Prologue

Jackson and the Age of the Democratic Revolution

In the early spring of 1835, the renowned engraver and painter Asher Durand executed the finest portrait of Andrew Jackson made during Jackson’s presidency. The artist could extract only four or five sittings from his irascible, distracted subject. Jackson, Durand reported, “has been part of the time in a pretty good humor, but some times he gets his ‘dander up’ & smokes his pipe prodigiously.” Still, the final picture was candid and persuasive, showing a care-worn, elegantly attired old man, his cheeks and forehead deeply lined, lips clenched over toothless gums, and black-coffee eyes emanating both melancholy and determination.* One New York critic pronounced it “not merely a likeness but a facsimile.”

Strong as it was, the rendering was incomplete—for hidden beneath Jackson’s shock of stiff white hair was a deep and nasty scar. As a boy soldier during the American Revolution, Jackson had been captured by British dragoons and ordered to scrape the mud off an officer’s boots. When Jackson claimed the status of a prisoner of war and refused to be shamed, the officer slashed him with a sword, nearly severing several fingers and cutting a permanent trench into the boy’s skull. Although it would not be the last violent badge of courage and honor Jackson would receive, it would remain his greatest source of pride, an eternal reminder of his patriotic suffering and dedication.

*Durand’s portrait is reproduced as the frontispiece of this volume.
A year before Jackson sat for Durand’s portrait, while the Senate was debating whether to censure him for presidential misconduct, he learned that a Whig congressman planned to introduce articles of impeachment—and to charge that the stories about the wartime slashing had been invented as a campaign ploy.

“The damned infernal scoundrel!” Jackson snarled to his close friend and adviser Francis Blair. “Put your finger here, Mr. Blair.” The president parted his hair, and Blair was shocked to discover that he could fit his entire finger inside the scarred gash.²

Fearless, principled, and damaged, Andrew Jackson was one of the fiercest and most controversial men ever to serve as president of the United States. Like few other presidents until the present era—Jefferson, Lincoln, FDR—Jackson inspired love and hatred, with no apparent middle ground. “Talk of him as the second Washington!” the New York patrician Philip Hone wrote with sarcasm and disgust in 1833. “It won’t do now: Washington was only the first Jackson.” Hone and his conservative friends in truth thought of Jackson as an American Caesar, who had stirred up the blockhead masses, seized power, and installed a new despotism. Jackson’s more radical critics likewise detested him as a dangerous demagogue. But to his admirers, Jackson was the most courageous man in the country, the one leader, a North Carolinian observed, who “could have withstood the overwhelming influence” of the nation’s “corrupt Aristocracy,” to safeguard equal rights and American democracy.³

There are plenty of signals in our culture today that we are supposed to admire Jackson as a great American. His picture is on the twenty-dollar bill. His plantation home outside Nashville, the Hermitage, is a national historic monument. The imposing statue of Jackson in his general’s uniform, rearing on horseback, still dominates Lafayette Square Park as it has for more than a century and a half, with Jackson donning his half-moon officer’s cap at the White House. Separate polls of historians who vary widely in their assessments of the presidents consistently rate Jackson near the top, just below Washington, Lincoln, and FDR. Yet apart from Jefferson, no past president has suffered harsher criticism from recent historians than has Jackson—no longer a hero, in many circles, but an ignorant, violent slaveholder who suppressed the abolitionists, ruined the American economy, and perpetrated genocide on the Indians. The attacks rival in their intensity those loosed on Jackson from both the Right and the Left in his own time.

Modern scholarship was initially shaped—as in many ways it continues to be—by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr’s, admiring Age of Jackson, published in 1945. Rejecting earlier portrayals of Old Hickory as a western outsider battling eastern privilege, Schlesinger narrated the politics of the 1820s and 1830s as more of a struggle between classes than between regions, focused on Jackson’s famous war against the Second Bank of the United States. Urban workingmen and distressed small farmers, Schlesinger argued, united behind the noble liberal Jackson, a true common-born man of the people, in an all-out struggle against shortsighted bankers and businessmen. Over the succeeding decades, numerous biographers and historians, including Robert V. Remini and Charles Sellers, offered modified versions of Schlesinger’s interpretation. Most recently, these admirers have depicted Jackson as the enemy of a soulless “market revolution” that transformed American economic and social life and widened material inequality.

Other historians over the past thirty years, however, have presented intensely negative assessments of both Jackson and his presidency. Some have drawn on the critical ripostes to Schlesinger that appeared in the 1940s and 1950s, notably by Richard Hofstadter and Bray Hammond. Far from being a forerunner of democratic liberalism, Hofstadter and Hammond claimed, Jackson represented an aggressive, self-promoting class of entrepreneurs who pioneered the cutthroat, laissez-faire capitalism that would come to dominate the country during the Gilded Age. Later scholars, led by Michael Paul Rogen, focused on the even darker sides of Jackson’s presidency—his unwavering dedication to Indian removal and his attacks on abolitionism—and recast Jackson as an avatar of racism. Rogen’s Freudian interpretation of what he described as Jackson’s
genocidal viciousness against the Indians also signaled a new emphasis on Jackson's psychology and character as the taproot of his politics. In later variations, Jackson has appeared as a traumatized product of the raucous southern backcountry, whose unbalanced quest for manly honor—what one scholar has called his “search for vindication”—caused him to lash out at chimerical threats ranging from the Cherokees to the Second Bank. If, as the 1960s slogan ran, the personal is the political, then Jackson was a leader twisted by inner rages—a man, one historian has recently written, whose arrogance should repel all “who identify with the world’s oppressed and seek remedies for the sins of violence and covetousness.”

This clash of historical interpretations of Jackson is confusing. Behind it lie long-term changes in basic political ideas and sensibilities that make assessing Jackson's legacy—or that of any political figure before the Civil War era—extremely difficult. The basic American vocabulary is very different now than it was in the 1830s. Should Jackson, for example, be considered a liberal or a conservative? Today, liberalism is loosely equated, sometimes in caricatured ways, with an interventionist federal government, a distrust of the free market, a dedication to civil rights (especially for blacks, women, and homosexuals), a wariness of the military, and a weakness for educated, even elitist cultural prejudices. Conservatives, according to the same broad depictions, supposedly believe in state rights, want to reduce government's involvement with the economy, are skeptical about or hostile to civil rights legislation, idolize the military, and emanate a down-home, anti-elitist (some say anti-intellectual) style. By these lights, Jackson, a southwestern slaveholder and military hero with populist appeal, who believed in limited government, ought to be considered a forerunner of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush—a view some modern conservative commentators are eager to endorse.

Such transposing of political labels in the search for political forerunners is anachronistic, deceptive, and often distorted. The idea, for example, that there has always been a pro-big government party and a laissez-faire party, and that presidents can be judged by which they adhere to, is as useless in interpreting the politics of the 1830s as it is for interpreting our own time. American political parties have always blended “small government” and “big government” policies. Today, the Republican Party rejects federal regulation of business, but shows a robust willingness to regulate the affairs of individuals over certain social, cultural, and political issues. Without embarrassment, Republican leaders look to the federal courts, sometimes at the direct expense of state rights, to secure what they consider a favorable outcome. The Democratic Party, meanwhile, is much more attentive to regulating business, but comparatively laissez-faire on cultural and social matters—and, when it suits them, Democrats kick and scream about violations of state rights. Likewise, in Jackson's day, both the Jackson Democrats and their Whig Party opponents favored minimal government on some issues but not on others. This does not mean that political parties are unprincipled and bend their ideas merely to advance their own interests; it means that party politics cannot be reduced to simplistic formulas about federal versus state powers, in either the past or the present.

There is an additional danger in confusing the means and ends of one historical period for those of another. Before the advent of large national corporations and heavy industry, American liberals commonly pursued their goals with what are now considered conservative policies, and vice versa. Jackson, for example, sought to sever the connection of government and private business, which sounds today like quintessential hands-off conservatism. Yet he did so because he wanted to discourage the rise of a small elite of monetized men who enjoyed disproportional political power—one of the overarching aims of American liberalism since the New Deal. In other areas—his attack on state rights nullification and his vaunting of the Union, his disregard for what would now be called “faith-based” politics—Jackson defied much of what have become modern conservative ideas. But in still other areas—especially regarding civil liberties, Indian removal, and racial equality—he looks like a liberal's nightmare.
All efforts to judge Andrew Jackson by political standards other than his own, and those of his time, are doomed from the start. And by the criteria of the 1830s, Jackson was regarded as a champion of equal rights and democracy, in line with the maxim, delivered in his first annual message, that "the majority is to govern." There were some exceptions, such as the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, who condemned Jackson as a slaveholder and upholder of sinful inequality. The British radical William Cobbett, however, hailed him as "the greatest soldier and greatest statesman, whose name has ever yet appeared upon the records of valour and of wisdom." The Scots-born émigré Frances Wright—a heterodox feminist, freethinker, and antislavery firebrand known as "the Red Harlot of Infidelity"—thought Jackson was "the true saviour of the species." The iconoclastic New York editor William Leggett came to dispute sharply Jackson's stance on slavery, but nevertheless thought him "the leader and champion of the people," who stood "at the head of the Democracy of the world, fighting its battles, and stemming the tide of selfish interest combined with unprincipled ambition." Eminent conservatives saw similar things in Jackson, but with dismay, calling him the foremost advocate of what the learned jurist James Kent denounced as "the democracy of numbers and radicalism."

In the grander scheme of national and world politics, Jackson aligned himself, in his own mind and those of his supporters, with the forces of movement rather than of order, on the side of egalitarianism and against privilege. Therein lies his claim to historical greatness. Jackson's life and public career coincided almost exactly with what historians have called the Age of the Democratic Revolution in the Atlantic world, commencing with the American Revolution and concluding with the failed European revolutions of 1848. It was an age of intense political upheavals, in which the friends of Enlightenment, backed by popular unrest, challenged the unquestioned authority of royalty and aristocracy. It was also a time of deep economic and social change. Enormous commercial and industrial innovations proved liberating for some and oppressive for others. Paternalistic hierarchies of family, clan, and church receded in favor of increasingly unbounded claims to individual rights and self-reliance.

The outcomes of this turmoil varied widely. The French Revolution of 1789 degenerated into tyranny before giving way to royalist restoration. On the rest of the continent, reaction held hard sway over liberalism and antimonarchical revolt through the middle of the nineteenth century. In Britain, the repression of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries prefaced a period of measured political reform that, though it won the abolition of slavery in Britain's overseas colonies, could achieve no more at home than the restrained Reform Bill of 1832, which ended some of the most flagrant inequalities of representation but left intact much of the landed aristocracy's power and privilege. Only in the United States—and there in incomplete and sometimes brutally paradoxical ways—did the Age of the Democratic Revolution break through to create enduring new political realities and possibilities. In a universe of kings and nobles, the American Republic stood alone as what Jefferson called, in 1801, the repository of "the world's best hope"—a government in which the citizenry and not royalty were sovereign.

Andrew Jackson dedicated his presidency to vindicating and expanding that hope by ridding the nation of a recrudescence corrupt privilege that he believed was killing it. His victories as well as his imposing presence have stamped his name on an entire period in American history covering the three decades after the War of 1812, known familiarly as the Jacksonian era. Jackson was not, though, an archetypal or predictable product of his time—what the greatest American philosopher in Jacksonian America (and no great admirer of Jackson's), Ralph Waldo Emerson, called a "representative man." Jackson was deeply paradoxical. Orphaned young, and reliant on his own wits, he was a parvenu who also embraced a paternalist southern code of honor and vengeance more typical of traditional landed classes than of the rambunctious new democratic world. Although his political hero was Thomas Jefferson, the bookish upholder of detached reason, Jackson was preeminently a man
of action, unschooled, and (compared to his presidential predecessors) ill-read, touted by his supporters as "nature's nobleman" and prized more for his instincts than for his intellect. (According to one, not wholly reliable, report, Jefferson considered Jackson, as a military man, too dangerous to be president.) Jackson was ranked, by friend and foe alike, as a social outsider, with an unpolished plebeian sensibility unlike any yet seen in an American president—yet he was also a member in good standing of Tennessee's slaveholding planter elite, described by many as gracious, even knightly. Although the head of the first mass democratic party in world history, he often acted on the basis of fierce personal loyalties (and hatreds), and took positions that seemed at odds with his stated principles, sometimes frustrating and sometimes confusing his political managers. Despite his contradictions, Jackson came to be regarded, for better or worse, as the embodiment of the democratic idea. Opposition to Jackson and his party was hopeless, the young anti-Jacksonian William Henry Seward wrote in 1835, so long as the American people supported the principle that Jackson represented: "That principle is Democracy. . . . It is with them, the poor against the rich; and it is not to be disguised."

One of the greatest challenges Jackson poses to any biographer or historian is to make sense of his paradoxes and contradictions without slighting either his defects or his achievements. Another is to describe the irksome personality of this strange democrat without allowing that personality to overwhelm everything else about him, including his ideas and principles—and without ignoring his ability to change. I have no interest in adding to the abundant literature of retrospective psychological interpretations concerning Jackson's presidency. I do not believe that a particular loss or trauma—the "Rosebud" syndrome of Orson Welles's Charles Foster Kane—can adequately explain any political career. Like other, even greater presidents, Jackson, by the time he reached the White House, had advanced well beyond his youthful trials and exploits. Abraham Lincoln at age forty—a hack Whig politician and disappointed officeholder, out to make as much money as he could from his law practice—gave little presentiment of the antislavery war president and the philosophical author of the Gettysburg Address he would become. Likewise, Jackson at forty, a dueling southwestern gentleman and would-be generalissimo, offered few hints of the democratic leader who would emerge twenty years later.

Still, after reading the sources on Jackson's life and thought, one cannot help being drawn back (as he was) to young Andrew's patriotic ardor and torment during the American Revolution—an experience that proved fundamental to his ideas and his actions for the rest of his life. Being "[b]rought up under the tyranny of Britain" and "losing every thing that was dear to me" in the struggle for independence, he once wrote, made it his sworn duty to uphold republican government "and the independent rights of our nation." Not only did he suffer permanent disfigurement fighting the British; the combat and the disease endemic among American prisoners of war cost him his mother (his father was already long dead) and both of his siblings. The personal cannot explain the political—but in Jackson's case, they reinforced each other mightily. His thinking and his spirit enlarged as he grew older, but basic themes recurred—themes that combined patriotism, manly honor, and, in time, what he came to champion as democracy. Jackson is best understood, I believe, in connection with these themes, as both a product of the American Revolution and a shaper of the larger Age of the Democratic Revolution in which he lived.

From the Revolution on, Jackson's hatred of monarchy, aristocracy, and political privilege—especially of the British variety—formed a screen through which he viewed the world. He always feared that the aristocratic British and their American allies and imitators—defiant Indians, overfed financiers, sectional extremists—threatened to undo the American Revolution and the Constitution of the United States. Unless checked, these forces would either dismember the Union from without or subvert it from within—bending the Constitution and the institutions of government to the will of a minority, substituting corruption and favoritism
for the formally classless Republic designed by the nation's founders. In Jackson's mind, vindicating his personal honor and protecting the Revolution's legacy were always entwined, two parts of the same mission.

From his first fleeting years in Congress as a frontiersman representative in the 1790s through his military exploits in the War of 1812, Jackson believed that he and the nation were embattled by the forces of rotten despotism. "Who are we? and for what are we going to fight," Jackson proclaimed in a handwritten call for enlistments early in the War of 1812. "[A]re we the titled Slaves of George the third? the military conscripts of Napoleon the great? or the frozen peasants of the Russian Czar? No—we are the freeborn sons of america; the citizens of the only republic now existing in the world." Later, when preparing for the Battle of New Orleans, he wrote to his wife, Rachel, and recalled his boyhood agonies: "I owe to Britain a debt of retaliatory vengeance; should our forces meet I trust I shall pay the debt." Robbed of the presidency in 1824 by, he believed, sinister, oligarchic machinations—another blow to his honor—he vowed to confound the corrupters by winning the White House four years later, and then cleansing the federal government of all traces of aristocracy. As president, he assailed anything he construed as either undemocratic heresy or a potential threat to democracy and the Union, by widening the field of executive appointments through rotation in office, exorcizing the South Carolina nullifiers, destroying the Second Bank of the United States—and silencing the radical abolitionists. Always he went into political battle with his continuing personal drama in mind, but also to defend principles much larger than himself.10

It is little wonder that such a vehement, towering figure inspired both loyalty and loathing—and that he still does. Yet Jackson also learned, after painful experience, how to temper his vehemence, and how to deploy it when necessary in service to his evolving political ideals. And although he sometimes appeared (and strove to appear) to be larger than life, his times shaped him as much as he shaped them. Jackson was not responsible for many of the democratic changes, including the expansion of the suffrage, that still adhere to his legend. He was democracy's beneficiary as well as its emblem. Many of the political ideals he came to embrace—radical "hard money" economics, constitutional nationalism, a strong hand for the executive branch—had barely begun to move him before he was elected to the White House. His capacity to build upon his anti-aristocratic instincts, to learn from his mistakes, and still command the loyalty of others, is what finally defined his presidency. And his success in advancing his principles, above and beyond his volatile personality, is what divided public opinion about him so sharply.

Jackson, one of the oldest men ever elected to the presidency, came of age at the dawn of the Age of the Democratic Revolution, when sober, responsible Americans—including patriots such as George Washington and John Adams—worried that their new Republic might be carrying equality too far, and building too democratic a political system. Some, like Adams, became convinced that men were inherently unequal, certainly in their natural capacities and even in the capacities they acquired in life. Jackson, like Jefferson before him, understood that such objections to democracy and equality were beside the point. They agreed that there was no such thing as universal equality. Some persons were blessed with greater intellect, talent, and good fortune than others, and those vicissitudes of chance and providence could not be altered. But the real issue facing America and the world was not natural inequality—it was artificial inequality, the ways in which some men manufactured privilege for their own benefit. Jackson believed that the American government was designed to undo artificial inequality, and that this idea was the foundation of the American Revolution and the federal Constitution. He ran his presidency accordingly.

Jackson pushed the idea of democratic popular sovereignty farther than any previous American president, but he did not see injustice in many of the inequalities repugnant to later generations of Americans, and even to some Americans in his own time.
Inequalities that others deemed artificial—especially between blacks and whites, Indians and settlers, men and women—appeared to Jackson, as they did to most of his American contemporaries, perfectly natural, the results of an inscrutable dispensation. Compared to some of his own supporters, Jackson’s conception of democracy was limited, especially over the issue of slavery. As president, he was, in many respects, a transitional figure in the history of American democratic politics, who stood midway between the founding of the Republic and its rebirth in the Civil War.

Interpreting Jackson as a transitional democrat helps make sense of his presidency, including its manifest failures and moral blindspots, its enormous tragedies as well as its triumphs. It also helps us make sense of the figure rendered by Asher Durand in 1835. Although Durand did not capture everything, he did portray the toll that life had taken on Andrew Jackson, in his rise from abject obscurity, his military battles and personal duels, and his rages against his enemies—and, Jackson believed, the Republic’s. The awkward plainness of Jackson’s crevassed face belies his fine dress. There is intense pain as well as sadness in his eyes, but also a glinting resolve. It is a portrait of the president as beleaguered democrat, for whom democracy’s expansion, as he understood it, was the measure of his own success as well as his country’s.

His travails began in the disorderly, hardscrabble Waxhaw backcountry of South Carolina colony, in the seventh year of the reign of King George III.

1

A Roaring Fellow

Jackson’s rise to fortune and then fame was unparalleled among the major political leaders of his generation. A few of the others could claim they had made their own way. Jackson’s close ally Martin Van Buren was the son of a rural New York tavern keeper, and moved up the ladder of the law and politics by dint of his diligence, charm, and ability to make useful connections. Jackson’s adversary Henry Clay, although born in comfortable circumstances in Virginia and trained in the law by Thomas Jefferson’s old mentor George Wythe, was, like Jackson, an adoptive westerner, having moved to Kentucky to establish his name. But none of these men had to climb nearly as much or as hard as did Jackson.

Jackson’s early life was even more dissimilar from those of the presidents who preceded him. It is often noted that Jackson was the first backcountry president, a product of the Carolina mountains who later moved to a state that lay entirely to the west of the Appalachians. Jackson’s western background, though, was not the only thing that set him apart. With the exception of John Adams, the son of a Quincy, Massachusetts, farmer and shoemaker, no president before him was reared in anything resembling a commoner’s family—and even Adams’s father had had the wherewithal to send his boy to Harvard. Compared to the wellborn slaveholders Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe, or to John Adams’s fortunate son John Quincy, Jackson came into the world a perfect nobody.