

Andrew Jackson and the Growth of American Democracy

14.1 Introduction

The presidential campaign of 1828 was one of the dirtiest in American history. The election pitted John Quincy Adams, the nation's sixth president, against Andrew Jackson, the popular hero of the Battle of New Orleans.

During the campaign, both sides hurled reckless accusations at each other, a practice called mudslinging. Adams was called a "Sabbath-breaker" for traveling on Sunday. He was falsely accused of being an alcoholic. He was accused of using "public money" to purchase "gambling furniture" for the White House. In reality, he had used his own money to purchase a billiard table. Strangely, his opponents missed the one truth that might have shocked most Americans of the day. The very formal and proper Adams had a habit of swimming naked in the Potomac River.

The president's supporters lashed back. They called Jackson a crude and ignorant man who was not fit to be president. They also raked up old scandals about his wife, Rachel. She was accused of marrying Jackson while she was still knowingly wed to her first husband (not true). One newspaper even charged Jackson's mother with immoral behavior (not true). Jackson was called "Old Hickory" by his troops because he was as tough as "the hardest wood in creation." But when he read these lies, he broke down and cried.

When the votes were counted, Jackson was clearly the people's choice. But he was not the choice of the rich and **well-born** people who were used to running the country—the planters, merchants, bankers, and lawyers. "Nobody knows what he will do," wrote Senator Daniel Webster gloomily. "My fear is stronger than my hope."

Jackson proved to be a controversial president. In this chapter, you will discover how he was viewed by several groups of Americans, including not only the rich and well-born, but also the common people, Native Americans, and supporters of states' rights.

14.2 The Inauguration of Andrew Jackson

On March 4, 1829, more than 10,000 people from every state crowded into Washington, D.C., to witness the inauguration of their hero. The visitors overwhelmed local hotels, sleeping five to a bed and drinking the city dry of whiskey. "I have never seen such a crowd here before," observed Senator Webster. "Persons have come 500 miles to see General Jackson, and they really seem to think the country has been rescued from some...disaster."

Many of the people flocking into the capital were first-time voters. Until the 1820s, the right to vote had been limited to the rich and well-born. Only white men with property, it was said, had the education and experience to vote wisely.

The new states forming west of the Appalachians challenged this argument. Along the frontier, all men—rich or poor, educated or not—shared the same opportunities and dangers. They believed they should also share the same rights, including the right to vote.

With the western states leading the way, voting laws were changed to give the "common man" the right to vote. This expansion of democracy did not yet include African Americans, Native Americans, or women. Still, over one million Americans voted in 1828, more than three times as many as voted in 1824.

Many of these new voters did believe that they had rescued the country from disaster. In their view, the national government had been taken over by corrupt "monied interests"—that is, the rich. Jackson had promised to throw these rascals out and return the government to "the people." His election reflected a shift in power to the West and to the farmers, shopkeepers, and small business owners who supported him.

After Jackson was sworn in as president, a huge crowd followed him to the White House. As the crowd surged in, the celebration turned into a near riot. "Ladies fainted, men were seen with bloody noses, and such a scene of confusion took place as is impossible to describe," wrote an eyewitness, Margaret Bayard Smith. Jackson was nearly "pressed to death" before escaping out a back door. "But it was the people's day, and the people's president," Smith concluded. "And the people would rule."

14.3 From the Frontier to the White House

The "people's president" was the first "**self-made** man" to occupy the White House. Jackson was born in 1767, on the South Carolina frontier. His father died before he was born, leaving Jackson, his mother, and two brothers in poverty. Young Andrew loved sports more than schoolwork. He also had a hot temper. He would pick a fight at the drop of a hat, a friend recalled, and "he'd drop the hat himself."

The American Revolution ended Jackson's childhood. When he was just 13, Jackson joined the local militia and was captured by the British. One day, a British officer ordered Jackson to polish his boots. "Sir," he replied boldly, "I am a prisoner of war and demand to be treated as such." The outraged officer lashed out with his sword, slicing the boy's head and hand. Jackson carried the scars to his grave.

The Frontier Lawyer After the war, Jackson decided to become a lawyer. He went to work in a law office in Salisbury, North Carolina. He quickly became known as “the most roaring, rollicking, game-cocking, horse-racing, card-playing, mischievous fellow” in town. The wonder is that he learned any law at all.

In 1788, Jackson headed west to Nashville, Tennessee, to practice law. At that time, Nashville was a tiny clump of rough cabins and tents beside the Cumberland River. But the town grew quickly, and Jackson’s practice grew with it. He soon earned enough money to buy land and slaves and set himself up as a gentleman planter.

Despite his success, Jackson never outgrew his hot temper. A slave trader named Charles Dickinson found this out when he called Jackson “a worthless scoundrel” and insulted his wife, Rachel. Enraged, Jackson challenged Dickinson to a duel (fight) with pistols, even though the slave trader was said to be the best shot in Tennessee. At that time, duels were accepted as a way of settling disputes between gentlemen.

Dickinson shot first, hitting Jackson in the chest. Jackson stiffened, raised his pistol, and fired a single shot. Dickinson fell dead to the ground.

“My God,” a friend exclaimed on spotting Jackson’s wound. “He missed your heart only by an inch.” In fact, Dickinson’s bullet was lodged so close to Jackson’s heart that doctors were not able to remove it. “I would have hit him,” replied Jackson, “if he’d shot me through the brain!”

The People’s Choice Jackson entered politics in Tennessee, serving in both the House and Senate. But he did not become widely known until the Battle of New Orleans during the War of 1812. His glorious defense of the city made “Old Hickory” a national hero.

In 1824, the hero of New Orleans ran for president against three other candidates—Henry Clay, William Crawford, and John Quincy Adams. Jackson won the most popular votes, and the most electoral votes as well. But he did not have enough electoral votes for a majority. When no candidate has an electoral majority, the House of Representatives chooses a president from the three leading candidates.

Clay, who had come in fourth, urged his supporters in the House to back Adams. That support gave Adams enough votes to become president. Adams then chose Clay to be his secretary of state.

It made sense for Adams to bring Clay into his cabinet, because the two men shared many of the same goals. Jackson’s supporters, however, accused Adams and Clay of making a “corrupt bargain” to rob their hero of his rightful election. And they promised revenge in 1828.

Jackson’s supporters used the time between elections to build a new political organization that came to be called the Democratic Party, the name it still wears today. This new party, they promised, would represent ordinary farmers, workers, and the poor, not the rich and well-born who had taken control of the Republican Party.

Jackson’s supporters worked feverishly to reach the nation’s new voters. Besides hurling insults at Adams, they organized huge parades, picnics, and rallies. At these events, supporters sang “The Hunters of Kentucky”—the nation’s first campaign song—and cheered for Old Hickory. They wore Jackson badges, carried hickory sticks, and chanted catchy campaign slogans like “Adams can write, but Jackson can fight.”

The result was a great victory for Jackson. But it was also a victory for the idea that the common people should control their government. This idea became known as Jacksonian Democracy.

14.4 Jackson’s Approach to Governing

Jackson approached governing much as he had approached leading an army. He listened to others, but then he did exactly what he thought was right.

The Kitchen Cabinet Unlike earlier presidents, Jackson did not rely on his cabinet for advice. He made most of his decisions with the help of trusted friends and political supporters. These advisors were said to meet with him in the White House kitchen. For this reason, they were known as the “kitchen cabinet.”

The rich and well-born looked at the “kitchen cabinet” with deep suspicion. In their eyes, the men around the president were not the proper sort to be running the country. One congressman accused Amos Kendall, Jackson’s closest advisor, of being “the President’s...lying machine!” Jackson ignored such charges and continued to turn for advice to men he trusted.

The Spoils System Jackson’s critics were even more upset by his decision to replace many Republican officeholders with loyal Democrats. Most of these **civil servants** viewed their posts as lifetime jobs. Jackson disagreed. Rotating people in office was more democratic than lifetime service, he said, because it gave more people a chance to serve their government. After a few years in office, civil servants should “go back to making a living as other people do.”

Jackson’s opponents called the practice of rewarding political supporters with jobs the **spoils system**. This term came from the saying that “to the victor belong the spoils [prizes] of war.” They also exaggerated the number of Republicans removed from office. Only about 10 percent of all civil servants were replaced, and many who were dismissed from their

jobs deserved to be. One was an official who had stolen \$10,000 from the Treasury. When he begged Jackson to let him stay in office, the president replied, “Sir, I would turn out my own father under the same circumstances.”

But Jackson could put patriotism above party loyalty. One dismissed postmaster started to undress to show the president his wounds from the Revolutionary War. Jackson snapped, “Put your coat on at once, sir!” The next day, the postmaster got his job back.

14.5 The Nullification Crisis

Jackson’s approach to governing was tested by an issue that threatened to break up the United States. In 1828, Congress passed a law raising **tariffs**, or taxes, on imported goods such as cloth and glass. The idea was to encourage the growth of manufacturing. Higher tariffs meant higher prices for imported factory goods. American manufacturers could then outsell their foreign competitors.

Northern states, humming with new factories, favored the new tariff law. But southerners opposed tariffs for several reasons. Tariffs raised the prices they paid for factory goods. High tariffs also discouraged trade among nations, and planters in the South worried that tariffs would hurt cotton sales to other countries. In addition, many southerners believed that a law favoring one region—in this case, the North—was unconstitutional. Based on this belief, John C. Calhoun, Jackson’s vice president, called on southern states to declare the tariff “null and void,” or illegal and not to be honored.

Jackson understood southerners’ concerns. In 1832, he signed a new law that lowered tariffs—but not enough to satisfy the most extreme supporters of states’ rights in South Carolina. Led by Calhoun, they boldly proclaimed South Carolina’s right to nullify, or reject, both the 1828 and 1832 tariff laws. Such an action was called *nullification*.

The constitutional issue of nullification had been raised by the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions 30 years before. But now South Carolinians took the idea of states’ rights even farther. They threatened to **secede** if the national government tried to enforce the tariff laws.

Jackson was outraged. “If one drop of blood be shed there in defiance of the laws of the United States,” he raged, “I will hang the first man of them I can get my hands on from the first tree I can find.” He called on Congress to pass the Force Bill, which allowed him to use the federal army to collect tariffs if needed. At the same time, Congress passed a compromise bill that lowered tariffs still further.

Faced with such firm opposition, South Carolina backed down and the nullification crisis ended. However, the tensions between the North and the South would increase in the years ahead.

14.6 Jackson Battles the Bank of the United States

Jackson saw himself as the champion of the people, and never more so than in his war with the Bank of the United States. As you learned in Chapter 13, the Bank was partly owned by the federal government, and it had a monopoly on federal deposits. Jackson thought that the Bank benefited rich Eastern investors at the expense of farmers and workers as well as smaller state banks. He felt that the powerful Bank stood in the way of opportunity for hopeful capitalists in the West and other regions. He also distrusted the Bank’s president, Nicholas Biddle, who was everything Jackson was not—wealthy, well-born, highly educated, and widely traveled.

The Bank’s charter was due to come up for renewal in 1836, and Jackson might have waited until then to “slay the monster,” as he called it. But Henry Clay, who planned to run for president against Jackson in 1832, decided to force the issue. Clay pushed a bill through Congress that renewed the Bank’s charter four years early. He thought that if Jackson signed the bill, the president would lose votes from farmers who shared his dislike of banks. But if Jackson vetoed the bill, he would lose votes from businesspeople who depended on the Bank for loans. What Clay had forgotten was that there were many more poor farmers to cast votes than there were rich bankers and businesspeople.

Jackson vetoed the recharter bill. Even though the Supreme Court had ruled that the Bank was constitutional, Jackson called the Bank an unconstitutional monopoly that existed mainly to make the rich richer. The voters seemed to agree. Jackson was reelected by a large majority.

Rather than wait for the Bank to die when its charter ran out, Jackson decided to starve it to death. In 1833, he ordered the secretary of the treasury to remove all federal deposits from the Bank and put the money in state banks. Jackson’s enemies called these banks “pet banks” because they were run by the president’s supporters.

Delegations of business owners begged Jackson not to kill the Bank. Jackson refused. Slaying the Bank, he believed, was a victory for economic democracy.

14.7 Jackson’s Indian Policy

As a frontier settler and famous Indian fighter—Native Americans called him “Sharp Knife”—Jackson had little sympathy for Indians. During his presidency, it became national policy to remove Native Americans from the East by force.

White settlers had come into conflict with Native Americans ever since colonial days. After independence, the new national government tried to settle these conflicts through treaties. Typically, the treaties drew boundaries between areas claimed for settlers and areas that the government promised to let the Indians have forever. In exchange for giving up their old lands, Indians were promised food, supplies, and money.

Despite the treaties, Native Americans continued to be pushed off their land. By the time Jackson became president, only 125,000 Indians still lived east of the Mississippi River. Warfare and disease had greatly reduced the number of Indians in the East. Others had sold their lands for pennies an acre and moved across the Mississippi. Jackson was determined to remove the remaining Indians to a new Indian Territory in the West.

Most of the eastern Indians lived in the South. They belonged to five groups, called *tribes* by whites: the Creek, Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Seminole. Hoping to remain in their homelands, these Indians had adopted many white ways. Most had given up hunting to become farmers. Many had learned to read and write. The Cherokee even had their own written language, a newspaper, and a constitution modeled on the U.S. Constitution. Whites called these Indians the “Five Civilized Tribes.”

While the Five Civilized Tribes may have hoped to live in peace with their neighbors, whites did not share this goal. As the cotton kingdom spread westward, wealthy planters and poor settlers alike looked greedily at Indian homelands. The Indians, they decided, had to go.

The Indian Removal Act In 1830, urged on by President Jackson, Congress passed the Indian Removal Act. This law allowed the president to make treaties in which Native Americans in the East traded their lands for new territory on the Great Plains. The law did not say that the Indians should be removed by force, and in 1831 the Supreme Court ruled that Indians had a right to their lands. An angry Jackson disagreed. Groups that refused to move west voluntarily were met with military force, usually with tragic results.

This was true of the Sac and Fox of Illinois. Led by a chief named Black Hawk, the Sac and Fox fought removal for two years. Black Hawk’s War ended in 1832 with the slaughter of most of his warriors. As he was taken off in chains, the chief told his captors:

Black Hawk is an Indian. He has done nothing for which an Indian ought to be ashamed. He has fought for his countrymen, the squaws [women] and papooses [young children], against white men who came, year after year, to cheat them of and take away their land. You know the cause of our making war. It is known to all white men. They ought to be ashamed of it.

The Trail of Tears Many whites *were* ashamed. Washington was flooded with protests over the treatment of Indians. Still the work of removal continued. In 1836 thousands of Creeks who refused to leave Alabama were rounded up and marched west in handcuffs. Two years later, under President Martin Van Buren, more than 17,000 Cherokee were dragged from their homes in Georgia and herded west by federal troops. Four thousand died during their long walk to Indian Territory. Those who survived remembered that terrible journey as their “Trail of Tears.” A soldier who took part in the Cherokee removal called it “the cruelest work I ever knew.”

Led by a young chief named Osceola, the Seminoles of Florida resisted removal for ten years. Their long struggle was the most costly Indian war ever fought in the United States. A number of Seminoles were finally sent to Indian Territory. But others found refuge (safety) in the Florida swamps. Their descendants still live in the state today.

When Jackson left office, he was proud of having “solved” the Indian problem for good. But as you will learn in the next two chapters, Jackson had simply moved the conflict between Indians and whites across the mighty Mississippi.

14.8 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you read about the presidency of Andrew Jackson. You used character portraits to evaluate Jackson’s presidency from the perspective of different groups.

First-time voters, many of them farmers and frontiersmen, flocked to the polls to help elect Andrew Jackson in 1828. Jackson’s supporters celebrated his election as a victory for the “common man” over the rich, well-born, and powerful. Jackson, after all, was a self-made man who rose from poverty to become president of the United States.

As president, Jackson fought a number of battles for “the people”—and rewarded his friends and supporters at the same time. For advice, he relied on his “kitchen cabinet,” rather than the official cabinet. He replaced a number of Republican civil servants with Democrats. And he waged war on the powerful Bank of the United States.

A controversy over higher tariffs led to the nullification crisis, in which South Carolinians threatened to separate from the United States. Although Jackson forced them to back down, the crisis was an early sign of developing tensions between northern and southern states.

Jackson's Indian policy was simple: move the eastern Indians across the Mississippi to make room for whites. The Indian Removal Act caused great suffering for thousands of Native Americans. Furthermore, Jackson had only moved the conflict between whites and Indians to the West, not solved it. For, as you will read in the next chapter, the West was just where many white Americans were looking for new opportunities and the chance to expand their way of life across the continent.