

# Andrew Jackson's Shifting Legacy

by Daniel Feller

Of all presidential reputations, Andrew Jackson's is perhaps the most difficult to summarize or explain. Most Americans recognize his name, though most probably know him (in the words of a famous song) as the general who "fought the bloody British in the town of New Orleans" in 1815 rather than as a two-term president of the United States from 1829 to 1837. Thirteen polls of historians and political scientists taken between 1948 and 2009 have ranked Jackson always in or near the top ten presidents, among the "great" or "near great." His face adorns our currency, keeping select company with George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and the first secretary of the treasury, Alexander Hamilton. Jackson is the only president, and for that matter the only American, whose name graces a whole period in our history. While other presidents belong to eras, Jackson's era belongs to him. In textbooks and in common parlance, we call Washington's time the Revolutionary and founding eras, not the Age of Washington. Lincoln belongs in the Civil War era, Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson in the Progressive era, Franklin Roosevelt in the era of the Great Depression, the New Deal, and World War II. But the interval roughly from the 1820s through 1840s, between the aftermath of the War of 1812 and the coming of the Civil War, has often been known as the Jacksonian Era, or the Age of Jackson.

Yet the reason for Jackson's claim on an era is not readily apparent. Washington was the Father of his country. Lincoln, Wilson, and Franklin Roosevelt were war leaders who also (not wholly coincidentally) presided over dramatic changes in government. But besides winning a famous battle in the War of 1812 years before his presidency—and at that, a battle that had no effect on the war's outcome, since a treaty ending it had just been signed—just exactly what did Andrew Jackson do to deserve his eminence? He led the country through no wars. No foreign policy milestones like Thomas Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase or the "Doctrines" of James Monroe or Harry Truman highlighted Jackson's presidency. He crafted no path-breaking legislative program like Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal or Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. Indeed Jackson's sole major legislative victory in eight years was an 1830 law to "remove" the eastern Indian tribes beyond the Mississippi, something more often seen today as travesty rather than triumph. That measure aside, the salient features of Jackson's relations with Congress were his famous vetoes, killing a string of road and canal subsidies and the Bank of the United States, and Jackson's official censure by the United States Senate in 1834, the only time that has yet happened. On its face, this does not look like the record of a "top ten" president.

An exception might be claimed for Jackson's handling of the Nullification Crisis of 1832–1833. Most southern states in Jackson's day vehemently opposed the "protective tariff," an import tax that provided most of the government's revenue and also aided American manufacturers by raising the price of competing foreign (mainly British) goods. In 1832 the state of South Carolina declared the tariff law unconstitutional and therefore null and void. In assuming this right, independent of the Supreme Court or anybody else, to judge what the US Constitution meant and what federal laws had to be obeyed, South Carolina threatened the very viability of the federal union. Although he was himself a southerner, no great friend of the tariff, and a South Carolina native, Jackson boldly faced down the nullifiers. He first confronted nullification's mastermind (and his own vice president), John C. Calhoun, with a ringing public declaration: "Our Federal Union—It must be preserved." He then responded officially to South Carolina's action with a blistering presidential proclamation, in which he warned that nullification would inexorably lead to secession (formal withdrawal of a state from the United States), and secession meant civil war. "Be not deceived by names. Disunion by armed force is *treason*. Are you really ready to incur its guilt?" Bloodshed was averted when Congress passed a compromise tariff that South Carolina accepted and Jackson approved. Although he played no direct role in its passage, Jackson took much credit for the compromise, and even many political opponents conceded it to him.

For his own generation and several to come, Jackson's defiance of nullification earned him a place in the patriotic pantheon above the contentions of party politics, at least in the eyes of those who approved the result. In the secession crisis thirty years later, Republicans—including Abraham Lincoln, an anti-Jackson partisan from his first entry into politics—hastened to invoke his example and quote his words. In 1860 James Parton, Jackson's first scholarly biographer, managed to praise Jackson's unionism while providing a negative overall assessment of his character.

Still, though not wholly forgotten, Jackson's reputation as defender of the Union has faded distinctly in the twentieth century and hardly explains historians' interest in him today. Secession is a dead issue, and commitment to an indivisible and permanent American nationhood is now so commonplace as to seem hardly worth remarking.

Rather, Jackson's continuing prominence, and the source of continuing controversy, lies in something much less concrete: his place as an emblem of American democracy. He is remembered less for specific accomplishments as president than for his persona or image, his role as America's first presidential Representative Man. That image has deep roots. In 1831–1832, midway through Jackson's presidency, a French aristocrat named Alexis de Tocqueville toured the country. Returning home, he published *Democracy in America*, still the most penetrating analysis of American society ever penned. De Tocqueville organized his exposition (which in many respects was not at all flattering) around two themes. One was "the general equality of condition among the people." The other was democracy, which gave tone to everything in American life: "the people reign in the American political world as the Deity does in the universe." De Tocqueville saw democracy, for good or ill, as the future of Europe and the world. "I confess that in America I saw more than America; I sought there the image of democracy itself, with its inclinations, its character, its prejudices, and its passions, in order to learn what we have to fear or to hope from its progress."

America, then, was democracy embodied—and Andrew Jackson was its exemplar. Born poor, half-educated, self-risen, he was the first president from outside the colonial gentry, the first westerner, the first with a nickname ("Old Hickory"), the first to be elected in a grand popular plebiscite—all in all, the first living proof that in America, anyone with enough gumption could grow up to be president. He furnished the plebeian template of humble origins, untutored wisdom, and instinctive leadership from which would spring "Old Tippecanoe" William Henry Harrison, "Honest Abe" Lincoln, and a thousand would-be imitators down to the present day.

The image of Jackson as a quintessential product of American democracy has stuck. Yet always complicating it has been the interplay between the personal and the political. If Jackson is a potent democratic symbol, he is also a conflicted and polarizing one. In his own lifetime he was adulated and despised far beyond any other American. To an amazing degree, historians today still feel visceral personal reactions to him, and praise or damn accordingly.

Jackson's outsized, larger-than-life character and career have always offered plenty to wonder at and to argue about. His lifelong political antagonist Henry Clay once likened him, not implausibly, to a tropical tornado. Jackson's rough-and-tumble frontier youth and pre-presidential (mainly military) career showed instances of heroic achievement and nearly superhuman fortitude. Mixed in with these were episodes of insubordination, usurpation, uncontrolled temper, wanton violence, and scandal. Jackson vanquished enemies in battle everywhere and won a truly astonishing victory at New Orleans. He also fought duels and street brawls, defied superiors, shot captives and subordinates, launched a foreign invasion against orders, and (disputably) stole another man's wife. As president he was, depending on whom one asked, either our greatest popular tribune or the closest we have come to an American Caesar.

An adept manipulator of his own image, Jackson played a willing hand in fusing the political and the personal. First as a candidate and then as president, he reordered the political landscape around his own popularity. Swept into office on a wave of genuine grassroots enthusiasm, Jackson labored successfully through eight years as president to reshape his personal following into an effective political apparatus—the Democratic Party, our first mass political party, which organized under his guidance. Significantly, the party's original name was the American Democracy, implying that it was not a party at all but the political embodiment of the people themselves. Democrats labeled their opponents, first National Republicans and then Whigs, as the "aristocracy." But the initial test of membership in the Democracy was less an adherence to a political philosophy than fealty to Andrew Jackson himself.

A generation after Jackson's presidency, biographer James Parton found his reputation a mass of contradictions: he was dictator or democrat, ignoramus or genius, Satan or saint. Those conundrums endure, and the facts, or arguments, behind them would fill a book.

There are a few focal points upon which Jackson's modern reputation has turned for better or for worse. One is his attack on corporate privilege and on the concentrated political influence of wealth. In his famous Bank Veto of 1832, Jackson juxtaposed "the rich and powerful" against "the humble members of society—the farmers, mechanics, and laborers," and lamented that the former "too often bend the acts of government to their selfish purposes." No president before and few since have spoken so bluntly of economic antagonisms between Americans. Jackson went on, in his Farewell Address in 1837, to warn of an insidious "money power," made up of banks and corporations, that would steal ordinary citizens' liberties away from them. (It said something of Jackson's sense of his own importance that he presumed to deliver a Farewell Address, an example set by Washington that no previous successor had dared to follow.)