

17 Andrew Jackson: Flamboyant Hero of the Common Man

JOHN F. MARSZALEK

The age of Jackson was a turbulent era—a period of boom and bust, of great population shifts into the cities and out to the frontier, of institutionalized violence and racial antagonisms, of utopian communities, reform movements, the abolitionist crusade, and the “great southern reaction” in defense of slavery. It was also a time of graft and corruption, of machine politics and ruthless political bosses. But above all, it was an age of the self-made man, a time when privilege and elitist rule gave way to the vestiges of popular democracy—at least for white males. Between the 1820s and the 1840s, America witnessed the rise of universal manhood suffrage for whites, long ballots, national nominating conventions, and grassroots political parties.

The man who gave the age its name was a self-made planter and slaveholder of considerable wealth. Like most aristocrats from the Tennessee country of his day, Andrew Jackson could not spell, he lacked education and culture, but he did aspire to wealth and military glory, both of which he won. Despite his harsh, gaunt features, he looked like a gentleman and a soldier, and in calm moods he could be gentle, even grave.

John F. Marszalek’s lively essay captures the passion of a man who was more popular than any political figure since George Washington. Like Washington, Jackson established his early reputation in his military exploits against the British. Unlike the aloof Washington, Jackson was an emotional man who fought duels over his wife’s honor and challenged corruption, real and perceived, in the political arena. His enemies—the British, Spanish, and the Indians—were the foes of the “common man” of his day, and Jackson successfully battled them all during his military career. Marszalek vividly describes Jackson’s rough-and-tumble background, so different from that of the previous presidents and one that most Americans born without inherited privileges found vastly appealing.

Jackson’s personality and rags-to-riches climb to the White House inspired a popular movement often called the Jacksonian revolution. This revolution moved America toward a more democratic system in which the government was responsive to the popular will. Jackson himself played a major role in the shift toward democracy—that is, toward a system of true majority rule, not just rule by a propertied elite. He set out to make the president and every other federal official answerable to the people. Thus, he favored abolishing the electoral college and rotating every elected office. He even challenged the role of the Supreme Court as the final arbiter in interpreting the Constitution, a subject covered in selection 14. Jackson also inaugurated the history of powerful executive leadership in this country. He used his veto power more than all his predecessors combined and asserted the right of the chief executive to initiate legislation, which altered the president’s relationship with Congress and made the president the head of state.

Marszalek's portrait of Jackson presents the modern reader with puzzling dilemmas. We wonder how Jackson could be fiercely protective of white women yet massacre women of color and hold them as slaves. Could a slaveowner really be a man of the people? As you ponder this question, reflect on Douglas L. Wilson's warning about presentism in selection 8. Jackson himself would have answered this question with a resounding "yes" on two counts. First, the Jacksonian revolution ushered in universal white manhood suffrage in most states and created a true mass electorate. Second, "the people" in Jackson's day was a political concept that included all those who could vote. That meant white men almost exclusively. Women, slaves, and free blacks outside New England were all denied the electoral franchise and were excluded from the idea of "the people." They had no will to which Jackson or any other government official could be responsive.

Through the mode of biography, you are about to undertake a fascinating journey into a life and a world far removed from your own. The unique quality of biography is that it personalizes history. Biography connects the present with the past, allowing people of one age to reach back through the mists, to touch people of another age, and to understand. Perhaps that is what Irish poet William Butler Yeats meant when he said that "nothing exists but a stream of souls, that all knowledge is biography."

GLOSSARY

ADAMS, JOHN QUINCY As President James Monroe's secretary of state, Adams negotiated the Adams-Onís Treaty with Spain in 1819. Among other things, the treaty gave Florida to the United States. Adams's diplomatic triumph salvaged Jackson's reputation after the impulsive general had exceeded his orders and killed Seminoles and British citizens in Spanish Florida. One of America's finest secretaries of state, Adams was also largely responsible for the Monroe Doctrine. Later he served one term as president (1825–1829).

BATTLE OF NEW ORLEANS America's greatest victory in the otherwise inglorious War of 1812, the nation's second war with Great Britain. The victory, however, had no effect on the outcome of the war, since a peace treaty had already been negotiated in Europe. Even so, the victory made Jackson the country's most celebrated war hero.

BENTON, THOMAS HART This prominent Missouri politician served in the national Senate from 1821 to 1851. An outspoken champion of western development, he eventually shifted his allegiance to Jackson.

BURR, AARON The man who killed Alexander Hamilton (see selection 13) resurfaces here as a schemer who encouraged Jackson to join him in a wild plot to seize and colonize Spanish territory in the Southwest. Jackson refused, and Burr wound up in jail on a charge of treason. He was found not guilty.

CALHOUN, JOHN C. He served as vice president under both John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson and later as a prominent senator from South Carolina. A nationalist during the War of 1812, Calhoun subsequently turned his brilliant mind to a defense of slavery and the right of the South to nullify federal laws that failed to serve sectional interests.

THE AGE OF JACKSON

CLAY, HENRY A transplanted Kentuckian and a popular figure in the West, Clay served as speaker of the House of Representatives, where he opposed Jackson's actions in Spanish Florida and later threw his support to Adams in the presidential election of 1824. Since Jackson had won the popular vote and Clay became Adams's secretary of state, considered then as a steppingstone to the presidency, the outraged Jackson believed a "corrupt bargain" had robbed him of the White House.

DICKENSON, CHARLES He made the fatal error of questioning Rachel Jackson's honor and faced the wrath of her husband, who challenged Dickenson to a duel. Jackson carried a bullet from Dickenson's dueling pistol in him for the rest of his life, but he had the satisfaction of killing his antagonist with the second shot.

DONELSON, RACHEL Jackson's wife and "the abiding love of his life." She was outgoing and attractive and had only a limited education. Her first marriage to Lewis Robards failed miserably, and it ended officially more than two years after she took her wedding vows with her new husband.

He stood tall and thin, six feet one inch, yet weighed only 140 pounds. His face was narrow, his nose pointed, his wide forehead melting into his frizzy hair, once a sandy red, but by the time he became president of the United States, a whitish gray. His eyes were blue, and when he became angry, they blazed fire, or so contemporaries imagined. Nearly sixty-two years of age when he took the oath of office on March 4, 1829, the ravages of time were evident in the creases on his face and the stiffness of his gait. Still, his appearance was impressive: erect in posture and exuding strength and power.

Andrew Jackson was without doubt one of the most popular men ever elected president of the United States. Architect of the great victory over the British at New Orleans during the War of 1812, and the man who had crushed the Indians in the southeast, his execution of two British subjects in Spanish Florida only added to his appeal. Americans disliked the British and the Indians, two enemies they saw as barriers to the nation's progress. Because of Jackson's important victories over these groups, people began to refer to him as the "Old Hero." A Floridian said he believed something a friend had told him, "as much as if General Jackson, or Jesus Christ, had said it."

Despite his wide popularity, Jackson also became one of the nation's most reviled chief executives. To many Americans he appeared as the border ruffian from frontier Tennessee. He fought duels, he had a passion for horse racing and cockfighting, and his fiery temper seemed irrational and frightening. That the common people reacted to him so passionately provided even greater concern. He might be the "Old Hero" to some, but others saw him a dangerous demagogue, a threat to the very stability of the nation. A modern historian, though favorable to him, has writ-

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Andrew Jackson's enormous popularity was a product of his military victories against the British, the Spanish, and Native Americans. The voters pictured him on horseback, not behind a desk. His enemies were the villains of the early national period. His humble background mirrored those of the great majority of the American electorate. (Library of Congress)

ten: "He was ill-educated, ill-tempered, opinionated, suspicious, unbending, dictatorial, . . . vindictive, and a fierce hater." A contemporary tried to find a middle ground: "If he was not as perfect and capable as his friends represented him to be, he was a better man than his enemies described him to be."

His beginnings themselves are in question; North and South Carolina both claim him as a native son because the exact location of his nativity is unknown. Without debate, however, all contemporaries and historians agree that he came from Scots-Irish frontier ancestry. His parents, Andrew and

Elizabeth Jackson, had come to the British colonies from Ulster, Ireland, in 1765, eventually settling into the proverbial log cabin in the Carolinas. Andrew, the husband and father, died in March 1767, leaving behind a widow pregnant with the soon-to-be-born son. Upon the death of her mate, Elizabeth moved in with her sister and brother-in-law. She gave birth to Andrew, her third child, on March 15, 1767, and took over household duties for her sickly sister. Andrew Jackson, therefore, spent the first years of his life carrying his father's name but fatherless and without a home of his own, the youngest of eleven children under his mother's care.

The boy went to school and quickly gained the reputation of being the most obstreperous of the horde of children in his adopted home. He pushed his mother's patience to the limit with his furious horseback riding, swearing, and fighting. She hoped that religion would save him, but the American Revolution proved to have the greater influence on his young life. The war forced him and his family to flee from the advancing British troops and their numerous Loyalist allies, people Andrew had known all his life. He and his two older brothers became soldiers, one brother soon becoming a war casualty.

In 1781, Andrew experienced a defining moment. The British captured him and his surviving brother, Robert, while wrecking their house. In the course of the pillaging, a British officer ordered Andrew to clean his boots. When the stubborn teenager boldly refused, the officer angrily swung his sword at the young boy, producing a deep cut and permanent scars on his head and on the fingers of his left hand, which he had thrown up to protect himself. Later, Andrew and Robert were thrown into prison in Camden, South Carolina, where they suffered from insufficient food and lack of medical attention. They would have died had it not been for their mother. Still nursing the sick and wounded as she had long been doing, she somehow convinced British authorities to include her sons in an exchange for some captive British soldiers.

Andrew's nightmare was hardly over, however. Robert died, and the debilitating fever of smallpox devastated his own body. His mother put him to bed at home. When he seemed out of danger, she hurried to Charleston to look after two nephews, both deathly ill on a prison ship in the harbor. Andrew never saw her again. In the fall of 1781, cholera struck her down as she nursed the sick.

His father, mother, and two brothers were all dead; his strong mother's departure was particularly devastating. A fearful, confused teenager, Andrew Jackson was forced to face the uncertain future alone. He grew angry and frustrated, no doubt developing his lifelong anger and dogged insistence on the unquestioning devotion of friends and relatives. All his life, Andrew Jackson wanted absolute assurance from those around him that they would always remain at his side. Having lost his family as a young man, he needed devoted permanent friends to take their place. He insisted on total loyalty, and he gave the same full measure.

Several severe physical maladies added to the young Jackson's problems. He apparently suffered from something known as the "big itch," a rash that affected his entire body. Equally, if not more embarrassing, he did not stop "slobbering" until after he became an adult. Any derogatory remarks about either ailment provoked him into a no-holds-barred fight, the skinny young man refusing to quit no matter how he fared in the scuffle. Andrew Jackson had "a morbid fear of being made ridiculous."

Whether to test his perimeters or as a way of dealing with the losses and fears in his life, he became "the most roaring, rollicking, game-cocking, horse-racing, card-playing, mischievous fellow that ever lived in Salisbury" (North Carolina), where he settled after the war. Once, as a joke, he invited the town's well-known prostitutes to the Salisbury Christmas ball, feigning surprise when the respectable townspeople, particularly the women, had them escorted out. Early on, Andrew Jackson

seemed unwilling or unable to understand society women and their protocol.

Jackson had moved to Salisbury to become a lawyer, though clearly he did not keep his nose buried in the books. Still, he was admitted to the bar in 1787. He argued his first case in 1788 in Jonesborough (now Jonesboro), Tennessee, his sensitivity toward any perceived insult becoming sensationally evident. He challenged the opposing lawyer to a duel for what he interpreted to be a slander of him. Having already demonstrated that he would not stand silent before any perceived insult about his appearance, he disclosed now that his sensitivity to affronts included character as well as looks.

That spring of 1788, Jackson left the Carolinas and moved west to Tennessee, his home for the rest of his life. He eventually settled in the Nashville area and rose quickly, becoming a lawyer, jurist, politician, land speculator, plantation and slave owner, militia leader, Indian fighter, and husband and father. He made fast friends among other young men on the make, individuals like John Overton and John Coffee, who smoothed the way for him in those early days. He impressed William Blount, the new state's leading politician and wheeler-dealer. He served as Tennessee's congressman and then United States senator from 1796 to 1798. Then the state's power brokers named him judge of the Superior Court of Tennessee, a post he held for the next six years. In 1801, he helped found the Tennessee lodge of Freemasons. The following year he was elected major general of the Tennessee militia. By the age of thirty-five he had become one of the leading figures in the frontier state.

Despite his political successes, opponents in Tennessee came to view him as an adulterer and a murderer, the two accusations resulting from the same root cause: his controversial marriage to Rachel Donelson, the abiding love of his life. As a youth he had suffered from the painful loss of his mother; now another woman would bring him pain anew.

Rachel Donelson was the daughter of one of the founders of Nashville, Colonel John Donelson. In 1780, Donelson had brought his family of eleven children from Virginia to the site he and others had already hacked out of the Tennessee wilderness. He had served in the Virginia House of Burgesses, so his move to Tennessee seemed less the result of desperation than the typical nineteenth-century American search for greater economic stature. Twelve years old at the time, Rachel still had not learned to read or write, skills she barely mastered in the next several years.

Not satisfied in Tennessee, Donelson decided to seek his fortune in another part of the frontier, in Mercer County, Kentucky. Here the pretty but untutored and flirtatious Rachel met a handsome, educated man named Lewis Robards. They fell in love and married in March 1785. Then disaster struck. Someone, Indian or white, killed Colonel Donelson during a trip between Kentucky and Tennessee. His widow took her unmarried children back to Tennessee, leaving Rachel and her husband behind in the home of Robard's mother. Among the other male boarders living there was John Overton, then studying the law in Kentucky and later to become one of Tennessee's leading justices and Andrew Jackson's closest friend.

It was obvious to anyone who spent any time at the Robards place that the young couple's marriage was a disaster. As family members watched, Lewis Robards proved "high-tempered, jealous hearted, . . . cruel [and] tyrannical." He accused his wife, an outgoing fun-loving girl, of sexual promiscuity with the young male boarders there. Actually he was the one having the affairs, rumors persisting that he regularly slept with slave women. No matter. He continued to blame her and finally threw her out of the house, convinced that her forward openness with men was inappropriate for a married woman. Samuel Donelson came for his sister in 1788 and took her home to their mother. Robards's own mother, hop-

ing to salvage the marriage, urged John Overton, since he was returning to Nashville, to bring the couple back together again.

When Overton returned to Tennessee, he took up lodging with the Widow Donelson and soon brought up the possibility of the Robards's reconciliation. Rachel Robards agreed to try, and her husband moved to Tennessee and settled on land he owned in the area. Until the site was prepared, however, he and Rachel would live in her mother's house with the male boarders.

It was about this time, in 1789, that Andrew Jackson came to live on the Donelson property, sharing a small cabin with Overton. He had just arrived from North Carolina. He was immediately attracted to the vivacious Mrs. Robards. One of Andrew Jackson's enduring characteristics was his extreme gallantry toward women, manifested especially in his belief that they were innately weak and that men, as the stronger sex, were morally obligated to protect them. He no doubt displayed this solicitude toward Rachel Robards. Unfortunately, Jackson's attentions caused her husband to revert to the suspicious jealousy he had shown in Kentucky; he suspected Rachel and Andrew of having an affair. Jackson decided to move away to squelch any suspicions, but he confronted Robards first, insisting that the husband had no cause for jealousy. Robards exploded in fury, threatening to give Jackson a beating. Equally angry, Jackson suggested a duel instead. Both men backed off before matters became even more heated, and Jackson peacefully moved away. He was prepared, however, to give battle for his honor and for a woman he insisted was only a friend.

This near-violent encounter only exacerbated the Robards's marriage problems. One day in May or June of 1789, Robards decided to go back to Kentucky, allegedly to bring back his furniture and other possessions. Yet sometime on the trip he told his travel mate that he had decided not to return at all. Rachel Robards remained married, but her husband,

sure of her infidelity, had left her, without indicating just how permanent the separation might be.

In the fall of 1790, rumors filtered down to Nashville that Lewis Robards planned to force his wife to return to Kentucky with him. Taking the news seriously and unwilling to reconcile again, Rachel began making plans to escape to Natchez in Spanish Florida, where she could stay with friends until her husband's latest tirade subsided. She asked a Colonel Robert Stark, who was moving his family to that region, if she could travel with his party. Worried about the danger of Indian attack along the way, Stark looked around for another male escort. No Donelson relative seemed willing or able to go, so the obviously smitten Andrew Jackson foolishly, but predictably, volunteered his services, agreeing to travel as Rachel Robards's protector on her dangerous trip through the wilderness.

If Lewis Robards had held any doubts about Jackson's intentions before, they vanished now. Jackson must have realized how suspicious this looked to a jealous husband and an increasingly skeptical community, but he plunged ahead anyway, perhaps hoping to spur the hot-tempered husband to divorce the wife he suspected of wrong-doing and make her available to him. Jackson's gallantry toward females in general and his increasing affection for this woman in particular caused him to ignore the obviously suspicious circumstances surrounding this trip. Rachel, for her part, went along without question, displaying the womanly subservience Jackson no doubt expected from her.

There is no way of knowing just what went on as the party traveled to Bayou Pierre, some thirty miles north of Natchez. They arrived on January 12, 1790, Rachel Robards remaining there for two years and Jackson apparently visiting her every chance he had. No one knows if the two lived together during his visits, but clearly their closeness became more than platonic and was obviously suspicious to anyone who cared to notice it. The bachelor lawyer and the separated wife had developed a relationship strong

enough for Jackson to brave the hard trip from Nashville to Natchez more than once.

Meanwhile, Lewis Robards was busy himself. Since Kentucky was a district of Virginia, he asked his brother-in-law, a member of the Old Dominion's legislature, to file divorce papers for him. At the same time, in the fall of 1790, he published his divorce plans in the press, claiming his wife had eloped with another man. On December 20, 1790, the Virginia legislature gave him authority to sue for divorce in a Kentucky court. Before any judicial action could be taken, however, the legislative resolution said that Rachel Robards had to be ordered, in eight issues of the *Kentucky Gazette*, to appear before the court and respond to charges of adultery. Apparently only Lewis Robards knew all these conditions attached to his successful petition, leaving everyone else to think that the Virginia legislature had simply granted a divorce. Jackson, a lawyer, never bothered to investigate the matter himself.

Robards's behavior, after he learned of the enabling legislation, only added to the confusion. He did not publish the first mandated order in the Kentucky newspaper until an entire year had passed. Perhaps plotting to ensnare Andrew and Rachel further, he did not file for divorce in the Mercer County, Kentucky, Court of Quarters Sessions until 1793. The final decree did not get promulgated until September 27 of that same year. By this time, Andrew and Rachel had been married for more than two years, Jackson's preeminent biographer arguing that they had actually taken this step even before they had learned of the December 1790 Virginia legislature's enabling act/divorce. They returned to Nashville in August of 1791 and lived openly as man and wife, they and their community ignoring the fact that Rachel Robards Jackson was clearly a bigamist.

Jackson did not learn of the recent Kentucky court divorce order until December 1793. John Overton, his close friend since their days together in the Donelson cabin, immediately counseled a legal

remarriage. On January 24, 1794, a disturbed Rachel Robards Jackson and a stubbornly reluctant Andrew Jackson repeated their marriage vows; they became man and wife legally. The Nashville community ignored the complicated legality, and this confusing affair of the heart and courts had no impact on Jackson's solid political and economical standing in Tennessee.

Clearly, however, his marriage dispute bothered Jackson. He worried about its effect on his future. As an individual who would not tolerate criticism and who needed to feel secure in the permanence of his marriage, he reacted violently when two men threw it in his face. In 1803, John Sevier, Jackson's long-time political enemy, won election as governor of Tennessee. Still angry over some accusations Jackson had made against him in that campaign and during an earlier election for militia major general, Sevier accosted Jackson before a large crowd in front of the courthouse in Knoxville. "I know of no great service you have rendered the country except taking a trip to Natchez with another man's wife," Sevier yelled out. Jackson lunged at him, shouting: "Great God! Do you mention *her* sacred name?" The crowd had to pull the irate husband off his accuser. Before they did so, however, Jackson challenged Sevier to a duel. No one was going to impugn his wife's integrity (and, of course, his own) without paying the price.

Jackson arrived at the dueling grounds at the scheduled time, only to have to cool his heels for two days because Sevier and his seconds were nowhere to be found. When he finally saw them approaching, he charged his horse forward, seeking to use his cane as a lance. Sevier, trying to dismount from his horse, fell off in his haste, and Jackson frustratingly rode around, hoping to find someone, anyone, to gore. The two men canceled the duel by mutual agreement, but Jackson never forgave Sevier for what he always considered a slanderous assault on the virtue of his beloved wife and on his own honor.

In 1806, another aspersion on Rachel Jackson's purity brought forth the same violent response. Jack-

son and Charles Dickinson became embroiled in an argument over a horse race. In his anger and apparently while under the influence of alcohol, Dickinson ridiculed Rachel for her lack of morality, though he later apologized for his words. Jackson was not appeased, and the harsh dialogue between the two men continued for months. Finally there seemed to be no other way out: there had to be a duel.

As the sun rose above the horizon on the early morning of May 30, 1806, Jackson and Dickinson met on the field of honor in nearby Kentucky. John Overton had convinced his reluctant friend to wear a loose-fitting coat, apparently hoping to camouflage his thin frame in the expansive cloth. Dickinson, allegedly the best shot in the state, fired first, and Jackson's left hand reached for his chest, although he displayed no other sign of pain. Dickinson shrieked in fear, upset that he had not killed his opponent with the first shot. Jackson aimed his pistol, but it failed to fire. He then pulled the trigger a second time, and this time he drove Dickinson to the ground with a direct hit to the stomach. Jackson calmly walked away, blood flowing freely from a chest wound, but his stubborn will refused to give onlookers the satisfaction of acknowledging pain or injury. Dickinson died within the day.

Jackson never budged from his belief that he had only done what was right. He carried Dickinson's bullet where it lodged near his heart for the rest of his life, a constant reminder of his unbending resolve to protect his honor. The bullet also reminded him that his honor was inexorably intertwined with the virtue of the most important woman in his life, his wife Rachel. Any attack on her was an assault on him, too. Even in those days of the double standard for men and women, if his wife was a sexual sinner, so was he. The only difference was that he could defend himself and she could not. He had to do it for her even if it meant that he would have to dispute the appellation "murderer" for the rest of his days.

Jackson seemed convinced that martial exploits offered the best way to rehabilitate his reputation after



DREADFUL FRACAS BETWEEN THE GENERAL AND THE BENTONS AT NASHVIL

This popular drawing shows Jackson embroiled in a fight with Missouri politician Thomas Hart Benton. Jesse, Benton's brother,

became involved in the fracas and shot Jackson in the arm and shoulder. (Library of Congress)

the two duels. In 1805, he listened enthusiastically to Aaron Burr's nebulous scheme of military action against the Spanish Empire but then quickly became disenchanted with the whole idea. In 1812, just before the United States declared war on England, Jackson unsuccessfully tried to get Tennessee authorities to allow him to lead a military expedition against the Creek Indians. Thwarted and increasingly angered over apparent American impotence in the face of British assaults on land and sea and over his own inability to change it, he lashed out against an available target and once more defended a woman's honor.

In 1811, Silas Dinsmore, Indian agent in Mississippi's Choctaw region, tried to enforce a federal law

requiring non-Indians passing through the territory to produce proper documentation. Slaveholders, for example, had to prove that slaves traveling with them were not fugitives. This administrative practice delayed the slaveholders on their travels to and from New Orleans, so they grew increasingly angry at the agent. When Jackson himself brought slaves from Louisiana to Tennessee, through Choctaw lands, he refused to obey Dinsmore's regulation and told anyone who would listen to him on his return to Nashville that his refusal had put a stop to further insults to lawful slaveholders.

Dinsmore had not backed down at all; indeed, he had only recently restrained a woman traveling with ten blacks through his territory. Angrily, Jackson

wrote his congressman that the Indian agent had demonstrated "*lawless tyranny . . . over a helpless and unprotected female.*" He threatened to march into Mississippi and personally thrash the offending official unless the government took action first. It was not his wife or his mother who needed protection now, but rather a woman he did not even know. No matter, Andrew Jackson would not stand for an affront to any woman. Certainly Jackson's anger against Dinsmore concerned slavery and Indians more than it concerned this unknown female, but it is no accident that he expressed his frustrations by defending a seemingly wronged woman. To him, assault against any woman indicated the mark of unspeakable and unforgivable baseness and cowardice, and he would respond forcefully to thwart it.

Jackson found little satisfaction in his minispat with Dinsmore. His reputation still needed redemption, so he continued to feel frustrated at his lack of military action in the nation's recently declared war against England. He led a Tennessee militia to Natchez on his way to New Orleans to join the war, but he was shocked in February 1813 to receive a War Department order dismissing him and his men from the military service. Frustrated again, he refused to dismiss his soldiers, determined to force them to return to Tennessee as an organized unit. On the difficult return trip, his tough determination to drive his soldiers on, no matter the many obstacles, gained him the appellation "Old Hickory."

At this point, in September 1813, Jackson foolishly became embroiled in another bout of violence, this time with Thomas Hart Benton, later a prominent Missouri politician and supporter, and his brother, Jesse. Once again, Jackson believed it a matter of honor. He had acted as a second in a June duel between a member of his staff and Jesse Benton, and had become angry at Tom Benton's taunts over his role in the fiasco. Jackson physically attacked Tom at a Nashville hotel. Seeing his brother under assault, Jesse shot Jackson in the arm and shoulder. One bullet fractured a bone, and the other remained lodged

in Jackson's left arm until it was removed years later during his presidency.

Although injured and in pain, Jackson was still determined to participate in the war that had broken out between the United States and England. In Alabama, the Creek Indians had begun a general uprising, and in August 1813 they overran Fort Mims, massacring many women and children. A horrified Jackson angrily led his Tennessee militia into Alabama to avenge the slaughter, and three months later he led a massacre at the village of Talluhatchee. After the killing, someone brought Jackson an Indian baby from the battlefield, and he tried to get some Creek women to adopt the child. They refused, telling Jackson to kill the boy since all his relatives were dead. Jackson, probably remembering his own orphanhood during the American Revolution, adopted the baby himself, and he and his wife gave the child a good home until the boy died of tuberculosis in 1828.

After one more successful battle against the Indians, Jackson discovered he had an enemy in his own ranks. Malnourished from lack of food and reaching the end of their enlistments, some of his militia wanted to return home, an entire brigade rising in mutiny. Jackson stood down these defiant soldiers not once but several times, yet he still saw his force melt away. New recruits rushed to the colors, however, impressed by his determination to keep fighting. In March 1814, he slaughtered the Creeks, women and children included, at Horseshoe Bend, Alabama. This bloodbath broke the back of the Creek uprising, and later at the Treaty of Fort Jackson, the victorious Tennessean took most of the Indians' land. Promotion to brigadier general in the United States Army and command of the entire Gulf region quickly followed. Jackson's massacre of Indian women did not bother him; gallantry toward women extended only to white females and did not include Indians or blacks.

In late January 1815, Jackson led a motley collection of regular army men, militia, pirates, and free

blacks to defeat an army of British regulars at New Orleans, a startling victory. He became the symbol of America's ability to stand up to the British, a hero whose stature equalled that of the leaders of the American Revolutionary generation. War gave him the status and the personal satisfaction for which he had been hungering. Importantly, too, it allowed him to rescue his dead mother from the shadow of the once conquering British, who had marched through their neighborhood and created the conditions that had resulted in her death and his orphanhood.

Andrew Jackson now became the nation's leading general. When he returned to Tennessee, it was clear that in his home state the Sevier and Dickinson duels were forgotten. Jackson was no longer a murderer, but a universally admired hero, the unusual circumstance of his marriage forgotten. Making sure this status stuck, John Henry Eaton, a little-known Nashville lawyer who had served with him in the army, completed a laudatory biography that only added to the Old Hero's fame. Meanwhile in Washington a young girl, later to be the biographer's wife and Jackson's maligned friend, survived the British sack of the capital and was growing into womanhood.

Jackson next negotiated several successful treaties with the southern Indians before the national government called on him to lead a campaign against recalcitrant Seminoles in Spanish Florida. These Indians were aiding runaway slaves from the United States, and Spanish authorities seemed powerless to stop them. Jackson's orders from President James Monroe and Secretary of War John C. Calhoun told him to pursue the Seminoles but not attack them if they took shelter in any Spanish fortification. Jackson quickly pushed into Spanish Florida, and just as quickly he went far beyond his instructions. In April and May 1818, he captured several Spanish towns, forced the Spanish governor to flee, and hanged two British subjects for allegedly aiding the Indians. Jackson's actions caused a major diplomatic flap and a se-

rious disagreement in Monroe's cabinet. The majority of the president's inner circle, led by Calhoun, wanted to censure Jackson for going beyond his orders, and Speaker Henry Clay gave a scathing speech against Jackson on the House floor. The House itself refused to disapprove of Jackson's activities, however, and Secretary of State John Quincy Adams used this as a lever to force Spain to sell all of Florida to the United States. Adams's support in the cabinet kept any movement against Jackson from progressing very far. The Monroe administration knew their general had exceeded his authority, but it made good political sense just to let the matter drop. At that time and later, however, political opponents tried to use this so-called Seminole Affair against Jackson, and he took their partisan criticism personally, lashing out against it whenever it reared its head.

Andrew Jackson, the poor orphan boy of the American Revolution, had become one of the nation's most celebrated personalities as a result of the War of 1812 and his repeated successes against the Indians. Unfortunately, his activities in Florida revitalized the murder charges. His terrible health was another problem. His damaged left arm ached incessantly, and when he coughed, he often produced blood. The two bullets he carried in his body caused recurrent physical ailments, which would have killed most people, but Jackson's stubborn will kept driving him on. He continued to negotiate Indian removal pacts, he began building the Hermitage, and he spent an unhappy three months as governor of the Florida territory he had gained for the United States. He returned to Nashville in 1821, with public admiration for him growing. In July 1822, the Tennessee legislature nominated him for the presidency. . . .

In the November 1824 election, Jackson won the popular vote over John Quincy Adams, Henry Clay, and William H. Crawford by a wide margin. Since he did not gain a majority in the Electoral College, however, the election had to be resolved in the House of Representatives. Insisting that he was no

politician, Jackson stood above the fray leading to the House vote. Others were not so altruistic and negotiated the best deal they could make for themselves and the candidates they supported. Henry Clay of Kentucky, like Jackson a candidate from the West and thus a major rival, threw his support to Adams. Clay could not stand Adams personally, but he found the New Englander's positions on public matters closer to his own than those of Andrew Jackson. On January 9, 1825, the House chose Adams to be the next president. Soon after, Adams chose Clay to be his secretary of state, the heir apparent to the presidency. Jackson roared in anger.

Throughout his life, whether it was the recurring matter of a woman's virtue, his own honor, or some public event, Jackson saw evil conspiracy and corruption in anything or anyone who stood in his way. In his own mind, his position, whatever it might be, was the correct one, the virtuous one; anyone who opposed him represented corruption. Just as Jackson was willing to duel whenever he believed someone called his honor as a gentleman into question, so he would fight to the finish whenever he believed he saw corruption. Consequently, the fact that he had won the popular vote for president, yet lost the election in the House, proved that he (and the people, his supporters) had been cheated. Adams and Clay had conspired together to thwart justice. A "corrupt bargain" had ensured that the people would not have the final say. "So you see," he shouted, "the *Judas* of the West has closed the contract and will receive the thirty pieces of silver . . . was there ever witnessed such a bare-faced corruption in any country before?"

Andrew Jackson, hurt before by the British and by the bullets of those who challenged his honor and that of his wife, had never quit before, and he would not do so now. He would conquer his corrupt adversaries as he had conquered Charles Dickinson. There was no half way; he determined to defeat this evil before it defeated him and through him destroyed the people and the nation.

In 1825, the Tennessee legislature passed a resolution nominating him once again for the presidency, even though the next election was three years away. His supporters in Tennessee and throughout the nation began to organize into a loose coalition of state organizations that eventually came to call itself the Democratic party. They attacked Adams, Clay, and their supporters at every turn in the Congress and on the local level. Democrats shouted their determination to overthrow the "corrupt bargain."

But it would not be so easy. The 1828 election campaign was one of the dirtiest in American history. Jackson's opponents combed through his past and attacked him viciously for his real and imagined transgressions. The so-called Coffin Hand Bill, the brainchild of John Binns of the *Philadelphia Press*, purported to document Jackson's alleged murders of twelve men in duels, executions, and various other war and peacetime activities. Charles Hammond of the *Cincinnati Gazette* launched a similar attack. High among the accusations against Jackson stood his alleged propensity for cockfighting, gambling, and cursing. Henry Clay castigated him as being a "military chieftain," who threatened American liberties. As one modern historian has phrased it: Jackson was "pictured as a bloody-minded tyrant who executed militiamen without trial, a sensualist who lived in sin with a woman to whom he had never been married, an ignorant, unreligious desperado who could scarcely write his own name."

On the most personal level, Jackson's opponents labeled his mother a British prostitute who had married a black man by whom she had given birth to Jackson, thus making him a black Englishman. Opponents dragged his own marriage through the mud, calling his wife a bigamist and an adulteress and accusing Jackson of being a wife stealer. "A vote for Jackson," an East Tennessee congressional candidate declared in an 1827 handbill, "meant a vote for a man who thinks that if he takes a fancy to his neighbor's pretty wife, he 'has nothing to do but to take a pistol in one hand and a horsewhip in another and

. . . possess her.'” Shocked and angered at this attack, for political purposes, against his mother and beloved wife, Jackson wanted to lash out against his opposition, particularly Henry Clay, whom he thought especially responsible for such villainy. He told Duff Green, editor of the newly established Jacksonian newspaper in Washington, the *United States Telegraph*, to attack the opposition forthrightly but not unlimitedly. “Female character never should be introduced or touched by my friends,” Jackson instructed, “unless a continuation of attack should continue to be made against Mrs. J. and then only, by way of *Just retribution* upon the *known guilty*. . . . *I never war against females*, and it is only the base and cowardly that do so.” But Jackson wished he could battle against those who dared attack his beloved Rachel, but he knew that, for once in his life, he had to remain silent.

As Jackson seethed, his supporters grew in numbers and became more unified. John Quincy Adams’s vice president, John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, and New York political boss Martin Van Buren joined the Jacksonian bandwagon, as did Thomas Hart Benton, now a senator from Missouri. . . .

The closer it came to election time in November 1828, the more confident Jackson and his supporters became. Only Rachel Jackson seemed unhappy. The attacks on her reputation stung her, and her health appeared to worsen. In June, Lyncoya, the Indian boy her husband Andrew had rescued from an Alabama battlefield and adopted as his own, died at the age of sixteen. Rachel did all she could to save her son and, when she failed, she was devastated by his death.

She especially worried about becoming the president’s wife and living in Washington, having to face the torments of public life. “I had rather be a door-keeper in the house of God than to live in that palace at Washington,” she lamented. No longer the attractive woman of her youth, she was, according to a contemporary description, “a coarse-looking, stout

little old woman.” She had a dark complexion at a time when the mark of beauty was to be pale. Yet she was “so good natured and motherly” that people felt “immediately . . . at ease with her.” She was a plain but charming woman, “benevolent” being the word usually applied to her. Though worried about handling the duties of first lady, she determined to trudge ahead, to be the faithful, supportive wife that she had always been and that society expected of its women.

Jackson’s great desire and his wife’s deeply felt dread came to fruition when he defeated John Quincy Adams to become the seventh president of the United States, winning a smashing victory in the Electoral College, 178 to 83. Eight hundred thousand more males voted in the election of 1828 than had participated in 1824. The “Old Hero” from frontier Tennessee defeated the incumbent president, son of a previous officeholder and representative of rock-ribbed New England and the elite tradition of the presidency. The elite were out, the people were in.

The nation had undergone a massive political change. The party of Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and James Monroe, which, since the Federalist party demise after the War of 1812 was the only national political organization left, split in two. The Democrats of Andrew Jackson harkened back to the states’ rights position of the original Jeffersonians, while the National Republicans of John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay supported the federal government supremacy that Adams had attempted to establish during his term.

The two-party system was born with a vengeance. The National Republicans represented the traditional elites, while the Jacksonians advertised themselves as the representatives of the common people. To argue that this party development was philosophical, however, would misrepresent the issue. There were National Republicans who were common men, and there were Jacksonians who were members of the elite. Party efforts revolved around elect-

ing candidates more than implementing ideology. Consequently, the era saw the birth of the politics of personality. Politicians attacked one another more than they battled over specific issues. In fact, they consciously obfuscated differences to prevent alienating any block of voters. Attacking one's opponent, tarring him with the brush of corruption, produced electoral success. Earlier on, when politics was the avocation of gentlemen, such attacks against an opponent's character were considered inappropriate. This attitude changed dramatically in the 1820s.

As far as Andrew Jackson and his supporters were concerned, therefore, they had won a victory in 1828 over major corruption. The main point of dispute during the Adams administration, after all, had been the "corrupt bargain" of 1824. This issue represented to the Jacksonians what was wrong with American society and politics overall. Corrupt elitists used the government for their own betterment, Jacksonians insisted, and the people suffered as a result. Jackson, as the tribune of the people, smashed such corruption in the election of 1828, the argument ran, and he could be counted on to root out all its manifestations in the national government and its offices. The people would no longer be fleeced, as they had been under Adams. They would have honest government for the benefit of all—through the agency of Andrew Jackson, the people's representative and the agent of reform.

But not every Jacksonian viewed reality this way. John C. Calhoun, for example, was Andrew Jackson's running mate less because he wanted to reform the Adams administration (of which he was the vice president after all) than because he saw an excellent opportunity to become president when Andrew Jackson retired from office, or more probably when he died during his term. This was no treachery; it was simply reasonable, practical politics. Calhoun, the great nationalist of his early years in Congress, was moving toward becoming the philosopher of states' rights, so he felt more comfortable with Jackson's localism than he did with Adams's nationalism.

He easily took his stand at Jackson's side. His native state of South Carolina was growing increasingly worried about threats to its slave system, so it viewed states' rights as a logical and effective defense against national encroachment on the institution.

Jacksonians, although they were hardly unified as a party, were pleased at the great victory of 1828. They were clearly in the ascendancy, and the future looked full of political promise. Only Rachel Jackson seemed withdrawn. She was pleased for her husband's sake, but concerned about her own future. She wondered whether she should even accompany her husband to Washington, only reluctantly accepting John Henry Eaton's advice that she not give in to those who had been attacking her. Women in Nashville began preparing a wardrobe for her, and the city scheduled a great day of celebration prior to the Jacksons' departure for the inauguration.

Feeling little enthusiasm and even less strength, Rachel Jackson bestirred herself to prepare for her travel to the nation's capital. She went to Nashville to do some shopping and there stumbled upon a pamphlet defending her virtue against opposition attacks. She had known before of the attacks against her and her husband, but had never realized the extent of their vehemence. She broke down, trying to hide her panic when she returned home, before finally telling Andrew Jackson of her discovery.

A few days later, she had a heart attack. She rallied briefly, but on December 22, 1828, to her husband's unbelieving horror, she suffered another massive attack and died. Jackson kept hoping that she would somehow still recover, but he was doomed to tearful disappointment. He stayed near her dead form all that night and through the next day, finally and reluctantly pulling himself away. His beloved Rachel was indeed dead, and there was nothing he could do about it. He could not fight for her any longer. After her funeral, he could only pray "that I may have the grace to enable me to forget or forgive any enemy who has ever maligned that blessed one who is now safe from all suffering and sorrow, whom they tried

THE AGE OF JACKSON

to put to shame for my sake!" Convinced that his political enemies had killed his wife with their slanderous attacks in order to get him, by his lifelong code he had to vindicate her by punishing them. He may have prayed for grace to forgive, but in his heart he coveted revenge.

Andrew Jackson's chivalrous defense of women, in part the product of the slanderous remarks directed at his wife, erupted into the so-called "petticoat affair." John Eaton, Jackson's secretary of war, had recently married the wife of a boarding house owner and a woman who gossips argued was of questionable virtue. Cabinet members' wives and the spouse of the vice president, John C. Calhoun, snubbed the Eatons. Predictably, "Old Hickory" came to the wronged woman's defense, and the resulting uproar led to the reorganization of the cabinet and increased hostility toward Calhoun. The favorite toast of Washington barbs soon became: "To the next Cabinet, may they all be bachelors, or leave their wives at home."

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 Andrew Jackson was more popular than any other president since George Washington. Why were the American people, especially the "common man," so attracted to him? Contrast his appeal with that of Washington, whom you met in selection 10. Would the two men have been comfortable in each other's company?
- 2 With the exception of John Adams and John Quincy Adams of Massachusetts, all of the previous presidents before Jackson were Virginia planters of significant wealth. How did Jackson's background differ from that of the presidents who came before him? Describe Jackson's early years and what Marszalek calls the "defining moment" in his life.
- 3 Explain Jackson's attitude toward and defense of women. Do you think that these deep-seated feelings were a product of his childhood and the loss of his mother?
- 4 In many ways, Jackson seemed to represent a number of troubling contradictions. For example, how do you explain the fact that his protectiveness toward women did not extend to those who were slaves or Native Americans? He massacred the Creeks, including women and children, at Horseshoe Bend, but why would he and his wife later adopt an Indian child and provide it with a loving home?
- 5 Character assassination and negative campaigning have characterized recent American politics. How did you react when you saw the same factors in the presidential election of 1828? What were some of the slanderous charges that Jackson's opponents directed at him, and how did the general react?

