

A Political Testament (Jackson's Farewell 1837)

Andrew Jackson

Historical Background

Before becoming President, Andrew Jackson served as a general in the US army. His dramatic military victories, such as the Battles of New Orleans (1815) and Horseshoe Bend (1814), made him a beloved figure and created a legendary persona for the man dubbed "Old Hickory." Significantly, Jackson was the first man elected President not from a core group of established American founders and, this fact, along with his military success, helped create a heroic "man of the people" aura that was part myth, part reality. His followers were intensely enthusiastic and loyal and they took great joy in the commonsensical approach he brought to politics. The 1830s have generally been dubbed the era of "Jacksonian Democracy," which represented a major shift both in the nation's political discourse and party alignment. Jackson's plebian followers created the modern Democratic Party, whose rise marked the end of the old gentry Federalist-Republican system with its aspiration to conduct national politics on a non-partisan basis.

Historical Significance

In his farewell speech, Jackson displays the unique ethos that brought him so much public fanfare. He overflows with praise and thanks to the people of the nation and expresses a kind of humility that masks some of his more aggressive and inflammatory rhetoric, such as that aimed at Native American tribes who allegedly blocked the "improvement of states" and retarded the nation's march toward prosperity.

Besides aptly illustrating Jackson's personality and rhetorical prowess, his farewell also touches on many of the major political issues and concerns of the 1830s which endure today, such as a general distrust for banks and bankers (brought on, in this case, by the Panic of 1819), the need to reform government, and the call for limiting its growth and especially its ability to tax the citizenry. Jackson expresses great pride that, after his tenure, the federal constitution can no longer be considered "an experiment," even while he voices prescient concern for the union and warns of grave danger should it succumb to sectional divisions.

Key Concepts and Learning Objectives

Concepts: Jacksonian democracy; federalism; limited government; national bank; manifest destiny

Learning objectives: On completion of this unit, students will be able to:

- outline the major features of Jackson's political philosophy;
- describe the threats Jackson saw to national unity and tranquility, including those posed by native Americans and sectionalism, and assess the remedies he offered for these threats;
- describe how Jackson combines a call for a strong nation with the desire for a government whose powers are also strictly limited;
- explain Jackson's reasons for opposing a national bank; compare and contrast his concerns with current concerns about elite moneyed interests;
- assess the extent of continuity between Jackson's rhetoric and current political concerns, such as limiting the size of government, the idea of a national destiny, and the need to "purify" Washington so that it may better reflect the views of citizens.

Questions to Explore

According to Jackson, what moral qualities and habits does a people need in order to maintain its freedom? Do you think anything should be added to or subtracted from his prescription?

Jackson struggles with problems created by cultural diversity in America in two different ways, in response to the warlike native Americans and the slave society of the American south. Is there a principled basis for his overall program for dealing with the problem of diversity? Within a single nation, how far can or should tolerance for cultural differences go? Are there habits or mores or laws that we should not allow within our borders, even if the majority of people in a local community approve of them?

Is it possible for the nation to aspire to greatness while still strictly limiting the size of its government and curtailing its ability to tax and generate revenue?

Andrew Jackson is sometimes thought of as a foundational figure of the American right. Is this characterization accurate? Consider, for example, that his followers were the founders of the modern Democratic Party. Are there assumptions that the Jacksonian democrats share with those of the modern American left? What important areas of shared concern do you see between Jackson and each of the major parties today, and for each of these, what differences do you see? For example, you might compare and contrast Jackson's opposition to taxation with contemporary Republican charges against "tax and spend" democrats.

What is Jackson's attitude toward Native Americans? How might this attitude have been shaped by specific elements of his life, his political commitments, and his political base of support? How might it be connected to the Indian Removal Act of 1830?

Before Jackson's election, political participation was largely limited to educated elites. What light does Jackson's speech shed on the advantages and disadvantages of extending participation to the common people? Is there anything to fear from too much plebian influence? From demagoguery? What might the Founders have thought of this speech? If these dangers are real, how might they best be mitigated?