

The Age of Jackson

by Ted Widmer



Andrew Jackson, by Thomas Sully, 1845. (Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington)

The Age of Jackson has never been easy to define. Broader than his presidency (1829–1837), and narrower than his life (1767–1845), it roughly describes the third, fourth, and fifth decades of the nineteenth century. While some historians have attempted to define this era as the Age of Reform, or Democracy, or the Market Revolution, no name has ever conveyed more of the era’s energy, upward aspiration, and general restlessness than that of Jackson himself. If his election in 1828 launched the Age of Jackson, and terminated the so-called Era of Good Feelings, then his death in 1845 and the Mexican War that immediately followed it (1846–1848) might be considered the era’s close. By 1850, the crisis over slavery began to dominate almost every aspect of political discourse, leading to the unraveling of the great Democratic coalition forged by Jackson.

The twenty-two years between 1828 and 1850 are brief, but there is nothing small about the significance of Jackson’s era. It was a time of tremendous growth, as measured by any index of population, wealth, or economic productivity. The American experiment in democracy recalibrated itself in important ways, including enlarged suffrage and a strengthened presidency. The geographic center of the United States shifted dramatically to the west, as Americans poured across the Appalachians, as Jackson himself had done, and built new lives in the Ohio and Mississippi valleys. In nearly every category, Americans began to act out Ralph Waldo Emerson’s popular phrase, “self-reliance.” One group that had been confined to the margins of power, landless white male voters, saw their status rise during the Age of Jackson. Others—white women in particular—clarified their desire for greater power, although they did not achieve it until the following century. And others still—African Americans and American Indians—were generally and often forcefully excluded from any form of citizenship. In other words, it was an era of quite sharp ambition, and marked contrasts, resulting in real progress for millions of middling male Americans, and a rising level of frustration for those who saw no progress at all.

In crude demographic terms, the growth of the American population was staggering. Through both immigration and natural increase, the numbers of Americans grew exponentially. In 1830, the

census recorded 12,866,020 Americans living in twenty-four states, including 2,009,043 slaves. In 1850, the United States had nearly doubled to 23,191,876 people, including 3,204,313 slaves. Seven new states—Arkansas, Michigan, Florida, Texas, Iowa, Wisconsin, and California—joined the Union, to say nothing of a vast amount of territory (including California) conquered from Mexico, which includes most of the Southwest.

But those figures, startling though they are, only begin to tell the story. There was also an extraordinary rise in urban population, as immigrants and rural Americans poured into coastal cities, river cities, and new cities like Chicago that came into existence almost overnight. More than any other city, New York exploded in size, nearly trebling from 202,589 to 515,547 in those twenty years. In the 1830s, nearly 600,000 immigrants came to the United States, primarily from Europe. In the 1840s, that number swelled to 1.7 million.

The reasons for this growth are not hard to find. Land was abundantly and inexpensively available, especially in the interior sections opened up by Jacksonian policies such as Indian removal. And an economy that was generally booming (despite a depression in 1837) created not only jobs, but a never-ending cycle of new industries. The Industrial Revolution owed its origin to the textile trade in New England, but picked up steam in the 1830s and 1840s, as factories expanded, machines grew more sophisticated, and productivity soared. What wasn't moving fast in these decades? Goods and people raced from place to place on railroads, while the completion of the Erie Canal in the mid-1820s, and the development of Henry Clay's "American System," an internal network of economic relationships, accelerated commerce dramatically. Other rapid improvements followed quickly in communications—the telegraph was invented in 1844, and by 1850, Americans could send and receive messages to each other nearly instantaneously, in a form of instant messaging not too different from our own. There was also constant improvement in the ways in which newspapers were distributed and their numbers increased rapidly. In 1831, there were fifty-four newspapers in New York alone.

These massive increases in the size and speed of the United States might have caused more trouble than they did if the mechanisms of government had not adapted well to them. This too was an important legacy of Jackson. His political lieutenant, Martin Van Buren, had helped to liberalize voting requirements in New York, resulting in a significant rise in new voters, and unsurprisingly, a rise in popularity for those who loosened the requirements. Other states followed suit, and the result was a broad new coalition of poor and middle-class voters, dramatically empowered vis-a-vis the old landed elites of the coastal cities. These were Jackson's people. He rode his high popularity to an unprecedented sway over the US government, deepening the powers of the presidency. For example, he forcibly suppressed a powerful senator (and his former vice president), John C. Calhoun, when the latter flirted with the idea that his state, South Carolina, might nullify an act of the federal government. And Jackson led a dramatic showdown against East Coast financial interests when he refused to recharter the original Bank of the United States—a crusade that increased his popularity, but may have contributed to the financial volatility that was also a feature of the Jacksonian era. Even if the federal government was tiny by modern standards, it was coming much closer to people's lives than it had. If "democracy" was still a new concept (the word had only been invented in 1789), Jackson did much to put flesh on its bones. Indeed, his party often called itself, simply, "The Democracy."

The great majority of Americans felt great zeal over this progress. As Alexis de Tocqueville, noted during his travels in the 1830s, Americans were patriotic, energetic, and highly individualistic—a word he coined. But as he also noted, they developed flexible systems of consensus and community dialogue that allowed this fledgling democracy to function. These included volunteer organizations,

free public schools, and a high degree of connectivity to the body politic. To Tocqueville's astonishment and general admiration, Americans seemed to have largely achieved the equality they proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence.

Of course, this equality was not universal, and only a tiny number of African Americans and Native Americans would have felt included in these elastic definitions of political and economic citizenship. Women could never vote in this era, although they organized more effectively and achieved occasional breakthroughs, such as the Seneca Falls conference in 1848, which rewrote the Declaration of Independence in language that was gender neutral. Significant numbers of rural Americans felt threatened by the incursions of railroads, joint stock corporations, fast-talking businessmen and other features of the Jacksonian landscape. Poverty, though rare compared to Europe, was nevertheless growing in large cities. But in spite of these real problems, most Americans felt a high degree of optimism in the future.

As this enormous and distended country felt itself growing in all directions, it inevitably began to express itself. For decades, Americans had felt keenly the sting of European taunts that their culture was feeble and monotonous. Even Tocqueville, generally admiring, permitted himself a few snubs on this front. But a torrent of new writings poured forth in the 1830s and 1840s, ranging from a highly vigorous newspaper press to a robust set of writings from a new generation of American writers. These included an active group of poets, essayists, and novelists around Boston, including Emerson and his friends Henry David Thoreau and Nathaniel Hawthorne. And in New York, befitting its spectacular growth, a renaissance was underway that would eventually see Manhattan become the nation's information headquarters, a position it has never relinquished. There, Walt Whitman wrote startling new poems and Herman Melville wrote epic novels that would incorporate all of the brassy confidence and some of the anxiety of the Jacksonian era.

The end of the Jacksonian era illustrated some of the instability that attended America's extraordinarily rapid growth. Following Jackson's death in 1845, a young Tennessean president, James K. Polk, led the United States into a war against Mexico that Jackson would have appreciated—fast, acquisitive, and victorious. All or part of ten new states came into the United States with the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, and it was precisely this windfall that destabilized the coalition Jackson had gone to such lengths to build. For decades, the issue of slavery had lain close to the surface of American prosperity, fueling fortunes in the South (and more than a few in the North), while undermining the equality and self-reliance that Jacksonians claimed to believe in. Jackson had stared down the extreme advocates of slavery's expansion in the Nullification Crisis, but as a slaveholder himself, he had little patience with efforts to end slavery. The winning of the West from Mexico forced all of these questions uncomfortably into the open. But without Jackson there to guide the conversation (or more accurately, to stifle it), tempers flared, and the North and South began to encounter a growing inability to get along. The Compromise of 1850 represented a last effort of the great generation of US senators who had governed well throughout the Age of Jackson, but it was violated within four years of its passage, laying the groundwork for the Civil War. That was a failure of politics as well as a violation of the original American creed, as expressed so enduringly, and so paradoxically, by the slaveholder who penned most of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson. Throughout much of the Jacksonian era, politicians from different regions and backgrounds had meaningfully subscribed to the same national vision. But in the race toward prosperity (sometimes a literal race, as with the California gold rush of 1849), some of those higher principles were sacrificed at the altar of self-aggrandizement. That too was a legacy of the Age of Jackson.

A former general, Jackson would have recognized the problem as a familiar military one. As armies of Americans moved quickly into the future, they did not always protect their supply lines—the ideas, and support systems, and community values that had taken them so far in so short a time. It is not certain that Jackson, or any other general, could have stopped Americans from racing headlong into the future without thinking through all of the consequences. But it was clear by 1850 that they had moved very quickly in the previous twenty-two years, and that there would someday be a final reckoning.

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