

Andrew Jackson



More nearly than any of his predecessors, Andrew Jackson was elected by popular vote; as President he sought to act as the direct representative of the common man.

Born in a backwoods settlement in the Carolinas in 1767, he received sporadic education. But in his late teens he read law for about two years, and he became an outstanding young lawyer in Tennessee. Fiercely jealous of his honor, he engaged in brawls, and in a duel killed a man who cast an unjustified slur on his wife Rachel.

Jackson prospered sufficiently to buy slaves and to build a mansion, the Hermitage, near Nashville. He was the first man elected from Tennessee to the House of Representatives, and he served briefly in the Senate. A major general in the War of 1812, Jackson became a national hero when he defeated the British at New Orleans.

In 1824 some state political factions rallied around Jackson; by 1828 enough had joined "Old Hickory" to win numerous state elections and control of the Federal administration in Washington.

In his first Annual Message to Congress, Jackson recommended eliminating the Electoral College. He also tried to democratize Federal officeholding. Already state machines were being built on patronage, and a New York Senator openly proclaimed "that to the victors belong the spoils. . . ."

Jackson took a milder view. Decrying officeholders who seemed to enjoy life tenure, he believed Government duties could be "so plain and simple" that offices should rotate among deserving applicants.

As national politics polarized around Jackson and his opposition, two parties grew out of the old Republican Party--the Democratic Republicans, or Democrats, adhering to Jackson; and the National Republicans, or Whigs, opposing him.

Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and other Whig leaders proclaimed themselves defenders of popular liberties against the usurpation of Jackson. Hostile cartoonists portrayed him as King Andrew I.

Behind their accusations lay the fact that Jackson, unlike previous Presidents, did not defer to Congress in policy-making but used his power of the veto and his party leadership to assume command.

The greatest party battle centered around the Second Bank of the United States, a private corporation but virtually a Government-sponsored monopoly. When Jackson appeared hostile toward it, the Bank threw its power against him.

Clay and Webster, who had acted as attorneys for the Bank, led the fight for its re-charter in Congress. "The bank," Jackson told Martin Van Buren, "is trying to kill me, but I will kill it!" Jackson, in vetoing the recharter bill, charged the Bank with undue economic privilege.

His views won approval from the American electorate; in 1832 he polled more than 56 percent of the popular vote and almost five times as many electoral votes as Clay.

Jackson met head-on the challenge of John C. Calhoun, leader of forces trying to rid themselves of a high protective tariff.

When South Carolina undertook to nullify the tariff, Jackson ordered armed forces to Charleston and privately threatened to hang Calhoun. Violence seemed imminent until Clay negotiated a compromise: tariffs were lowered and South Carolina dropped nullification.

In January of 1832, while the President was dining with friends at the White House, someone whispered to him that the Senate had rejected the nomination of Martin Van Buren as Minister to England. Jackson jumped to his feet and exclaimed, "By the Eternal! I'll smash them!" So he did. His favorite, Van Buren, became Vice President, and succeeded to the Presidency when "Old Hickory" retired to the Hermitage, where he died in June 1845.

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