness at the age of fifty-one. Possibly because of inappropriate medication, probably because of a stroke, he became “practically blind, hands and feet paralyzed, tongue thickened, and speech thickened and nearly inarticulate.” After twenty-three bleedings in three weeks, he improved only slowly. Though he recovered sufficiently to return to his office, he was never the same man again, suffering speech difficulties and bouts of incapacity. The fact that his protagonists continued to canvass his claims shows the depths of personal loyalty and admiration they felt for him. Even more, it demonstrates that important political interests of various kinds had become committed to his candidacy and could not be easily transferred to a rival candidate.

The fourth horse in the race was the Clay, “an airy supple-jointed fellow, of bright and cheerful countenance.” At forty-seven, Prince Hal was considered the most popular candidate in his manners and accessibility. While Jackson was a retired military man and Adams and Crawford hardworking public servants, Henry Clay was the Great Commoner. In frontier Kentucky he had learned the arts of stump speaking and
public appeal; he was the man who after the War of 1812 introduced into the United States the British practice of political dinners, with after-dinner speeches as well as the traditional toasts. He had deliberately stood apart from the Monroe administration, exercising his influence from the speaker’s chair in the House of Representatives and taking up popular causes ignored by the administration. As 1824 approached, many believed that his appeal to Westerners would enable him to sweep at least nine states; then, if the election had to be decided in the House, his personal influence as speaker would ensure victory.

Other figures, of course, were influential. The fifth entrant, John C. Calhoun—“a mere colt, scarcely bridle-wise”—was not yet the extremist spokesman for the slave South, and his efficiency as Monroe’s secretary of war made him a prominent candidate in the early stages of the presidential campaign. In the end he would be elected vice president with little effective opposition. In addition, as the horse-racing expert explained, “The Dewitt Clinton, of New York, a steed of no small celebrity, would have also entered, had not some Jockies of that state, last year, wilfully lamed him.” Clinton would hover in the background as the majestic (if unpleasant) candidate whose sudden intervention might yet upset all calculations. His rival in New York, chief jockey Martin Van Buren, risked his command of the largest state to elect his own preferred candidate, provoked public wrath, and lost control of both his state and its congressional delegation. This was not an election to be determined by managers.19

All the candidates had to be aware of the circumstances in which the election was held, and their success depended on being able to identify with significant political, economic, and cultural outlooks. All had to recognize that their personal campaign had to pay lip service to the tradition of the “mute tribune,” which frowned on candidates campaigning for themselves.20 All had to understand three critical realities that most historians of the election have overlooked or underestimated: the context of past political experience, the dire recent economic experience, and the immediate issues that concerned voters as they chose among the celebrated personalities before them.

**POLITICAL REALITIES**

The rowdy scenes at the White House after President Jackson’s inauguration in 1829 are traditionally seen as symbolizing the triumph
of democracy. But eight years earlier, the man sometimes credited with organizing those scenes, Senator John Eaton of Tennessee, had himself complained of the “mobocratic collections,” the “pressure through an immense crowd,” at the second “coronation” of James Monroe. So can the United States of 1824 realistically be described as an aristocratic republic, dominated by an elite and isolated from the people?

The republic had already long become, in most states, a functioning democracy, at least for white men. By 1792, state-imposed property tests on their right to vote had either been removed or made meaningless by inflation, while tax-paying qualifications meant little when a county road tax paid by labor on the roads could satisfy the requirement. The growth of two-party competition in the 1790s increased the numbers who actually voted, as partisans whipped up popular involvement and tried to drag every potential supporter to the polls. Fierce two-party conflict in state elections in the states north of the Potomac after 1807 encouraged statewide turnouts that in some states commonly passed 60 percent, even 80 percent, of white men. The powerful urge to vote made any suffrage restrictions meaningless, as the polls were swamped by force of numbers and sly manipulation of the rules; thus, constitutional reform in the North between 1815 and 1821 did little more than regularize what had become common practice. Though by 1824 only eight states out of twenty-four had adopted the principle of universal manhood suffrage (for whites), in practice every state except Virginia, Rhode Island, and Louisiana allowed almost all white men to vote for state legislature representatives and congressmen.

These developments transformed the relationship between voters and representatives. Traditionally, voters had often chosen to vote for their social superiors and established office holders, except in moments of public crisis. However, between 1799 and 1815 vigorous party action encouraged partisans to invade localities dominated by their opponents and challenge the hold of local notables by using issues to rouse popular support for the outside party. The decline of habitual deference was furthered in the Middle Atlantic states and Ohio before 1810 by the introduction of local delegate nominating conventions to reassure voters that the candidates they voted for were indeed the people’s choice. The growing power of constituency pressures forced the repeal of Jefferson’s embargo in 1809 and the declaration of war in 1812, and in 1816 punished congressmen who increased their own wages in an outpouring of popular wrath that returned fewer than one in five for the next session.
The Missouri crisis of 1819–1821 then demonstrated that most congressmen were unwilling to fly in the face of local public opinion, despite their better judgment. Any notion that the congresses of the early 1820s were divorced from the people they represented is entirely misleading.

In presidential elections, the final choice was more removed from the people, but haphazardly. Allowed by the Constitution to decide for themselves how to select their members of the Electoral College, half the states allowed their electorates to choose in 1796, 1804, and 1808. Those two Jeffersonian elections were probably the first in which a majority of white men had the opportunity to participate in a presidential election. The legislative method survived (and was occasionally restored, notably in 1800 and 1812) in states deeply divided by internal party conflict, because a legislative election could guarantee that the dominant party won all the state’s Electoral College votes. Such maneuvers were accepted by partisan voters as long as defeating the other party was a popular priority, but with the decline of party hostilities after 1815, all but six legislatures had surrendered the choice of electors to the people by the time the 1824 election took place.24

The Era of Good Feelings saw the Federalist Party drop its formal opposition to the national administration and accept James Monroe’s almost unanimous reelection in 1820. However, old party loyalties continued to dictate the outcome of state and local elections in many places where voters on both sides retained their sense of partisan identity. One Federalist insisted that Good Feelings were “distressing and odious to the subalterns” of the Democratic Republican Party, who remained “as full of fight and fury as ever.” On the other side, a respected New York Republican remembered that “the federalists as a party were neither disbanded nor annihilated. It is true, the glitter and blaze of their watch fires were not visible, but they were smothered, not extinguished. The embers remained, and there were not wanting many who . . . were ready to fan them into a flame.” As the Baltimore Niles’ Weekly Register put it in 1823, “All are federalists, all republicans, when gathered at Washington, whatever persons may be at home.”25

In 1823 the Albany Argus explained that, whereas old-style factions sooner or later disappeared, great parties like those of 1796–1816 took greater root. “Though they originate in a single point of difference . . . they outlive the causes of their commencement, and those who constitute them are led to opposite sides upon all questions which may arise in the progress of public transactions.” Their supporters “are bound to-
gether by a thousand affinities and antipathies; real or fancied persecu-
tions rivet the bonds of union; the succession of generations renders
them more enduring, and the transmissions of sentiments and feelings
of the father to the son is generally regular and unbroken.” As a result,
despite “the change of interests and of name, the same individuals and
families have been found after the lapse of years, acting in concert on
all questions of a public nature.” In 1824 the old radical William Duane
believed that in Philadelphia “the votes are given in the same way as
twenty years ago,” even if both parties now accepted the basic principles
of democracy.26

In the early 1820s old party labels were still used in some congres-
sional elections, and until 1825 newspapers still measured the balance
of power between the old parties after congressional elections. At the
local level, the old party nominating machinery was routinely mobilized
in many places as an essential means of promoting party candidacies.
At the state level, Republican nominations for governor and president
were normally made by the legislature, but by 1815 the idea of a specially
convened nominating convention made up of specially elected delegates
was spreading. In Pennsylvania in 1808 and 1817 and New York in 1817,
the party chose its gubernatorial candidate by holding a state nominat-
ing convention made up of both legislators and specially elected dele-
gates. Such devices reflected an ideological shift: as Van Buren observed,
by 1820 the party label “Democratic” was largely replacing that of “Re-
publican.”27

Opposing the regular Democrats stood an amalgam of dissidents.
Federalists had to recognize that the persistence of party sensitivities
doomed them to a perpetual minority, and their hope of influence and
office depended on attracting the support of dissident Republicans. In
most states some Republicans thought that party managers monopo-
lized office, pursued the interests only of those who supported them,
and prevented the proper pursuit of the common good. These dissidents
were willing to work with Federalists, and for a decade at least, politics
in many states had been a contest between Republican regulars and a
shifting coalition of opponents. This independent approach appealed to
many younger voters, at a time when about 45 percent of white males
over the age of twenty were in their twenties and outnumbered all those
aged over forty. According to one young Federalist, “Since the war a race
of men have grown up, animated with love of country, unaccustomed
to party discipline, and uninterested in those questions which have in

12  CHAPTER  ONE
an eminent degree sustained and nourished it.” They were unwilling to blindly follow party nominations and, as “the active and most efficient body of voters,” could not fail to give an impulse to public opinion in reference to the presidential question.28

These independents used vigorous democratic arguments to counter the regulars’ attempts to guide voters by prior nominations. Federalists and dissident Republicans had long argued that party nominations interfered with the right of suffrage, kept power in the hands of the leading men of the dominant party, and so risked creating an aristocracy. It made little difference whether the nomination was made by a caucus or a delegate convention; indeed, many contemporaries did not make a distinction but referred to both modes as caucuses or committees. This accusation of aristocracy could be applied in particular to the Democratic Republican Party’s practice of nominating its presidential candidate at a congressional caucus, which inevitably attracted all the criticisms of party dictation expressed over the last decade by Federalists and independent Republicans.

The Democratic Republican Party was not irretrievably committed to the congressional caucus. In 1816 some radicals, notably William Duane and his admirers, had suggested the party’s presidential nomination should more properly be made by a set of delegates specifically chosen by the people for the task. Party leaders dismissed the proposal as impractical because transportation difficulties would prevent a full attendance at a special national convention and so deprive the nomination of its authority among the voters. The precise mode of nomination did not matter, they said, but it must effectively unite the party’s support to prevent a Federalist resurgence. The party thought of itself as the “Democracy,” and therefore by definition embodied the popular will.

Thus the political principles at stake in the presidential election did not concern egalitarianism or democracy but the continuing use of partisan techniques; it did not concern the overthrow of an old aristocratic ways of doing things but the legitimacy of any party structure that persisted after the issues that originally justified it had passed away. Men on both sides of that question accepted the same democratic values but disagreed over their practical implementation. The election must therefore be judged in terms of the democratic and partisan structures that contemporaries had known for over twenty years, not the future conflicts that they were unknowingly in the process of generating. The past tells us more about its past than it does about its future.
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Times were hard in 1820. According to contemporary calculations, half a million men were unemployed in the country as a whole—and that in a nation of only two million free men, a large proportion of whom were farmers who owned their own land. In many cities soup stations fed the indigent, and newspapers appealed for gifts of old clothes and shoes. In New York City one in ten of a population of 120,000 was receiving poor relief. In Cincinnati, an observer lamented, “All things are changed, the rich have become poor, and the poor distrust, one universal state of embarrassment exists; ‘tis want, and fear and prosecution and suspicion and terror and dismay and bankruptcy and pauperism on all sides and on all hands.”20

This economic abyss provided the inescapable background to the presidential election of 1824. The postwar speculative boom had collapsed in 1818–1819; economic distress struck everywhere in 1820–1821; and the depression dragged on for years in many places. While New England was less severely affected than other parts of the country and economic indices showed improvement from 1821 onward, in many parts of the West and South signs of economic revival were not evident until after 1824. This first nationwide economic downturn bears close resemblance to that which began in 2007: recessions that follow a banking crisis, resulting from irresponsible lending to an overblown property sector and excessive private indebtedness, always prove the hardest to recover from.

Looking back, most contemporaries had no doubt where the blame should lie. The boom had been underwritten by a great monetary expansion, fostered by those who thought they had discovered new, infallible ways to wealth. Since 1811 state legislatures had chartered an unprecedented number of small local banks, which printed their own banknotes and loaned them to private individuals, often on subprime terms. The borrowers used them to service purchases of landed property made on credit, often from the federal government. Banks were laxly regulated and, outside New England, based on unsound practices. They had weak, sometimes near-fraudulent, capital backing; the banks issued notes in quantities far beyond their power to redeem, confident that many notes would not be returned for redemption. In an age that believed only gold and silver had permanent value, the notes of most banks depreciated, making them worth less than the loans they had furnished.

Worst of all, the new Bank of the United States (BUS) that Congress had chartered in 1816 had not restrained the system, as intended, but...
had acted as “a mighty brokers’ office,” hurrying to make quick profits. When in 1818 the BUS found its own notes falling to a discount and its specie reserves draining away, it called on state banks to redeem their debts to the BUS, including the piles of state banknotes that it had accumulated. This contraction forced the state banks to call in their loans, often from those without the means of redemption. In a single year some 85 banks, out of a total of 392, were forced close their doors. The consequence was a wave of bankruptcies and defaults and a rapid sell-off of stocks of goods at sacrifice prices as men tried to rebuild their cash position. Property values collapsed as credit and purchasers disappeared; the means of exchange diminished, making it difficult for even wealthy men to pay off their debts.  

The monetary contraction was compounded by the reduction in European demand for American agricultural produce in 1819–1820. Prices collapsed, and the value of domestic exports fell by over two-thirds. This decline could not be compensated by domestic demand: the United States remained overwhelmingly rural, with only 28 percent of its labor force in nonagricultural work, and most of that in construction. The small-scale industry that had grown up in the period of trade restraint before 1815, mostly based in households and serving local markets, had been undermined by the massive influx of British goods after the war, and most industry—outside the very few textile factories in southern New England—already faced depression before the Panic. The few large urban centers—containing only 7 percent of the population—were not primarily industrial but existed to service the agricultural and trading sectors, and they accordingly suffered along with their customers.

By 1821, according to historian Murray N. Rothbard, “the painful process of debt liquidation was over, and equally painful process of monetary contraction had subsided.” However, the collapse had medium-term effects that made economic recovery difficult. In some Western areas, almost all the instruments of credit that had existed in 1818 had been destroyed, and such banknotes as existed did not regain parity for many years. Many market-oriented rural areas retreated to a more subsistence basis and retracted from commercial activity. Some artisans and urban dwellers withdrew to the countryside in order to survive. Local trading continued, but often on a barter basis. The public’s hard-earned mistrust of banks, credit, and paper money was itself a major inhibition of economic recovery.  

During this economic disaster, men looked to government for assis-
tance, with success mainly (but not exclusively) in the West. Nine state governments passed stay laws, which postponed execution of a judgment, usually for two years. Five states passed minimum-appraisal laws to ensure that no property was sold for execution of debts below a certain minimum price, usually set by a board of neighbors. Four states established new state-owned banks to issue legal-tender notes, which soon depreciated rapidly and ceased to circulate. Other states, mainly in the South, allowed banks that had suspended specie payments to continue issuing notes they did not have to redeem. Among the seaboard states, only Virginia, New York, and New England were largely free from agitation to expand the money supply.

Debates over these measures aroused considerable bitterness and social conflict in the early 1820s. Merchants were accused of pursuing humble debtors while finding legal devices to avoid paying their own debts. Bankers were indicted of growing rich on paper wealth and illicitly retaining their shabbily gotten gains despite the crash: with the suspension of specie payments, they could carry on charging interest and expect repayment of loans they had made, yet refuse to redeem the paper money and promissory notes they had lent out. By contrast, ordinary farmers and artisans needed immediate relief, but many of them thought the future required the restoration of decent business habits in a world freed from the artificial stimulus of banks and paper instruments. Significantly, some of those whom historians have traditionally associated with lower-class interests, such as the radical William Duane in Philadelphia or Andrew Jackson in Tennessee, called for an end to stay laws and monetary issues, an abandonment of excessive debt, and a return to industry and economy.  

The evident class resentment turned against established politicians and embittered many elections in 1821 and 1822. In some jurisdictions local revolutions overthrew county and city elites and gave power to reformers keen to cut debt and expenditure. By 1824, however, these struggles had largely passed away, and in most states the relief acts had been repealed. The crisis had generated neither clear-cut lines of division nor a political movement that might dictate how men would align themselves in the presidential election. Local movements that described themselves as “democratic” or “popular” appeared before 1823, but they never directly correlated with the parties that competed in 1824 or (outside Kentucky) in 1828.

The economic downturn had, however, created cultural attitudes that
As early as 1818, commentators had blamed the excesses of the speculative boom on the moral decline of the citizenry, and into the 1820s men still demanded reformation. Yet this generalized sentiment had no immediate practical program beyond the demand that government waste be eradicated. Though the Bank of the United States was unpopular, attempts to reform or reduce it found little coherent support. The practical issues that invigorated politics in the states in the early 1820s were simply beyond the jurisdiction of the federal government. The class conflict that marked some elections in the early 1820s was confined to particular places and situations. But what did exist was a mood of discontent that might find expression in many varied ways. As John C. Calhoun said in 1820, “There has been within these two years an immense revolution of fortunes in every part of the Union; enormous numbers of persons utterly ruined; multitudes in deep distress; and a general mass of disaffection to the Government, not concentrated in any particular direction, but ready to seize upon any event and looking out anywhere for a leader.” But who should that leader be? Can it be possible that any of this experience connects with, and may even explain, the presidential election?

**Matters of Great Moment**

The presidential election of 1824 undeniably arose in a context of momentous and troubling events. Quite apart from the Panic and economic depression, the Union was shaken to its core by the Missouri crisis of 1819–1821, and bitter sectional disputes arose over internal improvements and protective tariffs. The balance of power within the nation changed with the "rise of the New West," the filling out of the Middle Atlantic states, the development of infant industries, and the expansion of the great seaboard commercial centers. New tensions expressed themselves in religious disputes, race riots, and industrial strikes. National security seemed threatened by the uncertainties surrounding the future of Florida, Cuba, and the new nations of Latin America. For a time it seemed that a French expeditionary force might carry a large Spanish army to the very flanks of the United States, prompting the president’s declaration of what became known as the Monroe Doctrine. Could these events and developments really have had no impact on the forthcoming presidential election?

Federal policy could do little to help with most issues arising from
the economic collapse. Though the Bank of the United States had been a major villain, prompting and aggravating the crisis, the assault on it was largely confined to the federal courts, and its future scarcely became an issue in the presidential campaign. The one thing the federal government could do was ease the difficulties of those buying federal land on credit, many of whom were on the point of losing their lands and improvements. Initially in 1819–1820 land policy tended to divide the newer Western states from more easterly ones. However, beginning in 1821, Congress helped its debtors secure part of their lands and control their debts, which greatly benefited most Western states but not Kentucky and Tennessee, where the land had never belonged to the federal government. For most others, this issue had in effect been solved before the election campaign was properly under way.\textsuperscript{15}

In many states, ongoing arguments over local economic problems were overwhelmed by the large degree of internal agreement about the positive policies that the federal government should pursue to revive and strengthen the economy. These issues tended to pit the half of the population that lived within reach of Atlantic water (excluding those in the Middle States) against the half that looked to the development of the continental interior for their prosperity. The most prominent issue in the early 1820s concerned plans to use federal money to improve communications, with a view to binding the country more closely together and encouraging internal trade. Resolutions in the House in March 1818 revealed that the country was evenly divided on whether the federal government had the constitutional authority to adopt such a policy. By 1822, the demand for federal internal improvements was overwhelming in the West and the Mid-Atlantic states, while dominant groups in New England and the South Atlantic states were vehemently opposed. In spite of their resistance, it was a common opinion, according to Rufus King, that no one could be elected president in 1824 who opposed the power to finance the building of roads and canals.\textsuperscript{16}

Transportation improvements were logically bound together with protective tariffs in what Henry Clay christened in 1824 the American System. Continuing dependence on imports of cheap, high-quality British manufactures had undermined effective national defense in the war against Britain, and it continued to undercut attempts to establish industries within the United States. In 1816 and 1818 a broad-based majority in Congress had accepted that the manufacture of items essential for national defense must be encouraged, and many would argue that
the coming of the depression demonstrated that higher duties were necessary. This demand did not come solely from industrial interests. Farmers appreciated that, given the collapse of foreign demand, the sale of their surplus crops depended on the creation of a home market by expanding the industrial sector. However, Southern planters who found their market in Europe, and Eastern merchants who serviced the Atlantic trade, opposed the raising of tariff barriers that might impede a vigorous commercial interchange with Europe. The contest over the tariff did not divide the country along the same lines as internal improvements but revealed a more North–South division, though with major exceptions.

Cutting across these economic alignments came the shock of the Missouri crisis. In its heat, men had threatened a dissolution of the Union; a fire had been kindled that, in the words of one Southern congressman, “all the waters of the ocean cannot put out, which seas of blood can only extinguish.” Though enough votes were found to pass a compromise, the prolonged crisis proved a major polarizing experience for politically aware Americans. Many Southerners now looked for the means of sectional protection, though this would not become universally true south of the Border states until after 1825. Many Northerners saw the 1820 compromise as a Southern triumph that demonstrated that slavery had gained too powerful a political hold on the republic; like Rufus King, they wanted to break this “black strap,” and to that end they advocated the election of a nonslaveholder as president. As Jefferson wrote, “A geographical line, coinciding with a marked principle, moral and political,” had been “held up to the angry passions of men . . . and every new irritation will mark it deeper and deeper.” A process of political reorientation had begun that would deeply affect the 1824 election.

Of course, there were also many current distractions that, on the face of things, had little to do with politics. Local religious revivals preoccupied many folk. In many places this was a time of great sickness and mortality, with malarial fevers sweeping parts of the West. Even in Washington the socialite Margaret Bayard Smith observed in 1822 that conversation was dominated by illness and religion as well as the presidential election, and the city was just as sickly in September 1823. Then from August 1824 onward, the visit of General Lafayette became the excuse for a great patriotic party, as the nation’s press followed his trip in huge, enjoyable detail as he journeyed along the East Coast from Boston to Washington in the weeks before and during polling. Yet these ostensibly nonpartisan events contributed importantly to the context of
A Foot Race. David Claypoole Johnston's full cartoon takes a retrospective view of the election because it was not known until mid-December 1824 that Clay would come fourth in the Electoral College and so be excluded from the House election. Typical of its age in its concentration on the spoken word, the cartoon illustrates the active interest in the election taken by a broad cross section of the community, including the poor, immigrants, free blacks, and, in the background, women. Courtesy: American Antiquarian Society.
the election. Illness and plague were a punishment for the immorality of the nation, seduced by easy material gain and attracted to immoral European fashions; a recall to traditional republican ways seemed all the more urgent. Lafayette’s visit reemphasized the importance of the public sphere and the debt the nation owed to men who had sacrificed themselves for its establishment. All had electoral implications, however indirect, as the contest for presidency raised questions about the character of the republic, its health, and its purposes.39

The many issues and concerns underlying the politics of the early 1820s could scarcely fail to influence the way politicians and voters thought about the coming contest, but the popular election never became a simple referendum on future policy. The issues were so complex, so cross-cutting, that no candidate seeking national success could afford to take a clear-cut stand on every issue. The exceptions, Clay and Calhoun, failed to come in the top three candidates. Ambiguity was essential if the object was to build a national coalition. For that reason it was difficult to pin down just where the leading candidates stood on a particular issue, as they responded to a political situation in which each region possessed its own peculiar mix of interest, outlook, and desired outcome.

That regional bias explains one paradox of the election. According to almost all contemporary observers, the protracted campaign aroused “the most intensive political excitement throughout the country.” As the most famous cartoon published during the election suggests, ordinary people of many kinds, including women and children, blacks and immigrants, took an interest, took sides, and expressed commitment in terms that revealed the particular ethnic, regional, and familial concerns that were of interest to them. Yet the overall level of turnout in the election was low, prompting many historians to describe the election as arousing little public interest. Certainly turnout in state elections between 1820 and 1825 was much higher: in eight out of the twenty-four states, it averaged over 64 percent of eligible voters, compared with 29 percent in the presidential election. The reason was that in most states, the outcome in the latter was already fairly clear, and voting did not seem a priority. Only half a dozen states experienced a real popular contest: in the Old Northwest, in New Jersey and Maryland, and in North Carolina. In these states, turnout in the presidential election rose to over 40 percent, compared with less than 24 percent in the ten other states that held a popular election. Remember the reluctance of voters at other periods
to vote when traditional party lines are blurred; remember the customarily lower level of voter turnout in presidential elections before 1824; remember that the presidential election was commonly held on a different day from the general election for state and congressional offices at a time when voting could mean giving up a day’s work in rural areas; remember that by polling day would-be voters knew that the final decision would be taken by a House of Representatives already elected—and then, all considered, 40 percent becomes a rather impressive turnout.\footnote{\textsuperscript{40}}

The sectionalized character of the election of 1824 ensured that it consisted of different regional contests. By the time of voting, the issue in New England was between Adams and Crawford, and in New York between Adams, Crawford, and Clay. In the four Atlantic states from New Jersey through Maryland, Jackson, Adams, and Crawford competed with each other. In the Southeast, Crawford fought first Calhoun and then Jackson. In the Old Northwest and Louisiana, Clay battled against Jackson and Adams, but in Kentucky and Missouri against Jackson alone; in most of the Southwest, Jackson was opposed mainly by Adams.

In an effort to understand this complex situation, part 1 introduces the four major candidates and three minor ones, and considers the political interests and grassroots situations that dictated their progress up to the early months of 1824. Then part 2 examines the dynamic of the election campaign through February 1825 in its various critical locations—in Washington, in the battleground states, in some state legislatures, and finally in the House of Representatives, where, sadly, the Patroon plays a somewhat less critical part than he does in legend.