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Charles Swanlund

Blinn College

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Presidential Politics in the Republic of Texas

BY CHARLES SWANLUND

Presidential politics in the Republic of Texas were notably raucous and contentious. For the most part, issues did not play a huge role in the politics of the Republic, but personalities did. Campaigns largely consisted of what one observer of the Texas election of 1841 described as being “a glorious orgy of name calling”, and on at least one occasion, the vitriol flew so fast and furious that one candidate was moved to challenge the other to a duel *during the campaign!* With the exception of the dueling aspect, a time traveler who observed the recent U.S. presidential election might well consider that the 2016 presidential race had been conducted with the utmost in civility and grace by comparison to the “full contact” nature of presidential politics as practiced in the Republic.

Given that only four men, David G. Burnet, Sam Houston, Mirabeau B. Lamar and Anson Jones would serve as the chief executive of Texas during the Republic period, it stands to reason that much of Texas’s politics would be personality driven. Texas would not really develop a two-party system until after the Civil War. Prior to this time, factions were the order of the day. Before the Revolution, there was the “Peace Party” and the “War Party”. Once the path to Revolution was clear, the “Peace” faction was subsumed by the “War” faction, and for a brief time, Texians seemed to agree with each other, at least in terms of politics. After the Revolution however, factions would once again become the fashion, only now they revolved around Sam Houston, either in support of, or in opposition to him.

The traditional view of the presidency of Texas more or less revolves around the notion that Sam Houston was the “indispensable man” of the Republic. Not only was he the leader who had delivered Texas from its thralldom to Mexico, he was a larger than life figure who had been associated with Andrew Jackson and was therefore destined for great things.

Charles Swanlund is a professor of history at Blinn College-Bryan

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He would be responsible for the survival of the Republic during his two non-consecutive terms in the presidency. His successor, Mirabeau B. Lamar, quite often is portrayed as being well meaning, but incompetent. The last president of Texas, Anson Jones, is rarely even included in the discussion, and has more or less faded into obscurity through the years.

David Burnet, while never a permanent chief executive of the Republic, merits some attention in as much as he presided over Texas during the critical period of the Revolution to the establishment of the constitutional government in Columbia. Burnet, in his capacity as *ad interim* President of Texas, oversaw the negotiation of the Treaties of Velasco, safeguarded a captive Santa Anna from a lynch mob, called for the election of permanent government officials, and presided over the installation of the first constitutionally sanctioned government of Texas. He was the Vice President in the Lamar administration, and served as acting president of Texas during Lamar's prolonged absence. All of these are worthy accomplishments, but Burnet was a cantankerous man who seemed to revel in his great hatred of Sam Houston. It was Burnet's personal animosity towards Houston that in large measure, provided the lion's share of the impetus for the rise of the anti-Houston faction in Texas politics, which pretty much would come to define Texas politics. Anson Jones, the last president of Texas and a keen observer of his time noted of him that: "D.G. Burnet is a good, honest man enough, has patriotism, and means well enough, and has decided talent; but he lacks tact and judgement, and is always too much under the influence of his prejudices, which are very powerful. He has every kind of sense but common sense, and consequently will never do for a statesman."¹

The personal animus between Burnet and Houston seems to date back to the Revolution, when Burnet famously chided the Commander in Chief of the Texas Army, "Sir: The enemy are laughing you to scorn. You must fight them. You must retreat no further. The country expects you to fight. The salvation of the country depends on your doing so."² Burnet assuredly did not appreciate Houston's thinly veiled sarcasm in his response to the missive: "I have kept the army together under most discouraging circumstances, and I hope a just and wise God, in whom I have always believed, will yet save

Texas. I am sorry that I am so wicked, for the 'prayers of the righteous shall prevail.' That you are so, I have no doubt, and hope that Heaven as such, will...crown your efforts with success on behalf of Texas and humanity."³ After the Mexican army had been defeated at San Jacinto, Burnet and the anti-Houston members of his cabinet began to search for ways to discredit Houston. Robert Potter, the Texas Navy Secretary proposed that they should charge Houston with malfeasance for distributing Santa Anna's treasure among the troops. When Surgeon General Alexander Ewing recommended that Houston be removed to New Orleans for treatment on his grievously wounded ankle, Burnet denied permission for Houston to leave the army. When Ewing and the captain of the steamer *Yellowstone* ignored Burnet, Burnet relented, but stripped Ewing of his rank. It was hoped that Houston could be transported to New Orleans aboard the Texas navy vessel *Liberty*, but Burnett again denied Houston permission to leave the army, hoping to charge Houston with desertion. Houston would finally be transported aboard a second rate ship, the *Flora*, but the die had been cast.

When Burnet called for elections to be held to establish a permanent government for Texas, it was widely assumed that Stephen F. Austin would be elected as Texas's first president, running against Henry Smith, who had briefly been the Provisional Governor of Texas at the outset of the rebellion. Shortly before the election, Sam Houston was induced to run for the presidency largely because he feared that the army would stage a coup. When he allowed his name to be placed on the ballot, Smith dropped out of the race and Houston handily defeated Austin by a wide margin. Austin never really understood the damage he had done to his reputation and credibility by advocating conciliation with Mexico until it was too late. In this election, as in future elections, the case can be made that had there really been any credible opposition, Sam Houston may never have won election to the Texas presidency.

When Houston arrived in Columbia to take up the reins of government, Burnet abruptly resigned the presidency. This too would further the hard feelings between the two men. The anti-Houston faction would charge that Sam showed up earlier than he was supposed to in an attempt to force Burnet to resign a month early. La-

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mar, now firmly in the anti-Houston camp wrote in his diary that, "Houston was so anxious to enter upon the duties of office that Burnet was forced by threat of members of Congress that if he did not retire for the new president, he would be pushed out. The constitutional period for the installation had not arrived as yet by a month. Houston could not wait. Burnet was forced to retire...this was the first Act of the Government, a palpable violation of the Constitution. The little month Houston could not wait; nor could the hungry expectants brook the delay who were looking forward to presidential favors."⁴ The attacks were just beginning.

As President Houston labored to impose some sort of order onto the chaos that was the nascent frontier republic, the next salvo in the war against him would come in February 1837. A short, thirty-eight-page pamphlet entitled *Houston Displayed: or Who Won the Battle of San Jacinto* entered into the political fray. This little pamphlet, which accused Houston of cowardice at San Jacinto among other things, would become the driving force behind the anti-Houston movement. *Houston Displayed* was the brainchild of Robert M. Coleman, a veteran of the Texas army and the Texas Rangers. Coleman had decided for a variety of reasons to bring down "Old Sam", charging him with cowardice at San Jacinto, drunkenness throughout the Revolution, and of being an opium fiend as well as pretty much being the worst person ever. The pamphlet appears to have been ghostwritten by Algernon Thompson, publisher of the *Velasco Herald*, and was printed on a printing press that was secretly owned by none other than Vice President Mirabeau Lamar. Lamar managed to keep his involvement from coming to light, even when an irate Houston tossed Coleman in jail for several months without ever preferring charges. Lamar became so uncomfortable with his position in the administration, he asked Congress for permission to leave Texas for a few weeks to take care of some personal business in Georgia. He left Texas in April of 1837 and did not return until November. By the time the Vice President returned to Texas, the furor had died down and Coleman had been released from jail. Coleman incidentally, would drown while bathing in the Brazos River several months later.⁵

The charges laid against the president were so legion that talk of

them even reached back to the United States. The New Orleans *True American* contacted Dr. Ashbel Smith “as to the truth about President Houston’s conduct, his drinking, his beastliness, and his generally erratic behavior.” Dr. Smith’s response was reprinted in the *Texas Telegraph* on February 24, 1838, “He has been represented as an imbecile in body and intellect: - a moral and physical wreck. Never was a calumny so false. His health has certainly been impaired by privations and exposures, but he possesses at this moment...more physical force than ninety-nine able-bodied men out of a hundred.” Smith continued, “As regards his mind, he is still in the pride of his intellect...his bearing is that of the most lofty and princely courtesy...Despite what has been said to the contrary, I believe him to be the most popular man in Texas. The statements of him being a madman and cutting tall antics before high Heaven and man are utterly and gratuitously false.”⁶

Sam Houston was constitutionally prohibited from serving a second consecutive term, so he would not be a factor in the 1838 election. Lamar had managed somehow to remain above the fray in the controversies of Houston’s first administration and was clearly the choice of the anti-Houston faction to be the next chief executive. The pro-Houston side was, however, without a clear choice to replace Sam. The first candidate to be nominated to run against Lamar was Peter Grayson, who had served as Attorney General in the *ad interim* Government, and as a commissioner to the United States. Grayson would not survive until election day, taking his own life several months before the election. He was replaced as the nominee by James B. Collinworth. Collinworth would also not make it until election day, either falling or being pushed overboard from a boat in Galveston Bay several weeks before the canvas. The final pro-Houston candidate on the ballot was Robert Wilson, original founder of Harrisburg. Lamar trounced Wilson in the most lopsided election in the brief history of the Republic.

The Texas presidency would undergo the first peaceful transfer of power in its history, but it would not go particularly well for the incoming president. Sam Houston arrived on the steps of the capital in Houston dressed as George Washington, with a powdered wig, knee “britches”, and the whole package. Houston then proceeded

to steal the show, launching into a three-hour valedictory address to great applause as Lamar quietly seethed. When Houston finally turned the stage over to Lamar, all he could do was to hand his carefully crafted inaugural address to the clerk of the Senate, Algernon Thompson, who delivered Lamar's speech in a monotone to the few people who remained after Lamar left.⁷ Houston had so completely stolen the show that even Francis Moore, the decidedly anti-Houston editor of the *Texas Telegraph* was moved to opine, "The day will come when his name will appear in the pages of the Texian story, unsullied by a single stain-his faults forgotten, his vices buried in the tomb."⁸

The presidency of Mirabeau Bonaparte Lamar started as badly as it possibly could have. Dr. Kenneth Howell, in his chapter about Lamar in *Single Star of the West* (this incidentally, in case you missed it, is a shameless plug for the book), posits that had the inaugural ceremonies proceeded a bit differently, Lamar may have indeed changed the trajectory of the Republic. Lamar had planned in his address, to inspire a new sense of hope into Texas. He had planned to share his vision of a "new" Texas, one that he believed could become the envy of the world. At the time of his ascension to the presidency, the people of Texas were certainly disillusioned with the course of events up to that point. In fact, many Texans hoped that Lamar could provide the answers to many of the challenges confronting the Republic. Howell also maintains that Lamar believed that by downplaying his own abilities in his inaugural speech, he could lower the expectations of his presidency, thus making any future accomplishments all the more significant. On top of all else, Lamar stressed the need for political unity. Despite his calls for unity however, almost everything he did served to further entrench political divisions in Texas.⁹

The short version of Lamar's tenure as president is that basically, it was a disaster. After removing the Cherokees from East Texas, he kicked over the anthill and started a war with the Comanche and others, spending the cash-strapped Republic into even farther into oblivion. He annoyed Mexico by leasing the Texas Navy to Yucatan, which was in open revolt against the centralist Government. He further antagonized Mexico with the abortive Santa Fe Expedition,

and maybe worst of all, he had no choice but to induce a crippling inflation by flooding the economy with un-backed currency. In addition to all of this, he had moved the capital to a “Comanche infested site,” Austin, which Sam Houston called “the most unfortunate site upon the earth for a capitol.” Had he been able to receive the anticipated \$5 million loan from France, it is possible that history may have been kinder to Lamar’s reputation. But Texas did not get the loan, and despair returned to the Republic. Anson Jones, the acerbic contemporary observer of Republic politics, and at the time, the President *pro tempore* of the Texas Senate, records several comments about this period. On April 13, 1839, Jones noted that “It is a very strong evidence of the poverty of worth or talent, when such a man as L. is called for the head of a country: He is a very weak man, and governed by petty passions which he cannot control, and by prejudices that are the result of ignorance (of the world)...”¹⁰

On August 20, 1839, Jones said, “Gen. Lamar may mean well- I am not disposed to impugn his motives- he has fine belles letters, talents, and is an elegant writer. But his mind is altogether of a dreamy, poetic order, a sort of troubadour and Crusader, and wholly unfit by habit or education for the active duties and the everyday realities of his present station. Texas is too small for a man of such wild, visionary, ‘vaulting ambition’”.¹¹

By the end of 1839, Sam Houston had returned to Texas and been elected to the Texas Congress by the people of St. Augustine. Jones astutely noted what he believed Houston’s strategy concerning Lamar was: “Gen Houston, I fear, does not care how completely Lamar ruins the country, so that he can hide the errors, the follies, and widespread ruin of his own past administration, and have it to say, ‘I told you there is nobody but Old Sam after all.’”¹² On January 1, 1840, Jones expanded further on Houston, writing that, “ he appears only intent on making Lamar’s administration as odious as possible, in order the contrast with his own may be favorable to him. He is willing the government should be a failure, in order that he may have it to say, there is no one but Old Sam that the people can depend on, and that he is the only man that can successfully administer the government of Texas. Lamar is certainly no statesman, and he and his friends are going to the Devil as fast as Gen H. can possi-

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bly wish..."¹³ At the end of Lamar's term of office, Jones noted that Texas was; "Brought to the extremist point of exhaustion consistent with the ability of being resuscitated."¹⁴ Even before his term was up, Lamar again abandoned Texas, leaving his Vice President David Burnet in charge.

Lamar was also unable to run for another consecutive term, so he endorsed Burnet. Sam Houston and his acolytes concentrated on trying to associate Burnet as much as possible with the disastrous policies of Lamar. What followed would become what can be viewed as the most contentious election in the history of Texas politics. This campaign would feature a bit of everything. The Burnet crowd would re-issue the *Houston Displayed* pamphlet, and both candidates would use the press to smear their opponent. Burnet with a series of op-ed pieces signed "*Publius*", and Houston with an equally nasty series of attack pieces signed "*Truth*". James Morgan, in a letter to J.W. Webb in January of 1841 described the situation as he saw it, "We have a bad state of affairs here now. – Lamar, the poor imbecile, could not hold out and had to give up the helm of state to Burnet, who is even more worthless... Old Sam H. with all his faults appears to be the only man for Texas. He is still unsteady-*intemperate*, but drunk in a ditch is worth a thousand of Lamar and Burnet... Burnet has rendered himself supremely ridiculous is so much disliked and being naturally of turbulent disposition that he has become as snarlish as a half-starved dog dealing forth anathemas against everybody... report says he challenged Gen. Houston because H. intimated that B. was a hog thief."¹⁵

Houston's favorite pejorative against Burnet was indeed "hog thief" or "King Wetumka, which Houston swore meant "Hog Thief in Indian."¹⁶ Burnet also, had challenged Houston to a duel through Branch T. Archer. Houston laughed off the challenge noting that he was "sure that the people are disgusted with both of us," and added that Burnet would "have to get in line as there were at least a dozen ahead of him." As *Publius*, Burnet wrote sixty-six columns in which he charged Houston with military incompetence during the Revolution as well as "bestly intemperance and other vices degrading to humanity."¹⁷ The *Texas Sentinel* of July 5, 1841 said that Houston was accustomed to "blaspheme his God, by the most horrible

oaths that ever fell from the lips of man.”¹⁸ Houston’s *Truth* pieces lacked the inherent vitriol of the *Publius* articles, adopting instead a rather mocking and sarcastic tone. His letters of August 16 and 18, 1841 appeared in the *Houstonian*. He created a character, a little man called “Grog” who went around Texas telling lies. “Grog”, who was sometimes a little unsteady himself, made a habit of charging other people with being drunk. “*Truth*” related the time when, “... you swelled to a most consequential degree; and really the collar of your shirt, from connection to your imagination, I presume out-topped your ears, while your step was as lofty and aimless too, as that of a blind horse! Was there any liquor in this? It appeared so to those who dared to question the *indomitable sobriety* of the illustrious *hero*, Davy G. Burnet...” Houston went on to accuse Burnet of personal motives for removing the Cherokee, and amplified the accusation that Burnet had bilked hundreds of immigrants to Texas out of their life savings. Houston finished with this: “You prate about the faults of other men, while the blot of foul unmitigated treason rests upon you. You political brawler and canting hypocrite, whom the waters of Jordan could never cleanse from your political and moral leprosy.”¹⁹

The editor of the Houston *Morning Star* may have spoken for most in Texas when shortly before the election he wrote that, “We should be heartily glad when this political canvas is over.”²⁰

The election was held on September 6, 1841. When the votes were tallied, Houston garnered 7,508 votes, against Burnet’s 2,574. Drunk or sober, Sam Houston was again the people’s choice. It was widely reported that Houston, during all of his inaugural festivities, “touched not a drop of the ardent spirits.” The main thrust of his second administration was simple: survival until such time as annexation became possible. While slashing the budget and trying to keep the peace with Mexico, Houston also worked hard on the question of annexation. He rightly reasoned that annexation would continue to be politically problematic in the United States, so he embarked on a strategy that some say was actually proposed by his Secretary of State, Anson Jones. Jones continued trying to curry favor with France and Great Britain as a means to put pressure on Mexico to recognize Texas.

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Houston may have believed that Anson Jones was a loyal supporter of his, but he would have certainly been shocked had he learned Jones's real opinions of him. As early as November 24, 1839, Jones had recorded his belief that "no man is more completely master of the art of appropriating to himself the merit of other's good acts, and shafting onto others the odium of his bad ones, than Gen. Houston."²¹ Jones also confided to his journal that Houston, "is not so strong in what he does himself; as in what his enemies do: It is not *his* strength, but *their* weakness- Not his *wisdom*, but their *folly*. Cunning, Indian cunning is the secret of his business. Old Bowles, the Cherokee Indian chief learned him all he knows, and... he learned *Indian* well."²² Jones further confided that Houston's political methods were not to his taste, "I have also strenuously opposed his system of petty, vindictive warfare upon individuals and the "Honourable Congress" which are gotten up by him to make political capital for himself; but are injurious to the interests and character of the country.- Gen. Houston and myself are drifting away from each other hourly."²³ On December 31, 1843, Jones appeared to have completely given up on Houston. He wrote, "...I may have to play the part of "Curtius" and if so, am prepared and willing to make a sacrifice like his if the grief of destruction... for Texas can happily be closed. - I am also content to let Gen. Houston be "Caesar"- for it is only by yielding to his vanity and ambition that we can now get together. And the whole safety of the country and the successful issue of the important measure now pending that we should cooperate, for however powerless Gen. Houston might be to do good, his position as president puts it in his power to do great harm..."²⁴

The last presidential election in the history of the Republic was almost anti-climactic. The anti-Houston faction nominated Houston's Vice President, Edward Burleson. Burleson had been somewhat of a non-entity as Vice President and had quite often voted against Houston's policies as he presided over the Senate. Burleson's main support came from the West, as befitted his frontier military background. For the pro-Houston faction, they had hoped to talk Thomas J. Rusk into running for the presidency, but Rusk declined to be nominated to the office. The ultimate choice for the pro-Houstons

was Secretary of State Anson Jones.

The key issues in the campaign were the economy, the growing separation between the interests of Texans in the East from those in the West, and of course, annexation. There would be however, little discussion of the issues in this campaign, as the main emphasis was on staining Burleson with the policies of Lamar, and conversely, to paint Anson Jones as little more than a puppet for Sam Houston. Political passions were still running high in the Republic. The editor of the La Grange *Intelligencer* wrote that, "Caligula, the depraved and worst of all tyrants that ever ruled Rome, after having trodden the spirit of his people into the most abject slavery, showed his contempt for them by making his horse a Consul. Gen. Houston, thinking the people of Texas in a like condition, evinces a much greater contempt for them buy wishing to impose Dr. Anson Jones upon the Republic as president- *A Less Noble Animal*."

The Houston *Telegraph and Texas Register*, on February 14, 1844 officially endorsed the candidacy of Burleson, and blasted Jones as being one "who is so embecile [sic] that he will be required to be kept in leading strings by his predecessor."²⁵ In the June 4 edition of the same paper, editor Francis Moore opined that, "The party spirit in the United states is tame and mild compared to the bitter, malignant, demoniacal zeal with which is displayed by the partisans of our candidates."²⁶ The Houston *Morning Star*, not to be outdone, opined on July 13, 1844 that, "On the one hand, Dr. Jones is going to be forced upon the people by the merits of Gen. Houston, and on the other hand, Gen. Burleson is to be sacrificed by the demerits of Lamar."²⁷ For their part, those who supported Jones made a number of scurrilous accusations, most implying that Burleson was functionally illiterate, and merely a pawn of Burnet and Lamar.

The candidates appeared to be running close, and ultimately it came down to Sam Houston's endorsement, which rather half-heartedly went to Jones. Houston said, "I am not opposed to his (Jones's) election. If I have not been a noisy advocate for his success, it has not been because I did not confide in him...He has conducted the foreign relations of the Government, and I have confidence that if the choice of the people should devolve upon him, he would consult the true interests of the country, and he would endeavor to carry out

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the policy which he might conceive would but promote its honor and prosperity. I have arrived at this conclusion from the fact that I know him to be intimately acquainted with the true and abiding interests of the people.”²⁸

While hardly a ringing endorsement, it did the trick. Jones won the election with 7,037 votes to Burleson’s 5,668. This would prove to be the closest presidential election in the short history of Republic politics. Dr. Anson Jones would become the last President of the Republic of Texas. If Sam Houston is indeed the “indispensable man” of Texas history, then Jones must be considered as the “Disposable Man” of the same. The only real issue that Jones had to face, was just how short his presidency would be. Annexation to the United States was in progress. U.S. President John Tyler had become determined to bring Texas into the Union as his legacy, and shepherded a Joint Resolution to annex Texas through both houses of Congress. Anson Jones, who had been working towards annexation for pretty much all of his public life, now had to face the diplomatic realities of the situation. Such reliance had been placed on the super powers, France and Great Britain getting Mexico to recognize Texas’s independence, that Jones felt an obligation to allow them one more chance. Jones was also I believe, really in favor of annexation, but was also interested in completing what he started. He wanted to wait on presenting annexation to the people until he had both options to present. Statehood or independence. Where he made his great mistake was however, not truly understanding the depth of popular support for annexation. The people of Texas were no longer interested in going it alone. As far as the folks were concerned, the “Grand Experiment” had failed, and it was time to put an end to it. The *La Grange Intelligencer* once again weighed in, saying on March 31, 1845, that Jones, “...without talents, without political honesty, has had greatness thrust upon him. His elevation shows to the world *King Log* in his native colors and shows a little mind swelled up to fancied greatness. Truly does he remind one of the fabled frog trying to swell up to the size of an ox: and now Anson tries to strut a patriot, statesman, and hero. ‘Shame where is thy blush...Sir, take your old post to the rear and leave the question for the Texas people to decide, for you cannot induce anyone to believe your opposition

to annexation arises from any native sentiments.”²⁹

All throughout the process, Jones’s delay was seen by some as an attempt to circumvent annexation and the will of the people. When Jones finally called the Texas Congress into session on June 16, 1845, Congress, when presented with the two options that Jones had wanted to present, immediately and to a man voted against independence, and voted unanimously to accept the annexation offer; they then stripped Jones of all but ceremonial powers and censured him. On February 19, 1846, Anson Jones mounted the rostrum and offered up his valedictory address. The close of his speech is oft quoted, “The Lone Star of Texas, which ten years ago arose over fields of carnage, obscurely seen for a while, had culminated, and following an inscrutable destiny, has passed on and become fixed forever in the glorious constellation which all freemen and lovers of freedom must reverence and adore- The American Union. Blending its rays with its sister states, long may it continue to shine, and may generous Heaven smile upon the wishes of the two republics now joined as one. May the Union be perpetual, and may it be the means of conferring benefits and blessings upon the people of all the States, is my ardent prayer. The final act in this great drama is now performed. The Republic of Texas is no more!”³⁰ With these words, Anson Jones left the rostrum, and faded into obscurity, as would Burnet and Lamar during their times. Sam Houston of course would remain the sun around which the political planets revolved in Texas.

With the demise of the Republic, Texas politics remained contentious and tumultuous, but in the main they resembled merely a microcosm of what was occurring on a national level. If politics are indeed a spectator sport as some pundits have maintained, then for sure the Republic of Texas gave the fans their money’s worth. In recent years, one often hears the lament that this election or that election is the most raucous and contemptuous in history; all one really needs to do is to look back at the brief political life of the Republic to realize that this simply is not true.

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Notes

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