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Chapter 4
Democracy and President Jackson

Americans have always prided themselves on their democratic heritage and ideals. Historians often speculate on the source of these democratic characteristics. The most popular and challenging thesis explaining the origins of these tradition in America, was articulated by Frederick Jackson Turner. In a paper presented shortly after the American frontier was officially declared closed in 1890, Turner argued that the West had fostered the growth of American democracy. "Democracy," Turner had written:

> *was based on the good fellowship and genuine social feeling of the frontier, in which classes and inequalities of fortune played little part. But it did not demand equality of condition, for there was abundance of national resources and the belief that the self-made man had a right to his success in the free competition which western life afforded [and which] was as prominent in their thought as was the love of democracy.*[19]

If democracy originated in the American West along the frontier, then the first President to be born and raised in the West should be a man who represented such ideals. The first western President was Andrew Jackson. And, indeed, Jackson's two terms in office have been called the era of Jacksonian Democracy. The noted historian, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., suggested this was a movement to control the power Eastern capitalists for the benefit of farmers and laboring men, East, West, and South. Other historians, however, have presented Jackson as an "opportunist" for whom "Democracy was good talk with which to win the favor of the people" and thus win elections without providing democratic reforms.[20] It will be the readers task at the end of this and succeeding chapters on Andrew Jackson to decide just what Jackson represented and whether he really favored democratic ideals or merely used democratic rhetoric to win and hold office.

Andrew Jackson: Frontiersman, Hero, Politician

A man of inconsistencies, Andrew Jackson was a fascinating personality whose presidency remains difficult to analyze or characterize. If, however, there was a single pattern of behavior in Jackson's life, it was an uncanny mixture of boldness with caution. Throughout his career, Jackson made bold, audacious moves, but only after thoughtfully considering all his alternatives and the probable results of his actions.

Andrew Jackson's father died in 1767, only two years after immigrating to America from his native Ireland. A month later, in a small frontier settlement straddling North and South Carolina, his wife gave birth to her third son, Andrew. When Jackson was fourteen, his mother died while attending to American prisoners during the Revolutionary War. The war also was responsible for the death of his two brothers; and Andrew himself bore two ugly scars for the rest of his life for refusing to clean the boots of a British officer. Upon the death of his mother, Andrew was apprenticed to a saddle maker and moved to

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[19] Frederick Jackson Turner, "The West and American ideals" in J.F. Turner, *Frontier and Section* (Specptrum Books: Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1961), p. 108.

[20] Quoted in Charles G. Sellars, Jr. "Andrew Jackson versus the Historians", *Mississippi Valley Historical Review,* XLIV (March, 1953), pp. 515-33.

Salisbury, North Carolina three years later. There he read law and sowed his wild oats. He soon earned a reputation as the most "roaring, rollicking, game-cocking, horse-racing, card-playing, mischievous fellow, there ever lived in Salisbury".[21] Between his studies and his wild good fellowship, Jackson learned the necessary social graces. By the age of twenty, he was a practicing lawyer and an appointed public prosecutor. He moved to Nashville, Tennessee where he represented creditors who wanted him to collect their bad debts. Within his first month in Nashville, Jackson enforced seventy writs for debts, and set a pattern he was to follow the next ten years. He generally represented propertied interests, accepted payments in land instead of money, and rapidly rose to become one of the wealthiest landowners in the entire state.

Jackson quickly invested the money he made from his practice in property. His Hermitage plantation, a great, sprawling, luxurious estate, became his home, but was only one of the many he owned. Some 150 slaves tended Jackson's fields, cotton gins, distilleries, and horse-breeding farms. Following the pattern of other self-made men in the southwest frontier, Jackson also raised and raced horses, bought and sold slaves, and speculated in western lands. While much of this lifestyle was typical for the times, Jackson was far more successful than other self-made men.

Jackson's marriage, too, added to his success, but it also cost him much in personal pain and animosity. Rachel Donelson Robards was the beautiful and fun-loving daughter of Jackson's landlady, a member of Tennessee's first and largest family, and the wife of the neurotically jealous Lewis Robards. Here husband objected to Rachel's flirtations with Andrew, and eventually sued for divorce. Rachel and Andrew were married without realizing the divorce had not become final. Upon discovering their mistake two years later, they promptly remarried. Nevertheless, Jackson was criticized throughout his career for living in sin with his wife, and eventually fought two duels to protect her honor. Jackson survived his duel with Charles Dickinson only because the large, billowy coat he wore confused his opponent and spoiled his aim. Jackson fired his return shot with a bullet lodged in his chest, but his grim, steady hand and face never let Dickinson know he had been hit.

Jackson's success in law was paralleled by his success in politics. In 1791, he was appointed attorney-general for the western districts of North Carolina, now Tennessee. As a delegate to its convention, Jackson helped write the Tennessee constitution in 1796, and then was elected to represent the new state in Congress. Here he voted against Congress's tribute to the outgoing President Washington because he considered him both too pro British and too pro Indian.

The next year Jackson was appointed to represent his adopted state in the Senate, but soon resigned to take care of his business affairs. He had been caught short in land speculation and by a bank failure that made the paper money he had used to buy property worthless. As a man of honor, Andrew Jackson accepted the responsibility for making good the bad money he had unwittingly passed, even though it was twenty years before he could pay the entire debt. As a result of this experience, Jackson developed a strong distaste for paper currency and came to regard gold and silver coins as the only honest money.

Despite his lack of military training, Jackson was elected major-general of the Tennessee militia. When the War of 1812 broke out, ten years later, General Jackson offered his service to the National government. His first active campaign was not against the British, but against the Creek Native Americans. Within a single year, Jackson systematically and ruthlessly destroyed this enemy and imposed harsh surrender terms. The Native Americans were required to cede 23,000,000 acres of land, about half the combined size of Georgia and Alabama. With the execution of six soldiers charged with

21Robert V. Remini, Andrew Jackson Harper and Row, New York, 1966, p. 22.

desertion, Jackson enforced discipline among his raw troops, but also earned himself the reputation of a merciless leader.

Jackson in New Orleans

In November 1814, General Jackson was ordered to defend New Orleans against an attack by an invading British army fresh from its victories over France's Napoleon. Jackson chose his defensive positions well. His rough collection of frontiersmen, pirates, Louisiana Frenchmen, and free blacks from New Orleans met and routed a far larger British army. The English forces were destroyed with the loss of 2,057 killed compared to American losses of only thirteen. This victory, coming at the end of a war that had brought few American successes, made Jackson an immensely popular national hero.

Between 1815 and 1819, Jackson took time off from fighting Native Americans to secure political support in many parts of the nation. As an Indian fighter during this period, General Jackson brashly invaded Florida, which was then under Spanish ownership, and defeated the Seminoles, who had attacked American settlements across the border. Jackson also caught and hastily executed two British traders who had supported the Native Americans. This incident drew strong protests from Britain and furthered Jackson's reputation as a military executioner. Despite these criticisms, General Jackson's popularity as an Indian fighter and national hero increased to the point that he was considered Presidential material. After the purchase of Florida in 1819, Jackson was made this territory's first governor.

Two years of service as territorial governor whet Andrew Jackson's appetite for a more responsible executive position. He consequently resigned his post to initiate an active campaign for the presidency. Supporters in Tennessee immediately made preparations; the state legislature elected him again to serve in the U.S. Senate and placed his name in nomination for the presidency. The presidential race in 1824 became a four man contest between Tennessee's Andrew Jackson, Georgia's William Crawford, Kentucky's Henry Clay, and Massachusetts's John Quincy Adams. With years of experience as Congressman, Ambassador, and Secretary of State, Adams was clearly the most qualified man. Although basically uneducated and with only limited government experience, Jackson was the most popular candidate. In a campaign which revolved more around personalities than political issues, Jackson won 152.000 votes to Adams's 114,000. The other candidates lagged far behind with approximately 47,000 votes apiece. Since no candidate had a majority of the electoral vote, the contest was thrown into the House of Representatives. Henry Clay, the advocate of the American System, was able to use his considerable influence to throw the election to the Nationalist, John Quincy Adams. When Adams then named Clay as his Secretary of State, a position that Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, and later Adams were able to use as a stepping stone to the presidency, Jackson called foul play. Despite the absence of any specific evidence that an understanding actually existed, the Jackson forces reminded the public for the next four years that Adams had obtained his position through a corrupt bargain.

The Election of 1828

Determined not to be denied again, Jackson's supporters organized their campaign for the next presidential election. It became one of the hardest fought and most vicious political campaigns in

American history. Jackson was portrayed as an illiterate, backwoods brawler, an adulterer, slave trader and military dictator. Adams was called an aristocratic, intellectual snob who wasted the people's money on rare wines and gaming equipment (he had put a pool table in the White House) and, of course, the author of the corrupt bargain that brought him the Presidency and fellow conspirator, Henry Clay, the office of Secretary of State.

The key to Jackson's strategy, however, was organization. Mindful of the lessons from the election of 1824, Jackson dedicated himself to the careful applications of the art of politics. He resigned his Senate seat two years before the election and returned home to set up and direct a Central Committee in Nashville. This Committee corresponded with similar Jackson committees throughout the nation. Jacksonian newspapers were established in many Northern states to spread the message that JACKSON'S COMING, JACKSON'S COMING. Among the most notable messengers were Duff Green's Washington *United States Telegraph,* Isaac Hills Concord, N.H. *Patriot*, and Amos Kendall's, Kentucky *Arus of the West*. In the nation's capitol, Congressional supporters of 'Old Hickory' (as Jackson was then known) began holding regular caucus sessions to devise strategy to defeat the Adams-Clay coalition. Soon, a steady exchange of letters flowed between the Hero in Nashville and such Washington based Congressmen as Sam Houston of Tennessee (and later of Texas), Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri, and John Calhoun of South Carolina. Martin Van Buren of New York (and later President of the United Sates) saw Jackson as the man of the future and allied himself and his well disciplined and effective political organization behind Jackson.

The Jackson-Calhoun-Van Buren alliance created a large umbrella under which diverse interests, sections, and philosophies joined. In order not to scare off these supporters, Jackson displayed extreme caution in his public statements on the critical issues of the day. He carefully avoided discussing the bank of the United States, despite his aversion for paper money, and only briefly dwelt on the tariff, saying he favored a middle and just course. On three points, however, Andrew Jackson spoke out boldly. He would remove all men from the Federal government who had taken part in the corrupt bargain; he was opposed to nationally financed internal improvements, and he favored a policy of Indian removal. His cabinet, Jackson promised, would be composed of plain businessmen who would aid in restoring fiscal and ethical soundness to government.

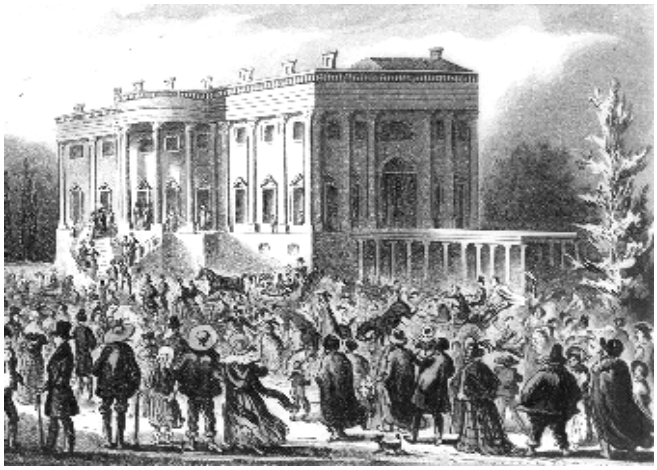
As the election of 1828 drew nearer, the Democrats, as Jackson's emerging party came to be called, stirred great voter appeal through new and exciting electioneering techniques. They raised to a fine art the use of rallies, parades, barbecues, and dinners. They distributed campaign buttons and special hats, sporting hickory leaves. Barely disguising his own activities behind the anniversary celebration of his victory at New Orleans, Jackson accepted that city's invitation to attend and only there campaigned openly for the presidency. Otherwise, Jackson allowed others to campaign for him.

President Jackson

The excitement generated by this election and the new techniques engineered by Jackson supporters brought far more voters to the polls than ever before. Jackson won with an astonishing 647,000 votes (four times more than his 1824 total) to Adams's 508,000.

Before the advent of Andrew Jackson, the presidential inauguration had been a genteel ritual, performed before a gracious gathering of well mannered ladies and gentlemen. But Jackson's inaugural and victory banquet at the White House attracted people from all walks of life, including common backwoodsmen from Kentucky and Tennessee, free blacks from New Orleans, working men from Philadelphia, Boston and New York, and plain farmers from Connecticut and Ohio.

Unfortunately, the people flooded into the White House, breaking several thousand dollars worth of furniture and china, and bloodying each others' noses in an effort to reach the punch, lemonade, and ice cream set out for them. The refreshments were quickly carted out to the lawn with the huge crowd in hot pursuit. All the while, the refined John Quincy Adams was hurrying North to his beloved Massachusetts, bewailing the arrival of the king mob allegedly in control of America's destiny.



One target of the 1828 Presidential campaign was the rich patronage represented in jobs held by Federal officials. Here democratic theory blended conveniently with political purpose. Claiming that the common man had the good sense and decency to hold public offices, Jackson argued that he would and should replace government officials who had long served in Washington with loyal supporters. Determined that their workers should be rewarded with government jobs, Jackson's party organizers pressed for political appointments. Ultimately, many were disappointed, for Jackson replaced fewer than ten percent of all Federal office holders during his first term. Nevertheless, he extended the sorry principle that public office was not a public trust bestowed on capable men, but a reward to faithful political followers. This principle had long been the cement that glued state party organizations together, and Jackson now extended it to the National level.

Conclusion and Forward

The tale of Jackson's presidency can not be told in a single chapter. His term of office encompassed eight turbulent years which ultimately saw the first serious threat of secession, divided the country on the Bank issue, and removed the last tribes of Native Americans from Georgia. Today, historians generally agree that Andrew Jackson was one of the great or near great presidents. The reader, however, is left to decide whether Jackson's election and tenure in office represented democratic principles or whether he only used democratic rhetoric for self-interest and partisan purposes.

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Did Jackson's career up to and including his inauguration, indicate that he was truly democratic? Consider at least three of the following:

a. Did Jackson's early life exemplify the kind of background that prepares someone to be the president of a truly democratic country?
b. Did Jackson's career in law, public office, and the military indicate a democratic bent?
c. Was Jackson's failure to win the election in 1824 the result of a 'corrupt bargain?'
d. Was Jackson too focused on the bargain that led to his defeat in 1824 rather than the programs that would help the people?
e. Did Jackson's inauguration show his election was a victory for the American people?