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Abstract
The presidential campaign of 1828 has been widely and understandably characterized as the "dirtiest, coarsest, most vulgar" such contest in American History. Though president John Quincy Adams's strong commitment to active government as a means to national improvement in many spheres of life provided the basis for a serious if contentious exchange of views as he bid for reelection, most scholars agree that the campaign turned less on issues than on the Jacksonians' superior organization and propaganda. [excerpt]

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The General, the Secretary, and the President: An Episode in the Presidential Campaign of 1828

By Michael Birken

The presidential campaign of 1828 has been widely and understandably characterized as the "dirtiest, coarsest, most vulgar" such contest in American history. Though President John Quincy Adams's strong commitment to active government as a means to national improvement in many spheres of life provided the basis for a serious if contentious exchange of views as he bid for reelection, most scholars agree that the campaign turned less on issues than on the Jacksonians' superior organization and propaganda.

Both sides expended great energy tarnishing the image of the opposition nominee for the nation's highest office. President Adams was charged with being a secret monarchist, an aristocrat, a corruptionist, and a spendthrift. For Jacksonians, perhaps the ultimate symbol of Adams' corruption was his alleged use of public funds to purchase a billiard table for the White House. Adams men were equally severe on General Jackson. The Tennessee candidate, they said, was little more than a savage, a man who provoked duels and engaged in brawls at the slightest provocation. Jackson was charged variously with adultery, with abetting Aaron Burr's western conspiracy in Jefferson's administration, and with illegal behavior as General of the Army during the Seminole War. Further, he was widely portrayed as a heartless leader who had ordered the execution of six militia men in the Florida campaign who he claimed had deserted, but who his political enemies said had only been lost.

That the rhetoric on each side was blunted and their respective charges against the opposition less than accurate, however based on fact (Adams, for example, had purchased a billiard table, though with his own funds), few historians have denied. Yet the virulence of the complaints against General Jackson were sometimes fueled by

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2Washington, D.C., United States Telegraph, March 30, 1828; Remini, Election of Andrew Jackson, 155; Edwin A. Mintz, "President Adams's Billiard Table," New England Quarterly, 45 (March 1972), 31-43.
3Remini, Election of Andrew Jackson, 155-56.
more than simple politics. For many Americans opposed to him, the General's hot-trigger temper was a legitimate and compelling reason to fear his accession to the presidency—and an important point to carry to the public.

Few citizens felt this more strongly than President Adams's secretary of the navy, Samuel Lewis Southard. Himself deeply involved in the campaign to advance President Adams's reelection prospects, Southard became entangled in 1827 in one of the more bizarre, if little known, episodes of that campaign. At the center of the controversy lay General Jackson's contribution to the great triumph over the British at New Orleans in 1815.

The origins of the Jackson-Southard controversy may be traced to late June, 1826, when Southard joined his family on a holiday in Fredericksburg, Virginia, for a week with his wife's relatives. Several days into the visit Southard had dinner at the home of his old friend, Dr. John S. Welford, a dinner also attended by former president James Monroe and their mutual friend, Francis T. Brooke, a local attorney and jurist. The day following a pleasant evening reminiscing with this company, Southard was again invited to Welford's home for more conversation—this time over after-dinner wine. Southard attended the soirée, where he was joined by a half-dozen of Welford's neighbors. Talk was brisk and informal, and the wine flowed.

In the course of the evening politics inevitably came up. One of Welford's guests, Dr. John H. Wallace, vigorously contended that Andrew Jackson's performance at the Battle of New Orleans was in itself proof that he was fit for the presidency. With this remark others around the table, including Southard, took issue. Jackson merited applause for the victory over the British, Southard agreed, but he had not lacked assistance. Not enough credit for the defense of New Orleans in 1814 had ever been given to James Monroe, then serving as secretary of war. Monroe, Southard argued, had made all the arrangements for the city's defense, and he had warned General Jackson of the British approach to Louisiana. Had Monroe not been as diligent as he was, Jackson would have faced immeasurably greater difficulties at New Orleans. These comments, influenced by Southard's warm affections for Monroe (to whom he owed his initial appointment as secretary of the navy), and probably heated a bit by the wine he had been sipping, were fairly innocuous—essentially a sentimental if insistent defense of a man he greatly admired, and a mild debunking of a political adversary. Stretched a bit, however, the remarks could be taken as an insult to General Jackson.

Stretched they were. Wallace, a Jacksonian partisan, offered to friends his own account of the after dinner discussion, putting the worst possible face on Southard's comments. This interpretation was soon carried off to Andrew Jackson in Tennessee, where it had the same effect, as John Quincy Adams later recalled, as throwing a "scarlet blanket upon a tiger." Never one to treat insults lightly, particularly when they touched his military reputation, Jackson declined to accept remarks like Southard's, regardless of the context in which they were made. In his anger the general went to his table and penned an acid letter to Southard—a composition that, to say the least, was hastily and intemperately drawn. Jackson demanded that Southard explain himself. If no satisfaction were offered, there would be serious consequences.

The letter never reached Southard. Jackson sent it first, unsolicited, to his friend, Tennessee Congressman Sam Houston, who was to carry it on to Secretary Southard in Washington. When Houston read the letter he recognized that given its subject, and the harsh language employed, it was potentially explosive. Consulting with other Jacksonians in the capital, Houston decided to hold on to the letter and to write the general advising a milder, less contentious missive, and perhaps even delay in sending it.

Houston's attempts to calm his friend were shrewd but not completely successful. As the new year, 1827, approached, Jackson's patience wore thin. He wrote again to Southard on January 5, repeating that Wallace had told him about Southard's remarks, and

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*Few biographies of Jackson or histories of the period discuss the Jackson-Southard controversy, and none provide any substantial detail. For a brief account unfattering to Jackson, see John Spencer Bassett, The Life of Andrew Jackson (Garden City, N.Y., 1913), I: 386-96. For a different perspective, see Robert V. Remini, Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Freedom, 1828-1852 (New York, 1981), 121-22.


*Ibid. See also copies of letters from those who attended the gathering at Dr. Welford's, including John H. Wallace, Lafayette Johnson, William J. Gray, Archibald Hart and William M. Blackford, each addressed to John S. Welford, all dated March 23, 1827, in Andrew Jackson Papers, LC, scollum real 34.


suggested that "a charge of so serious a nature" could not "pass
without some notice." He requested Southard's grounds for saying
what he did about his [Jackson's] alleged desire to leave New Orleans
prior to the battle, and Monroe's "peremptory order to return to that
place." This letter, too, in Houston's mind, was too tart. He conse-
quently held it. Finally, after prodding by the general, Houston
delivered the second Jackson letter to Southard at his office on
February 3. By the time the letter arrived, it was hardly a surprise to
Southard, since political gossip travelled quickly in Washington, and
Southard had learned of the original, undelivered Jackson protest
letter by mid-December. 13 Faced at last with a demand for an ex-
planation of his comments the previous July, Southard immediately
consulted his political friends, including President Adams, and
prepared a defense. The subject consumed a good deal of his time
and nervous energy for the next few months. 14

In truth, this clash between the general and the secretary was un-
necessary. Southard's comments had not been particularly flattering
to Jackson, but they had been casually and privately expressed, and
they had not included a suggestion that Jackson wished to avoid a
fight with the British at New Orleans. Southard's major thrust was a
defense of James Monroe, not an attack on Andrew Jackson. 15 Far
worse things than Southard's comments at Dr. Wellford's informal
gathering had been said on the stump and in the press. Yet Jackson,
ever sensitive to honor, particularly regarding an important episode
in his career, insisted on carrying the issue forward.

For his part, Southard answered Jackson's letter in a similar frame
of mind, if not exactly in the same tone. Southard's response to
Jackson, dated February 9, 1827, explained the circumstances
behind the remarks at Dr. Wellford's, and specifically denied that he
ever "charged you with neglect or desertion of your military
duties—nor denied to you the merit and glory of fighting the battle
of New Orleans." His object in the conversation, Southard insisted, was

13Andrew Jackson to Samuel L. Southard, January 8, 1827, in Bassett, ed., Correspondence,
3:329-30; Jackson to Sam Houston, January 5, 27, 1827, in ibid., 330-33. Southard mentioned
the undelivered Jackson letter to John Quincy Adams on December 23, 1836. On February 3,
1827, he told Adams that he had finally received a letter from Jackson, but not the one an-
ticipated. Requested for an opinion on how best to proceed, Adams urged Southard to take a
defensive approach and, on February 9, expressed satisfaction with Southard's course.

14For example, the spate of letters to friends, requesting advice and assistance, which may be
found in the Southard Papers, LC, and the Samuel L. Southard Papers, Princeton University
Library (hereafter PUL).

15Consult later cited in n. 9, above, as well as John S. Wellford's letter to Jackson, March 22,
1827, Jackson Papers, LC, manuscript no. 54.
and on he wrote, as a matter of reference for himself and preparation, perhaps, for further controversy. In the perspective of 150 years, that a cabinet officer would expend such time and energy over an affair of this kind seems unbalanced. Yet, in Southard’s mind, who could know what would eventuate? Jackson seemed just unpredictable enough to demand a duel. Certainly Jackson had a good track record on the dueling field! In the end, Southard determined to hold his ground—to deny what he had not said, to avoid countercharges, and also to demur in pronouncing “the eulogy which the General demands of me.”

To Southard there appeared one potential advantage in the cloud of this unexpected controversy: the possibility of enlisting former President James Monroe as a political ally of the administration. Southard had come to the conclusion by 1826 that if President Adams were to carry Virginia (and the election nationally) in 1828, the endorsement of his predecessor would be almost essential. Southard knew that Monroe and Jackson had never been friendly, and he believed that Adams was carrying on in the tradition of President Monroe. Once Jackson began to recollect the events leading to New Orleans in a fashion unflattering to Monroe, and once Jackson’s lieutenants picked up the refrain in their speeches and in print, the way was open to winning Monroe’s endorsement for the administration. So it seemed.

Southard’s notion was not entirely implausible. Monroe was hostile to Jackson, and he was sympathetic to Southard, and the administration Southard served. The former president was willing to provide Southard with access to his personal papers in support of Southard’s recollections about the Battle of New Orleans. But there was an important qualification. Monroe wanted to remain out of the controversy, at least as far as possible, and asked Southard not to bring the issue before the public. Monroe’s motives were both altruistic and selfish. On one hand, it felt it would be unseemly for a former president to engage in a bitter personal and political quarrel. More important on the other hand, however, was an immediate financial concern. Monroe at this time was pressing a large claim before the government for services rendered earlier in his public career and he well knew that without the backing of Jackson’s friends in Congress, his claims had no chance of success. Hence Monroe’s strong request that Southard not publish anything which might prejudice his case—which meant, in effect, no publication. Southard agreed to comply, and for the time being Monroe was not directly involved.

The Jackson-Southard affair was not quite over. In an effort to tantalize gossip-hungry Washington, and perhaps to put Southard on edge, Washington Telegraph editor Duff Green had been hinting about Southard’s enormities and their implications since the Spring. Some of these items were picked up in newspapers across the nation, and Southard was periodically asked by friends and acquaintances just when his “duel” with Jackson was going to transpire—a suggestion that he quickly demurred.

In late June, 1827, Green finally bruited the issue directly, in an editorial titled “GEN JACKSON AND MR SOUTHARD.” In this article Green recapitulated the substance of the differences between the secretary and the general, from a perspective sympathetic to Jackson but professedly ignorant of the specifics of most of the correspondence. In a follow-up, responding to defenses of Southard that appeared in several pro-administration papers, Green charged that Southard was the “convicted slanderer” of General Jackson, a man unwilling or unable to tell the truth. In neither of these editorials, nor in a third, published on July 11, did Green print any of the correspondence—probably because he knew that publication would not redound to the general’s benefit. For his part Southard, who wished to exhibit the Jacksonian literary style to an interested public, was prevented from doing so because of his pledge to Monroe. The Jackson-Southard duel never transpired, the correspondence was never published, and the issue faded. Political Washington turned to such matters as the tariff, Governor George Troup’s continued truculence regarding the Creek Indians in Georgia, and the president’s penchant for billiard playing.

For Samuel Southard, the incident was a harrowing, ugly, but in the end strangely edifying experience. He had for months been talk-

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7For example, William Ten Eyck to Southard, n.d., 1827, Thomas W. White to Southard, July 4, 1827, George Halcombe to Southard, May 28, 1827, Peter J. Clarke to Southard, May 19, 1827, Southard to Peter J. Clarke, n.d., 1827, Southard to Thomas W. White, July 9, 1827, Southard Papers, FUL. The letters written by Southard were both rough drafts.

8Washington, D.C., United States Telegraph, June 28, July 7, 11, 1827.

9A further restraint on Southard’s conduct was the consistent advice from President Adams to avoid, insofar as possible, being drawn further into controversy with Jackson. Adams, Memoirs, 7: 269, 289. See also John Taliaferro to Southard, May 20, 1827, Southard Papers, FUL.

10“Remarks on the Correspondence,” Southard Papers, L.C.
“a pleasant employment” for four years, with “a handsome yearly income”—something Southard well knew Monroe needed and wanted. 21

Despite these arguments, and similar ones offered by Taliaferro in his own confidential letter, Monroe did not rise to the bait. He immediately wrote to Southard politely but firmly declining the offer on the grounds that he had pledged himself to “observe a perfect neutrality” between Adams and Jackson. “If I were to suffer myself to be brought forward, in the present instance, after what has passed, or being borted forward, was not to decline the trust . . . it would do to my character, an irreparable injury, since it would be concluded, by an impartial public, that I had abandoned a ground which I had adopted on principle, by the allurements of office.” 22 Weeks later, Monroe also rejected efforts to place him on an electoral ticket in Virginia that was favorable to President Adams. Like his old friend James Madison, who was similarly approached, Monroe had warm feelings for Adams, but was emphatic in refusing to interfere or participate in the election. 23

Thus ended the one possibility that some political result beneficial to the administration might emerge from Southard’s bizarre run-in with General Jackson. Though Southard and his allies continued their labors in Virginia and elsewhere against Jackson, the possibility of carrying Virginia for the president had receded markedly, and General Jackson was one step closer to his overwhelming vindication in the election of 1828.

What good reasons could be given for accepting such a nomination? Southard listed several, the strongest being defense of Monroe’s “principles & policy” as president and, not least, the opportunity for

21Southard to James Monroe, December 16, 1827, Monroe Papers, LC; and John Taliaferro to Monroe, December 15, 1827, in ibid.
22James Monroe to Samuel L. Southard, December 17, 1827, Southard Papers, PUL.
23Annex, Monroe, 259-60.