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Democracy in America

I. Introduction

On May 30, 1806, Andrew Jackson, a thirty-nine-year-old Tennessee lawyer, came within inches of death. A duelist's bullet struck him in the chest, just shy of his heart (the man who fired the gun was purportedly the best shot in Tennessee). But the wounded Jackson remained standing. Bleeding, he slowly steadied his aim and returned fire. The other man dropped to the ground, mortally wounded. Jackson—still carrying the bullet in his chest—later boasted, “I should have hit him, if he had shot me through the brain.”¹

The duel in Logan County, Kentucky, was one of many that Jackson fought during the course of his long and highly controversial career. The tenacity, toughness, and vengefulness that carried Jackson alive out of that duel, and the mythology and symbolism that would be attached to it, would also characterize many of his later dealings on the battlefield

George Caleb Bingham, *The County Election*, 1852. Reynolda House Museum of American Art.

and in politics. By the time of his death almost forty years later, Andrew Jackson would become an enduring and controversial symbol, a kind of cipher to gauge the ways that various Americans thought about their country.

II. Democracy in the Early Republic

Today, most Americans think democracy is a good thing. We tend to assume the nation's early political leaders believed the same. Wasn't the American Revolution a victory for democratic principles? For many of the founders, however, the answer was no.

A wide variety of people participated in early U.S. politics, especially at the local level. But ordinary citizens' growing direct influence on government frightened the founding elites. At the Constitutional Convention in 1787, Alexander Hamilton warned of the "vices of democracy" and said he considered the British government—with its powerful king and parliament—"the best in the world."² Another convention delegate, Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts, who eventually refused to sign the finished Constitution, agreed. "The evils we experience flow from an excess of democracy," he proclaimed.³

Too much participation by the multitudes, the elite believed, would undermine good order. It would prevent the creation of a secure and united republican society. The Philadelphia physician and politician Benjamin Rush, for example, sensed that the Revolution had launched a wave of popular rebelliousness that could lead to a dangerous new type of despotism. "In our opposition to monarchy," he wrote, "we forgot that the temple of tyranny has two doors. We bolted one of them by proper restraints; but we left the other open, by neglecting to guard against the effects of our own ignorance and licentiousness."⁴

Such warnings did nothing to quell Americans' democratic impulses in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Americans who were allowed to vote (and sometimes those who weren't) went to the polls in impressive numbers. Citizens also made public demonstrations. They delivered partisan speeches at patriotic holiday and anniversary celebrations. They petitioned Congress, openly criticized the president, and insisted that a free people should not defer even to elected leaders. In many people's eyes, the American republic was a *democratic* republic: the people were sovereign all the time, not only on election day.

The elite leaders of political parties could not afford to overlook "the cultivation of popular favour," as Alexander Hamilton put it.⁵ Between



the 1790s and 1830s, the elite of every state and party learned to listen—or pretend to listen—to the voices of the multitudes. And ironically, an American president, holding the office that most resembles a king’s, would come to symbolize the democratizing spirit of American politics.

III. The Missouri Crisis

A more troubling pattern was also emerging in national politics and culture. During the first decades of the nineteenth century, American politics shifted toward “sectional” conflict among the states of the North, South, and West.

Since the ratification of the Constitution in 1789, the state of Virginia had wielded more influence on the federal government than any other state. Four of the first five presidents, for example, were from Virginia. Immigration caused by the market revolution, however, caused the country’s population to grow fastest in northern states like New York. Northern political leaders were becoming wary of what they perceived to be a disproportionate influence in federal politics by Virginia and other southern states.

Furthermore, many northerners feared that the southern states’ common interest in protecting slavery was creating a congressional voting bloc that would be difficult for “free states” to overcome. The North and South began to clash over federal policy as northern states gradually ended slavery but southern states came to depend even more on slave labor.

The most important instance of these rising tensions erupted in the Missouri Crisis. When white settlers in Missouri, a new territory carved out of the Louisiana Purchase, applied for statehood in 1819, the balance of political power between northern and southern states became the focus of public debate. Missouri already had more than ten thousand slaves and was poised to join the southern slave states in Congress.⁶

Accordingly, Congressman James Tallmadge of New York proposed an amendment to Missouri’s application for statehood. Tallmadge claimed that the institution of slavery mocked the Declaration of Independence and the liberty it promised to “all men.” He proposed that Congress should admit Missouri as a state only if bringing more slaves to Missouri were prohibited and children born to the slaves there were freed at age twenty-five.

Congressmen like Tallmadge opposed slavery for moral reasons, but they also wanted to maintain a sectional balance of power. Unsurprisingly,



the Tallmadge Amendment met with firm resistance from southern politicians. It passed in the House of Representatives because of the support of nearly all the northern congressmen, who had a majority there, but it was quickly defeated in the Senate.

When Congress reconvened in 1820, a senator from Illinois, another new western state, proposed a compromise. Jesse Thomas hoped his offer would not only end the Missouri Crisis but also prevent any future sectional disputes over slavery and statehood. Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky joined in promoting the deal, earning himself the nickname “the Great Compromiser.”

Their bargain, the Missouri Compromise of 1820, contained three parts.⁷ First, Congress would admit Missouri as a slave state. Second, Congress would admit Maine (which until now had been a territory of Massachusetts) as a free state, maintaining the balance between the number of free and slave states. Third, the rest of the Louisiana Purchase territory would be divided along the 36°30' line of latitude—or in other words, along the southern border of Missouri. Slavery would be prohibited in other new states north of this line, but it would be permitted in new states to the south. The compromise passed both houses of Congress, and the Missouri Crisis ended peacefully.

Not everyone, however, felt relieved. The Missouri Crisis made the sectional nature of American politics impossible to ignore. The Missouri Crisis split the Democratic-Republican party entirely along sectional lines, suggesting trouble to come.

Worse, the Missouri Crisis demonstrated the volatility of the slavery debate. Many Americans, including seventy-seven-year-old Thomas Jefferson, were alarmed at how readily some Americans spoke of disunion and even civil war over the issue. “This momentous question, like a fire bell in the night, awakened and filled me with terror,” Jefferson wrote. “I considered it at once as the [death] knell of the Union.”⁸

For now, the Missouri Crisis did not result in disunion and civil war as Jefferson and others feared. But it also failed to settle the issue of slavery’s expansion into new western territories. The issue would cause worse trouble in years ahead.

IV. The Rise of Andrew Jackson

The career of Andrew Jackson (1767–1845), the survivor of that back-country Kentucky duel in 1806, exemplified both the opportunities and



the dangers of political life in the early republic. A lawyer, slaveholder, and general—and eventually the seventh president of the United States—he rose from humble frontier beginnings to become one of the most powerful Americans of the nineteenth century.

Andrew Jackson was born on March 15, 1767, on the border between North and South Carolina, to two immigrants from northern Ireland. He grew up during dangerous times. At age thirteen, he joined an American militia unit in the Revolutionary War. He was soon captured, and a British officer slashed at his head with a sword after he refused to shine the officer's shoes. Disease during the war had claimed the lives of his two brothers and his mother, leaving him an orphan. Their deaths and his wounds had left Jackson with a deep and abiding hatred of Great Britain.

After the war, Jackson moved west to frontier Tennessee, where despite his poor education, he prospered, working as a lawyer and acquiring land and slaves. (He would eventually come to keep 150 slaves at the Hermitage, his plantation near Nashville.) In 1796, Jackson was elected as a U.S. representative, and a year later he won a seat in the Senate, although he resigned within a year, citing financial difficulties.

Thanks to his political connections, Jackson obtained a general's commission at the outbreak of the War of 1812. Despite having no combat experience, General Jackson quickly impressed his troops, who nicknamed him "Old Hickory" after a particularly tough kind of tree.

Jackson led his militiamen into battle in the Southeast, first during the Creek War, a side conflict that started between different factions of Muskogee (Creek) Indians in present-day Alabama. In that war, he won a decisive victory over hostile fighters at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend in 1814. A year later, he also defeated a large British invasion force at the Battle of New Orleans. There, Jackson's troops—including backwoods militiamen, free African Americans, Indians, and a company of slave-trading pirates—successfully defended the city and inflicted more than two thousand casualties against the British, sustaining barely three hundred casualties of their own.⁹ The Battle of New Orleans was a thrilling victory for the United States, but it actually happened several days after a peace treaty was signed in Europe to end the war. News of the treaty had not yet reached New Orleans.

The end of the War of 1812 did not end Jackson's military career. In 1818, as commander of the U.S. southern military district, Jackson also launched an invasion of Spanish-owned Florida. He was acting on vague orders from the War Department to break the resistance of the region's

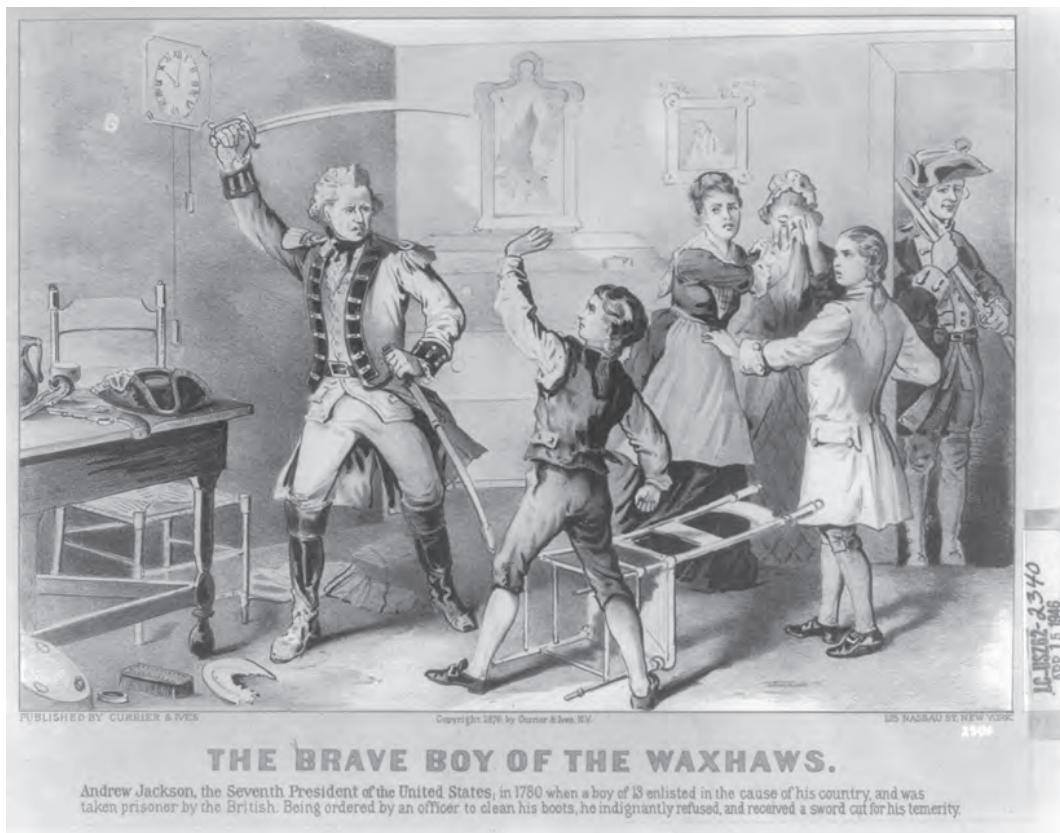


Seminole Indians, who protected runaway slaves and attacked American settlers across the border. On Jackson's orders in 1816, U.S. soldiers and their Creek allies had already destroyed the "Negro Fort," a British-built fortress on Spanish soil, killing 270 former slaves and executing some survivors.¹⁰ In 1818, Jackson's troops crossed the border again. They occupied Pensacola, the main Spanish town in the region, and arrested two British subjects, whom Jackson executed for helping the Seminoles. The execution of these two Britons created an international diplomatic crisis.

Most officials in President James Monroe's administration called for Jackson's censure. But Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, the son of former president John Adams, found Jackson's behavior useful. He defended the impulsive general, arguing that he had had been forced to act. Adams used Jackson's military successes in this First Seminole War to persuade Spain to accept the Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819, which gave Florida to the United States.

Any friendliness between John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson, however, did not survive long. In 1824, four nominees competed for

Images like this—showing a young Jackson defending his family from a British officer—established Jackson's legend. Currier & Ives, *The Brave Boy of the Waxhaws*, 1876. Wikimedia.



the presidency in one of the closest elections in American history. Each came from a different part of the country—Adams from Massachusetts, Jackson from Tennessee, William H. Crawford from Georgia, and Henry Clay from Kentucky. Jackson won more popular votes than anyone else. But with no majority winner in the Electoral College, the election was thrown into the House of Representatives. There, Adams used his political clout to claim the presidency, persuading Clay to support him. Jackson would never forgive Adams, whom his supporters accused of engineering a “corrupt bargain” with Clay to circumvent the popular will.

Four years later, in 1828, Adams and Jackson squared off in one of the dirtiest presidential elections to date.¹¹ Pro-Jackson partisans accused Adams of elitism and claimed that while serving in Russia as a diplomat he had offered the Russian emperor an American prostitute. Adams’s supporters, on the other hand, accused Jackson of murder and attacked the morality of his marriage, pointing out that Jackson had unwittingly married his wife Rachel before the divorce on her prior marriage was complete. This time, Andrew Jackson won the election easily, but Rachel Jackson died suddenly before his inauguration. Jackson would never forgive the people who attacked his wife’s character during the campaign.

In 1828, Jackson’s broad appeal as a military hero won him the presidency. He was “Old Hickory,” the “Hero of New Orleans,” a leader of plain frontier folk. His wartime accomplishments appealed to many voters’ pride. Over the next eight years, he would claim to represent the interests of ordinary white Americans, especially from the South and West, against the country’s wealthy and powerful elite. This attitude would lead him and his allies into a series of bitter political struggles.

V. The Nullification Crisis

Nearly every American had an opinion about President Jackson. To some, he epitomized democratic government and popular rule. To others, he represented the worst in a powerful and unaccountable executive, acting as president with the same arrogance he had shown as a general in Florida. One of the key issues dividing Americans during his presidency was a sectional dispute over national tax policy that would come to define Jackson’s no-holds-barred approach to government.

Once Andrew Jackson moved into the White House, most southerners expected him to do away with the hated Tariff of 1828, the so-called Tariff of Abominations. This import tax provided protection for northern

manufacturing interests by raising the prices of European products in America. Southerners, however, blamed the tariff for a massive transfer of wealth. It forced them to purchase goods from the North's manufacturers at higher prices, and it provoked European countries to retaliate with high tariffs of their own, reducing foreign purchases of the South's raw materials.

Only in South Carolina, though, did the discomfort turn into organized action. The state was still trying to shrug off the economic problems of the Panic of 1819, but it had also recently endured the Denmark Vesey slave conspiracy, which convinced white South Carolinians that antislavery ideas put them in danger of a massive slave uprising.

Elite South Carolinians were especially worried that the tariff was merely an entering wedge for federal legislation that would limit slavery. Andrew Jackson's own vice president, John C. Calhoun, who was from South Carolina, asserted that the tariff was "the occasion, rather than the real cause of the present unhappy state of things." The real fear was that the federal government might attack "the peculiar domestick institution of the Southern States"—meaning slavery.¹² When Jackson failed to act against the tariff, Vice President Calhoun was caught in a tight position.

In 1828, Calhoun secretly drafted the "South Carolina Exposition and Protest," an essay and set of resolutions that laid out the doctrine of nullification.¹³ Drawing from the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions of 1798 and 1799, Calhoun argued that the United States was a compact among the states rather than among the whole American people. Since the states had created the Union, he reasoned, they were still sovereign, so a state could nullify a federal statute it considered unconstitutional. Other states would then have to concede the right of nullification or agree to amend the Constitution. If necessary, a nullifying state could leave the Union.

When Calhoun's authorship of the essay became public, Jackson was furious, interpreting it both as a personal betrayal and as a challenge to his authority as president. His most dramatic confrontation with Calhoun came in 1832 during a commemoration for Thomas Jefferson. At dinner, the president rose and toasted, "Our Federal Union: it must be preserved." Calhoun responded with a toast of his own: "The Union: next to our Liberty the most dear."¹⁴ Their divorce was not pretty. Martin Van Buren, a New York political leader whose skill in making deals had earned him the nickname "the Little Magician," replaced Calhoun as vice president when Jackson ran for reelection in 1832.



Calhoun returned to South Carolina, where a special state convention nullified the federal tariffs of 1828 and 1832. It declared them unconstitutional and therefore “null, void, and no law” within South Carolina.¹⁵ The convention ordered South Carolina customs officers not to collect tariff revenue and declared that any federal attempt to enforce the tariffs would cause the state to secede from the Union.

President Jackson responded dramatically. He denounced the ordinance of nullification and declared that “disunion, by armed force, is TREASON.”¹⁶ Vowing to hang Calhoun and any other nullifier who defied federal power, he persuaded Congress to pass a Force Bill that authorized him to send the military to enforce the tariffs. Faced with such threats, other southern states declined to join South Carolina. Privately, however, Jackson supported the idea of compromise and allowed his political enemy Henry Clay to broker a solution with Calhoun. Congress passed a compromise bill that slowly lowered federal tariff rates. South Carolina rescinded nullification for the tariffs but nullified the Force Bill.

The legacy of the Nullification Crisis is difficult to sort out. Jackson’s decisive action seemed to have forced South Carolina to back down. But the crisis also united the ideas of secession and states’ rights, two concepts that had not necessarily been linked before. Perhaps most clearly, nullification showed that the immense political power of slaveholders was matched only by their immense anxiety about the future of slavery. During later debates in the 1840s and 1850s, they would raise the ideas of the Nullification Crisis again.

VI. The Eaton Affair and the Politics of Sexuality

Meanwhile, a more personal crisis during Jackson’s first term also drove a wedge between him and Vice President Calhoun. The Eaton Affair, sometimes insultingly called the “Petticoat Affair,” began as a disagreement among elite women in Washington, D.C., but it eventually led to the disbanding of Jackson’s cabinet.

True to his backwoods reputation, when he took office in 1829, President Jackson chose mostly provincial politicians, not Washington veterans, to serve in his administration. One of them was his friend John Henry Eaton, a senator from Tennessee, whom Jackson nominated to be his secretary of war.

A few months earlier, Eaton had married Margaret O’Neale Timberlake, the recent widow of a navy officer. She was the daughter of





This photograph shows Eaton at a much older age. *Eaton, Mrs. Margaret (Peggy O'Neill), old lady*, c. 1870–1880. Library of Congress.

Washington boardinghouse proprietors, and her humble origins and combination of beauty, outspokenness, and familiarity with so many men in the boardinghouse had led to gossip. During her first marriage, rumors had circulated that she and John Eaton were having an affair while her husband was at sea. When her first husband committed suicide and she married Eaton just nine months later, the society women of Washington had been scandalized. One wrote that Margaret Eaton's reputation had been "totally destroyed."¹⁷

John Eaton was now secretary of war, but other cabinet members' wives refused to have anything to do with his wife. No respectable lady who wanted to protect her own reputation could exchange visits with her, invite her to social events, or be seen chatting with her. Most importantly, the vice president's wife, Floride Calhoun, shunned Margaret Eaton, spending most of her time in South Carolina to avoid her. Even Jackson's own niece, Emily Donelson, visited Eaton once and then refused to have anything more to do with her.

Although women could not vote or hold office, they played an important role in politics as people who controlled influence.¹⁸ They helped hold

official Washington together. And according to one local society woman, “the ladies” had “as much rivalry and party spirit, desire of precedence and authority” as male politicians had.¹⁹ These women upheld a strict code of femininity and sexual morality. They paid careful attention to the rules that governed personal interactions and official relationships.

Margaret Eaton’s social exclusion thus greatly affected Jackson, his cabinet, and the rest of Washington society. At first, President Jackson blamed his rival Henry Clay for the attacks on the Eatons. But he soon perceived that Washington women and his new cabinet had initiated the gossip. Jackson scoffed, “I did not come here to make a cabinet for the ladies of this place,” and claimed that he “had rather have live vermin on my back than the tongue of one of these Washington women on my reputation.”²⁰ He began to blame the ambition of Vice President Calhoun for Floride Calhoun’s actions, deciding “it was necessary to put him out of the cabinet and destroy him.”²¹

Jackson was so indignant because he had recently been through a similar scandal with his late wife, Rachel. Her character, too, had been insulted by leading politicians’ wives because of the circumstances of her marriage. Jackson believed that Rachel’s death had been caused by those slanderous attacks. Furthermore, he saw the assaults on the Eatons as attacks on his authority.

In one of the most famous presidential meetings in American history, Jackson called together his cabinet members to discuss what they saw as the bedrock of society: women’s position as protectors of the nation’s values. There, the men of the cabinet debated Margaret Eaton’s character. Jackson delivered a long defense, methodically presenting evidence against her attackers. But the men attending the meeting—and their wives—were not swayed. They continued to shun Margaret Eaton, and the scandal was resolved only with the resignation of four members of the cabinet, including Eaton’s husband.

VII. The Bank War

Andrew Jackson’s first term was full of controversy. For all of his reputation as a military and political warrior, however, the most characteristic struggle of his presidency was financial. As president, he waged a “war” against the Bank of the United States.

The charter of the controversial national bank that Congress established under Alexander Hamilton’s financial plan had expired in 1811.

But five years later, Congress had given a new charter to the Second Bank of the United States. Headquartered in Philadelphia, the bank was designed to stabilize the growing American economy. By requiring other banks to pay their debts promptly in gold, it was supposed to prevent them from issuing too many paper banknotes that could drop suddenly in value. Of course, the Bank of the United States was also supposed to reap a healthy profit for its private stockholders, like the Philadelphia banker Stephen Girard and the New York merchant John Jacob Astor.

Though many Democratic-Republicans had supported the new bank, some never gave up their Jeffersonian suspicion that such a powerful institution was dangerous to the republic. Andrew Jackson was one of the skeptics. He and many of his supporters blamed the bank for the Panic of 1819, which had become a severe economic depression. The national bank had made that crisis worse, first by lending irresponsibly and then, when the panic hit, by hoarding gold currency to save itself at the expense of smaller banks and their customers. Jackson's supporters also believed the bank had corrupted many politicians by giving them financial favors.

In 1829, after a few months in office, Jackson set his sights on the bank and its director, Nicholas Biddle. Jackson became more and more insistent over the next three years as Biddle and the bank's supporters fought to save it. A visiting Frenchman observed that Jackson had "declared a war to the death against the Bank," attacking it "in the same cut-and-thrust style" with which he had once fought the Indians and the British. For Jackson, the struggle was a personal crisis. "The Bank is trying to kill me," he told Martin Van Buren, "but I will kill it!"²²

The bank's charter was not due for renewal for several years, but in 1832, while Jackson was running for reelection, Congress held an early vote to reauthorize the Bank of the United States. The president vetoed the bill.

In his veto message, Jackson called the bank unconstitutional and "dangerous to the liberties of the people." The charter, he explained, didn't do enough to protect the bank from its British stockholders, who might not have Americans' interests at heart. In addition, Jackson wrote, the Bank of the United States was virtually a federal agency, but it had powers that were not granted anywhere in the Constitution. Worst of all, the bank was a way for well-connected people to get richer at everyone else's expense. "The rich and powerful," the president declared, "too often bend the acts of government to their selfish purposes."²³ Only a strictly limited government, Jackson believed, would treat people equally.

