

how that happy commutation might have changed the current of American history.

Benton's Waterloo

The Polk Administration, that carried on so successfully the war with Mexico, was, of course, Democratic; and while Polk had made up his mind that he did not desire a second term, he naturally wanted to be succeeded by a Democrat. Knowing the penchant of the American people for soldiers, and realizing that the two most popular Generals with our army in Mexico—Scott and Taylor—were Whigs, and also realizing that it would be ridiculous to promote any General then in the field, holding a junior commission, over those popular heroes, and believing it necessary to have a Democratic idol come out of the war a logical candidate for President, Polk determined to have a Lieutenant-General created, the intention being that Benton should be the Lieutenant-General and afterward the Democratic nominee for President. A bill for that purpose was rushed through the House, but was defeated in the Senate, as Benton claimed, through the machinations of William L. Marey, James Buchanan and Robert J. Walker, all members of the Cabinet, all of whom wanted to be President and none of whom had any military record. Had this program gone through, Benton would have been nominated and elected President in 1848, and, it is as certain as anything in politics can be that he would have been re-elected in 1852. A stronger Union man than Benton never lived. Had he, instead of Pierce, been elected President in 1852, it would have averted the trouble in Kansas that precipitated the Civil War. That awful catastrophe would have been postponed for years, perhaps for ever. All of which might have happened, but for the ambitions of Buchanan, Marey and Walker.

*"Of all sad words of tongue or pen,
The saddest are these: 'It might have been.'"*

The War of 1812 gave us Andrew Jackson and William Henry Harrison as Presidents. While Jackson was the hero of Horse Shoe Bend and Chalmette, he had also been United States District Attorney, Judge of the Supreme Court of Tennessee and a member of both Houses of Congress—phases of his career little known and lightly valued in the public mind. His civil career, however, may have had weight in bringing about his election, by a majority of one, as Major-General of the Tennessee Militia, and probably no more important and far-reaching events ever hung upon one vote. The people elected Old Hickory President, because they knew that he had broken the power of the Creek Nation in one pitched battle and had routed the flower of the British Army in another.

Jackson, no doubt, was aided materially in his three Presidential races by the fact that as a boy he had served a few days in the Revolutionary Army, and had received a cruel scalp wound from a sword in the hands of a brutal British officer for manfully refusing to black his boots. We may wonder whether Jackson thought of that gash in his head as evening closed on his astounding victory in front of New Orleans!

It is on record that, during the bitter Clay-Jackson campaign of 1832, the elder Francis Preston Blair went over to the White House and told the hero of New Orleans that the Clay newspapers were declaring the story of his having been slashed in the head by a British officer to be a fake. Whereupon, Jackson made Blair run his fingers through his bristly white hair and into the sear, as evidence of its existence.

The Fathers were not all mild-mannered or mealy-mouthed in politics.

The Betrayal of Henry Clay

General Harrison had served in both Houses of Congress, had been Governor of the North-West Territory, and Minister to one of the South American States, and when elected to the Presidency was serving in the humble position of County Clerk; but his victories at Tippecanoe and the Thames were what gave him the nomination and sent him to the White House.

Harrison's nomination in 1839 made Henry Clay beside himself with rage. When the news reached the great Kentuckian in Washington, he rose from his chair and walking rapidly up and down the room, lifting his feet like a horse string-halted in both legs, he stamped upon the floor, exclaiming: "My friends are not worth the powder and shot it would take to kill them! If there were two Henry Clays, one of them would make the other President of the United

States. It is a diabolical intrigue. I know now who have betrayed me. I am the most unfortunate man in the history of parties. Always run by my friends when sure to be defeated, and now betrayed for a nomination when I, or any one, would be sure of an election."

The War of 1812 also contributed largely to the nomination of General Lewis Cass thirty-six years later, his principal military achievement having been to break his sword on hearing that General Hull had surrendered. As the Whigs had nominated Zachary Taylor, hero of Buena Vista, the Democrats were in sore need of a hero, and being short of the article did their best to make one of Cass. Taylor, of course, went to the White House; but General Cass would have been elected had not Martin Van Buren bolted and run as the Free Soil candidate because, he claimed, Cass had been instrumental in beating him out of the nomination in 1844. Van Buren's performance so outraged the Missouri Democrats that they peremptorily changed the name of Van Buren County to Cass and that of Kinderhook to Benton.

Speaking of Van Buren, an illustration of the far-reaching consequences that small things sometimes have, even in the winning and losing of Presidencies, was the Quixotic attempt of President Jackson to force Peggy O'Neal into exclusive Washington society—an attempt that disrupted the Jackson Cabinet and made much politics. The Cabinet ladies would have none of Mistress Peggy, and Old Hickory would have none of their husbands. But sly Martin Van Buren, being a widower and having a very clear idea on which side his political bread was buttered, wisely sided with Jackson and paid court most assiduously to pretty Peg—a bit of diplomacy that completely won the General, and caused him to create the Sage of Kinderhook his heir apparent. Thus, it is written that when Martin Van Buren rang the O'Neal doortell to make his first call, the history of the United States was changed for twenty years. Mistress Peggy cut nearly as many high jinks and caused the powers of politics and government nearly as much trouble as did Helen in Trojan days.

James Parton says of Jackson that when the latter came into the Presidency, a Presidential program was arranged for twenty-four years, as follows: Andrew Jackson, eight years; Martin Van Buren, eight years; Thomas H. Benton, eight years; but unfortunately for that scheme, Old Tippecanoe impinged on the scene in the coonskin, hard-cider, log-cabin hysteria of American politics and broke the program exactly in the middle.

Calhoun's Boomerang

It will be remembered that Jackson appointed Van Buren Minister to England during a recess of the Congress, and he served in that capacity several months. When his nomination was sent to the Senate it was rejected, his rival for the Presidency, John C. Calhoun, then Vice-President, casting the deciding vote. A few moments later, Senator Benton remarked to the truculent South Carolinian: "Mr. Vice-President, you have broken a Minister to England, but made a President;" and so he had. The day on which Chief Justice Taney, who had been rejected by the Senate as Associate Justice, administered the Presidential oath to Martin Van Buren, who had been rejected as Minister to the Court of St. James, was one of the happiest in the stormy life of Jackson.

James K. Polk is the only man to have been both Speaker of the House of Representatives and President, though several other Speakers strove manfully for the supreme honor of the Republic. Polk, however, did not reach the Presidency until long after he had ceased to be Speaker. He and Thomas Brackett Reed are the only Speakers who have been thanked by the House on a strict party vote, for ability and fairness in the Chair. He also is the only man elected to the Presidency, thus far, who failed to carry his own State. In the Convention that nominated Polk the vote on the first ballot stood as follows: Martin Van Buren, of New York, 146; Lewis Cass, of Michigan, 83; Richard M. Johnson, of Kentucky, 23; James Buchanan, of Pennsylvania, 4; Levi Woodbury, of New Hampshire, 2; Commodore Stewart, of Pennsylvania, 1; John C. Calhoun, of South Carolina, 6. Two-thirds being necessary to nominate, the voting proceeded until the eighth ballot, when Polk, whose name had not previously been mentioned, received 44 votes, and on the ninth ballot he was unanimously nominated. Van Buren received a majority on only one ballot—the first—while at the late Baltimore Convention I led on thirty

ballots, and had a clear majority on nine of them. Adroit lying and manipulation have more than once robbed men of the Presidency.

History sometimes repeats itself very nearly in the movements and machinations of Conventions—the fluctuating tides of politics—and the story of the nomination and election of Polk is of dramatic interest and somewhat parallel to the Baltimore situation.

A "Gentlemen's Agreement" That Went Wrong

It was generally accepted that the Democrats would nominate Martin Van Buren and that the Whigs would nominate Henry Clay. So, that pair of worthy and ambitious patriots entered into a gentlemen's agreement that the question of Texas annexation, then brewing, should be postponed until a more convenient season; at least, more convenient for them. Consequently, Clay wrote a letter against annexation, and Van Buren gave out a statement of the same tenor, that would now be dubbed an interview. Everything seemed lovely for the twain, but only *seemed* so; for a coterie of Southern statesmen was bent on the immediate annexation of Texas and on having a President of their own way of thinking. So, they went quietly and systematically to work to frustrate the nomination of Van Buren, who had already secured a majority of the delegates to the Convention. Many of them, however, were more for the immediate annexation of Texas than they were for Van Buren. So, some scheme had to be devised to save their faces while defeating their candidate.

General Jackson, rusticated at the Hermitage after weathering the multitudinous storms of a long life, but with his eagle eye still sweeping the political horizon and his vengeful heart still set on beating his ancient enemy, Henry Clay, was for Van Buren tooth and nail; but he was also for the immediate annexation of Texas.

Old Hickory was of an unsuspecting character, and the wily politicians determined to circumvent him and to make him the destroyer of Martin Van Buren. Considering how wholeheartedly he stood by his friends, one is forced to pronounce such a performance a most cruel one. The schemers induced Aaron V. Brown, a Congressman from Tennessee, to write Jackson a private letter of inquiry concerning his views on annexation. In his innocence, the General sent a strong reply declaring himself in favor of immediate annexation. The chances are that, if pressed, he would have declared in favor of annexing all of Mexico. However, at the psychological moment the Jackson letter was published and widely exploited, creating a tremendous sensation. Even with this aid, it was necessary to formulate a plan whereby the annexationist delegates who were instructed for Van Buren could help to crush him while appearing to support him, thereby exonerating themselves to their constituents at home. So, the two-thirds rule was introduced and many annexationist Van Buren delegates voted for it, enabling themselves to keep the word of promise to the ear but to break it in fact by voting for Van Buren on every ballot, knowing full well that he never could obtain the necessary two-thirds. The plan worked like a charm in 1844, giving the Democrats a President and giving the country Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Nevada and parts of Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado, Nebraska and Utah. Subsequently—as fate frequently ordains in balancing accounts—it worked as a boomerang when, in 1848, Van Buren bolted for the sake of revenge and defeated General Cass.

From Battlefield to White House

I have spoken of Zachary Taylor among the Presidents who have owed their White House tenures to their war records. Taylor not only had never had any civil experience, but he had never even voted prior to becoming President. This was due to his having been in the regular army since he had been of voting age. His nomination, which Webster declared was one unfit to be made, caused the angry Senator from Massachusetts to characterize him as a "mere rough frontier soldier," caused Henry Clay to sulk in his tent, led to Clay being defeated for President and to the death of the Whig party.

The war between the States made General Grant President, and aided materially in making Presidents of Johnson, Hayes, Garfield, Arthur, Harrison and McKinley. It also gave Presidential nominations to McClellan and Hancock, and did much toward making Frank P. Blair and B. Gratz Brown Vice-Presidential nominees. Grant had never held civil office prior to being President—had, indeed, never

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