The Father of Patronage

Video Transcript

President George Washington truly desired a universally representative bureaucracy that was focused not on political interests, but on the needs of the people. A new development in politics, however, contributed to the growth of the patronage system in American bureaucracy.

The first development was the rise of centralized party politics in the 1820s. After losing the election to John Quincy Adams in 1824, Andrew Jackson took steps to ensure victory in the next election. Jackson turned to a man who was, in many ways, his political opposite: Martin Van Buren.

Van Buren was the father of the “party” system in New York. Beginning with the 1789 election, people voted for candidates they knew — men of leadership and stature. However, Van Buren used newspapers and public campaigns to convince voters that they did not need to know the candidate if they knew the party. Van Buren’s brand of party politics was incredibly successful and he swept into control of New York.

In 1828, Jackson turned to Van Buren, promising him a quick rise into national politics. Jackson used his personal popularity in the South, his name recognition throughout the country, and Van Buren’s “party, not person” campaign to ride a landslide into office in 1828. Party politics had truly arrived in America.

To reward those who supported him, and to solidify the ranks of the Democratic Party, President Andrew Jackson filled the ranks of the bureaucratic offices around the country with thousands of party loyalists. This was the beginning of the spoils system in which political appointments were transformed into political patronage doled out by the president on the basis of party loyalty.

Jackson and Van Buren’s partnership was created out of a desire for success, not political ideology. Jackson, a Southern slave owner, opposed protective tariffs designed to protect the fledgling U.S. textile industry by raising the price of cheap English fabrics. These tariffs would damage the South’s
economy by slowing England’s purchase of cotton. However, the factories were in the North, and Van Buren’s New York was a large part of America’s growing Industrial Revolution, so Van Buren supported the tariffs.

Then there was the slavery issue. Jackson and Van Buren stood on opposite sides of the two largest political issues of the day. However, both were pragmatists, willing to trade principle for political success. As a result, the partnership was perfect. Jackson served two terms as president, followed by Van Buren, who served one term. Both men achieved what they wanted… but at what price?

About this transcript:

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