

This Day in History... February 9, 1825

John Q. Adams Elected in “Corrupt Bargain”

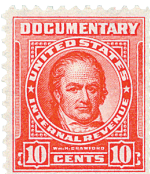
On February 9, 1825, John Quincy Adams was elected president of the United States even though he had not won a majority of the electoral vote. The unusual outcome exposed deep political divisions and set the stage for one of the most contested elections in early American history.

The election of 1824 took place during a period often called the “Era of Good Feelings,” when the Democratic-Republican Party dominated national politics. The Federalist Party had largely collapsed, leaving only one major political party competing for power. President James Monroe, who had served two terms, followed the precedent set by George Washington and chose not to run for a third term. His vice president, Daniel D. Tompkins, struggled with poor health and political unpopularity, which left no clear successor within the party.

As a result, the race to replace Monroe was crowded and highly competitive. Several prominent figures from Monroe’s own administration entered the contest. These included Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, Secretary of War John C. Calhoun, and Secretary of the Treasury William H. Crawford. Each had national experience and strong political connections. Outside the cabinet, two other powerful figures also ran: Henry Clay, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and Andrew Jackson, a senator from Tennessee and a celebrated general from the War of 1812.



Popular “Black Jack” stamp issued during the Civil War.



Crawford placed third, but a severe stroke soon ended his political ambitions.



After losing the election, Jackson and his supporters founded what became the Democratic Party

John C. Calhoun eventually withdrew from the presidential race after realizing he lacked enough support to win. Instead, he ran for vice president, a position that was still chosen separately at the time. Calhoun won that race, ensuring his place in the next administration regardless of who became president.

Support for the remaining candidates was divided along regional lines. Adams drew most of his strength from New England and parts of the Northeast. Jackson was popular in the South, the West, and the mid-Atlantic states. Clay appealed mainly to western voters, while Crawford retained support in parts of the East and among party insiders. With four strong candidates splitting the vote, it became clear that no one was likely to win an outright majority.

Voting took place over several weeks, from October 26 to December 2, 1824. When the electoral votes were counted, Andrew Jackson led with 99 votes. John Quincy Adams followed with 84, William H. Crawford had 41, and Henry Clay finished with 37. At the time, 131 electoral votes were needed to win a majority. Although Jackson had more electoral votes than any other candidate, he fell well short of that mark.

Because no candidate received a majority, the Constitution required the House of Representatives to decide the election. Under the 12th Amendment, the House could choose only from the top three electoral vote recipients: Jackson, Adams, and Crawford. Each state delegation would cast one vote, and a majority of states was needed to win.

Henry Clay, who had finished fourth and was therefore excluded from consideration, still played a crucial role. As Speaker of the House, he had significant influence over the voting process. Clay strongly disliked Andrew Jackson, whom he viewed as unfit for the presidency. He once remarked that he could not believe that “killing 2,500 Englishmen at New Orleans” qualified Jackson for the complex responsibilities of the office. Clay’s political views also aligned more closely with Adams, especially on issues like federal power and economic development.

When the House voted on February 9, 1825, Adams won on the first ballot. He received the votes of 13 state delegations. Jackson received seven, and Crawford received four. Despite Jackson’s strong showing in the popular and electoral vote, Adams was declared the winner.

The decision stunned Jackson and his supporters. Many believed the outcome was unfair. Just before the House results became public, an anonymous letter appeared in a Philadelphia newspaper. It accused Clay of striking a secret deal with Adams, trading his support in the House for a powerful cabinet position. Although no formal investigation ever confirmed the claim, Adams did appoint Clay as secretary of state shortly after taking office.

Jackson and his allies labeled the arrangement a “corrupt bargain.” The accusation followed Adams throughout his presidency and weakened his administration. Jackson used the controversy to rally supporters, presenting himself as a victim of political elites. Four years later, in the election of 1828, Jackson defeated Adams decisively, bringing the turbulent chapter of 1824 to a close.



Adams was the fourth secretary of state in a row to become President.



Calhoun remained vice president under Jackson until 1832.



Clay ran for President again in 1832 and 1844, and lost both times.



Clay was dubbed the “Great Pacificator” for orchestrating several major compromises.

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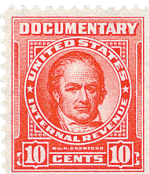
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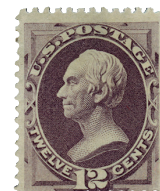
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