



From Autobiography of Andrew Dickson White, Volume I

Andrew Dickson White, 1832-1918

From Section II, Chapter III: “Political Life, from Jackson to Fillmore:”

My recollections of American politics begin, then, with the famous campaign of 1840, and of that they are vivid. Our family had, in 1839, removed to Syracuse, which, although now a city of about one hundred and twenty thousand inhabitants, was then a village of fewer than six thousand; but, as the central town of the State, it was already a noted gathering-place for political conventions and meetings. The great Whig mass-meeting held there, in 1840, was long famous as the culmination of the campaign between General Harrison and Martin Van Buren.

As a President, Mr. Van Buren had fallen on evil times. It was a period of political finance; of demagogical methods in public business; and the result was “hard times,” with an intense desire throughout the nation for a change. This desire was represented especially by the Whig party. General Harrison had been taken up as its candidate, not merely because he had proved his worth as governor of the Northwestern Territory, and as a senator in Congress, but especially as the hero of sundry fights with the Indians, and, above all, of the plucky little battle at Tippecanoe. The most popular campaign song, which I soon learned to sing lustily, was “Tippecanoe and Tyler, Too,” and sundry lines of it expressed, not only my own deepest political convictions and aspirations, but also those cherished by myriads of children of far larger growth. They ran as follows:

“Oh, have you heard the great commotion-motion-motion
Rolling the country through?
It is the ball a-rolling on
For Tippecanoe and Tyler, too,
For Tippecanoe and Tyler, too;
And with them we’ll beat little Van;
Van, Van is a used up man;
And with them we’ll beat little Van.”

The campaign was an apotheosis of tom-foolery. General Harrison had lived the life, mainly, of a Western farmer, and for a time, doubtless, exercised amid his rude surroundings the primitive hospitality natural to sturdy Western pioneers. On these facts the changes were rung. In every town and village a log cabin was erected where the Whigs held their meetings; and the bringing of logs, with singing and shouting, to build it, was a great event; its front door must have a wooden latch on the inside; but the latch-string must run through the door; for the claim which the friends of General Harrison

especially insisted upon was that he not only lived in a log cabin, but that his latch-string was always out, in token that all his fellow-citizens were welcome at his fireside.

Another element in the campaign was hard cider. Every log cabin must have its barrel of this acrid fluid, as the antithesis of the alleged beverage of President Van Buren at the White House. He, it was asserted, drank champagne, and on this point I remember that a verse was sung at log-cabin meetings which, after describing, in a prophetic way the arrival of the “Farmer of North Bend” at the White House, ran as follows:

“They were all very merry, and drinking champagne
When the Farmer, impatient, knocked louder again;
Oh, Oh, said Prince John, I very much fear
We must quit this place the very next year.”

“Prince John” was President Van Buren’s brilliant son; famous for his wit and eloquence, who, in after years, rose to be attorney-general of the State of New York, and who might have risen to far higher positions had his principles equaled his talents.

Another feature at the log cabin, and in all political processions, was at least one raccoon; and if not a live raccoon in a cage, at least a raccoon skin nailed upon the outside of the cabin. This gave local color, but hence came sundry jibes from the Democrats, for they were wont to refer to the Whigs as “coons,” and to their log cabins as “coon pens.” Against all these elements of success, added to promises of better times, the Democratic party could make little headway. Martin Van Buren, though an admirable public servant in many ways, was discredited. M. de Bacourt, the French Minister at Washington, during his administration, was, it is true, very fond of him, and this cynical scion of French nobility wrote in a private letter, which has been published in these latter days, “M. Van Buren is the most perfect imitation of a gentleman I ever saw.” But this commendation had not then come to light, and the main reliance of the Democrats in capturing the popular good-will was their candidate for the Vice-Presidency, Colonel Richard M. Johnson, of Kentucky. He, too, had fought in the Indian wars, and bravely. Therefore it was that one of the Whig songs which especially rejoiced me, ran:

“They shout and sing, Oh humpsy dumpsy,
Colonel Johnson killed Tecumseh.”

Among the features of that period which excited my imagination were the enormous mass meetings, with processions, coming in from all points of the compass, miles in length, and bearing every patriotic device and political emblem. Here the Whigs had infinitely the advantage. Their campaign was positive and aggressive. On platform-wagons were men working at every trade which expected to be benefited by Whig success; log cabins of all sorts and sizes, hard-cider barrels, coon pens, great canvas balls, which were kept “a-rolling on,” canoes, such as General Harrison had used in crossing Western rivers, eagles that screamed in defiance, and cocks that crowed for victory. The turning ball had reference to sundry lines in the foremost campaign song. For the October

election in Maine having gone Whig by a large majority, clearly indicating what the general result was to be in November, the opening lines ran as follows:

“Oh, have you heard the news from Maine -- Maine -- Maine?
Rolling the country through?
It is the ball a-rolling on
For Tippecanoe and Tyler, too.”
&c., &c., &c.

Against all this the Democrats, with their negative and defensive platform, found themselves more and more at a disadvantage; they fought with desperation, but in vain, and one of their most unlucky ventures to recover their position was an effort to undermine General Harrison's military reputation. For this purpose they looked about, and finally found one of their younger congressional representatives, considered to be a rising man, who, having gained some little experience in the Western militia, had received the honorary title of “General,” Isaac M. Crary, of Michigan; him they selected to make a speech in Congress exhibiting and exploding General Harrison's military record. He was very reluctant to undertake it, but at last yielded, and, after elaborate preparation, made an argument loud and long, to show that General Harrison was a military ignoramus. The result was both comic and pathetic. There was then in Congress the most famous stump-speaker of his time, and perhaps of all times, a man of great physical, intellectual, and moral vigor; powerful in argument, sympathetic in manner, of infinite wit and humor, and, unfortunately for General Crary, a Whig, -- Thomas Corwin, of Ohio. Mr. Crary's heavy, tedious, perfunctory arraignment of General Harrison being ended, Corwin rose and began an offhand speech on “The Military Services of General Isaac M. Crary.” In a few minutes he had as his audience, not only the House of Representatives, but as many members of the Senate, of the Supreme Court, and visitors to the city, as could be crowded into the congressional chamber, and, of all humorous speeches ever delivered in Congress, this of Corwin has come down to us as the most successful. Long afterward, parts of it lingered in our “speakers' manuals” and were declaimed in the public schools as examples of witty oratory. Many years later, when the House of Representatives left the old chamber and went into that which it now occupies, Thurlow Weed wrote an interesting article on scenes he had witnessed in the old hall, and most vivid of all was his picture of this speech by Corwin. His delineations of Crary's brilliant exploits, his portrayal of the valiant charges made by Crary's troops on muster days upon the watermelon patches of Michigan, not only convulsed his audience, but were echoed throughout the nation, Whigs and Democrats laughing alike; and when John Quincy Adams, in a speech shortly afterward, referred to the man who brought on this tempest of fun as “the late General Crary,” there was a feeling that the adjective indicated a fact. It really was so; Crary, although a man of merit, never returned to Congress, but was thenceforth dropped from political life. More than twenty years afterward, as I was passing through Western Michigan, a friend pointed out to me his tombstone, in a little village cemetery, with comments, half comic, half pathetic; and I also recall a mournful feeling when one day, in going over the roll of my students at the University of Michigan, I came upon one who bore the baptismal name of Isaac Crary. Evidently, the blighted

young statesman had a daughter who, in all this storm of ridicule and contempt, stood by him, loved him, and proudly named her son after him.

Another feature in the campaign also impressed me. A blackguard orator, on the Whig side, one of those whom great audiences applaud for the moment and ever afterward despise, -- a man named Ogle, -- made a speech which depicted the luxury prevailing at the White House, and among other evidences of it, dwelt upon the "gold spoons" used at the President's table, denouncing their use with such unctiousness that, for the time, unthinking people regarded Martin Van Buren as a sort of American Vitellius (Roman emperor known for his lack of ability). As a matter of fact, the scanty silver-gilt table utensils at the White House have been shown, in these latter days, in some very pleasing articles written by General Harrison's grandson, after this grandson had himself retired from the Presidency, to have been, for the most part, bought long before; -- and by order of General Washington.