The Head and the Heart: How America Chooses Presidents

In October 2011, the American political chattering class was flabbergasted by the emergence of Herman Cain as a serious presidential candidate. They knew, virtually everyone knew, that Mr. Cain was, in no manner of speaking, qualified for the presidency; the highlights of his resume were CEO of Godfather’s Pizza, Chairman of the Kansas City Branch of the Federal Reserve Bank, and talk show radio host. While impressive, this sort of resume does not a president make. Media speculation as to how this unqualified candidate, who also seemed less than sharp and nuanced on the issues, rose so dramatically in the polls ran rampant. It ranged from a “‘Tea Party appetite for extremist rhetoric’"¹ that attracted “politicians without serious jobs and who had very little to lose”² to his ability to speak in simple terms to a frustrated part of the electorate, to a conscious choice by conservatives, wary of accusations of racism, to let a black man win in order to “drive a stake through the claims that the movement harbors racists.”³ Regardless of the specific theory, there seemed to be universal acceptance that Cain’s month atop the polls was the result of his supporters failing to think rationally through their choices. Conventional wisdom suggested that the Cain collapse was inevitable, that “eventually, a campaign run solely on charm and hokum tends to wind up in a ditch.”⁴ In the greater context of American electoral history, however, there would be nothing impossible about the election of Herman Cain or his campaign strategy. Although many believe that this episode was an extremely rare occurrence, in which a “radical” group hijacked the electoral landscape from the always reasonable American voters, America through the years has a tendency to think irrationally about its’ presidential candidates and to instead rely on emotional appeal. Whether in

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² Ibid
³ Shannon Travis, “Cain's race not as big an issue with conservatives as Obama's was three years ago,” CNN, October 13, 2011.
the failure to make William Seward, the extremely qualified and skilled statesman, president, or in the successful bids of Lincoln and Jackson and many others, we don’t always choose the presidents an unbiased observer thoughtfully weighing the pros and cons or the resumes of each candidate would think we would, and this has implications for all future candidates and speaks to our nature as a country. In the elections of 1860 and 1828, we see the nation make a head-scratching presidential choice, based little on logic, and are forced to wonder what brought them about and what they can teach us about modern politics.

One example of America choosing a president with its heart rather than its head comes from 1860 in what historian Clarence Macartney called “the most amazing upset in the history of American politics.”\(^5\) As the Republican Convention approached, there was little doubt in anyone’s mind that the nominee would be and should be William Henry Seward. Seward was accomplished: governor of the nation’s biggest state (New York), the most prominent Republican member of the Senate, and one of the founders of the Republican Party. Seward was a talented public speaker: his “Higher law than the Constitution,” “Irrepressible Conflict,” and address from the Senate floor on February 29, 1860, speeches are legendary to this day. Seward supported the Republican’s anti-slavery cause as strongly as anyone in the country: abolitionists Cassius Clay and Frederick Douglass endorsed him, with Douglass proclaiming him as the “ablest man of his party.”\(^6\) Above all, Abraham Lincoln himself suggested that the nominee ought to be Seward writing: “Is it not, as a matter of justice, due to such men, who have carried this movement forward to its present status, in spite of fearful opposition, personal abuse, and

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\(^6\) Frederick Douglass, “Mr. Seward’s Great Speech,” *Douglass’ Monthly*, April 1860.
hard names? I really think so.” Even Democrats admired him, as the Democratic paper, *The Atlas and Argus*, commented that “we have recognized the genius and leadership of this man.”

When stacking up resumes, accomplishments, and skill sets on paper, there was no question, even among his opponents, that Seward both would and deserved to win. As Frederic Bancroft, the leading Seward scholar and enthusiast of his time, believed, “Seward was sincerely regarded by the scheming politicians, the general public, a very large portion of the truest antislavery men, and the most cultured Republicans as their best representative.” Also, Seward was more than just the most qualified and skilled candidate, he was the most popular and well-known, as well. In the calendar year before the convention, Seward was mentioned ten times more often than Abraham Lincoln in a representative sample of newspapers and three to four times more often than other competitors Chase and Bates (see: Figure I).

It wasn’t just that Seward would be the logical choice of someone who rationally thought through the experiences, achievements, and talents of the candidates, but Seward was a rock star of American politics compared to his rivals, who were virtual no-names. However, to their credit and as a result of multiple factors, the Republicans decided to deviate from the path that made the most sense, nominating Seward, in order to follow an inexperienced, unknown leader in Abraham Lincoln at the Republican Convention of 1860.

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8 *The Atlas and Argus*, May 19, 1860.


10 According to the Infotrac 19th Century Newspaper Database, in the calendar year before the Convention began, Seward was mentioned 378 times. By comparison, the eventual nominee, Lincoln, was mentioned 34 times, and other candidates, Chase and Bates, were mentioned 132 and 84 times, respectively. The database is constantly getting added to, and my numbers came from the database as of March 2012.

Despite being managed by one of the sharpest political minds of his generation, Thurlow Weed, Team Seward made several mistakes, arguably resulting from cockiness, that factored into Lincoln’s nomination. The first of these mistakes was the failure of Weed to meet and lock up the support of Pennsylvania kingmaker, Simon Cameron, before the Convention met in Chicago. Whether or not this blunder was the result of overconfidence or just bad luck seems to depend on interpretation and is disputed by historians. Doris Kearns Goodwin writes that “overconfidence played a role in Weed’s failure to meet with Simon Cameron,”12 but Lawrence Denton argues that “often the course of history hinges on…luck – in this case the lack of a meeting between two powerful political bosses.”13 Of course, those respective opinions are not surprising given Goodwin’s position as a Lincoln political biographer and Denton’s very favorable view of Seward and Weed. Regardless, whatever the reason for the missed connection between the two, the importance of it is clear; “years later Cameron was reported to have said that if Weed had gone to Chicago by way of Harrisburg, Seward would have been nominated.”14

The second mistake was clearly a result of cockiness. The night before balloting was to begin in

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12 Goodwin, Team of Rivals, 216
13 Denton, William Henry Seward and the Secession Crisis, 17
Chicago, while the determined Not-Seward Camp bargained and schemed throughout the night scraping together enough votes to make it to the second ballot, Team Seward helped themselves to three hundred bottles of champagne in their hotel rooms. The third mistake also involved a conceited approach from the Seward campaign. A feud had broken out between Seward and Weed and their former ally and *New York Tribune* editor, Horace Greeley, over Greeley’s hurt feelings and different ambitions for the future of the party (Greeley advocated a “big tent” party including Know-Nothings and Old Democrats, Seward/Weed disagreed), and after it developed, Greeley began writing some nasty editorials and advocating the Republican Party find a Not-Seward nominee. However, Weed doubted that Greeley posed any sort of serious threat. Of course, as it turned out, Greeley has been highlighted after the fact as the “chief cause of Seward’s defeat”\textsuperscript{15} by some for his determination to build an anti-Seward coalition and find a candidate to serve as its vessel. When a dejected Weed wrote Seward to explain the inexplicable after the Convention, he snarled: “Greeley was malignant. He misled many fair minded men. He was not scrupulous.”\textsuperscript{16} This knowledge after the fact, however, did no good.\textsuperscript{17}

Seward’s difficulties, though, rose from more than just specific missteps and can be traced to his bigger picture positioning in the race. There’s an old saying in politics that it’s impossible for a senator to be elected president, and the collapse of Seward’s candidacy provides evidence for the rule. The Not-Seward coalition was tied together by a string of grievances; some had been frustrated and jealous of Seward’s power for years and saw a chance to level the field, others questioned his electability, fearing that his well-established pro-immigrant record would

\textsuperscript{15} Denton, *William Henry Seward and the Secession Crisis*, 18
\textsuperscript{16} Thurlow Weed, Personal letter to William H. Seward, May 20, 1860.
hurt the party with the critical Know-Nothing faction in swing states. While Seward’s integrity was never in question, there were rumblings that on Seward’s behalf, Weed had pursued a cronyistic brand of politics. These objections highlight the key takeaways from Seward’s example to American presidential politics in general. First, politics is a full-contact sport, and the longer you are involved and the more prominent your position, the more influential people you are likely to collide with and alienate. As Weed noted in his explanatory letter to Seward after the Convention, “Much of this mischief has been doing for months by members of Congress.”

Second, as a long-time, high profile public servant, William Seward had to make tough choices that sometimes pitted the betterment of his constituents against the advancement of his political career. In the case of his treatment of immigrants, he defended them from the jingoism and persecution they were receiving because he believed it to be the right action to take, but also knowing that doing so would cost him the support of the smaller, but critical wing of the party, the Know-Nothings. And finally, a focused and relentless negative campaign, regardless of the merits or relevance of the attacks, can move support quickly. From the moment they stepped off the train in Chicago, the unaffiliated but bitter Greeley and Lincoln’s go-to man, Judge David Davis, hammered into the minds of every delegate their focused message: Seward was too radical to win and would not be able to carry Pennsylvania because of the strong Know-Nothing representation. With Team Seward partying in their rooms and not making an effort to offer a positive message in response, a lot of delegates were able to be turned around.

Just as remarkable as the story of Seward losing the nomination, is the story of Abraham Lincoln winning it. The self-made frontiersman had tried to accrue a solid political resume, but frankly, had not been allowed to by Illinois voters. Lincoln went from the Illinois state

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19 Bancroft, The Life of William H. Seward, 524-525; Denton, William Henry Seward and the Secession Crisis, 15-18
legislature to one two-year term in the U.S. House, which was then followed by two defeats in pursuit of a Senate seat. However, the 1858 Lincoln-Douglas debates inspired national media coverage and gave Lincoln a “national reputation without being a national character.”

Coming off his disappointing but career-making campaign against Douglas, Lincoln sought to further his good name across the country, while keeping his options and eyes open to the slim chance of trying to get the Republican nomination in 1860. It was at about this point that he received a letter, from Jesse Fell of the Illinois Republican Party, outlining what would become the basis of the Lincoln road map to the nomination. The advice was simple enough: bring to the forefront the details of your background and personal story and convince the party that you strongly stand with it on the most important issue of the day, slavery. To do so, Lincoln began a nationwide speaking tour, during which he earned the title of “rising star.”

Lincoln traveled throughout the country extolling his ideas on slavery, and though he put forth somewhat moderate policy proposals, he spoke with such obvious conviction in a way that the entire audience could understand, while sticking to a core Republican tenet of keeping slavery out of the territories and free states, that even the radical Republicans ate it up. In the mean time, a Lincoln biography detailing his humble beginnings and how he rose above them began circulating the country. So, Americans were reading about the impeccable character of “Honest Abe” and, at the same time, were being blown away by him as an “effective speaker, because he is earnest, strong, honest, simple in style.”

In fact, in the Chicago Tribune’s endorsement of Lincoln, one of their most prominent arguments was that “Mr. Lincoln is an honest man.” In addition, Lincoln had so little time in public office that there was nothing in his record that could be brought out to make

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20 Bancroft, The Life of William H. Seward, 526
the Republicans reconsider their affections for him. Fell’s plan was working. Seward may have had an insurmountable lead in Republican’s heads, but Lincoln was quickly winning their hearts.\(^{24}\)

Lincoln’s rapid ascent was made up of more than just strong messaging from the candidate; his team did all the little things right to sneak out of the Convention of 1860 with the nomination. Their first coup was pulled off by adviser Norman Judd in keeping “Old Abe out of sight”\(^{25}\) of the other candidates’ strategists and then convincing them to hold the Convention in Chicago because it was “good neutral ground where everyone would have a chance.”\(^{26}\) Obviously, once Lincoln announced his candidacy, Chicago was no longer “neutral ground,” and the home court advantage proved to be an incredibly valuable asset. Armed with campaign-supplied counterfeit tickets, young Lincoln supporters packed into the 10,000 seat Wigwam and cheered like it was a college basketball game, fueling Lincoln’s momentum on the second and third ballots while making it impossible for Weed to whip back the lost delegates with deafening crowd noise. The New York Times’ correspondent to the Convention reported at the scene that “the Wigwam is as full as ever – filled now by thousands of original Lincoln men… who are shouting themselves hoarse.”\(^{27}\) It was also difficult for Weed to regroup because Judd had been tabbed to serve as floor manager and intentionally placed the New York and Pennsylvania delegations on opposite sides of the floor, preventing Weed from plugging the leak of delegates. Team Lincoln had also wisely played nice with the other Not-Seward camps, advertising their


man as a Plan B, and then embarked on the all-out negative blitz against Seward. Once Seward became vulnerable, everyone else compromised and rallied behind Lincoln in an attempt to beat Seward. Although much of the reason for Lincoln’s upset stems from his powerful speaking, an inspiring biography, well thought out conviction on the issues, and a lack of a controversial record for opponents to attack, clearly, Lincoln’s advisers also deserve credit for executing their strategy flawlessly and for providing catalysts to the momentum generated on the stump.28

Another man who became president almost solely by riding emotional appeal is Andrew Jackson. Like Lincoln, Jackson had an awe-inspiring personal narrative and background: self-made on the Tennessee frontier, fought in the Revolutionary War at the age of fourteen, and killed a man in a duel. Jackson’s story and charismatic personality reached celebrity status across the country after his heroics in the Battle of New Orleans in the War of 1812. As Jackson mulled a presidential future in 1824, he faced the same problem Lincoln did, lack of a convincing resume. He was so under qualified, in fact, that the other campaigns did not even consider him a legitimate contender until they began hearing reports that Jackson-mania was sweeping the country. Jackson had served a combined six months in Congress, three in the House as a place holder until a census could be held and three in the Senate before inexplicably quitting. “Old Hickory” did have a military governorship of Florida under his belt, but after being appointed in 1821, he unsurprisingly resigned from the post after eleven weeks. This fact combined with his reputation for hot-headedness and minimal self-control should probably have led voters to rationally conclude that he was ill-suited for the presidency.29

28 Goodwin, Team of Rivals, 229, 244, 247-249; Denton, William Henry Seward and the Secession Crisis, 12, 15, 16; Harris, Lincoln’s Rise to the Presidency, 200-202.
In fact, Jackson himself was skeptical of a presidential bid, and the only reason he even entertained the idea was that his Nashville friends wanted him to run to prevent William Crawford from gaining traction in the state. Jackson hated Crawford personally, and his friends were supporters of either John Quincy Adams or Henry Clay. However, as historian Sean Wilentz tells it “Jackson’s name proved magnetic…signs of widespread popular support, linked with Jackson’s pride and his principles, propelled the candidate into serious contention.”30 The cult of personality surrounding Jackson interpreted his lack of experience as being “untainted” by Washington; voters saw in Jackson a combination of “the common touch of the self-made man with the poise and determination of a natural aristocrat”31 that allowed them to look past the empty resume. Jackson also avoided taking a strong stand on any issue, fearing that a developed issue profile could force him to be something less than what he was in the country’s imagination, and instead emphasized his ability to be a great unifier, through frequent mass rallies and parades.32

Although some historians are quick to rightly point out that the irrelevance of the Federalist Party and the lack of new, pressing political debates made the 1824 election cycle more “personal rather than political,”33 nevertheless, it would be incorrect to write off Jackson’s improbable rise as a product of the times or think that Jackson was anything less than unusual in his campaign style. Those assumptions would be distortions because the other candidates offered much more substantive policy proposals, like Clay’s American system or Adam’s plan for a national university and observatory in addition to improved infrastructure, while, as previously

30 Sean Wilentz, Andrew Jackson (New York: Times Books, 2005), 41.
31 Watson, Liberty and Power, 78.
32 Watson, Liberty and Power, 77-80; Brands, Andrew Jackson, 97, 79; Wilents, Andrew Jackson, 46, 49; Mercantile Advertiser, January 28, 1824.
mentioned, Jackson offered nothing in the way of policy but instead a truly unified democracy of the common man.

Despite Jackson’s victories in both the popular and electoral votes in 1824, the regionally divided results sent the election to the House of Representatives where Henry Clay’s supposed “Corrupt Bargain” gave the presidency to John Quincy Adams. After finishing fourth in the electoral vote to Jackson, Adams, and Crawford, Clay was eliminated but set on using his considerable influence in the House to prevent what he thought would be “the greatest misfortune that could befall the country,” Jackson becoming president. What happened next is unclear, and it seems doubtful that an explicit bargain was reached between Clay and Adams, but we do know that Adams won the presidency with the support of Clay and two days later Adams announced Clay as his choice for Secretary of State. Regardless of whether these men had collaborated on these actions, they had taken the White House away from the people’s candidate (he won in a landslide the states that chose their electors based on popular vote), and the people were outraged. In the Louisville Public Advertiser in Clay’s home state, no less, Clay was the target of a scathing editorial: “How is Mr. Clay to justify himself, before the western people, or any part of the Union for his pretended preference of Mr. Adams over Mr. Jackson?” The likely mythical “Corrupt Bargain” created a very real anger in the populace over being cheated in the election that would not be forgotten but turned into very real motivation to actually get their man in 1828.

34 William Plumer, Jr. to William Plumer, January 28, 1824.
35 Louisville Public Advertiser, February 16, 1825.
36 Wilents, Andrew Jackson, 45-49; Watson, Liberty and Power, 91-95
While it was infuriating to Jackson, who called Clay the “Judas of the West,” this outcome set Jackson up perfectly to run a “Fellian” campaign in 1828 (in addition to his populist, “great unifier” sentiment he debuted in 1824). Obviously, Jackson had a compelling personal narrative to tell, and by this point, it had already been told to the entire country, making him a national hero and celebrity and laying the foundations for his widespread appeal. As for the most important issue, the public outcry over the “Corrupt Bargain” was so great and overwhelming that the Jackson campaign was run almost entirely on the premise that Adams was an immoral man who achieved the presidency by cheating, and that the only way to rid government of immorality was to elect a common man, Gen. Jackson. After acting as a surrogate for Jackson throughout the campaign season, the Pittsfield Sun hit all of the important talking points in their endorsement: the headline read "Our Country! And the purity and freedom of elections!," the editorial featured positive character statements about Jackson from the likes of Jefferson, Monroe, and Madison, and it included the statement “the fact is, ninety-nine hundredths of the PEOPLE believe that Gen. Jackson acted on every occasion for the good of his country (emphases theirs).”

Although historians do focus mainly on how Jackson exposed Adams’ vulnerability resulting from the “Corrupt Bargain,” Adams also faced criticism on another front: his ties to the controversial Free Masons and to the Unitarian Church. Despite distancing himself from the Masonic Institution, he certainly had family ties to the Order and was subject to accusations in the press such as, “We have also understood that Mr. Adams joined in a Masonic

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37 Andrew Jackson to William B. Lewis, February 14, 1825.
38 The Pittsfield Sun, October 23, 1828.
Adams made no effort to distance himself from his Unitarian faith, but this also made him less relatable to for many and raised suspicions for some.40

While the Adams response probably should have been along the lines of Clay’s succinct criticism, “I cannot believe that killing 2,500 Englishmen at New Orleans qualifies for the various, difficult, and complicated duties of the Chief Magistracy,”41 instead, they went personal in return. The Adams camp played up the story of Jackson’s involvement in the “Burr Conspiracy of 1805,” in which Jackson was accused of conspiring with Aaron Burr to form an illicit military force that would attack the Spaniards and attempt to provoke a war. Burr was charged with treason but acquitted, and the evidence linking Jackson to Burr was murky, at best. Although neither historians of today nor the well-informed of 1828 really had a complete picture of the facts of the case, when it comes to political smear campaigns, the facts of the case matter significantly less than the voter’s perception of the truth. And so, in Adams partisan papers and the National Journal, stories began circulating with sources that could prove “that Gen. Jackson was on the most intimate footing with Col. Burr... [and] that Gen. Jackson understood the character and object of Burr’s movements.”42 Adams supporters also spread the story of how Mrs. Jackson married the General, thinking she had been officially divorced from her abusive ex-husband, but in reality, the divorce was not official and thus, she was an “adulteress.” However, Adams had not gained the trust or credibility with the electorate that Jackson had, and what most of the country saw was desperation that would “blast the reputation of a woman, [and] would not

39 United States Telegraph, August 11, 1828
41 Henry Clay to Francis Preston Blair, January 29, 1825.
hesitate to accuse the patriot and an honest man as a vile conspirator. In turn, Jackson crushed Adams, 178-83 in the Electoral College. Through a direct appeal to the voters’ hearts, Jackson pulled off the seemingly impossible and irrational: beating a sitting president with virtually no political experience or even a defining policy vision for the country. As it turned out, the Charleston Courier’s analysis on January 9, 1827 could not have been proven more fitting: “Mr. Adams may be said to have sprung into power from the brain of the people. General Jackson was the creature of their admiration and affections. Judgment often outlives both admiration and affection, but while the heart is warm, it is likely to guide and control the head.”

The stories of Jackson and Lincoln’s shocking roads to the White House provide a detailed sketch of what can be seen from the bird’s eye view of American presidential politics. We want presidents with personal narratives who inspire us, like Lincoln and Jackson’s determination to rise out of poverty or Obama’s battling the family and racial difficulties he faced. We want presidents that we can relate to, as we could to Lincoln’s “honest, simple” speaking style or Jackson’s life as a self-made common man or Cain’s common sense, simple solutions to our complex problems. We want presidents that, with a little imagination, we could make into whoever we wanted them to be, as we couldn’t with Seward because of his long public record that pinned down exactly who he was, what he stood for, and what his limitations were, but could in the cases of Jackson, Lincoln, Grant, Eisenhower, or Obama. Most importantly, we want presidents who we know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, will stand up for us on the issue we feel the strongest about. Lincoln’s conviction on stopping the spread of slavery was tangible when he spoke, Jackson’s service as a boy in the Revolution proved he cared enough about the

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43 New Hampshire Patriot & State Gazette, July 7, 1828.
Republic to return it to a higher moral standard, and there was just something about Obama that mesmerized us and assured us that we would be able to change the broken government of Washington for the better. Often, it doesn’t matter the qualifications of this individual or even if he or she is running against William Seward. Now, certainly, there are many other factors that could make these presidential upsets more likely, such as the political climate of the time, which clearly improved Jackson’s odds because of the anti-establishment mood, but it is clear that connecting with voters at a gut, emotional level is frequently a driving force behind our choices as a nation. This habit of ours, picking a sort of “Fellian” president and letting our hearts “guide and control the head,” as the insightful Charleston Courier writer put it, sometimes leads us astray. It gave us the historically frowned-upon presidencies of Jackson and Grant, it gave us President Obama who faces sub-50% approval ratings in his first term, and for a month, it looked like it would give the Republicans the likely disastrous nomination of Herman Cain. But then, sometimes, it gives us Lincoln.