

Andrew Jackson

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In 1828, Andrew Jackson defeated John Quincy Adams for the Presidency and began what is still one of the most controversial administrations in American history. Usually rated among the most effective of American presidents, Jackson and his era remains the subject of varied interpretations. Yet few will deny that he drastically altered the political landscape of the United States and revolutionized the office of the President.

Elected largely on the strength of his reputation as a war hero, Jackson was poorly educated, although he possessed a law degree. However, he demonstrated a great native intelligence, sense of timing, and was a brilliant politician. A master of the controlled rage, Jackson could stage a tantrum that withered would-be-opponents. He was a man of the strongest convictions for whom political and personal enemies were one and the same. In Jackson there seems to have been no self-doubt or hesitancy. Yet he was not exceedingly dogmatic. If convinced he was wrong he would admit it. There simply was little moderation in Andrew Jackson. The campaign of 1828 had been one of the most scurrilous in American history. The Jacksonians astutely avoided strong positions on such volatile issues as tariffs or internal improvements and instead focused on the inviting target of Adams. Similarly, Adam's supporters struck at Jackson as a murderer and especially upon the circumstances of his marriage to his beloved Rachel. The subsequent death of Mrs. Jackson before inauguration further embittered the President against his political enemies. Never one to tolerate criticism, Jackson would now turn with hatred toward those he believed responsible for his wife's death.

The Jackson cabinet "... save for Van Buren... was composed of mediocrities of worse, and was destined to be of little use to its chief."¹ Instead, Jackson relied upon his famous "Kitchen Cabinet" composed of old and new political allies and cronies. The extent of influence of the "Kitchen Cabinet" and the fact that no single dominant figure emerges from it indicates that its function was advisory and nothing more. The final decision in all matters was that of Andrew Jackson. He was simply not the type of man to be dominated or manipulated.

The Jacksonian era has been associated with the so-called “spoils system,” the wholesale removal of opposition office holders by the victorious Jacksonians. In reality, the system was as old as politics itself. While the puritanical Adams had refrained from such removals, Jackson saw them as a positive good. “Rotation” in office was essential not only for political reward, but also to remove inefficient office holders and especially to restore the faith of the common man in the government bureaucracy.² Furthermore, wholesale removal from office simply did not occur. During the eight years of the Jackson Presidency, less than one-fifth of all federal officials were dismissed.³ Indeed, a far greater extent of removals occurred under Harrison and Tyler during 1840-1844 in the Whig administration that so bemoaned the “corruption” of the spoils system.

There is no question that Jackson was a thoroughly political being. He understood the political realities of his time and used this understanding to his greatest advantage. Certainly he was the most politically oriented president before Lincoln. He astutely courted public opinion and most fully manipulated it. His political acumen is obvious in the major political events of his administration: the tariff and nullification crisis, internal improvements, the Supreme Court, and the Bank of the United States.

Passed in 1828, the Tariff of Abominations wrought extreme hardship on the South. Simply put, southerners felt that they were being forced to subsidize northern industry by paying higher prices for imported manufactured goods. Led by the Vice-President, John C. Calhoun, the State of South Carolina talked of nullification as a remedy for this discrimination. The doctrine of nullification stated that sovereign states could annul an unfair federal law by banning its enforcement in that state. The doctrine was at least as old as the Virginia and Kentucky Resolves of 1798-1799. New England had talked of it during the War of 1812, but now through the Webster-Hayne debate in the Senate, the issue came to the fore.

Jackson’s position on the tariff had been vague. As a southern planter, he felt that it was too high. However, he felt that nullification clearly threatened the existence of the Union. Finally, he had come to hate John C. Calhoun. The Peggy O’Neal affair had already soured relations between the two men but the real break came when Jackson discovered that in 1819 then Secretary of War Calhoun had favored reprimanding Old Hickory over the latter’s action in Florida. To Jackson this was a betrayal. Using a

Jefferson Day dinner as the occasion, Jackson glared at Calhoun and made his famous “Our federal Union – it must and shall be preserved” toast.

The nullification issue reached crisis proportions when South Carolina formally nullified the tariff. Jackson asked for the Force Act from Congress – an act giving him the authority to use federal troops to enforce the law. At the same time, Henry Clay secured the passage of a bill that substantially lowered the tariff. Coupling the carrot with the stick, Jackson signed both bills into law. Isolated and threatened with force, South Carolina repealed the nullification of the tariff although it nullified the Force Act. Jackson was content to allow this face-saving gesture and ignored the urging of Webster to use force.

No crisis better illustrated the political skill of Andrew Jackson than the tariff question. He upheld federal law while signing a lower tariff that somewhat mollified public opinion in the South. As much as any man, Andrew Jackson saved the Union in this crisis. South Carolina was isolated and received only minimal support from her sister states. The presence of a popular southerner in the White House who served with ability to settle the crisis prevented a secession movement at a time when the North did not have the resources to stop such a move. It is hard to imagine Adams successfully coping with such a crisis.⁴

Despite his insistence on federal power in the nullification crisis, Jackson remained committed to Jeffersonian deals of limited government, especially in the area of internal improvements. He used the Maysville Veto to illustrate this. Although he had signed other internal improvements into law, Jackson selected the bill for a road from Maysville, Kentucky to Lexington as a test case. It was a purely local improvement. Furthermore, it struck at Henry Clay, whom Jackson detested, and finally it would do Jackson minimal political damage. While some westerners resented it, they approved Jackson’s economic and Indian policies far too much to break with him over a road.

For westerners, the Indian problem was immediate and they wanted an immediate solution: the removal of all the eastern tribes to Oklahoma. The Indians had their sympathizers in New England whose ancestors had used extermination rather than removal to solve the problem of the red man. However, the real hope of the Indians lay in the Supreme Court.

In two cases, the court of John Marshall ruled that the State of Georgia had no authority to remove the Cherokee Indian reservations. These cases gave Jackson the chance to strike at two foes who he despised: Indians and courts. His attitude toward Indians was that of most westerners – the Indians were merely an obstacle to be eliminated as quickly as possible. His first-hand witness of the massacre at Ft. Mims in 1813 had further increased his hatred. At the same time, he welcomed the chance for a confrontation with the federal courts. Like most members of his Democratic (formerly Republican) party, Jackson felt that the unelected courts had usurped powers that should belong to the states or the people. “John Marshall has made his decision, now let him enforce it,” may or may not have been Jackson’s words regarding the Cherokee laws, but the statement certainly illustrates his actions. The President simply ignored the decree, and the Indian removals continued.

Marshall wisely did not attempt to confront Jackson on the issue. Whatever the moral argument of Indian removal, Jackson’s action was highly popular in the West. Also, he clearly demonstrated the limits of judicial power. Using appointments, he would fundamentally alter the court. By 1836, eight of the nine justices were Jackson appointees including Roger B. Taney who succeeded Marshall as Chief Justice. The Taney court would move the judiciary away from constitutional tinkering toward strict construction.

Politically, the most important clash in Jackson’s tenure of office involved his war with the second Bank of the United States. The Bank was privately controlled but one-fifth of its capital was subscribed by the government, and it served as the depository for public funds. It was protected from state taxes, could issue currency, and the government could appoint five of its twenty-five directors. There was no question that under its President, Nicholas Biddle, it had amassed a great deal of wealth and power in the hands of a few people. Now a symbolic level, the Bank represented Hamiltonianism, federal power, Eastern (often old federalist) monied interests and other assorted enemies of the Democrats. Politically, it was an ideal target. To western farmers, attacking the Bank was about as politically safe as opposing incest. Its periodic tightening of credit brought about foreclosures that made it “The Monster.” Its arrogant president, Biddle, was

himself thoroughly political. He interfered in elections on behalf of the bank's friends as an ally of Clay and he bankrolled Daniel Webster.⁵

In his first inaugural address, Jackson had expressed his doubts about the constitutionality of the Bank, but its charter did not expire until 1836. Henry Clay was certain to be Jackson's major opponent in the 1832 election and saw in the Bank his chance to destroy Jackson politically. He would make it the central issue of the 1832 campaign. Along with Biddle, Clay pushed for an early re-chartering of the Bank in 1832. The plan was to put Jackson in a no-win situation. If he vetoed the charter he could bring about financial instability and lose the critical state of Pennsylvania; if he signed the charter, he would be accused of betraying his principles in the West. Old Hickory met the challenge head-on. In his veto he decried the concentration of power in the hands of a few; the Bank was undemocratic and unconstitutional. Clay's strategy would prove a disaster for his presidential ambitions and the Whig Party. The central issue of the campaign became "The Monster" against the people. The voters responded accordingly. Jackson buried Clay along with anti-Masonic and nullification candidates in a landslide.

The Bank was now to die a natural death, but Jackson was determined to hasten its demise. Through Roger Taney, his Secretary of the Treasury, he withdrew all federal funds from the Bank, placing them in various state or "pet" banks. Biddle fought back by starting a substantial depression. He tightened credit and called in loans. Again, he and Clay miscalculated the political impact of such a move. The public blamed the Monster, not Jackson. The President played on this sentiment of telling anyone who complained to him to "go to Biddle." Indeed, the hard times created by Biddle vindicated Jackson's decision to destroy "the Monster." It was now clearly demonstrated that in the Second Bank of the United States enough power had been concentrated to control the economy in the country.

Jackson's bank policies brought the President into a full clash with the legislative process of government. In the Senate a strange alliance of Clay, Calhoun and Webster passed a Resolution of Censure against him. Although it failed in the Jacksonian House of Representatives, for the first time a president had been censured by the Senate. Subsequently, the Senate would vent its spleen by rejecting a number of Jacksonian

appointments (including Taney). Jackson chose to go over the head of Congress for vindication. The voters would guide him and they seemed to approve his policies. The 1834 Congressional elections increased his supporters in both houses of Congress. In his policies Jackson was the first (but by no means the last) president to appeal directly to the voters. He was also one of the most successful. In 1837, the resolution of censure was removed from the Senate record.

Economically, Jackson's last years as president were characterized by a worsening inflation. His opponents blamed it on his bank policies, but other reasons were behind it. Under Jackson, the sale of public land was the major source of revenue. This source was a growing one as land speculation increased. At first, the President welcomed it, because it enabled him to accomplish a major goal – that of paying off the national debt. The termination of the national debt considered to be among the greatest accomplishments of his presidency. However, much of the payment for these lands was in the form of paper money of very questionable value since it had been issued by many small and unsound banks. By accepting such payment, Jackson felt the government was encouraging inflation as well as subsidizing land speculation. The result was Jackson's issuance of the Specie Circular of 11 July 1836, which stated that payment for public lands must be in hard currency. Despite the fact that it froze many small buyers out of the land market, Jackson defended the Specie Circular as the only medicine that would curb inflation.

Foreign affairs did not play a great role in Jackson's term. He wanted very much to annex newly independent Texas to the United States, but opposition in New England was such that he was content to recognize Texas' independence and hope (correctly) that subsequent events would lead inevitably to Texas annexation. A favorable trade treaty with the British concerning the West Indies trade was secured. In relations with France, Jackson pushed for payment of the debt owed the United States over French damage to American Commerce during the Napoleonic Wars, and threatened to seize French property in the United States if payment was not forthcoming. France responded in a hostile manner and war seemed a real possibility. After an exchange of threats, relations were suspended in 1835, but with British mediation, Jackson's initially hostile rhetoric moderated and the debt was paid in 1836. Jackson's threats and military preparations

have been called “big stick” diplomacy, but it is noted that the end result was complete diplomatic victory for Jackson who had to contend not only with the French but also with Whig pacifism in Congress during the crisis.

Andrew Jackson left an indelible mark on the American Presidency. There can be no argument that he vastly expanded the powers of the office. In each crisis of his administration, he thrust his own personality into the fray. Like Jefferson, he expanded presidential powers while expounding strict construction and states’ rights. Unlike Jefferson, who reluctantly expanded such powers, Jackson had no compunction at all. He used the veto in his two terms of office more than all his predecessors combined, and seems to have felt that the President’s duty was to protect the little man from the powers of Congress, monied interests, and the courts. Certainly, he went over Congress directly to the voter to justify his decision. Some historians, notably Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., see him as the champion of the working man and small farmers against monied eastern interests. Richard Hofstadter conversely sees him as representing western capitalism that was essentially as explosive as its eastern counterpart. John W. Ward portrays him as a symbol of newly-emancipated voters and the spirit of entrepreneurship of the new era of the 1830s. Much has been written of the man and the depth and breadth of the controversy illustrates well the accomplishments of his Presidency.

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Endnotes

¹ Glyndon G. Van Deusen, *The Jacksonian Era, 1828-1848* (New York, 1959), p. 32

² *Ibid.*, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston, 1945), pp. 45-47.

³ Van Deusen, p. 35

⁴ Page Smith, III, *Peoples History of the U.S., Volume III The Antebellum Years* (New York, 1980), p. 73.

⁵ Schlesinger, p. 84.

Questions:

1. What issues defined the Jackson presidency and how did he respond to them?

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2. Jackson often sided with the South on most issues as he was a southern planter. He did, however, oppose the South on the issue of nullification, which had even been advocated by the Republicans, the predecessors of Jackson's Democrat Party. What was nullification and why would the president oppose it?
 3. Although he was opposed to state nullification of federal laws, Jackson was very much in favor of presidential nullification of judicial rulings. He firmly shared with Jefferson animosity toward the power of the federal courts. How did he deal with the Marshall court? Were his actions constitutional?