

Confession of a Convert

Samuel L. Boicourt

Commentary

Calhoun's doctrine of nullification failed to get much favorable response outside South Carolina, but sectionalism intensified during the 1830s. Increased antislavery rhetoric in the North alienated the South far more than a tariff reduction pacified it. Yet Jacksonian Democrats managed to gain support in all sections. The first, and perhaps most important, reason is that their rhetoric continued to emphasize their dedication to the common man at a time when more and more States were abolishing property qualifications for voting and, thus, turning more and more common men into voters. While the nation's population doubled in the years between 1828 and the Civil War, the number of voters tripled. Second, Jacksonians utilized the most efficient media, forgetting pamphlets (which had been a major medium in the eighteenth century but which common men of the nineteenth century rarely read). They relied on partisan newspapers and stump speeches. Third, Jackson reflected dominant public opinion by generally favoring States rights but vigorously opposing Calhoun's doctrine of nullification. Fourth, the Jacksonian party was well organized at the local and State levels. It began holding national conventions in 1831. The first convention was simply to select a vice-presidential candidate to replace the incumbent Calhoun (who was unacceptable to Jackson). The new system enabled it to survive Jackson's retirement. Now called the "Democratic party" or "The Democracy" (words with egalitarian appeal), it nominated Martin Van Buren for the presidency in 1836, rallied behind him in a well-run campaign and was victorious once again.

Meanwhile, Jackson's opponents had trouble getting organized and adapting to the rhetorical revolution that was going on. Despite his defeat in 1828, John Q. Adams refused to form a political party. Nevertheless congressional leaders who believed in strong government, such as Webster and Clay, formed a new "National Republican" party in 1831-1832 and nominated Clay for president. The party's name reflects its rhetorical traditionalism. Although "republican" was a god term which dated back to

the Jeffersonians, "national" reflected the party's commitment to a strong central government much too clearly to attract a majority of the nation's voters. National Republicans focused on the issues, especially the National Bank, which Congress had rechartered shortly before the election but which was killed by Jackson's veto. Jacksonian rhetoric about the "Monster Bank" and its greedy supporters was integrated easily into its common man appeal. National Republicans failed to adapt well to the new media. Although they established some partisan newspapers and did a little stump speaking, they did so to a lesser extent than the Jacksonians and continued to rely heavily on pamphlets.

Gradually adapting to the new situation between the elections of 1832 and 1836, the party changed its name to "Whig," a word that was denotatively meaningless but connotatively rich because of its identification with the "whig patriots" of the Revolution. It downplayed ideology as it sought support from all kinds of anti-Jacksonians, including pro- and antislavery people, pro- and antiprotectionists and both people who were for and against the National Bank. It flirted with egalitarianism as it incorporated remnants of the short-lived Anti-Masonic party, which had devoted itself during the late 1820s and early 1830s to abolishing secret societies. In 1836, the Whigs tried to avoid ideology by nominating for the presidency William Henry Harrison, who was not identified with any particular ideology. The tactic was not totally successful. Some New England protectionists insisted on supporting Daniel Webster while some strong backers of States rights campaigned for Hugh White.

An economic recession during Van Buren's presidency brightened the outlook for the Whigs as the election of 1840 approached. Whig leaders knew that they would have to borrow the rhetorical strategies of their Democratic enemies if they were to win. Being a coalition of people with diametrically opposed ideologies, Whigs were only in accord in that they disagreed with Van Buren's proposal to deposit government funds in government vaults (part of the Sub-Treasury bill). They knew this issue alone would not bring them victory. Consequently, their basic strategy was to divert public attention from anything as trivial as a substantive issue.

The strategy unfolded as they nominated William Henry Harrison (1773-1841) for president and John Tyler for vice-president. Tyler, a former Jacksonian, was nominated to make the ticket more palatable to discontented Democrats.

Although Harrison was the oldest presidential candidate to have been nominated prior to 1840, he was not well known as a politician and even less so as an ideologist. He had served only one term in the House of Representatives and his Senate term (beginning in 1825) was cut short when he resigned to accept a brief diplomatic post. Most of his career had been as governor of the Indiana Territory. He had become famous as an Indian fighter, especially as commander of the territorial militia at the famous Battle of Tippecanoe in 1811 and as commanding general of the Army of the Northwest during the War of 1812. During the 1830s, the elderly gentleman

had been living on his estate at the north bend of the Ohio River. This made him a farmer, and Whigs saw the rhetorical potential of doing what their enemies had done earlier with Jackson: portraying him as a common man and a military hero.

Whig strategy was aided by a horrendous mistake made by an Eastern Democratic newspaper, which belittled Harrison's age and Western crudeness. It added: "Give him a barrel of hard cider, and settle a pension for two thousand a year, and take our word for it, he will sit the remainder of his days contented in a log cabin." Seizing upon this quotation, Whigs put pictures of Harrison's "log cabin" on everything in sight, including handbills and ribbons that supporters pinned on their coats. They used slogans such as "Tippecanoe and Tyler too." They blamed Van Buren for the recession and termed the Democrats' use of patronage the "spoils system," but they carefully avoided ideology. Rallies, complete with stump speeches, were highlighted by parades in which imitation log cabins were drawn through the streets on wagons. Cider was distributed, usually in containers shaped like log cabins. Journalists and speakers dubbed Harrison "The Farmer of North Bend," while Van Buren was called "the silk stocking aristocrat." They repeated poems such as, "Let Van from his coolers of silver drink wine/And sit on his cushioned settee/Our man on a buckeye bench can recline/Content with hard cider is he." Whigs printed song books with titles such as *The Tippecanoe Roarer*, and at rallies they sang songs such as "The Log Cabin Two-Step." They published campaign newspapers with titles such as the [Chicago] *Hard Cider Press* and *The [New York] Log Cabin*.

Caught off guard by Whig strategy and their own rhetorical blunder, Democrats protested that Whigs were turning the campaign into a farce. Whigs had a sharp retort, as is illustrated by a letter which is reproduced from the American Antiquarian Society's copy of the July 2, 1840 issue of *The [Steubenville, Ohio] Log Cabin Farmer*, p. 4.

Confession of a Convert

Louisville, May 19, 1840.

GENTLEMEN: I went on Saturday to the log cabin raising, as true a Van Burenite as ever fobbed a custom-house check, to see what fools intelligent Whigs were going to make of themselves to humbug ignorance.

But when, from Mr. Field's speech, I came to understand that the log cabin and hard cider cry was not got up by the Whigs, but had originated from scoffs and jeers in democratic newspapers, cracked off in derision of an old and estimable defender of his country, for being too poor to live in a palace and drink wine, I felt a little stumped.

Thinks I to myself, does honest poverty merit contempt? If he, who handled millions of public money, had been less honest, might he not have been more

rich than some of his scoffers? — But again, thinks I, I am poorer than the General: wonder if I am an object of contempt to my rich brother democrats? And, sirs, I set to and saddled down a log. But now, thinks I again, I came here to hunt fools, and may be I'm making one of myself, and I'll quit and go home.

When I got home, I took a look at a likeness of Van Buren; it didn't seem to look as well as it used to. I took it down, washed its face, wiped its nose, and hung it up again; but all wouldn't do — he still smirked through his whiskers at me, just as a shallow fop does at a shoemaker. So I turned him face about and told him to OUT. And now, sirs, I am going with the 'log cabin dwelling-cider-drinker,' to battle against those palace-dwelling, champaigne-drinking democrats, with full confidence that, under the humble banner of the log cabin, the nation is to be rescued from the dominion of the spoilers. It was under the banner of the infamous cross, sirs, that the world was redeemed from the devil and his imps — a banner assumed by the followers of our blessed Lord in commemoration of the ignominious treatment to which he had been subjected by his unholy scoffers and persecutors.

SAMUEL L. BOICOURT

Shoemaker & Cobbler, Jefferson st., between
Third and Fourth streets.