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March 13, 2015

History 11

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Andrew Jackson: An American Thug

Andrew Jackson was a thug, a scofflaw, and a sociopath. His presidency was *one of*, if not *the*, most controversial in America's history so far. In addition to being very charismatic, although with an infamously short temper, the man had no respect for the institution he 'served,' and acted to his own whims. These ranged from criminal-worthy, such as ignoring the ruling of the Supreme Court to basic, such as 'playing politics' with the states, opposing politicians, and Congress to meet his own ends. This blatant disregard for ethics and standards show Jackson for the power-hungry tyrant that he really was.

Jackson's presidency started with a landslide election over the incumbent President Adams, with an electoral vote count of 183 for Jackson, and 83 for Adams, as well as Jackson obtaining a 150,000 popular vote lead on Adams.¹ Jackson conveyed himself as a 'peoples president,' and so to fit his image, one of the first things he did as President was a bureaucratic reshuffle. Jackson had those 'corrupt' officeholders who advanced a self-serving establishment, inhibiting the growth of the 'people,' were weeded out, and replaced with those handpicked by Jackson.² Unfortunately for the American people, such an act merely changed *which* people benefited from the self-serving establishment, rather than abolishing it. This is known as the 'spoils system,' in which friends and allies of those in power are given political offices in their regime. This blatant cronyism, which Jackson happily joined in, showed that even the 'greatest' presidents were not above playing politics.¹

¹ Larry Schweikart and Michael Allen. *A Patriot's History of the United States* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 205.

² Alan Brinkley. *Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2013), Chapter 9.

¹ Schweikart and Allen, *Patriot's History*, 205-206.

One of Jackson's most famous exploits was his trickery, relocation, and slaughter of American Indians. These started after a group of radical American Indians from the Creek Tribe called the Red Sticks attacked Fort Mims in 1813, killing 250 people. In retaliation for this attack, Jackson had nearby Creek villages sacked, burned, and their inhabitants killed. Jackson promised rewards for attacking and claiming Red Stick territory, for white Americans and Natives alike.³ This scorched earth tactic roused more resistance, within the native tribes and the Army. The Red Stick fiasco ended in 1814, at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend, where Jackson attacked and killed 800 out of 1000 Creeks.³ After the battle, the Americans and the Creek signed a treaty, taking away half of the Creek territory for America. Over the next ten years, more and more treaties were signed between American Indians and Jackson, taking much of the Indians land away from them. Then, in 1818, Jackson began leading raids into Florida after learning of the Seminole Tribe's popularity as a refuge for escaped slaves. These raids eventually became the Seminole War of 1818, in which the Spanish owned Florida was forcibly taken by Jackson, under the pretense of "self-defense."⁴ By the 1830s, most of the Indians had been either killed, or squished together in small areas in the west. Then, the most telling actions of Andrew Jackson's character came apparent with *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* and *Worcester v. Georgia*. The Cherokee Nation was a collective of five tribes, who in 1830 sued the government of Georgia via the Supreme Court, claiming status as a sovereign nation upon whose rights were being violated.⁵ The Court ruled that, although the Cherokee could not be recognized as a sovereign nation, the acts of the Georgia government violated federal treaty powers under the constitution. Then, in 1832, in *Worcester v. Georgia*, the Court ruled that Georgia could not violate the Cherokee's land rights, as they were protected under jurisdiction of the federal government. Jackson then famously said, "John Marshall has

³ Howard Zinn. *A People's History of the United States* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 127.

³Zinn. *People's History*, 127-128.

⁴ Zinn. *People's History*, 128-129.

⁵ Schweikart and Allen, *Patriot's History*, 208.

made his decision, now let him enforce it.”⁶ The President then continued to violate the rights of the Cherokee, as dictated by the Supreme Court. This shows Jackson's blatant disregard for the Constitution, the rights of individuals, and simple decency.

Running parallel to the Indian conflicts, Jackson also practiced thuggery internally. The Bank of the United States, or the BUS, was run by a man named Nicholas Biddle. Biddle had been the U.S. Minister to France, edited papers of Lewis and Clark's expedition, and served in the Pennsylvania state senate.⁷ The Bank had opposition from many Americans, who were split into 'hard money' and 'soft money' factions. Soft money advocates believed that having a national bank that controlled all the money greatly restricted state banks from issuing loans and notes freely. Hard money supporters believed that having physical coin was the safest system, and were majorly opposed to loans and banknotes, and those banks that issued them.⁸ Andrew Jackson, being a hard money man, saw the BUS as a way for the 'wealthy elite' to take advantage of many hard working Americans. Jackson is famous for his 'war' against the BUS. But the man was not as charitable as many will say. In 1829, Jackson asked one of his confidants to plan a replacement for the BUS, when its charter would end in 1836.⁹ But if Jackson wanted the BUS to be destroyed then why would he want to make a new one? Because he saw it as a political threat. Nicholas Biddle, the man who ran the BUS, often gifted favors to those on the political stage. He had a huge amount of influence over the course of the country, and became deeply rooted in the Whig party, opposing the Democratic-Republicans. Jackson wanted Biddle and the Whigs out of the picture, and so in 1832, when Congress gave him a bill to recharter the BUS, he vetoed it. It became the main issue of the 1832 election, which Jackson ultimately won. But even then, he could not legally destroy the BUS, although laws hadn't seemed to have been a concern of his in previous actions, so he decided to withdraw all federal deposits from it, and moved them to other banks

6 Brinkley. *Unfinished Nation*, Chapter 9.

7 Schweikart and Allen, *Patriot's History*, 213-214.

8 Brinkley. *Unfinished Nation*, Chapter 9.

9 Schweikart and Allen, *Patriot's History*, 214.

run by his supporters.^{10 11} This meant the BUS had virtually no money to lend, and would cause harmful destabilization in the economy. Jackson's Secretary of the Treasury knew this, and refused to transfer the deposits, so Jackson fired him. When his replacement also refused, Jackson fired him too. Jackson then named one of his close supporters as Secretary of the Treasury, and the deposits were transferred. Biddle responded by raising interest rates and collecting loans, claiming that without the governments support, the Bank had become spread too thin. These actions caused a recession. Then, during the winter of 1833/84, when the recession was at its worst, petitions were sent to Washington by the bank and its supporters pleading for a recharter.¹¹ Jackson refused, and blamed the recession on Biddle. After the charter ran out in 1836, Jackson had his victory, and the BUS closed down, but the conflict of the preceding years meant that the country would not have a stable banking system for a long time. Andrew Jackson once again showed that he valued his own interest over that of the country's.

During the 'Bank War,' Jackson's health had been rapidly declining, and not long after, he died in 1837. The man left behind a legacy of a 'people's president,' a Robin Hood like figure. But Jackson was not the hero he was said to be. He stomped all over the Constitution, violated the rights of countless people, disobeyed the Supreme Court, and created an economic instability within the country that it would not recover from for many years. He was a power hungry tyrant, just another glorified man whose many flaws were given a blind eye in favor of his few redeeming qualities.

10 Schweikart and Allen, *Patriot's History*, 216.

11 Brinkley. *Unfinished Nation*, Chapter 9.

Annotated Bibliography

Secondary Sources:

Brinkley, Alan. *Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People*. New York: McGraw Hill, 2013.

This book gives a good amount of detail about Andrew Jackson's presidency, with a good flow.

Schweikart, Larry and Michael Allen. *A Patriot's History of the United States*. New York: Penguin, 2004.

This book gives great detail of Andrew Jackson's entire presidency with a conservative bias.

Zinn, Howard. *A People's History of the United States*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001.

This book focuses on Andrew Jackson presidency, specifically his conflicts with Native Americans. This is written casting Jackson in a negative light, with plenty of detail, but a clear bias.