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

## **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*]

## **Keywords**

John Quincy Adams, Presidential Election of 1828, Andrew Jackson, corruption, Samuel Southard

## **Disciplines**

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For the children of the middle-class people who crowded into Red Boiling Springs in the years between the wars, belief in the curative properties of mineral waters became quaint, much like belief in the efficacy of the patent medicines which had been so heavily advertised in the thirties. It is more modern to take vitamins than Cardui, to calm a woman with tranquilizers rather than send her off for three months of rest at Red Boiling Springs, and to drive to Florida, the East Coast, or even across the country to Disneyland than to spend a vacation only a half-day's drive from home. Still, believers in the mineral waters can yet be seen in the town, filling up plastic jugs with red sulphur water; and the hotels entertain guests who are drawn to the town by its old-fashioned charm. It seems probable that the decline of the town's resort business was as much due to the changing tastes of the area's middle classes as to the availability of good roads. Any revival in the resort business will probably be due to the current fashion for nostalgia: the town may have been "out" long enough to be "in" again.

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

By MICHAEL BIRKNER

The presidential campaign of 1828 has been widely and understandably characterized as the "dirtiest, coarsest, most vulgar" such contest in American History.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

That the rhetoric on each side was bloated 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

<sup>1</sup>Robert V. Remini, *The Election of Andrew Jackson* (Philadelphia, 1963) is the standard account. Quotation is from Remini's essay, "The Election of 1828," in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., ed., *History of American Presidential Elections, 1789-1968* (New York, 1971), I: 426.

<sup>2</sup>Washington, D. C., *United States Telegraph*, March 30, 1827; Remini, *Election of Andrew Jackson*, 103; Edwin A. Miles, "President Adams's Billiard Table," *New England Quarterly*, 45 (March 1972), 31-43.

<sup>3</sup>Remini, *Election of Andrew Jackson*, 153-56.

more than simple politics. For many Americans opposed to him, the General's hair-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.<sup>4</sup> Several days into the visit Southard had dinner at the home of his old friend, Dr. John S. Wellford, 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 Wellford's home for more conversation—this time over after-dinner wine. Southard attended the soiree, where he was joined by a half-dozen of Wellford's neighbors. Talk was brisk and informal, and the wine flowed.<sup>5</sup>

In the course of the evening politics inevitably came up. One of Wellford'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

<sup>4</sup>Few biographies of Jackson or histories of the period discuss the Jackson-Southard controversy, and none provides any substantial detail. For a brief account unflattering to Jackson, see John Spencer Bassett, *The Life of Andrew Jackson* (Garden City, N.Y., 1911), I: 395-96. For a different perspective, see Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Freedom, 1822-1832* (New York, 1981), 121-22.

<sup>5</sup>"Remarks on the Correspondence [with Andrew Jackson]," Samuel L. Southard Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (hereinafter LC).

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.<sup>6</sup>

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."<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

The letter never reached Southard. Jackson sent it first, unsealed, 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 that.<sup>9</sup>

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

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.* See also copies of letters from those who attended the gathering at Dr. Wellford's, including John H. Wallace, Lafayette Johnson, William J. Gray, Archibald Hart and William M. Blackford, each addressed to John S. Wellford, all dated March 22, 1827, in Andrew Jackson Papers, LC, microfilm reel 34.

<sup>7</sup>Quoted in Charles F. Adams, ed., *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams, Comprising Portions of his Diary from 1795 to 1848* (Philadelphia, 1874-1877), 7: 218-19.

<sup>8</sup>Andrew Jackson to Sam Houston, November 23, December 15, 1826, in John Spencer Bassett, ed., *The Correspondence of Andrew Jackson* (Washington, D.C., 1926-1935), 3: 319, 325.

<sup>9</sup>Bassett, *Life of Jackson*, I: 395-96; Llerena Friend; *Sam Houston: The Great Designer* (Augustin, Texas, 1954), 14-15.

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 consequently 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.<sup>10</sup> Faced at last with a demand for an explanation 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.<sup>11</sup>

In truth, this clash between the general and the secretary was unnecessary. 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.<sup>12</sup> 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

<sup>10</sup>Andrew Jackson to Samuel L. Southard, January 5, 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, 1826. On February 3, 1827, he told Adams that he had finally received a letter from Jackson, but not the one anticipated. 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. *Memoirs*, 7: 218-19, 220, 221, 223.

<sup>11</sup>For 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).

<sup>12</sup>Consult letters cited in n. 6, above, as well as John S. Wellford's letter to Jackson, March 22, 1827, Jackson Papers, LC, microfilm reel 34.

"to vindicate Mr. Monroe," not "to deprecate your military exploits. They form a part of our national glory which I have no inclination to tarnish."<sup>13</sup>

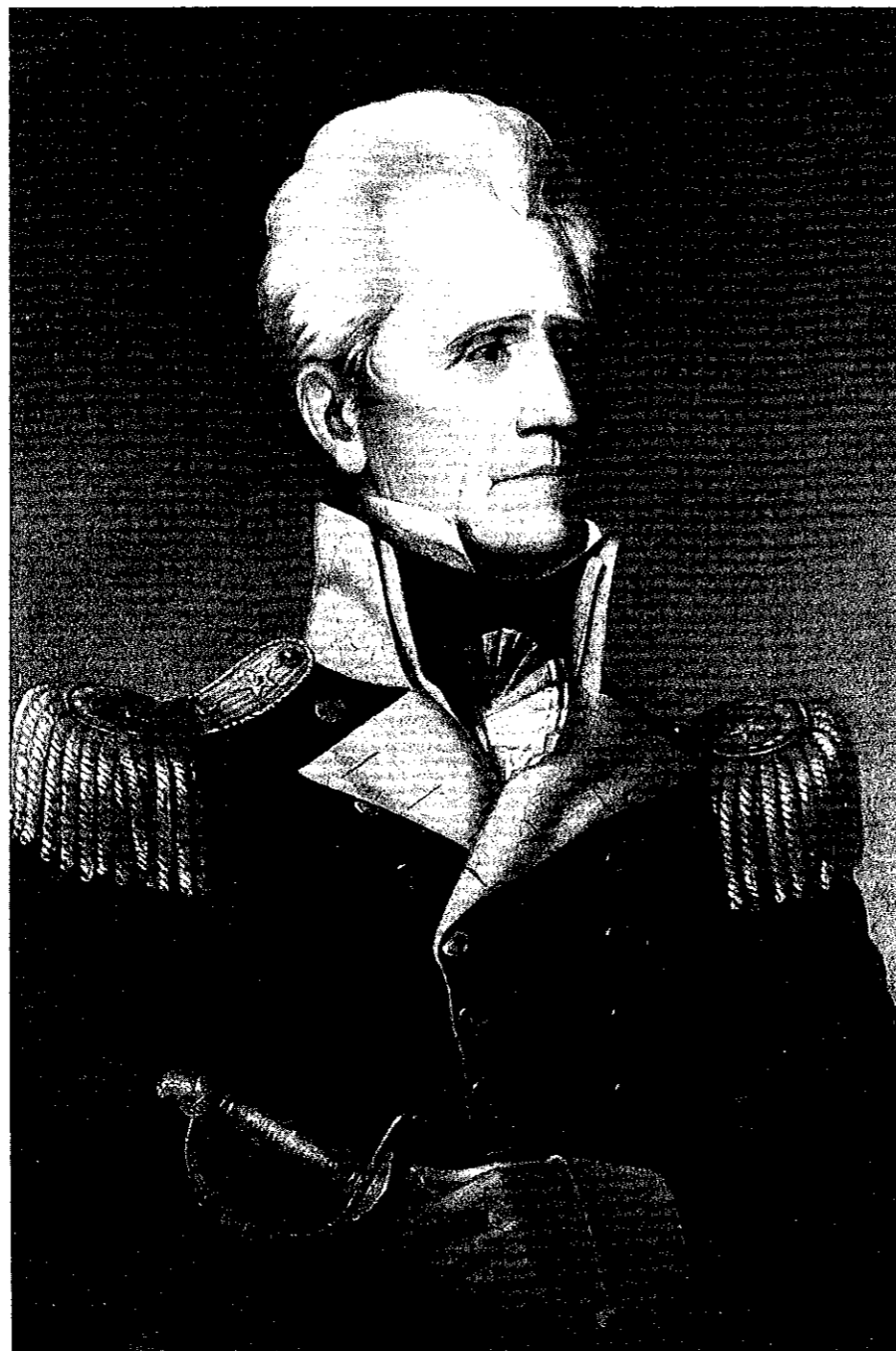
Jackson was not appeased. On March 6 he responded to this explanation maintaining that his information was accurate and asserting that Southard's reply was less than "frank and candid." The letter, which dripped with sarcasm, offered a lengthy recollection of the events of 1815, which to his mind proved that Monroe's assistance in the defense to New Orleans was, at best, peripheral. "I have therefore to request," Jackson concluded, "when on your electioneering tours, or at your wine drinkings hereafter, you will not fail to recollect these historical facts which indeed you ought long since to have known." With this injunction, Jackson announced that the correspondence was at a "close."<sup>14</sup>

This letter reached Southard on April 2, through Major John Eaton, Jackson's Tennessee friend, currently a member of the United States Senate. Uncertain how to proceed under the circumstances (Jackson, after all, had declared their correspondence was over), Southard boiled. He was dismayed at the prospect of a military chieftain gaining the presidency, disgusted by the misinformation conveyed by Wallace, and appalled by the style and tone of Jackson's letters to him. In this frame of mind Southard sat at his desk in Washington and penned a thirty-one page memorandum to himself as a summary of the affair. He was particularly upset at this time that Jackson's third letter—the one declaring their correspondence at an end—was mentioned in Duff Green's virulently anti-administration journal, the *United States Telegraph*, in terms most unflattering to him. A private slur was one thing; public humiliation was ten times worse. As he sat at his desk, Southard vented some of his frustrations.

Aside from the atrocious style of writing, Southard observed in his "Remarks on the Correspondence," Jackson's exposition lacked every semblance of decency and fairness. Jackson had queried and Southard had offered a candid response. Was this insufficient? If by a "chivalric" answer Jackson had meant a "blustery, gasconading, insulting, duel seeking" rejoinder, "I freely confess that I had no disposition to give such a one. . . ." Southard professed hope and confidence that Jackson would not be so foolish as to demand a duel. On

<sup>13</sup>Samuel L. Southard to Andrew Jackson, February 9, 1827, in Bassett, ed., *Correspondence*, 3: 342-44.

<sup>14</sup>Andrew Jackson to Southard, March 6, 1827, in *ibid.*: 345-348. See also Jackson to John Coffee, March 16, 1827, in *ibid.*: 348-49.



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PORTRAIT OF GENERAL ANDREW JACKSON  
BY RALPH E.W. EARL



U.S. Naval History Museum

SAMUEL SOUTHARD, SECRETARY OF THE NAVY

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. . . .”<sup>15</sup>

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 insofar as possible, and asked Southard not to bring the issue before the public. Monroe's motives were both altruistic and selfish. On one hand, he 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

<sup>15</sup>“Remarks on the Correspondence,” Southard Papers, LC.

case—which meant, in effect, no publication. Southard agreed to comply, and for the time being Monroe was not directly involved.<sup>16</sup>

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 dampened.<sup>17</sup>

In late June, 1827, Green finally bruted 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.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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-

<sup>16</sup>Southard to James Monroe, February 4, 1827, Monroe Papers, LC; Monroe to Southard, February 9, 1827, Southard Papers, PUL. On Monroe's financial plight, and its bearing on the controversy between Southard and Jackson, see Lucius Wilmerding, Jr., *James Monroe, Public Claimant* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1960), 88-90, 112 and Harry Ammon, *James Monroe: The Quest for National Identity* (New York, 1971), 558-59.

<sup>17</sup>For 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, PUL. The letters written by Southard were both rough drafts.

<sup>18</sup>Washington, D.C., *United States Telegraph*, June 29, July 7, 11, 1827.

<sup>19</sup>A 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: 259, 260. See also John Taliaferro to Southard, May 26, 1827, Southard Papers, PUL.

ing privately about Jackson's unfitness for the presidency. Now his personal experience seemed to validate what he had been saying all along. The controversy over his remarks in Fredericksburg in 1826 convinced Southard more than ever that Jackson had to be defeated in 1828. As he wrote to an old friend at the bar, John Wurts, who by 1827 was emerging as a Jacksonian operative in Philadelphia: "The more I see & hear of Gen. J. & his disregard of all obligations which impede the course of his passions, the more I dread his ascent to the Presidency."<sup>20</sup>

Aside from its educational value, the fracas with Jackson had opened the possibility of playing the Monroe card in the coming presidential contest. If Southard could not draw Monroe into direct confrontation with Jackson on the events surrounding the "wine drinking" controversy, perhaps Monroe could be brought into the administration camp in another way. One night in Fredericksburg in the fall of 1827 Southard hatched a scheme with his friend, Virginia Congressman John Taliaferro, wherein each would approach Monroe about running for the vice-presidency on the Adams ticket in 1828. In one stroke the course of the current administration would be vindicated by one of the "last of the cocked hats," and Virginia could be brought into the National Republican camp. It sounded perfect when Taliaferro and Southard conversed together; they determined to make the effort. Within weeks, each man wrote confidentially to Monroe, making the suggestion. "In looking around for a candidate for the Vice Presidency, to be run with President Adams," Southard wrote,

it seems to be generally thought that Virginia ought to furnish the man & that in selecting him, she owes it to her character & fame to let him be the first & best. . . . In reflecting about it, it has occurred to us, that you might, with propriety, be put into the situation. And if you were named, a unanimous approbation of the act would follow.

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

<sup>20</sup>(Draft) Southard to John Wurts, June 27, 1827, Southard Papers, LC. See also Southard to Wurts's brother, Alexander Wurts, February 1, March 1, 1828, in which Southard alluded not only to Jackson's deficiencies as a writer, but to the general's commitment "to hate me without cause."

"a pleasant employment" for four years, with "a handsome yearly income"—something Southard well knew Monroe needed and wanted.<sup>21</sup>

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 brot 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 allur[e]ment of office."<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup>

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.

<sup>21</sup>Southard to James Monroe, December 16, 1827, Monroe Papers, LC and John Taliaferro to Monroe, December 15, 1827, in *ibid.*

<sup>22</sup>James Monroe to Samuel L. Southard, December 17, 1827, Southard Papers, PUL.

<sup>23</sup>Ammon, *Monroe*, 559-60.