

The Age of Jackson 1820s – 1840s

The era marked by the emergence of popular politics in the 1820s and the presidency of Andrew Jackson (1829-1837) is often called the Age of the Common Man, or the Era of Jacksonian Democracy. Historians debate whether Jackson was a major molder of events, a political opportunist exploiting the democratic ferment of the times, or merely a symbol of the era. Nevertheless, the era and Jackson's name seem permanently linked.

The Election of 1828

"J. Q. Adams who can write" squared off against "Andy Jackson who can fight" in the election of 1828, one of the most bitter campaigns in American history. Jackson's followers repeated the charge that Adams was an "aristocrat" who had obtained office as a result of a "corrupt bargain." The Jackson forces also alleged that the president had used public funds to buy personal luxuries and had installed gaming tables in the White House. They even charged that Mrs. Adams had been born out of wedlock.

Adams's supporters countered by digging up an old story that Jackson had begun living with his wife before she was legally divorced from her first husband (which was technically true, although neither Jackson nor his wife Rachel knew her first husband was still living). They called the general a slave trader, a gambler, and a backwoods buffoon who could not spell more than one word out of four correctly. One Philadelphia editor published a handbill picturing the coffins of 12 men allegedly murdered by Jackson in numerous duels.

The Jackson campaign in 1828 was the first to appeal directly for voter support through a professional political organization. Skilled political organizers, like Martin Van Buren of New York, Amos Kendall of Kentucky, and Thomas Ritchie of Virginia, created an extensive network of campaign committees and subcommittees to organize mass rallies, parades, and barbecues, and to erect hickory poles, Jackson's symbol.

For the first time in American history, a presidential election was the focus of public attention, and voter participation increased dramatically. Twice as many voters cast ballots in the election of 1828 as in 1824, four times as many as in 1820. As in most previous elections, the vote divided along sectional lines. Jackson swept every state in the South and West and Adams won the electoral votes of every state in the North except Pennsylvania and part of New York.

Contemporaries interpreted Jackson's resounding victory as a triumph for political democracy. Jackson's supporters called the vote a victory for the "farmers and mechanics of the country" over the "rich and well born." Even Jackson's opponents agreed that the election marked a watershed in the nation's political history, signaling the beginning of a new democratic age. One Adams supporter said bluntly, "a great revolution has taken place."

Who Was Andrew Jackson

In certain respects, Jackson was truly a self-made man. Born in 1767 in a frontier region along the North and South Carolina border, he was the first president to be born in a log cabin. His father, a poor farmer from Northern Ireland, died two weeks before his birth, while his mother and two brothers died during the American Revolution. At the age of 13, Jackson volunteered to fight in the American Revolution. He was taken prisoner and a British officer severely slashed Jackson's hand and head when the boy refused to shine the officer's shoes.

Jackson soon rose from poverty to a career in law and politics, becoming Tennessee's first congressman, a senator, and judge on the state supreme court. Although he would later gain a reputation as the champion of the common people, in Tennessee he was allied by marriage, business, and political ties to the state's elite. As a land speculator, cotton planter,

and attorney, he accumulated a large personal fortune and acquired more than 100 slaves. His candidacy for the presidency was initially promoted by speculators, creditors, and elite leaders in Tennessee who hoped to exploit Jackson's popularity in order to combat anti-banking sentiment and fend off challenges to their dominance of state politics.

Indian Removal

At the time Jackson took office, 125,000 Native Americans still lived east of the Mississippi River. Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Creek Indians--60,000 strong--held millions of acres in what would become the southern cotton kingdom stretching across Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. The key political issues were whether these Native American peoples would be permitted to block white expansion and whether the U.S. government and its citizens would abide by previously made treaties.

Since Jefferson's presidency, two conflicting policies, assimilation and removal, had governed the treatment of Native Americans. Assimilation encouraged Indians to adopt the customs and economic practices of white Americans. The government provided financial assistance to missionaries in order to Christianize and educate Native Americans and convince them to adopt single-family farms. Proponents defended assimilation as the only way Native Americans would be able to survive in a white-dominated society. By the 1820s, the Cherokee had demonstrated the ability of Native Americans to adapt to changing conditions while maintaining their tribal heritage. Sequoyah, a leader of these people, had developed a written alphabet. Soon the Cherokee opened schools, established churches, built roads, operated printing presses, and even adopted a constitution. The other policy--Indian removal--was first suggested by Thomas Jefferson as the only way to ensure the survival of Native American cultures. The goal of this policy was to encourage the voluntary migration of Indians westward to tracts of land where they could live free from white harassment. As early as 1817, James Monroe declared that the nation's security depended on rapid settlement along the Southern coast and that it was in the best interests of Native Americans to move westward. In 1825 he set before Congress a plan to resettle all eastern Indians on tracts in the West where whites would not be allowed to live. After initially supporting both policies, Jackson favored removal as the solution to the controversy. This shift in federal Indian policy came partly as a result of a controversy between the Cherokee nation and the state of Georgia. The Cherokee people had adopted a constitution asserting sovereignty over their land. The state responded by abolishing tribal rule and claiming that the Cherokee fell under its jurisdiction. The discovery of gold on Cherokee land triggered a land rush, and the Cherokee nation sued to keep white settlers from encroaching on their territory. In two important cases, *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* in 1831 and *Worcester v. Georgia* in 1832, the Supreme Court ruled that states could not pass laws conflicting with federal Indian treaties and that the federal government had an obligation to exclude white intruders from Indian lands. Angered, Jackson is said to have exclaimed: "John Marshall has made his decision; now let him enforce it."

The primary thrust of Jackson's removal policy was to encourage Native Americans to sell their homelands in exchange for new lands in Oklahoma and Arkansas. Such a policy, the president maintained, would open new farmland to whites while offering Indians a haven where they would be free to develop at their own pace. "There," he wrote, "your white brothers will not trouble you, they will have no claims to the land, and you can live upon it, you and all your children, as long as the grass grows or the water runs, in peace and plenty."

Pushmataha, a Choctaw chieftain, called on his people to reject Jackson's offer. Far from being a "country of tall trees, many water courses, rich lands and high grass abounding in games of all kinds," the promised preserve in the West was simply a barren desert. Jackson responded by warning that if the Choctaw refused to move west, he would destroy their nation.

During the winter of 1831, the Choctaw became the first tribe to walk the "Trail of Tears" westward. Promised government assistance failed to arrive, and malnutrition, exposure, and a cholera epidemic killed many members of the nation. Then, in 1836, the Creek suffered the hardships of removal. About 3,500 of the tribe's 15,000 members died along the westward trek. Those who resisted removal were bound in chains and marched in double file.

Emboldened by the Supreme Court decisions declaring that Georgia law had no force on Indian Territory, the Cherokees resisted removal. Fifteen thousand Cherokee joined in a protest against Jackson's policy: "Little did [we] anticipate that when taught to think and feel as the American citizen ... [we] were to be despoiled by [our] guardian, to become strangers and wanderers in the land of [our] fathers, forced to return to the savage life, and to seek a new home in the wilds of the far west, and that without [our] consent." The federal government bribed a faction of the tribe to leave the land in exchange for transportation costs and \$5 million, but most Cherokees held out until 1838, when the army evicted them from their land. All told, 4,000 of the 15,000 Cherokee died along the trail to Indian Territory in what is now Oklahoma.

A number of other tribes also organized resistance against removal. In the Old Northwest, the Sauk and Fox Indians fought the Black Hawk War (1832) to recover ceded tribal lands in Illinois and Wisconsin. The Indians claimed that when they had signed the treaty transferring title to their land, they had not understood the implications of the action. "I touched the goose quill to the treaty," said Chief Black Hawk, "not knowing, however, that by that act I consented to give away my village." The United States army and the Illinois state militia ended the resistance by wantonly killing nearly 500 Sauk and Fox men, women, and children who were trying to retreat across the Mississippi River. In Florida, the military spent seven years putting down Seminole resistance at a cost of \$20 million and 1,500 casualties, and even then succeeding only after the treacherous act of kidnapping the Seminole leader Osceola during peace talks.

Nullification

Bitter sectional disputes arose during Jackson's presidency over public lands and the tariff. In 1828 Congress passed the Tariff of 1828 to protect industries of the North. American manufacturers, it was reasoned, needed protection for less expensive foreign goods produced by cheap labor. Infant American industries, like babies in the cradle, needed protection until big enough to fend for themselves. Those industries and products most in need of protection included cotton textiles, wool, hemp, and flax. The tariff averaged forty-five cents for every dollar of imports.

Southerners were appalled and referred to it as the Tariff of Abominations. They saw two distinct disadvantages of the tariff. First protection would increase the cost of imports. Since the South exported its great crops, such as cotton, rice, and tobacco it had no need of protection. The tariff, in fact, operated as a tax on the goods bought but not produced by Southerners. Secondly, the tariff hurt the South by making it more difficult for foreigners to buy American products. Thus the tariff hurt the South by increasing the prices of goods bought while reducing sales to foreign countries.

Assaulted by what they considered to be hostile forces, South Carolinians began to search for a formula that would protect them from unfriendly national laws. The answer was the nullification doctrine embodied in the South Carolina Exposition and protest, a document secretly authored by John Calhoun in 1828. The Exposition was a direct response to the Tariff of Abominations. But it could be used to nullify any law Southerners judged contrary to their interests.

According to Calhoun the tariff of 1828 was illegal because it was a protective and not a revenue tariff. The Constitution gives Congress the right to impose duties and imposts, but does not specifically state that the purpose of the tariff could be to protect industry. Since this purpose was not directly stated in the Constitution, Calhoun claimed it was beyond the powers given by

South Carolina to the government of the United States, and therefore the Tariff of 1828 could be declared null and void.

Jackson revealed his position on the questions of states' rights and nullification at a Jefferson Day dinner on April 13, 1830. Fixing his eyes on Vice President John C. Calhoun, Jackson expressed his sentiments with the toast: "Our Union: It must be preserved." Calhoun responded to Jackson's challenge and offered the next toast: "The Union, next to our liberty, most dear. May we always remember that it can only be preserved by distributing equally the benefits and burdens of the Union."

Relations between Jackson and Calhoun had grown increasingly strained. Jackson had learned that when Calhoun was secretary of war under Monroe he had called for Jackson's court-martial for his conduct during the military occupation of Florida in 1818. Jackson was also angry because Mrs. Calhoun had snubbed the wife of Secretary of War John H. Eaton, because Mrs. Eaton was the twice-married daughter of a tavern keeper. Because Jackson's own late wife Rachel had been snubbed by society (partly because she smoked a pipe, partly because she had unknowingly married Jackson before a divorce from her first husband was final), the president had empathy for young Peggy Eaton. In 1831, Jackson reorganized his cabinet and forced Calhoun's supporters out. The next year, Calhoun became the first vice president to resign his office, when he became a senator from South Carolina.

In 1832, in an effort to conciliate the South, Jackson proposed a lower tariff. Revenue from the existing tariff (together with the sale of public lands) was so high that the federal debt was quickly being paid off; in fact on January 1, 1835, the United States Treasury had a balance of \$440,000, not a penny of which was owed to anyone--the only time in U.S. history when the government was completely free of debt. The new tariff adopted in 1832 was somewhat lower than the Tariff of 1828 but still maintained the principle of protection.

In protest, South Carolina's fiery "states' righters" declared both the Tariff of 1832 and the Tariff of 1828 null and void. To defend nullification, the state legislature voted to raise an army.

Jackson responded by declaring nullification illegal and then asked Congress to empower him to use force to execute federal law. Congress promptly enacted a Force Act. Privately, Jackson threatened to "hang every leader...of that infatuated people, sir, by martial law, irrespective of his name, or political or social position." He also dispatched a fleet of eight ships and a shipment of 5,000 muskets to Fort Pinckney, a federal installation in Charleston harbor.

In Congress, Henry Clay, the "great compromiser" who had engineered the Missouri Compromise of 1820, worked feverishly to reduce South Carolina's sense of grievance. "He who loves the Union must desire to see this agitating question brought to a termination," he said. In less than a month, he persuaded Congress to enact a compromise tariff with lower levels of protection. South Carolinians backed down, rescinding the ordinance nullifying the federal tariff. As a final gesture of defiance, however, the state adopted an ordinance nullifying the Force Act.

In 1830 and 1831 South Carolina stood alone. No other southern state yet shared South Carolina's fear of federal power or its militant desire to assert the doctrine of states' rights. South Carolina's anxiety had many causes. By 1831 declining cotton prices and growing concern about the future of slavery had turned the state from a staunch supporter of economic nationalism into the nation's most aggressive advocate of states' rights. Increasingly, economic grievances fused with concerns over slavery. In 1832, the Palmetto State was one of just two states (the other was Mississippi) the majority of whose population was made up of slaves. By that year events throughout the hemisphere made South Carolinians desperately uneasy about the future of slavery. In 1831 and 1832 militant abolitionism had erupted in the North, slave insurrections had occurred in Southampton County, Virginia, and Jamaica, and Britain was moving to emancipate all slaves in the British Caribbean.

By using the federal tariff as the focus of their grievances, South Carolinians found an ideal way of debating the question of state sovereignty without debating the morality of slavery. Following the Missouri Compromise debates, a slave insurrection led by Denmark Vesey had been uncovered in Charleston in 1822. By 1832 South Carolinians did not want to stage debates in Congress that might bring the explosive slavery issue to the fore and possibly incite another slave revolt.

The Bank War

The major political issue of Jackson's presidency was his war against the Second Bank of the United States. The banking system at the time Jackson assumed the presidency was completely different than it is today. At that time, the federal government coined only a limited supply of hard money and printed no paper money at all. The principal source of circulating currency - paper bank notes - was private commercial banks (of which there were 329 in 1829), chartered by the various states. These private, state-chartered banks supplied the credit necessary to finance land purchases, business operations, and economic growth. The notes they issued were promises to pay in gold or silver, but they were backed by a limited amount of precious metal and they fluctuated greatly in value.

In 1816, the federal government had chartered the Second Bank of the United States partly in an effort to control the notes issued by state banks. By demanding payment in gold or silver, the national bank could discipline over-speculative private banks. But the very idea of a national bank was unpopular for various reasons. Many people blamed it for causing the Panic of 1819. Others resented its political influence. For example, Senator Daniel Webster was both the bank's chief lobbyist and a director of the bank's Boston branch. Wage earners and small-business owners blamed it for economic fluctuations and loan restrictions. Private banks resented its privileged position in the banking industry.

In 1832, Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and other Jackson opponents in Congress, seeking an issue for that year's presidential election, passed a bill rechartering the Second Bank of the United States. The bank's charter was not due to expire until 1836, but Clay and Webster wanted to force Jackson to take a clear pro-bank or anti-bank position. Jackson had frequently attacked the bank as an agency through which speculators, monopolists, and other seekers after economic privilege cheated honest farmers and mechanics. Now, his adversaries wanted to force him either to sign the bill for recharter, alienating voters hostile to the bank, or veto it, antagonizing conservative voters who favored a sound banking system.

Jackson vetoed the bill in a forceful message that condemned the bank as a privileged "monopoly" created to make "rich men...richer by act of Congress." The bank, he declared was "unauthorized by the Constitution, subversive of the rights of the States, and dangerous to the liberties of the people." In the presidential campaign of 1832, Henry Clay tried to make an issue of Jackson's bank veto, but Jackson swept to an easy second-term victory, defeating Clay by 219 electoral votes to 49.

Jackson interpreted his reelection as a mandate to undermine the bank still further. In September 1833, he ordered his Treasury secretary to divert federal revenues from the Bank of the United States to selected state banks, which came to be known as "pet" banks. The secretary of the Treasury and his assistant resigned rather than carry out the president's order. It was only after Jackson appointed a second new secretary that his order was implemented. Jackson's decision to divert federal deposits from the national bank prompted his adversaries in the Senate to formally censure the president's actions as arbitrary and unconstitutional. The bank's president, Nicholas Biddle, responded to Jackson's actions by reducing loans and calling in debts. "This worthy President," said Biddle, "thinks that because he has scalped Indians and imprisoned Judges he is to have his way with the Bank. He is mistaken." Jackson retorted: "The Bank...is trying to kill me, but I will kill it."

Jackson's decision to divert funds drew strong support from many conservative businesspeople who believed that the bank's destruction would increase the availability of credit and open up new business opportunities. Jackson, however, hated all banks, and believed that the only sound currencies were gold and silver. Having crippled the Bank of the United States, he promptly launched a crusade to replace all bank notes with hard money. Denouncing "the power which the moneyed interest derives from a paper currency," the president prohibited banks that received federal deposits from issuing bills valued at less than \$5. Then, in the Specie Circular of 1836, Jackson prohibited payment for public lands in anything but gold or silver. That same year, in another anti-banking measure, Congress voted to deprive pet banks of federal deposits. Instead, nearly \$35 million in surplus funds was distributed to the states to help finance internal improvements.

To Jackson's supporters, the presidential veto of the bank bill was a principled assault on a bastion of wealth and special privilege. His efforts to curtail the circulation of bank notes was an effort to rid the country of a tool used by commercial interests to exploit farmers and working men and women. To his critics, the veto was an act of economic ignorance that destroyed a valuable institution that promoted monetary stability, eased the long-distance transfer of funds, provided a reserve of capital on which other banks drew, and helped regulate the bank notes issued by private banks. Jackson's effort to limit the circulation of bank notes was a misguided act of a "backward-looking" president, who failed to understand the role of a banking system in a modern economy.

The effect of Jackson's banking policies remains a subject of debate. Initially, land sales, canal construction, cotton production, and manufacturing boomed following Jackson's decision to divert federal funds from the bank. At the same time, however, state debts rose sharply and inflation increased dramatically. Prices climbed 28 percent in just three years. Then in 1837, just after the election of Jackson's successor, Democrat Martin Van Buren, a deep financial depression struck the nation. Cotton prices fell by half. In New York City, 50,000 people were thrown out of work and 200,000 lacked adequate means of support. Hungry mobs broke into the city's flour warehouse. From across the country came "rumor after rumor of riot, insurrection, and tumult." Not until the mid-1840s would the country fully pull out of the depression.

Who was to blame for the Panic of 1837? One school of thought holds Jackson responsible, arguing that his banking policies removed a vital check on the activities of state-chartered banks. Freed from the regulation of the second Bank of the United States, private banks rapidly expanded the volume of bank notes in circulation, contributing to the rapid increase in inflation. Jackson's Specie Circular of 1836, which sought to curb inflation by requiring that public land payments be made in hard currency, forced many Americans to exchange paper bills for gold and silver. Many private banks lacked sufficient reserves of hard currency and were forced to close their doors, triggering a financial crisis.

Another school of thought blames the panic on factors outside of Jackson's control. A surplus of cotton on the world market caused the price of cotton to drop sharply, throwing many southern and western cotton farmers into bankruptcy. Meanwhile, in 1836, Britain suddenly raised interest rates, which drastically reduced investment in the American economy and forced a number of states to default on loans from foreign investors.

If Jackson's policies did not necessarily cause the panic, they certainly made recovery more difficult. Jackson's handpicked successor, Martin Van Buren, responded to the economic depression in an extremely doctrinaire way. A firm believer in the Jeffersonian principle of limited government, Van Buren refused to provide government aid to business.

Fearful that the federal government might lose funds it had deposited in private banks, Van Buren convinced Congress in 1840 to adopt an independent treasury system. Under this proposal, federal funds were locked up in insulated subtreasuries, which were totally divorced from the banking system. As a result the banking system was deprived of funds that might have aided recovery.

The Whigs

Although it took a number of years for Jackson's opponents to coalesce into an effective national political organization, by the mid-1830s the Whig party, as the opposition came to be known, was able to battle the Democratic Party on almost equal terms throughout the country. The Whig party was formed in 1834 as a coalition of National Republicans, Anti-Masons, and disgruntled Democrats, who were united by their hatred of "King Andrew" Jackson and his "usurpations" of congressional and judicial authority, came together in 1834 to form the Whig party. The party took its name from the seventeenth-century British Whig group that had defended English liberties against the usurpations of pro-Catholic Stuart Kings.

In 1836 the Whigs mounted their first presidential campaign, running three regional candidates against Martin Van Buren: Daniel Webster, the senator from Massachusetts who had substantial appeal in New England; Hugh Lawson White, who had appeal in the South; and William Henry Harrison, who fought an Indian alliance at the Battle of Tippecanoe and appealed to the West and to Anti-Masons in Pennsylvania and Vermont. The party strategy was to throw the election into the House of Representatives, where the Whigs would unite behind a single candidate. Van Buren easily defeated all his Whig opponents, winning 170 electoral votes to just 73 for his closest rival.

Following his strong showing in the election of 1836, William Henry Harrison received the united support of the Whig party in 1840. Benefiting from the Panic of 1837, Harrison easily defeated Van Buren by a vote of 234 to 60 in the Electoral College.

Unfortunately, the 68-year-old Harrison caught cold while delivering a two-hour inaugural address in the freezing rain. Barely a month later he died of pneumonia, the first president to die in office. His successor, John Tyler of Virginia, was an ardent defender of slavery, a staunch advocate of states' rights, and a former Democrat, whom the Whigs had nominated in order to attract Democratic support to the Whig ticket.

A firm believer in the principle that the federal government should exercise no powers other than those expressly enumerated in the Constitution, Tyler rejected the entire Whig legislative program, which called for reestablishment of a national bank, an increased tariff, and federally funded internal improvements.

The Whig party was furious. An angry mob gathered at the White House, threw rocks through the windows, and burned the president in effigy. To protest Tyler's rejection of the Whig political agenda, all members of the cabinet but one resigned. Tyler became a president without a party. "His Accidency" vetoed nine bills during his four years in office, more than any previous one-term president, frustrating Whig plans to recharter the national bank and raise the tariff while simultaneously distributing proceeds of land sales to the states. In 1843 Whigs in the House of Representatives made Tyler the subject of the first serious impeachment attempt, but the resolutions failed by a vote of 127 to 83.

Like the Democrats, the Whigs were a coalition of sectional interests, class and economic interests, and ethnic and religious interests.

Democratic voters tended to be small farmers, residents of less-prosperous towns, and the Scots-Irish and Catholic Irish. Whigs tended to be educators and professionals; manufacturers; business-oriented farmers; British and German Protestant immigrants; upwardly aspiring manual laborers; free blacks; and active members of Presbyterian, Unitarian, and Congregational churches.

The Whig coalition included supporters of Henry Clay's American System, states' righters, religious groups alienated by Jackson's Indian removal policies, and bankers and businesspeople frightened by the Democrats' anti-monopoly and anti-bank rhetoric.

Whereas the Democrats stressed class conflict, Whigs emphasized the harmony of interests between labor and capital, the need for humanitarian reform, and leadership by men of

talent. The Whigs also idealized the “self-made man,” who starts “from an humble origin, and from small beginnings rise[s] gradually in the world, as a result of merit and industry.” Finally, the Whigs viewed technology and factory enterprise as forces for increasing national wealth and improving living conditions.

In 1848 and 1852 the Whigs tried to repeat their successful 1840 presidential campaign by nominating military heroes for the presidency. The party won the 1848 election with General Zachary Taylor, an Indian fighter and hero of the Mexican War, who had boasted that he had never cast a vote in a presidential election. Like Harrison, Taylor confined his campaign speeches to uncontroversial platitudes. “Old Rough and Ready,” as he was known, died after just 1 year and 127 days in office. Then, in 1852, the Whigs nominated another Indian fighter and Mexican War hero, General Winfield Scott, who carried just four states for his dying party. “Old Fuss and Feathers,” as he was called, was the last Whig nominee to play an important role in a presidential election.