

## Andrew Jackson, his Friends and Foes

An important period of American history that has not always received the attention it deserves begins with Andrew Jackson's election to the Presidency in 1828 and continues up to the Civil War. The country was rapidly growing both in population and size, and political parties were being delineated. An independent democracy was still being established and significant outside threats were still present especially by England. The first six presidents came from what could be called American aristocracy; all but John Adams being from Virginia. While they were generally competent executives, they relied heavily upon Congress to initiate and affect policy. Vetoes were seldom used. Political parties in their infancy were not organized or focused. Jackson's party, the Democrats of today, had its origins in the Anti-Federalist party which stood for states rights rather than a strong central government in this early period. The Anti-Federalists had strong southern representation and included former Presidents Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe. Their party favored slavery and lower tariffs.

The other major party had its origins in the Federalist party of George Washington and the two Adams, father and son. This party became the Whig party and later by the time of Lincoln, the Republican party. For non historians, party labels can be quite confusing, especially in this period of changing names.

With the election of 1828, popular voting rather than selection by the legislature was used in all but two states. The personal popularity of General Stonewall Andrew Jackson was originally derived from his distinguished war record at the battle of New Orleans (1815). This helped him defeat incumbent John Quincy Adams whose Presidential term (1824 – 1828) was considered by most standards to be well above average.

Andrew Jackson changed the nature of the Presidency as we shall soon see. He was born in the backwoods of North Carolina. His father died when Jackson was one and his mother when he was 14. As a teenager, he was mostly on his own; hard working to become a practicing lawyer first, and later, a U.S. Attorney, U.S. Congressman, Major General in the Tennessee militia, and finally a General in the U.S. Army. In his younger years he lived a wild and venture-some life; for example, killing a man in a duel on May 5, 1806 at age 37. The duel was over a horse race. Jackson was wounded, suffering a hit in the lung and near fatal internal bleeding from which he had lasting disability. He later established his military reputation in the battle of New Orleans (1815) defeating the British, which eliminated them permanently as a threat to the southern United States, and established Jackson as a military hero.

The presidential campaign of 1828 was the most vicious and partisan up to that time. Political parties became a much larger influence. John Quincy Adams had defeated Henry Clay and Jackson in 1824, but under much less competitive circumstances and without popular voting. Jackson won the rematch in 1828. Adams was a very talented, honorable person who after being President, served for many years in the House of Representatives where he continued to be a leader and policy maker in the Whig party.

The sudden, unexpected death of Jackson's wife, Rachel, just six weeks after the election of 1828 was a major tragedy. They had enjoyed a long and happy marriage. There was a question about the legality of her divorce at the time she married Jackson. The bigamy accusation was used against Jackson politically, although it cost him no elections. Rachel was undoubtedly a stabilizing influence in his life and upon her death he turned to Andrew Donelson, a nephew of Rachel's who became his secretary and confidant. Donelson's wife Emily also became an important person in Jackson's life as she assumed many of the duties of the first lady.

Another person very close to Jackson was John Henry Eaton, the new Secretary of War. Eaton, Senator from Tennessee, (1818 – 1828), had helped promote Jackson’s career and was an important strategist in his 1828 campaign. Eaton brought with him a new wife Margaret who had a reputation for promiscuous behavior. She was described as being a real beauty, quite flirtatious, frequently infuriating wives because of her attention to their husbands. Her reputation was so bad that she was not received socially in Washington. Pressure on Jackson to dismiss Eaton was intense, but his loyalty to him as a friend and valued advisor allowed him to continue. This created tensions within the administration, particularly among cabinet members and their wives.

Emily Donelson had a particular dislike for Margaret Eaton, viewing her as a rival for Jackson’s attention. In subtle ways the Donelsons and Vice President John Calhoun kept the pressure on for Eaton’s dismissal, but Jackson’s loyalty to his friend outweighed the practical considerations, and Eaton stayed on. As time went on, the situation became worse. For instance, Martin Van Buren, Jackson’s designated successor gave a party which no Cabinet wife attended when it was learned that Margaret Eaton was invited. There were other similar episodes which caused a significant disruption to harmony within the administration. The Eaton affair finally ended in April 1832 precipitated by the resignation of Secretary of State Martin Van Buren and ending with all Cabinet members including Eaton resigning. While this was an unprecedented occurrence and temporarily disruptive, Jackson rather quickly was able to assemble a new cabinet. From the beginning Jackson assumed a much stronger presence than his predecessors. He relied very little on his Cabinet while creating an informal “kitchen cabinet” that he was more comfortable with. He had little respect for the judiciary, openly defying the Supreme Court on several occasions. His relationship with Chief Justice John Marshall was tenuous at best since

Jackson frequently disagreed with the Court. He exercised his veto power more often than all his six predecessors combined. The most noteworthy veto came in 1829 – the Maysville veto. Both political parties were in favor of improving national infrastructure, particularly roadways, which had been neglected generally and were bad to start with. States were not financially able to be of much help. The Maysville bill proposed funding a paved road from Maysville to Lexington Kentucky. This was to be the first paved road west of the Alleghenys. It was planned to be a link in a much more extensive highway system that would later involve a number of states. The veto came as a surprise even to his own party. He said that federal money should not be used for an intrastate project ,even though the plan would later involve adjacent states. It has been concluded by some historians that Jackson was not favorable for capitalism. It would seem fairer to say that he was against excessive federal spending on many things, some of which could be considered pro business. The Maysville veto literally strikes close to home for me. Thomas Metcalfe was Governor of Kentucky 1828 – 1832. Some of his exploits have been recounted in several of my previous club papers since he developed and lived at Forest Retreat, the farm my father Eslie Asbury acquired in 1935 and owned until 1992. Metcalfe and Henry Clay were the only non Democrats elected to significant offices in Kentucky in 1828. For local Kentucky elections Democratic dominance has not changed much since, although several Republicans have been elected to the U.S. Senate in recent years. Jackson vetoed the Maysville bill which had bipartisan support in 1829. He was probably right in using this unpopular veto since the road was soon built anyway by private enterprise requiring no federal funds. It appears that Governor Metcalfe exercised his gubernatorial power to see that the road went by his farm rather than through the county seat of Carlisle, just three miles away. We still have a farm fronting on this, the first paved road west of the Alleghenys; now known as the Maysville-Lexington Pike. It has

not become a link in a larger interstate system, but continues to be a heavily traveled intrastate highway. Jackson did consider the veto a “power” weapon and used it at time as he explained to a colleague, “to keep Congress in line”. Some later presidents used the veto in much the same way, as the legislative tool of the executive. Both Roosevelt’s and Woodrow Wilson used the veto frequently, a forerunner to its being used much more often in recent times, both for political and constitutional reasons, but Jackson was the first to use it to strengthen the Presidency at the expense of Congress.

One of the most controversial issues of this period concerned the forced removal of Indians to designated areas west of the Mississippi River. After the battle of New Orleans Jackson who had earned the title of “Old Hickory”, stayed in the army primarily as an Indian fighter. In 1815 the Seminoles refused to leave their homelands in Florida which had previously been acknowledged as theirs by treaty with the U.S. Against a Supreme Court ruling, the state of Georgia used their militia to forcibly remove the Seminoles. Badly outnumbered, the Indians sought protection in a Spanish Fort. President Monroe had sent instructions to Jackson that were vague, putting no specific limits on what Jackson might do. He elected to free Florida of both the Seminole’s and the Spanish, who had clear title to much of Florida at that time. In the process he executed two British subjects who Jackson said had aided the enemy. These executions were carried out one day after a hastily convened court found them guilty of helping the enemy. The accused had no counsel and were completely at the mercy of the Jackson controlled court. When tidings of this were received in Washington, there were many who felt strongly that Jackson had greatly exceeded his authority both with respect to the executions and the attacking of a Spanish occupied fort. In Monroe’s cabinet, Vice President John Calhoun and Treasury Secretary William Crawford strongly denounced Jackson’s actions, while Secretary of

State John Quincy Adams defended him. Speaker of the House and presidential hopeful Henry Clay was particularly critical of Jackson, stating his actions represented the military usurping civilian authority. A subsequent congressional investigation later recommended no disciplinary action, but Jackson's aggressiveness against the Indians did provide substantial material for use against him in later political campaigns, and left a permanent black mark on his record. The so-called Seminole War was an early indication of Jackson's intolerance of Native Americans, a feeling shared by many Americans at that time.

Later as President, he felt that the Indians should be moved even if this meant breaking or ignoring treaties previously made by the U.S. Government with individual Indian tribes. In February 1830, Jackson pushed a bill in Congress that would force the Indians to exchange their present land for land west of the Mississippi. There was much opposition to the treaty breaking and forced land exchange led by Senator Theodore Frelinghuysen, of New Jersey and strongly backed by Henry Clay and John Quincy Adams. There was much opposition from outside of Congress as well. One of the most outspoken and effective outside leaders was Catherine Beecher, sister of Harriet Beecher Stowe and daughter of Lyman Beecher, of the Cincinnati Seminary. Even Martin Van Buren, Jackson's protégé, recognized the obvious unfairness of the legislation and tried to have it altered. Jackson's disciples were forced to do much arm twisting and lobbying which finally proved effective for the personally popular President. Highly respected John Quincy Adams wrote "General Jackson rules by his personal popularity which his Senate partisans dare not oppose, and as long as he has a majority in both houses, they will stand by him no matter what the issue". The vote in the house after much debate did prove to be close, 102 – 98, for removal of the Indians.

The Indian displacement law was strong, and was often brutally enforced. Many of the displacements occurred in severe winter weather and combined with illness, resulted in high mortality. In most cases the west lands for exchange were very inferior to the original eastern lands previously occupied. Many tribes lost 50 to 80% of their members in moving. While it was inevitable that there would be displacement and hardship for many Indians anyway, there were certainly other more humane methods that could have been employed. Much more could be written concerning Indian displacement and it would not reflect well on the United States. It should be noted that the plan and much to its execution originated during Jackson's administration, despite strong and at times bi-partisan opposition. He was determined "to get rid of those dam savages", and as usual, he was not denied.

The Second National Bank was chartered by Congress in 1816 for a twenty year period and handled U.S. tax receipts as well as government financial matters including most foreign exchange transactions. The Bank also made many commercial loans and in general simplified and facilitated bank transactions. Nicholas Biddle, a young Philadelphian, soon emerged as the leader of the Board of Directors. The Bank was functioning well and was relatively non-controversial when Jackson was elected in 1828. After the election, it soon became apparent that Jackson was not favorable toward banks in general and the Bank of the United States (BUS) in particular.

Some years before he had been involved in a financial deal in which a bank caused him to have a severe financial loss, which apparently left a permanent bank scar on him. As time went on, Jackson and Biddle became bitter enemies. The bank was up for renewal in 1836 just before the end of Jackson's second term and without Jackson's opposition, the Bank's charter would have been renewed. Jackson made its demise a point of party honor and in due time the

charter was not renewed, despite strong bipartisan support in its favor. History judges that the banking system, particularly government business, suffered as a result. Once again Old Hickory won an unpopular battle because of his personal popularity and the obedience of his party to his wishes. Well known historian Robert Remini wrote “The Killing of the Bank of the United States (BUS) was primarily the work of one man, Andrew Jackson”.

The bank story was not over. As his Vice President Van Buren feared, Jackson’s war against the BUS alienated many of both parties. Southern Democrat defectors were particularly prevalent among business men and cotton planters who knew the role the Federal banking system had played in stabilizing the cotton market. Christopher Biddle now board chairman fought back. As Jackson withdrew government funds from BUS, Biddle tightened credit even more, making borrowing very difficult, even forcing some businesses into bankruptcy. The tide had turned so far against Jackson’s war on the BUS that by a vote of 26 to 20 he was censured by the Senate for the arbitrary removed of federal funds from BUS. While the censure had no binding effect on Jackson, it was an insult, not well received by the President. He was determined to have the censure expunged from the record which he was finally able to do near the end of his term in early 1837. Jackson’s war on the BUS is certainly a weak spot in his resume.

Jackson had some strongly held convictions that did have popular support. Among them was a belief in a strong military. In a message to Congress in 1836, he quoted George Washington. “There is a rank due the United States among nations which will be withheld, if not absolutely lost, by the reputation of weakness. If we desire to avoid insult, we must be able to repel it. If we desire to secure peace, one of the most powerful instruments of our rising

prosperity, it must be known that we are at all times, ready for war". The question of emphasizing a strong military was surely much less controversial then now.

As an ironic aside, in May of 1833, Jackson appointed a young aspiring member of the rival party to be postmaster at New Salem, Illinois. Twenty-four year-old Abraham Lincoln had just lost a bid to be elected to the Illinois State Legislature and was grateful to receive the unexpected Federal appointment from a member of the rival party.

It is not surprising that Jackson was a strong supporter of slavery being from Tennessee. Having been raised in the South, one would expect slavery to be accepted as a normal part of his life. He imposed hard rules and at time extremely harsh punishment on his own slaves, especially runaways who were captured and returned to his home. He owned as many as one hundred fifty and did not ever free a slave even in his will. Like many Southerners, he considered slaves property, not human beings. On a lighter note, a visitor at the Hermitage once asked a slave if he though the General would go to Heaven. The slave replied, "If the General wants to go, who is going to stop him"?

To help re-elect Jackson in 1832, tariffs in general were raised which was particularity popular in the North. This favored northern manufacturers, but hurt cotton growers. Indian removal and the Bank War were of more interest to Jackson, but Southern politicians such as Calhoun and Clay were fighting for lower tariffs. If tariffs were not lowered the idea that an individual State could elect to nullify tariffs came under consideration. Jackson and many others were strongly opposed to nullification which if enacted by a State could be considered to be the equivalent of withdrawing from the Union. Under John Calhoun, South Carolina was the leader in advocating nullification and they hoped to induce other Southern states to follow. Above all,

Jackson was for preserving the Union and he fought hard against nullification. Three Senators dominated the debate. They were:

Daniel Webster, great orator from New England, represented the case for high tariffs; John Calhoun, chief spokesman for the South and low tariffs, and Henry Clay, the great compromiser, searching for an acceptable middleground. Behind the scene was a patient Andrew Jackson who wanted to avoid nullification, secession, or outright Civil War. He was finally able to broker a compromise and by skillful political maneuvering effected an agreement which did lower tariffs enough to be acceptable to the South, thus avoiding any further threat of nullification.

Jackson's health had been poor for some years. There has been a possibility that he might run for a third term, but his health and probably other considerations did not permit it. Although his poor health persisted, he still lived another eleven years, mostly confined to his Nashville home, where he continued to have much influence on the Democratic Party. For some years, Van Buren was Jackson's choice to succeed to the presidency and he did win beating Whig nominee William Henry Harrison in 1836. The election was closer than in 1832, but Van Buren still won comfortably. His social skills were impressive and politically he relied on publicity, patronage, and organization. The Democratic party continued to be influenced by Jackson for many years; opposition to a National Bank, promoting territorial expansion, protecting slavery and taking over Indian lands being the main issues. Despite their strong anti-BUS stance, neither Jackson nor Van Buren could fairly be accused of being anti-capitalistic. Labor unions still in their infancy were shown no special favors by the Democrats of this era.

The panic of 1837 has been blamed by most economists as being at least partly caused by the monetary politics of Jackson, policies which were left unchanged by Van Buren. Chief

among these were complicated financial considerations involving specie reserves at large banks as well as the absence of a strong National Bank. The panic was deep and extensive and led to Van Buren's defeat by William Henry Harrison in 1840.

As I researched the presidency of Andrew Jackson, I was struck with some similarities that he shared with President Barack Obama, as well as some clear-cut differences. Of course, there are obvious problems in attempting to compare Presidents that serviced 180 years apart, but there are some worthwhile consideration. For some similarities.

1. Both fit the description of strong willed individuals (some might say strong egotists). One might believe that all Presidents have strong egos, but even a superficial perusal of the 45 Presidents shows this to be untrue.
2. Both are of the same political party although the party was more state rights oriented in Jackson's era, and has become a party favoring a strong central government during the past 80 years.
3. Blue collar support was very strong for Jackson as it currently is for Obama.
4. Both strongly backed some legislation that was unpopular with the general public, and both were able to have it adopted

Obama: Health Care and Stimulus.

Jackson: Indian displacement and strong opposition to a National Bank

5. Both generally unfavorable toward business.

Also some striking differences:

1. Very different attitude toward the National Debt.

Jackson: Tried to pay off debt completely. He was always conscious of the National debt.

Obama: Has shown little restraint and seems to feel the country can spend itself out of recession.

2. Redistribution of wealth is a major objective of Obama. There is no evidence that Jackson favored redistribution of wealth.
3. Obama currently less than halfway through his first term is much less popular than Jackson at a comparable time. There were no polls then, but Jackson was known to have strong grassroots support throughout his administration. Probably the most important factor was that Jackson was favored by good economic times throughout his 8 years, in contrast to Obama's first two years of bad economic times. It seems problematic as to whether a President has much control over financial ups and downs especially near term, but there is no doubt that the state of the economy is a major factor affecting any President's popularity.

Now back to the narrative. Coming up to the 1840 election, everything pointed toward a Whig victory particularly since a bad economy continued to plague the country. Although Henry Clay continued to be the party leader, the Whigs were reluctant to nominate a two time loser; Clay having lost to John Quincy Adams in 1824 and to Andrew Jackson in 1832. Instead they turned to a military hero, William Henry Harrison. He won handily over incumbent Martin Van Buren. Harrison died of pneumonia less than two months into his term and was succeeded by Vice President John Tyler. Clay had been so disappointed by not receiving the Presidential nomination that he turned down the Vice-Presidency and thus the Presidency when Harrison died.

It is interesting to note that the 1840 election attracted 80% of eligible voters. This compares to the 50% or less in recent U.S. elections. With the prospect of having a Whig

President and already having control of both House and Senate, the Whigs were finally ready to put their agenda into law. Reestablishing A National Bank and higher tariffs were foremost on the list. John Tyler, a never reliable party-liner, had different ideas and became so at cross proposes with the Whigs that he was later expelled from the party. Near the end of his term, rejected by both major parties, he ran for re-election on a third party ticket finishing a poor third. None of the Whig agenda was enacted during his term.

As the 1844 election approached, Henry Clay was nominated and it appeared that he would be an easy winner since the Democrats had no obvious candidate. Van Buren, by this time past his prime, vied with Lewis Case in the early balloting at the Democratic convention. On the second day, a real darkhouse James K. Polk unexpectedly emerged the winner. In the general election Clay appeared to be an easy winner over Polk until the subject of admitting Texas as a state became the crucial issue of the campaign. Polk was strong for admitting Texas, while Clay was opposed. The mood of the county was for territorial expansion, and this carried the day for Polk in a close election.

From 1840 to 1860 when Lincoln was elected, there was only one strong President; James K. Polk (1844 – 48) and he only served one term. During Polk’s administration, the country expanded more than under any other President including Jefferson who had added the Louisiana purchase. Polk added Texas, New Mexico, California, and Oregon.

Many historians have felt that if Clay had been elected in 1840 or 1844, the Civil War might have been avoided. Keeping the disagreements between North and South under control would certainly have been high on the list of the great compromiser. The three weak Presidents that followed: Zachary Taylor 1848, Franklin Pierce 1852, and James Buchanan 1856, did nothing to reduce North – South tensions.

In reviewing the period 1828 to 1860, there are two outstanding individuals that had by far the most influence on this period, and for years thereafter; Andrew Jackson, Democrat and Henry Clay, Whig. Their careers overlapped and they were personal as well as political adversaries. Jackson served two terms as President and Clay none, but this was largely offset by Clay's long reign as Senate Whig leader as well as being the acknowledged leader of the Whig party for at least thirty years. Jackson pursued his own goals relentlessly, while Clay often used compromise to attain goals that were good for the country as well as for him personally. Both had a significant lasting impact on the government of the United States.

I have enjoyed visiting this period in American history with you this evening. Thank you for your courteous attention.

Taylor Asbury  
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