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H. W. Brands

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The Age of Jackson

Slaves, Indian Wars, and Equality?

By H. W. Brands

There is only one president in history who has an "age" in history named after him. There's no Age of Washington; there's no Age of Jefferson; there's no Age of Lincoln. There is an Age of Jackson and it's the period from the mid-1820s to the 1840s, and it's dominated by this one personality -- the personality of Andrew Jackson.

The task of the American people during the Age of Jackson was to figure out what equality means in the American setting. What in the world did Thomas Jefferson mean when he said, "all men are created equal"? What is this democracy that people are starting to talk about? You may know that in the 1780s and 1790s, "democracy" was essentially a swear word in American politics. The United States and the U.S. Constitution were not established for a democracy. There was supposed to be a clear distinction between the folks who made the laws and the folks who had to obey the laws. People got to vote -- not everybody by any means -- but they were supposed to vote for their betters. They were not expected to vote simply for folks like them.



"If school children know anything about Andrew Jackson, they know first of all that he was a slave holder, and secondly that he was the one that drove the Cherokees out of Georgia."

The first American president that people voted for who was like them was Andrew Jackson. In fact, the first American president who people actually got to vote for was Andrew Jackson. You may be aware that in the Constitution where it explains about the electoral college, it doesn't say that the people of the states shall choose the electors. It says that the states shall choose the electors and they may choose the electors any way they want. If the state of Michigan wants to choose electors by lottery, or by letting the state legislature make the determination, that's the way they can do it. Until the Age of Jackson, which is essentially synonymous with the age of democracy, most electors were chosen by the state legislatures. So if you want to know what the popular vote for George Washington was in 1789 or 1792... well there was no popular vote for George Washington. If you want to know what the popular vote for Thomas Jefferson was... well by then there were a few states where people could vote, but in most states it was still the state legislatures. In fact there were no popular vote totals reported until 1824 -- the year Jackson was elected president.

Jackson is the candidate of the people -- he's the first one the people can identify with. People have identified in a peculiar way with their presidents ever since. This shows up in simply the style of campaigning. In 2000, the presidential debate was between George W. Bush and Al Gore. Here were two men who had three Ivy League degrees between them, and each one was going out of his way to show he was just "ordinary folks." Before Jackson, people didn't do that. Thomas Jefferson didn't try to explain that he was just an ordinary person. No, no, he was happy for people to know he was an extraordinary person. George Washington, for heavens sakes, he knew he was the best qualified person in the country to be president and he wanted everybody to know that too. He wouldn't deign ask people for votes, it was their expected duty that they would vote for him and he would serve as president.

It's only after Jackson that the president is supposed to be like the ordinary folks of America.

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The fundamental question for all of history is: What were they thinking? When I'm trying to figure out what Jackson was thinking, one of the things I have to impress on my readers is how different life was in Jackson's age from life in our own day. For example, it's very easy for us in the first decade of the 21st century, when we know that the United States is the world's most powerful country, and furthermore that the United States has been the world's most powerful country for the last 100 years, to assume that it was always that way or that it was somehow always destined to be that way. When I make the point in my book on Jackson that Jackson spent his entire life fearful for the future of the United States -- fearful that the United States would fall victim to the British, the French, the Spanish, the Indians, or internal dissension -- these were real fears. In fact, he was absolutely correct to fear for the future of the American democratic experience because fifteen years after he died the country fell apart in Civil War.

It's incumbent upon the biographer to try to recreate the stakes of the battle.

I have never yet met a person who said, "Andrew Jackson is my favorite president." If school children know anything about Andrew Jackson, they know first of all that he was a slave holder, and secondly that he was the one that drove the Cherokees out of Georgia. On both of those counts, Jackson has some explaining to do. To us, he's come down on the wrong side of these issues that are morally clear. How can I justify the time writing about this guy who was such a ferocious ogre, who spent his time enslaving African Americans and killing Indians? It's a job. It's not that easy to do. Jackson, in the case of slavery, doesn't give me much to work with. Thomas Jefferson owned twice as many slaves as Andrew Jackson ever did, but Jefferson had the good grace for historians and for his biographers to at least feel guilty about it. With Jackson, there's no sense that he feels guilty about it -- slavery was part of Jackson's world, just the way war was part of Jackson's world. He hadn't designed the world, he hadn't designed slavery, he hadn't designed war. But if slavery existed, if war existed, he was going to deal with both of them as best as he could.

It is the hardest thing in the world to make students today understand that sincere, well-meaning people who considered themselves religious -- basically good people -- could live in a world that allowed slavery, could own slaves themselves. How does one make that understandable? It's a delicate task. Sometimes a draw an analogy. The analogy I've been using lately is to war. There are very few people today who say that war is a good thing. I think it's apparent that there is a majority in the United States who would say that as evil as war might be, sometimes it's necessary. I think for many slaveholders in the 18th and 19th century, that was the attitude they took: slavery is an evil, but as far as we can tell it's a necessary evil. We can argue with them across time, but my point is that the historian has to try to make these folks understandable to a modern audience, in particular to get at this question of: What were they thinking?

As for Jackson and the Indians, here's another one where Jackson comes down on the wrong side. We know how the Indians were mistreated over all those years and generations, so what was Jackson doing demanding that the Indians leave the eastern part of the United States -- although to him it was the western part of the United States -- and cross the Mississippi River into what was called the Indian territory. Here's one where I have to make Jackson understandable. I don't have to make modern audiences agree with him, but I would be not doing my job if I didn't try to make it understandable.

The argument I could make is Jackson's argument -- modern audiences are free to agree or disagree. The Cherokees wanted to stay in Georgia, they wanted to continue to live as an organized tribe, and Jackson said to their leaders, 'you can stay in Georgia but not as a sovereign tribe, or if you're going to remain as a sovereign tribe you have to leave Georgia -- you can't have it both ways.'

Part of his reasoning was his concern over the security of the United States. He had lived during 40 years when foreign countries had used American Indian tribes as ways of weakening America on the frontier. The War of 1812 was as much a war between American and Indian tribes in the Southeast as it was a war between Americans and the British.

The other thing was that Jackson knew his contemporaries, he knew his countrymen, and he knew the folks in Georgia who were insisting that the Cherokees leave. He knew that the alternative to leaving Georgia, for the Cherokees, wasn't remaining peacefully on their ancestral lands.

The realistic alternative was that they were all going to be killed. He wasn't going to kill them, the U.S. Army wasn't going to kill them, but he knew the people in Georgia and he knew that they would kill them. How did he know this? Because he had lived with people just like that for most of his life in Tennessee, and it was a world in which there was a constant struggle for survival.

This is another one where, for modern audience, how do I convey the stakes of the struggle between the settlers in Tennessee and the various Indian tribes, including the Cherokees? Each party to this conflict thought it was fighting for its land and its lives. We could say, if we feel so inclined, 'well the settlers shouldn't have been there.' It was the Indians' land and therefore the settlers had no place. Well, maybe in some cosmic sense that was true. But after they had been there for a generation or two, then all they knew was that their uncle and their cousins had been killed by raiding Indians.

So what's a modern analogy to this? It seems to me that a reasonable analogy is the struggle for control of the West Bank today, where there are two people who both have this firm belief that this land is theirs. Who got there first? At this point it doesn't make any difference because at this point there have been two or three generations of Israelis there and it's their land, in their point of view. And for the Palestinians, of course, 'It was ours first.' I can't say that one side has the moral high ground or the other. This is one of those cases where history is really messy.

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The Age of Jackson is the age of democracy. By the time Jackson dies, democracy has triumphed in the sense that no one any longer says democracy is not for the United States. The political, philosophical, and ideological opponents have been vanquished. It's quite true that there are still large exceptions to this democratic notion. Most African American can't vote, no slaves can vote. In a few places women can vote but for the most part they can't. But it is true that for the first time, if you are an adult, white male, you can almost certainly vote -- and this is a big change. Furthermore, there is a kind of momentum that is built into the system -- now people know what Jefferson was talking about when he said, "all men are created equal." We're not there yet, but we're moving in that direction. The triumph of democracy is a big step in that direction.

We also must remember that it was democracy that allowed slavery to flourish as long as it did -- slavery was a majority opinion in this country, probably beyond the Emancipation Proclamation. It was a hard thing to get enough states to ratify the 13th amendment. The treatment of the American Indians, again, this was a majority opinion. Democracy is better than the alternatives, but it's got a lot to answer for on its own. This might be a way of trying to explain Andrew Jackson to a modern audience -- yes, he's the one who brought us democracy but don't expect democracy to solve all of America's problems. It didn't in Jackson's day and it hasn't since.