CHAPTER IX

DEMOCRACY SPLITS UNDER JOHN QUINCY ADAMS
1825-1829


In ever a man reached high elective office through sheer worth and merit, in spite of faults and even more in spite of virtues, John Quincy Adams accomplished this in his attainment of the Presidency.

Forced out of the Senate in 1804 by Pickering and other Blue Light Federalists for supporting Jefferson's embargo, he had ever since been cooperating and affiliating with the Republicans, the party in power. Technically he was a Republican in Jefferson's administrations, and in Monroe's régime which ignored minor political differences and included all except extreme Federalists or those who, like Webster, held aloof from allegiance though not offering partisan opposition.

Adams, like his predecessors, had a long and distinguished public record. Educated in America, France, and Holland and finally graduating at Harvard, he was an accomplished scholar, and a constant contributor to the press, publishing once a partial answer to Paine's "Rights of Man."

In 1794, when twenty-seven years old, Washington appointed him Minister to the Hague, later to Portugal, and insisted on John Adams appointing him to Berlin where he negotiated valuable commercial conventions with Sweden and Prussia. In 1803 he was State Senator and then promoted to the United States Senate. Differing with his party and supporting Jefferson, he resigned and was charged by his Federalist enemies with abandoning a losing and joining a victorious party. This quarrel with the extreme Federalists, the ghost of the old Essex Junto, was kept up until he was President, and resumed during the latter part of his Presidency, when it became especially malignant.

He was the victor in this contest, reaching the highest offices, while only Harrison Gray Otis of his old enemies ever got back into national prominence and he but briefly.

In 1809 Madison sent him to Prussia and it was owing to his popularity there that Czar Alexander proposed mediation to America and England. Madison named him as Justice on the Supreme Court, but he declined, and was made one of the Peace Commissioners who framed the Treaty of Ghent. In 1815 he was resident Minister to England, and transferred by Monroe to the Department of State. In all the places he filled he distinguished himself. Of the thirty-one years between his first office and his inauguration, about twenty-seven had been in public service.

Nominally a Republican he was really a Nationalist and Independent. He was an Adams, a New Englander with a Puritan cast of mind, and above everything a loyal American. Referring to a free trader he wrote: "He has all the contracted prejudices of that political sect; his whole system of government is comprised in the maxim of leaving money in the pockets of the people." Another quotation shows further his political cast: "It is by the complication of the government alone that the freedom of mankind can be assured. If the people of these United States enjoy a greater share of liberty than any other nation upon earth, it is because all the governments upon earth, theirs is the most complicated." In his first message, in an effort to spur Congress into measures not popular with the constituencies of some members, he asked: "Shall we proclaim to the world that we are punished by the will of our constituents?"

Confident of his own integrity, imagining other men as willing as he to forego all personal and party feeling for the country's welfare, he proposed, Calhoun one rival being in the Vice-President's chair, to bring all the others into the cabinet, Clay, State; Jackson, War; Crawford, Treasury, and, he declining, Gallatin. Then all should embark the nation on a policy of internal improvement, material in roads and canals, rivers and harbors, educational in a national university and astronomical observatory, and a Naval Academy.

A curt declamation from Crawford, a sarcastic one from Gallatin and information that Jackson would not receive his offer in the spirit it would be made in, made him abandon his idea of a coalition of all the politics.

Adams, the President, except Washington, most unpoltical-minded, suffered more from politics than any of his fellows. He began his administration under a great political handicap. He
was a minority President, yet his exact mind attached little, if any, importance to the fact that the wishes of probably a considerable majority of the people had been defeated by his selection over Jackson. The Constitution and laws of the country had been honestly followed and to him his title was as impeccable as if conferred by a great majority.

His immediate announcement of his intention to appoint Clay was impolitic. Proceeding from a sense of conscious honesty, it was one of those blunders which in politics is worse than a crime. Politically the appointment was unwise in many ways. If Adams was too little of a politician and Clay too much of one, the sum total of the two did not, as it would in mathematics, produce a good average; instead of a sum in addition a remainder in subtraction resulted.

Friends defended the appointment; there was really no other man in the country fitted for the place. The Jackson men retorted that with his long experience as Minister and Secretary, Adams needed only a good clerk to fill the State Department. Besides, they added, Richard Rush's remarkable success in London pointed him out as the best fitted man in America for the State portfolio. And as for Clay, had he not attacked the conduct of Jackson in Florida which Adams had defended in the cabinet, had justified so successfully with the English and Spanish governments?

There was that unsettled question of 'adjourned veracity' between Adams and Clay as to Adams being willing at Ghent to give up the Mississippi for fishing rights in Newfoundland. If the administration needed Clay's support, was he not unquestionably more valuable in Congress than in the cabinet? Had not Kentucky instructed her Representatives to vote for Jackson by an overwhelming majority?

This Clay appointment hung like a millstone around the neck of the administration. Jackson seems to have acquitted Adams, and cordially shook hands with him. But the less just and less informed public were not so fair. Jackson did not acquit Clay; ever afterward he spoke of him as the "Judas of the West." Randolph voiced a widely held sentiment when, borrowing his characters from Fielding's "Tom Jones," he denounced in Congress "The Coalition of Bibb and Black George; the combination unheard of in all the Puritan and the black-leg."

Clay from Kentucky a supporting a New Englander and an anti-slavery man against his next state neighbor and a pro-slavery man! Clay known to be, as many of his fellow statesmen were, addicted to gambling on horse races, preferring a Puritan over Andrew Jackson, the owner and racer of Truxton, the greatest race horse ever seen in America! There were many single-minded Americans who could find only one explanation for this—the appointment of Clay by Adams to the position of heirship to the Presidency; and after a Northern man who so natural to succeed as a Westerner?

Casuists may argue the ethics of the Adams-Clay transaction from every angle and on every hypothesis of fact, but few, if any, practical politicians will be found to censure it. Such combinations are frequent enough between friends of candidates in nominating conventions, and arrangements for support after nomination, and it is said, candidates for the highest offices carry out such arrangements when elected.

Adams and Clay were members of the same party, and Adams' views and principles coincided much more with Clay's than did Jackson's. There were many reasons for his supporting Adams; there were many reasons for his opposing Jackson. Clay had long before shown dislike of Jackson, had announced during the canvass that he would never support Jackson. As this appointment is to have influence on many Presidential campaigns, and is the most discussed cabinet appointment in our history, a brief review of the evidence is not out of place.

Though friends of all the candidates were busy and some officious, and overtures were made by Adams' friends to Clay, by Jackson's friends to Clay and by Clay's friends to Adams and Jackson, the available evidence acquits all three of any personal application, trade or deal. The positive denial of the principals, taken with their conduct and character clinches the matter.

Adams' diary, an honest memoranda, records many confidential interviews in those trying days, two with Clay. The kernel of the first interview is thus given: "He wished me as far as I might think proper to satisfy him with regard to some principles of great public importance, but without any personal considerations for himself. In the question to come before the House between General Jackson, Mr. Crawford and myself he had no hesitation in saying that his preference would be for me." Here the entry closes with no light thrown on what those 'principals of great public importance' were which Clay had in mind.

The second interview, a two-hour talk, seems to have been just such a friendly discussion as their ordinary relations called for.
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was given internal improvements, but the question with many was whether they should be made by the states or the federal government. Adams had a glorious vision of a great national system of roads, canals, navigable rivers and safe harbors, but little was his administration able to accomplish along these lines. New England, which had built its own roads, was indifferent and many states wanted only land grants and aids to their own projects.

The advanced stand taken by Adams would have been a bold move by any President coming after Monroe's constitutional negative on the questions involved. For a minority President its imprudence was accentuated.

Adams' first Congress met and Adams' friend, Taylor, was re-elected Speaker by only two majority. As Taylor had friends of his own, his election was not an administration victory. The opposition controlled the Senate, and administration measures were blocked or so mutilated as to impair their usefulness and popularity. That the Chief Executive was one not chosen by the people was constantly kept before the public eye by committees of inquiry, by numerous proposals to amend the Constitution so as to secure hereafter a popular choice. Benton proposed a general election of President by districts, a second election between the two highest candidates in case of failure of majority in the first. No proposal could get the approval of two-thirds of either house.

In the second session of the Twentieth Congress $30,000 was voted for repairs to the Cumberland Road and various canals and roads were aided by land grants, and the navigability of the Ohio improved.

The Panama Conference, a forerunner of the Pan-American Congress, was pushed forward by Clay, if not originated by him, who impared some of his zeal to Adams. But the President's announcement that he had accepted the invitation to send delegates was resisted by the cautious Senate. Delegates were confirmed, however, but none attended the first meeting which met only to adjourn over, and the adjourned meeting was never held. Poinsett, who was one of our delegates, was instructed by Clay to propose the purchase of Texas. In 1829 in a debate on the Spanish treaty, Clay had sought to force Monroe's hand and bitterly excoriated the treaty because it gave up Texas. In 1846 Clay is to lose the Presidency by his opposition to the annexation of Texas.

The slavery element found fault with this mission in the
possible recognition of the black republic Hayti, and the international suppression of the slave trade which they feared would lead to an international drive against slavery. They disliked and feared, too, a close alliance with these republics, some of whose generals and statesmen were negroes and mulattoes. It was in this debate that Randolph shot his coalition bomb at the President and his Secretary of State.

Amid this wrangling Calhoun is described as presiding in his chair with saturnine eye on the contending men and passions on the Senate floor. Did Randolph, whom he had so capably handled years before in the House and whom he had once despised—did Randolph draw him along, as some think, into that array of the South against the North which his bitterness and hardness did so much to hasten and widen? Calhoun began to slough off his nationalism, reverse his position on internal improvements and the tariff, abandon his former latitudinarian views on constitutional construction, to give to states rights more intellectual force, more powerful reasoning and more individual leadership than any other one individual ever gave it.

Two grave dissensions between the federal government and the State of Georgia under the governorship of the fiery Troup, arose in 1828, one over the treaty with the Creek Indians, the other over the boundary between Georgia and Alabama Territory. Adams with wise forbearance had both matters brought to Congress and settled without serious difficulty. One result was the removal of the Creeks across the Mississippi, and a better system in our dealings with the Indians. Monroe, notably just in his treatment of the Indians, had in his last message suggested as the only solution of the Indian question their removal far from contact with the white man.

Virginia had protested against internal improvements when the President sounded his first note on the subject, and when Congress began on a higher tariff law, Georgia and South Carolina joined her in asserting the unconstitutionality of both tariff and internal improvements. Jefferson and Madison were consulted. Neither approved of Adams’ advanced program; Madison counseled patience and reminded his friends of the difference between the exercise of unconstitutional powers and the abuse of constitutional powers. Jefferson’s last advice to his countrymen was to suggest again constitutional amendments allowing internal improvements under proper safeguards, and expressly wished Virginia not to take the lead in opposition.

Foreign affairs gave Adams much concern. Our friend Caesar

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Alexander was dead, the French King would give us no satisfaction in our spoliation claims, and England under Canning, who after a period of boastful friendship, was once more our sarcastic enemy, shut off our trade with the West Indies.

Gallatin, whose appointment after his curt refusal of the Treasury shows Adams’ broadness, was sent to England, but Canning refused even to discuss the question though eventually agreeing to compensation for seized slaves. Nothing more could be effected until Canning’s death, when the old conventions were restored.

The Nineteenth Congress at its first session did little more in the way of legislation than provide for the removal of the Creek Indians. The most important measure of its second session was the appropriation of $500,000 annually for six years for the improvement of the navy. From this bill as it came from the Senate the House struck out Adams’ project of a Naval Academy. The proposed Interior Department and other administration measures died, through neglect, on the calendars. Calhoun’s casting vote killed a tariff bill much like the one to be adopted by the next Congress.

Edward Everett began his career in this Congress, and Buchanan ended his first four years of service, while James K. Polk was a new member.

‘The lukewarm friends and even the opponents of the President kept on excellent social terms with the White House, dined there and recommended friends for office. Adams records his opinion of these in his diary: “as bad as Randolph,” who was “the image of a great man stamped on base metal.”’

To the handicap the administration began with, its last two years had the added burden of its first two. Politics far outweighed government with nearly every one except the President. He gave his mind and heart to the nation’s business.

State politics were quiet. Van Buren was in complete control of New York and Clinton so badly beaten as to make overtures to Adams which were rejected. The Congressional elections, however, were exciting. There were Adams meetings and Jackson meetings and Adams candidates and Jackson candidates in the field. Party names were not much used. Clay was hopeful and put out another refutation of the “Bargain and Corruption charge.” Webster was hopeful, too, but Adams calmly resigned to probable defeat.

Adams records that he wrote his message to the first session of the Twentieth Congress in “agony of mind from causes relat-
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