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Andrew Jackson

THE AMERICAN PRESIDENTS

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2005
Times Books
HENRY Holt AND COMPANY, NEW YORK
Earlier in the day, Jackson, conscious of his place in history, issued a farewell address, written mainly by Chief Justice Taney, which emulated President George Washington's farewell of 1796. The message overflowed with Jackson's pleasure at what he considered his administration's greatest accomplishments: the destruction of the Second Bank of the United States, the suppression of nullification, and the completion of Indian removal. Jackson claimed that his presidency had resisted the workings of "[m]any powerful interests," protected the rights and liberties of "the great body of the people of the United States," and preserved popular sovereignty and the Union.

Yet Jackson's valedictory, like Washington's, also warned of trouble ahead. Despite the successes of the Bank War, Jackson observed, "[t]he paper-money system and its natural associations—monopoly and exclusive privileges" had "struck their roots too deep in the soil," and the nation would have to redouble its strength to "eradicate the evil." Sectional wrangling persisted, caused by those who would "sow the seeds of discord between different parts of the United States . . . to excite the South against the North and the North against the South," over "the most delicate and exciting topics," by which Jackson meant slavery. Should the sectionalists ever sunder the country, Jackson's message said, "the controversies which are now debated and settled in the halls of legislation will then be tried in fields of battle and determined by the sword." Twenty years later, those words rang like prophecy.

Coming to terms with Jackson's presidency is crucial to any understanding of American history. The presidents whom historians rate at the very top—Washington, Lincoln, and FDR—oversaw the three great political revolutions that have defined the American experience: the American Revolution and framing of the Constitution, the Civil War, and the New Deal. All three led the country through momentous wars and other tests of the nation's will. All three left behind national political institutions, including the presidency, very different than the ones they had inherited.
Jackson's presidency endured similar trials and wrought similar changes. More than any other American, Jackson oversaw the decline and fall of the elitist, gentry order established by the Framers, and its replacement with the ruder conventions and organization of democracy. More than any other president before him, he made the office of the presidency the center of action in national politics and government. Yet the incompleteness of Jackson's democracy—and the rise of two separate conceptions of democracy, North and South—contributed to the eventual disunion and terrible civil war he so deeply feared. And for many Americans, including the displaced Indians, Jackson's democracy and his activist presidency were disastrous. Questions thus linger over Jackson's contributions and leadership. What difference did he really make in the democratization of Americans' political sensibilities and practices? Given the terrible conflicts that followed, does his presidency deserve admiration or condemnation? Was he truly a democratic man of the people or a vengeful backwoodsocrat?

The widespread judgment that Jackson lacked a guiding political philosophy, and was motivated chiefly by his passions and prejudices, is as mistaken about the realities of the American presidency as it is about Jackson. True, Jackson was primarily a man of action who wrote nothing that approached a systematic political treatise and who appeared to shift his position in contradictory ways. Several accomplishments and declarations of which he himself was most proud were largely the handiwork of his aides and advisers. But the same holds true for all of the country's most revered presidents. Even Lincoln, the most eloquent president in American history, never presented a thorough account of what "Lincolnism" was, borrowed freely from his counselors, and often stood accused of inconsistency and vacillation. Jackson, like other effective presidents, developed his philosophy over time, in a series of pragmatic decisions and actions grounded in a few fundamental and unyielding principles. Like others, he surrounded himself with loyalists who presented him with diverse perspectives on political affairs, and he drew on their advice in order to refine his own thinking.

What some criticize in Jackson were actually traits of steadfastness and practicality that are advantageous to any political leader, especially in large and often divided democracies.

Jackson did have a more volatile personality than most other presidents, and was quick to personalize political disputes and see himself encircled by dark conspiracies. In this respect, he bears a superficial resemblance to many failed chief executives, including, in recent times, Richard M. Nixon. Jackson's fiery temperament, coupled with his capacity for intense distrust that sometimes turned into obsession, distracted him from the nation's business during the Eaton affair, and nearly crippled his first term. But Jackson righted himself and his administration in 1830 and 1831. Thereafter, his search for personal success and absolution merged with the "task of reform" he had proclaimed in 1829, both in advancing changes such as rotation in office and in meeting new contingencies, above all during the Bank War and the nullification crisis.

Jackson outlined the essential ideas of what became known as Jacksonian Democracy in piecemeal fashion throughout his presidency. One of the fullest, simplest, and most direct statements came in a letter he wrote to his ward Andrew Jackson Donelson in 1835. Jackson posed the question: What distinguishes "Whigs, nullies & blue light federalists" from Democrats? He began with specific matters of policy: Democrats opposed a national bank, supported rotation in office, and favored limited state and national government according to a strict reading of the state and federal constitutions. But Jackson then moved to more abstract ideas about government. Democrats, he wrote, subscribed to "the republican rule that the people are the sovereign power, the officers their agents." Above all, they were "true republicans agreeable to the true Jeffersonian creed."

These might sound like partisan platitudes today, but in Jackson's time they articulated important and by no means settled axioms of democratic government. The Constitution had provided for a national government based on popular sovereignty, a term that, to Jackson, meant precisely what it said, the rule of the people.
The people had the right to expect their representatives to voice and advance their will. The people decided government’s actions, according to majority rule. The people’s representatives were to neither decide for themselves what the people’s will actually was nor ignore it in order to advance their own desires and beliefs. No government body, including the Supreme Court, could supersede the popular majority, as expressed in elections, least of all on matters concerning the true meaning of the Constitution. No private interests could be permitted to obtain special privileges that would bend the Constitution to fulfill their own selfish interests, over and above those of the people.

These ideas—at odds with those of such wide-ranging adversaries as John Quincy Adams, William Lloyd Garrison, Nicholas Biddle, and John C. Calhoun—undergirded all of President Jackson’s major efforts. The Bank veto and the war on the Bank hung on Jackson’s insistence on dismantling a tremendously powerful private institution that evaded democratic checks and balances. Jackson’s attack on nullification grew from his claim that the nullifiers were defying both the explicit terms of the Constitution and the people’s will—heeding Calhoun’s heretical claim that “[c]onstitutional government, and the government of the majority, are utterly incompatible”—and directly threatening the Union. Jackson’s rejection of the Cherokees’ claims to tribal sovereignty and his pursuit of Indian removal rested partly on his belief that creating separate nations within the borders of the United States violated the Constitution, permitted the federal government to violate state sovereignty, and created an abnormal and intolerable threat to national integrity and security.

Who, then, did Jackson envisage as “the people”? Not black Americans, the preponderance of them enslaved; not American women, of any class or color, who lacked basic political and civil rights; and certainly not the Indians. Neither, though, did he equate the American people, as many scholars have claimed he did, with the nation’s rising businessmen and expectant capitalists, who wanted to liberate business from a corrupt government and institute a policy of laissez-faire. It is true that Jackson believed that a large and expansive federal government was oppressive and had no legitimate powers to intercede with the natural flow of human commerce and individual self-advancement. But in the 1830s (unlike in our own time) this meant liberating democratic government from the corrupting encroachments of powerful business. Jackson stood up, in the people’s name, against the “few Monied Capitalists” to free government from “the rich and powerful” and their “selfish purposes.” Thus Jackson was sometimes prepared to give the government more power, not less, in overseeing finance and the nation’s economy.

“The people,” for Jackson, were always “the humble members of society,” as he described them in the Bank Veto Message. They were the “working classes of Americans,” he later wrote, “the laboring classes” and their families—who lacked political connections and who rose or fell by dint of their talents and hard work. “The agricultural, the mechanical, and the laboring classes have little or no share in the direction of the great moneyed corporations,” his farewell message declared:

The planter, the farmer, the mechanic, and the laborer all know that their success depends upon their own industry and economy, and that they must not expect to become suddenly rich by the fruits of their toil. [T]hese classes of society form the great body of the people of the United States; they are the bone and sinew of the country. . . . But . . . they are in constant danger of losing their fair influence in the Government, and with difficulty maintain their just rights against the incessant efforts daily made to encroach upon them . . . [by] the moneyed interest.

With his banking and currency policies, Jackson tried to protect ordinary American citizens from government favoritism to the rich
and powerful. He strove to establish an alternative form of democratic commerce, one that would not, first and foremost, serve the well-being of merchants and financiers. That alternative system, based on hard money, would, he believed, open the way to a moderate but secure prosperity for most Americans, while shielding them from the hurtful boom-and-bust cycles endemic to what the Jacksonian Globe called a system of speculation based on "a succession of rolls of the dice."

In his pursuit of egalitarian reform, Jackson pushed certain ideas of popular democracy as far as any president has—further, perhaps, than the United States could possibly sustain, now as well as then. He began with the presumption that the actual governing of the country should be conducted by the people at large, striking down elitist presumptions with his proposals for rotation in office. Elected officials, including the president and U.S. senators, he contended, should be elected directly by the voters, not by an Electoral College or the state legislatures. By the end of his presidency, he even favored popular election of the federal judiciary and the imposition of seven-year terms on federal judges (though with provisions that would permit their reelection). Whereas in aristocratic Britain an independent judiciary was necessary to ward off impositions by the crown and the nobility, in democratic America "the people would always re-elect the good judges."

Some of Jackson's proposals, notably the direct election of senators, were well ahead of their time. Others remain open to serious questions, including whether maximizing direct electoral control over federal officials might hamper deliberative government. Too much direct democracy, critics charge, would dangerously subject public officials to passing popular whims or enthusiasms, while providing insufficient legal safeguards for minorities and for unpopular views. These debates over the pros and cons of direct democracy are a perennial feature in American politics. Over the long run, more constrained conceptions of democracy have proven an indispensable check on a potentially tyrannical majority. But more expansive democratic ideas have been a powerful solvent of privilege and stagnation, and Jackson deserves a great deal of the credit for injecting them into the American political tradition. Although he did not fit the mold of a philosopher-statesman, he certainly had a strong democratic political philosophy, and carried it as far as he could.

Jackson's forceful style, as well as his ideas, also established the foundations of the modern democratic presidency. By the time he departed the White House, Jackson had twice recomposed his cabinet, ostracized one vice president and selected his successor, and vetoed more legislation than any of his predecessors combined (and more than any later president until the Reconstruction era). His assertions of presidential prerogative altered Americans' presumptions about the president's role in the national government. Jackson's staunch opponent Benjamin Watkins Leigh observed that "[u]ntil the President developed the faculties of the Executive power, all men thought it inferior to the legislature—he manifestly thinks it superior." Although overstated, Leigh's assessment was basically correct.

The republican ideas inherited from the Revolution, and reinforced by the Revolution's anti-monarchism, held that the legislative branch, and in particular the lower house of the legislature, was more directly representative of the people than the executive. Jackson, although still positing the equality of the three coordinate branches of government, reversed that premise. Especially now that the voters, and not state legislatures, chose presidential electors (the lone exception, after 1828, being aristocratic South Carolina), the president, along with the vice president, was the most direct individual embodiment of the majority will. Congressmen represented only their small districts, and senators their states; the president represented the entire electorate and was thus, Jackson said, more
“amenable to the people.” To Whigs such as Leigh, Jackson was an anti-democrat out to augment “the monarchical part of Government.” Jackson, however, perceived the American executive as a uniquely democratic part of government, an idea that would later animate Theodore Roosevelt, who wrenched the office out of the throes of what one of his successors, Woodrow Wilson, called “congressional government,” and help establish the presidency as we know it.

Jackson and his supporters also created the first mass democratic national political party in modern history. Earlier semblances of American political parties had emerged over sharp ideological differences and then devised innovative means to spread their messages and get their voters to the polls. Yet to the generation of Jefferson and John Adams, the very idea of parties still remained suspect as vehicles of personal ambition and fomenters of disunion. And although popular involvement, especially at the state level, increased after 1800, power in national politics still remained concentrated in the hands of a fairly small elite. When, in 1801, President Thomas Jefferson proclaimed, in a conciliatory fashion, that “we are all republicans, we are all federalists,” his aim was not to legitimize the existence of two permanent political parties; rather, he later wrote, he wanted to sink Federalism “into an abyss” by absorbing the more moderate Federalists into his own Republican Party and delegitimizing the rest, thereby ending, for good, all party strife. Only decades later, after the Panic of 1819 and the Missouri crisis shook the one-party politics that arose after the Federalists’ demise, did Jefferson come to understand that party divisions might be ineluctable. Yet even then, the older generation assumed that national party affairs would still be conducted by supposed natural aristocrats, through devices like the nomination of presidential candidates by congressional caucus.

The Jackson Democracy did not fully reconcile itself to what later historians would describe as a mature party system. In correcting what they considered the insidious opportunism and factionalism that beset one-party politics, the Jacksonians also considered themselves the only authentic successors of the Jeffersonian Republicans and, thus, of the Revolution itself. Their opponents—neo-Tories, they believed, at war with the Spirit of 1776—should be allowed to organize their own party and contest free and democratic elections. But these contests, the Jacksonians thought, would serve mainly as a spur to their own party faithful, to keep them disciplined and sharpen their devotion, as they put it, to the success of principles, not men. They fully expected that they, the party of popular sovereignty, would hold power most of the time, unless, as Martin Van Buren wrote, a slackening of zeal and vigilance caused “the gradual abandonment of the principles it sustained.”

Within those limitations, though, the Jackson Democracy enlarged greatly on earlier forms of party organization. In place of discarded state and national nominating caucuses, the Jacksonians built a network of party committees that stretched from the ward and township levels to the quadrennial national convention. Political activities would continue more or less year-round, focused on the lowest local contests as well as on presidential elections, with party committees calling regular meetings to approve nominations and pass resolutions. Party newspapers, from the Globe in Washington to the local sheets, would publicize these events and keep the faithful apprised of the latest news—and of the proper way to assess that news. At election times, the party machinery would reach into high gear, sponsoring elaborate campaign rallies, dinners, and processions in order to raise funds and heighten party morale. And, although designed to fit the image of Andrew Jackson’s own politics, the Democracy was larger than any individual, even its hero. The coalition formed in advance of Jackson’s 1828 election evolved, over the next eight years, into the kind of party that Jackson’s loyalist Martin Van Buren had foreseen in his famous letter to Thomas Ritchie—emerging just in time, after political twists and turns he could not have predicted, to elect Van Buren president in 1836.

Jackson retired, all but spent, to his mansion, horses, slaves, and the tomb of his beloved Rachel. His health had been wretched for
decades. More than once during his presidency, the effects of old war and dueling wounds, of the chronic dysentery he had contracted during the Creek Wars, and of a lifetime spent smoking and chewing tobacco laid him so low that many feared he would not survive. The white-haired master of the Hermitage returned home wracked by a persistent cough, severe pains on his left side, chronic blinding headaches, and recurrent insomnia. Although he was still strong enough to take his stallion Sam Patch for turns around his holdings, the horse racing, gambling, and other gentlemanly sports that once filled his leisure time no longer held his interest. Never an especially pious man (despite his mother’s wishes and his wife’s intense devotion), he joined the Presbyterian Church in 1838—although initially he balked when his minister told him he needed to absolve, in his heart, all his old enemies.

Politics remained his chief passion. When the long-predicted financial panic finally struck in May 1837, Jackson strong urged President Van Buren to stay the course of hard-money policies. The new president had reasons of his own, but Van Buren’s decisions not to rescind the Specie Circular and to ask Congress to establish a so-called Independent Treasury, thereby achieving a divorce of the government and commercial banking, pleased Jackson immensely. Keeping close tabs on developments in Washington, he scorned the Whigs (whom he sometimes called “Federalists,” using what he thought the only proper term) and their Conservative Democratic allies as vile enemies of “the labor of the country.” When the treasury bill finally passed Congress in 1840, Jackson rejoiced: “The Whigs whipt, so it goes all well. The Whig effort later that year to proclaim themselves the true democrats—and replace Van Buren with William Henry Harrison in their famous Log Cabin and Hard Cider campaign—struck Jackson as both disgraceful and desperate. “I have all along assured [our opponents],” he wrote to Van Buren at the end of July, “that the Federalist hard cider drinkers . . . would not carry a state in the union south or west of the potomac but one and that doubtful, Kentucky. I am now persuaded my prediction will be realised.”

Jackson’s howls of disappointment at Harrison’s crushing victory passed quickly when Harrison died only a month after his inauguration. Jackson made no attempt to hide his satisfaction at the sudden interference by a “kind and overruling providence” to keep Harrison, “under the direction of the profligate demagogue, Henry Clay,” from undoing all of his and Van Buren’s hard-won achievements. Yet the disarray that followed—with a state rights Whig, John Tyler, elevated to the presidency and pitted against his great rival Henry Clay—spelled trouble for a return in 1844 to the Jacksonian status quo ante. Goaded by state rights southerners, Tyler pushed for the annexation of Texas, reopening sectional divisions over slavery and expansion; the divisions worsened when Tyler’s secretary of state, John C. Calhoun, made Texas annexation an issue of southern rights on explicitly pro-slavery grounds. The 1844 election was approaching, and Clay, the expected Whig nominee, had already opposed the annexation drive. His expected opponent, a resurgent Martin Van Buren, faced a difficult choice. Having hoped to keep the Texas issue out of the election, angered by what he saw as Calhoun’s latest attempt personally to do him in, and wary of losing the bulk of the northern vote, Van Buren was inclined to oppose Texas annexation. But doing so, he well knew, would so alienate southern Democrats that he might not even receive the nomination.

Jackson, who had long coveted Texas, supported its annexation, although for reasons very different from Calhoun’s. Jackson’s old expansionist hopes had become linked to his ancient fear and loathing of the British. During the early 1840s, Britain had become increasingly entangled in the Texas issue, trying to forestall American annexation by enticing the Texans with a variety of financial incentives and by offering to persuade Mexico finally to recognize the independent republic. To Calhoun and the southern state rights men, the British had an ulterior abolitionist motive: in gaining recognition from Mexico, the stories ran, Texans would have to agree to free their slaves. Jackson, however, was convinced that the British were intent on reconquering America, using Texas as a base
of operations for seizing control of the Mississippi Valley and the Gulf of Mexico as they had failed to do—thanks to Jackson—in 1814 and 1815. Texas, he wrote to Francis Blair, was “the important key to our future destiny—take and lock the door against all danger of foreign influence.”

The 1844 campaign was Jackson’s last. When Van Buren, in the most courageous act of his political career, came out in opposition to Texas annexation, Jackson threw his support to his loyal friend and follower from Tennessee, the former Speaker of the House, James K. Polk. As Van Buren’s backers had feared, their man’s stand on Texas cost him the nomination, and the Democratic convention deadlocked over a candidate. Finally, Polk emerged the winner, the first “dark horse” presidential nominee in American history. Jackson backed Polk to the hilt, playing the part of elder statesman of the party, and enhancing Polk’s chances by convincing President Tyler, abandoned by the Whigs, not to mount a third-party campaign that might well siphon off valuable southern Democratic votes.

Polk won a narrow victory over Jackson’s old nemesis Henry Clay. Jackson had been his chief political benefactor—and, in the process, Jackson helped assure the annexation of Texas, and, in time, a worsening of sectional hatreds. Yet neither Jackson nor Polk saw the situation in those terms. While calling for the addition of Texas, the Democratic platform and the Polk campaign also demanded the addition of Oregon, an area now filling up with American settlers, its border with Canada the subject of hot contestation between the United States and Great Britain. Texas annexation, by Jackson’s and Polk’s lights, was part of a national enterprise, not (contrary to Calhoun) a sectional cause or (contra to the abolitionists) a pro-slavery ruse.

Jackson’s pride in Polk would, however, rapidly diminish. After pausing to visit Jackson at the Hermitage on the way to his inauguration, the president-elect, now known by the nickname “Young Hickory,” listened patiently to Old Hickory’s advice about policies and appointments. But as soon as he surveyed the political situation in the capital, Polk went his own way, naming none of Jackson’s favorites to the cabinet and replacing the Jacksonian warhorse Francis P. Blair as editor of the administration’s official newspaper (which, under the direction of Thomas Ritchie, was renamed the Union). Jackson, aghast, worried that Polk’s precipitate moves might damage party unity. But Polk would not budge. He was determined, he wrote, “to be myself President of the U.S.”

All along, Jackson was dying, as fast as he could get on with it, he told one friend. Although he continued, as he had for years, to receive strangers who just wanted to tell the world they had met Andrew Jackson, his body became severely bloated in the early spring of 1845, as one organ after another began to fail. Friends and family gathered at his bedside. His last words, those of a plantation patriarch, were directed at a group of his slaves who were weeping out on the porch. “Oh, do not cry—be good children & we will all meet in heaven.” At six in the afternoon on June 8, he died. Two days later, he was buried in the Hermitage garden tomb next to Rachel.

Democracy’s ascendancy was Jackson’s greatest triumph—the supreme reason why his legacy retains its luster. Yet the tragedies of Jackson’s presidency were also numerous and enormous and need to be weighed in the balance. In his zeal to extend a paternal hand to the Indians, Jackson promulgated a coercive and fiscally tight policy that invited fraud and caused immense suffering and the deaths of thousands. His detestation of nullification prompted a forceful response that crushed the immediate threat posed by Calhoun’s assertions of unlimited state sovereignty and permissible secession, but that response also alienated large numbers of southern planters and fostered sympathy for the nullifiers. His attempts to suppress the abolitionists in order to buttress national harmony led him to propose a federal censorship law that belied his democratic professions, angering some members of his own party and further inflaming sectional divisions. In the endeavor on which he wagered his entire presidency, he successfully battled the Second Bank of the United States, and thereby permanently changed the
nation’s political economy. Never again would formal control over banking and currency policy fall so far from democratically elected leaders as they had under Nicholas Biddle’s Bank of the United States. But Jackson’s efforts to establish a suitable replacement for the Bank, and to fight his adversaries’ attempts to obstruct those efforts, contributed to a financial crisis that would make life miserable for President Martin Van Buren—and pave the way for the Whigs to win the presidency.

The most powerful contradictions generated by Jackson’s presidency and legacy had to do with slavery, democracy, and American expansionism. For Jackson, as it had been for Thomas Jefferson, the nation’s physical growth was a precondition for the continued prosperity of those Americans he considered the sum and substance of “the people,” the great majority of farmers, artisans, and laborers. With fresh land, and with protection from the monied few, the many would have the chance to establish their personal independence, provide themselves and their families with at least a decent prosperity, and enlarge the American experiment in free government. Yet the push westward of rival political and social systems—one based on free labor, the other on chattel slavery—would reignite the sectional furies that the Missouri Compromise had temporarily contained and settled. In the debates over the annexation of Texas and the fate of newly acquired lands beyond the domain of the Louisiana Purchase, American expansionism would bring not renewed amity and national resolve, but ferocious conflicts about whether slavery was essential to democratic government or was democracy’s undoing.

As Jackson noted in his farewell address, sectional divisions over slavery and democracy directly threatened his very conception of democracy. For Jackson, the confrontations were artificial, whipped up by ambitious demagogues in order to distract the electorate from the truly important division between the privileged few and the humble many. But slavery and its expansion were not artificial issues; they were redefining how Americans thought about democracy. How long could Jackson’s Democracy, in the name of preserving the Union, back the gag rule and other attacks on free speech without, in northerners’ eyes, fatally compromising their professed dedication to equality? How long could the Jacksonians portray themselves as the party of “the laboring classes” and still tolerate slavery and the political domination of slaveholders—men who, the hard-money Jacksonian Thomas Morris of Ohio declared, lived upon “the unrequited labor of others”? Alternatively, how long, growing numbers of southerners wondered, could equality be preserved unless the Democracy took more dramatic steps to preserve what they considered the foundation of equality and democracy among free men, the institution of black slavery? How long could democracy endure with slavery under assault—and without the Democracy declaring that slavery, condoned by the Framers, was the cornerstone of democratic government?

Two decades would pass before the clash between the northern democracy and the southern democracy shattered Jackson’s Democratic Party in all but its name. Yet in the most profound irony of all, the widening of democratic politics that (as Herman Melville would later write in Moby-Dick) “didst pick up Andrew Jackson from the pebbles” and “thunder him higher than a throne” would also render that conflict irrepressible. By expanding popular politics and enshrining the popular will, Jackson and his followers exposed the political system to precisely the kinds of agitation they (and their Whig Party adversaries) hoped to keep forever out of national debates. Using all of the electioneering techniques pioneered by the Jackson Democrats, new movements, factions, and parties would arise and amass popular support over issues connected to slavery—and would elect candidates to national office dedicated solely to addressing whether slavery threatened or embodied democratic values. Less than four years after Jackson’s farewell, the Liberty Party, the nation’s first explicitly antislavery political party, initiated its first presidential campaign; four years later, it would run another presidential ticket, lambasting the slave power as “an overwhelming political monopoly” that had “subverted the constitutional liberties
of more than 12,000,000 American freemen.” Southern fury at such charges helped fortify backing for a powerful southern state rights faction within an increasingly unstable Democracy. That faction, led by John C. Calhoun, would force the slavery issue front and center in 1844 over the annexation of Texas.

Jackson lived long enough to feel these early tremors of the crisis of American democracy over slavery, and he would try to still them with all the strength he could muster. He would never fully comprehend how his own democratic achievements had brought them about, and lead his countrymen, North and South, to begin questioning whether democracy could endure in a nation half slave and half free, a house divided against itself.

A little more than two months before he died, Jackson wrote a letter to Jesse Duncan Elliott, another aging veteran of the War of 1812. Near the end of his remarks, Jackson observed that “[t]rue virtue” could reside only “with the people, the great laboring and producing classes . . . the bone and sinew of our confederacy.”

It was, in a way, a fitting valedictory, a condensation of what had become the straight Jackson political line during the 1830s. That line had become snarled around issues concerning slavery and expansion—issues that raised upsetting questions about true virtue, the people, and democracy and would tear apart both Jackson’s party and the Union he loved.

But that these issues arose at all was, paradoxically, in part to Jackson’s credit, much as he strove to suppress them in order to preserve the nation’s peace. By pushing the idea of democracy as far as he did, and by equating the Union’s survival with the survival of free government, Jackson expanded the terms upon which Americans conducted the national experiment in popular sovereignty. As president, he established democratic and nationalist principles that have endured to this day. If his own standards of equality and justice fall beneath our own, he helped make it possible for today’s standards and expectations to be as elevated as they are. His tragedies are undeniable. So are his triumphs and his greatness.

Notes

The following abbreviations appear in the notes:

AC Annals of Congress, 1789–1824
CG Congressional Globe, 1834–71
PAJ Sam B. Smith, Harriet Chappell Owsley et al., eds., The Papers of Andrew Jackson (Knoxville, Tenn., 1980– )
RD Register of Debates in Congress, 1824–37
Richardson James D. Richardson, ed., A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of National Literature and Art, 1910)

Prologue: Jackson and the Age of the Democratic Revolution