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Abstract

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Andrew Jackson: Our First Populist President

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JEFF TAYLOR

In Defense of Andrew Jackson, *Bradley J. Birzer, Regnery History, 209 pages*

I grew up with an affinity for our seventh president. It came naturally—partly from patriotic interest in U.S. history but also from family history. In 1814, my great-great-great-great-grandfather, Barzilla Taylor, fought Creek Red Sticks at the Battles of Emuckfaw and Enotachopco Creek, in what is now central Alabama, as a Tennessee volunteer under General Andrew Jackson. One year later, three of Barzilla's brothers were with Jackson at the more famous Battle of New Orleans.

My long-ago personal connection to Jackson parallels the underlying theme of Bradley Birzer's book. Birzer, a historian at Hillsdale College, and a scholar-at-large at *TAC*, posits that Jackson was, in some ways, "the first truly *American* president." His experiences and attitudes were deeply rooted in our young nation's soil, his military leadership during our "Second War of Independence" echoed that of General Washington, and he became an exemplar of democracy.

Andrew Jackson's story is one of unlikely success. His Scotch-Irish immigrant parents settled in the Carolina border area. Deprived of his father a few weeks before birth, when Andrew Sr. died in a farm accident, the red-haired boy had a hardscrabble upbringing. His mother and two brothers all died of illness during the Revolutionary War, leaving him an orphan at 14 years of age.

We need not buy into the exceptionalism myth of "only in America" to recognize something quintessentially American in Jackson's gradual rise to success. By the time he took the reins of executive power, the youthful Carolinian was an elderly planter in Tennessee on the eve of his 62nd birthday.

Jackson was a slaveholder on his Hermitage farm outside of Nashville, but, in his day, he was viewed as more of a westerner than a southerner. In comparison to the Atlantic-bordering Eastern Seaboard—North and South—the frontier West was considered wild and not quite civilized in the 1820s. Unlike our nation’s first six presidents, Jackson was not classically educated. Nonetheless, he eventually became a lawyer, served briefly in both the U.S. House and Senate, and spent time as a state judge.

Although Jackson was not really a professional politician or statesman, having a preference for agriculture and the military instead, he was territorial governor of Florida in 1821, and returned to the Senate a couple of years after that. His second stint in Washington brought him a little more respectability among the political class.

One ironic aspect of Jackson’s life, as noted by Birzer, was his once-positive relations with John Quincy Adams. Adams was the only Monroe cabinet member to support General Jackson’s actions in Spanish Florida, and Jackson admired the secretary of state when both were first touted for president. Adams and Jackson were White House rivals in 1824 and 1828. The former won the first contest through a controversial U.S. House disconnect with popular and electoral voting, and the latter won a rematch four years later.

Lacking elite status and a liberal arts education, Jackson instead “knew the Bible, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and his own experiences on the frontier and in war.” Birzer concludes that this was “more than enough to make him an American, a republican, and a great president.”

He was a polarizing figure in his day, but Jackson’s ranking by historians as a near-great president and inclusion on U.S. currency betoken a lasting legacy of personal charisma, bravery, and honesty, mixed with respect for the common people. If his historical stock is on a downturn today, that says less about Jackson and more about current progressive pieties.

I approached *In Defense of Andrew Jackson* with some trepidation, partly because of the title and partly because of the publisher. Yes, I’ve been an admirer of “Old Hickory” since childhood, but as a mature scholar, I find historical whitewashes and political agenda pushers to be

unhelpful and annoying. Even actual facts, in such a context, are suspicious.

I feared this might be a lightweight pro-Jackson tract, with a trendy Donald Trump tie-in. I was wrong. Birzer is a bona fide historian and he writes like it. He acknowledges up front that Jackson had “many” faults. There is a lopsidedness to his handling of the more controversial aspects of Jackson’s legacy, but in presenting his side of the argument—even if it sometimes falls into special pleading—Birzer is balancing out other recent books that lean disproportionately toward the other side of the debate.

The tone is not defensive. Important information is brought to our attention, including extensive primary sources such as letters and newspapers contemporaneous with Jackson. This is not a superficial rehash of other biographies packaged for a conservative audience. This is a well-written book based on valuable historical spadework. It is a short book, perfect as an introduction to Jackson for those who have a couple of days to spare. It’s not going to replace in-depth treatments. The gold standard, for those wishing detailed information about Jackson’s life, remains historian Robert V. Remini’s three-volume biography from the 1970s and 1980s.

Birzer spends too much time detailing John C. Calhoun’s political theory in connection with tariff nullification. This could have been summarized in a paragraph instead of seven pages of a brief book. More interesting is a tantalizing reference to Jackson’s letter to ex-senator Nathaniel Macon, in which “Jackson admitted that while he still believed” in the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions of Jefferson and Madison, “he also believed in the Union.” Some of the space devoted to the Calhoun summary could have been more profitably devoted to the letters of these two Jeffersonians, as they wrestled with the tension between states’ rights and union preservation.

The inclusion of President Jackson’s farewell address (March 1837) is one of the highlights of the book. Unfortunately, the circumstances of the address are not noted. Was it spoken to an audience or only written? Was it composed entirely by Jackson or was he assisted? It is not one of the more controversial aspects of Jackson’s life or presidency, but I find his perspective on the military establishment to be especially interesting. Birzer makes mention of it several times in the

book. Even more might have been made of it, considering the knee-jerk tendency of American conservatives to conflate militarism with patriotism (thereby giving big government, when marketed as “defense,” a pass).

When writing his Independence Day toasts in 1805, “Jackson, tellingly, toasted the militias before the army,” and prior to the War of 1812, he contrasted the liberty-preservation quality of a well-organized militia with the obvious “corruption” in “our regular army.” At his first inauguration, Jackson “welcomed militias but wanted no national military participation.” In his address as incoming president, Jackson reiterated his view of standing armies as being “dangerous to free government in time of peace,” said that he would “not seek to enlarge our present [military] establishment,” and called the volunteer militia “the bulwark of our defense.”

Using Jackson’s “preference for militias over a standing army” as an example, Birzer comments, “He wanted to keep authority and its exercise at the most immediate and local level, trusting that free men would sacrifice themselves for the greatest duties of hearth and home when called upon.”

Despite his own military background, Jackson did not unnecessarily glorify war or disparage peace. In his farewell address, he wrote, “It is unquestionably our true interest to cultivate the most friendly understanding with every nation and to avoid by every honorable means the calamities of war.” Calling the navy “our natural means of defense,” the outgoing president coupled naval strength with the traditional militia as the two bulwarks of U.S. protection while omitting any reference to a standing army.

As a plantation proprietor, Jackson owned hundreds of slaves over the course of his life. While Jefferson owned slaves and was ambivalent on race, our third president publicly condemned slavery as a moral evil and called for gradual abolition of the institution. Jackson did not denounce slavery and apparently did not have scruples about it. Instead, in his farewell address, Jackson denounced the anti-slavery movement: “The citizens of every State should studiously avoid everything calculated to wound the sensibility or offend the just pride of the people of other States, and they should frown upon any proceedings within their own borders likely to disturb the tranquillity of

their political brethren in other portions of the Union.” Without identifying them by name, Jackson declared that abolitionists deserved “strongest reprobation” for a false humanitarianism that was making “mischief” and imperiling the union.

We can all agree that Jackson’s pro-slavery stance was a real weakness, but Birzer eschews the temptation to judge him without context or mercy by the standards of our day. In other words, he does not sacrifice to the god of political correctness. Undoubtedly, Andrew Jackson was no John Woolman. But then few early 19th century Americans were Woolman, or anyone akin to him, in standing up for kindness, justice, and peace.

An even bigger stain on Jackson’s reputation comes from his signing of the Indian Removal Act in 1830, which forced the Cherokee and other southern tribes to abandon their land and migrate west to what later became Indian Territory (Oklahoma). He promised at his first inauguration to pursue a “just and liberal policy” toward American Indians, but most of us view the subsequent Trail of Tears as a horrific crime.

Birzer argues that Jackson had a nuanced interpretation of Indians, believing that they were “natural republicans with republican instincts and human rights guaranteed by God” but also believing that they were “well behind white Americans in terms of culture and civilization, a constant threat to the lives of settlers and their families, and a direct military threat likely to ally with America’s European enemies.” Birzer points out that one of Jackson’s adopted sons was an orphaned Indian boy.

Spending six pages on President Jackson’s removal policy, the author acknowledges that the law was controversial at the time and that it was “a humanitarian disaster” as implemented, using Tocqueville’s observation as evidence. Even so, Birzer is hesitant to call Jackson a hypocrite and quotes Remini’s defense of Jackson’s policy—asserting that it was designed to protect the southeastern tribes from the extinction that had befallen most of the northeastern tribes.

In his farewell address, Jackson defended his policy: “While the safety and comfort of our own citizens have been greatly promoted by their removal, the philanthropist will rejoice that the remnant of that ill-fated

race has been at length placed beyond the reach of injury or oppression, and that the paternal care of the General Government will hereafter watch over them and protect them.”

Is it fair to judge a person, primarily, on the basis of his biggest failings? Yes, they must be part of the evaluation. But most of the evaluation? Who among us can stand up to that kind of scrutiny, especially historical figures possessing blind spots, errors, and sins that were typical of their time and place? This is even more true when we think about the complexity of the situation in the 1830s. What was the ideal solution to frontier conflict?

The most important historical role played by Jackson is party founder—or re-founder, to be more accurate. Jackson was “an ardent Jeffersonian” but the feeling was not reciprocal.

Viewing the general as “most unfit” and “dangerous,” Jefferson supported William Crawford for president in 1824, not Jackson. Despite similarities in ideology, Jefferson and Jackson were very different in temperament. One was a bookish, cultured introvert with a rational, deistic take on religion. Although possessing definite principles, he disliked personal conflict. The other was a brawling extrovert who relished the rough-and-tumble of personal conflict and was content with the evangelical faith of his Presbyterian youth.

While it is true that the name *Democratic-Republican* used for Jefferson’s party is anachronistic, and that *Republican* was the most common designation, Birzer is wrong in stating that Jefferson wasn’t the leader of a “recognizable” political party. Jefferson founded an opposition party to the Federalists as early as 1798 and, contrary to Birzer’s assertion, it was not “pre-ideological.”

While most of our Founding Fathers were hostile to democracy, Jefferson was an exception. In 1816, he wrote, “The full experiment of a government democratical but representative was and is still reserved for us.” Jefferson objected to the Era of Good Feelings because it masked genuine ideological differences. Andrew Jackson the popular hero and Martin Van Buren the party manager worked together to construct the modern Democratic Party.

Following Jefferson, Jackson believed in states' rights and the Tenth Amendment, but he was also committed to keeping the union together. He tried to strike a balance between being decentralist but also opposed to Calhoun's use of nullification. Acknowledging the "honorable feeling of state pride and local attachment" and resisting "consolidated government," Jackson nonetheless did not want the nation splintered by sectional differences.

Jackson's populism, including his opposition to the privately owned Bank of the United States, is a recurring theme throughout the book. Jackson was billed as the "People's Candidate" for good reason. His words were populist in nature—opposing special privileges for "powerful interests," "corporations and wealthy individuals," "large manufacturing establishments," "monopoly," "moneyed power"—and his actions followed suit.

This book draws a connection between Andrew Jackson and Donald Trump. In some ways, Jackson was the Trump of his day—not a real estate tycoon but a media celebrity by the primitive standards of the early 1800s. Like Trump, Jackson was viewed as a political outsider and disrupter of established norms.

Both are known for their populist rhetoric and anti-establishment appeal. In speaking about the seamy side of political life, both have spoken with frankness, at times to a fault. Both can be rightly criticized for excesses of temperament, including self-righteousness and anger, and both have faced unprecedented vitriolic opposition. Hatred directed at each has made their admirers even more loyal because they detect the right enemies. Finally, we can see parallels in the sheer force of will that has driven the careers of both men.

Trump placed a painting of Jackson in the Oval Office upon moving in and he publicly identifies with him. But the 2010s are not the 1810s, and we should not be so fixated on the present that we interpret what's gone before in its light. Instead, better to allow history to provide context for today.

Despite our family heritage, my daughter acted as prosecutor against Andrew Jackson in an eighth grade mock trial. He was charged with crimes against humanity. The drama ended in a mistrial—which seems about right. For society, as a whole, Jackson remains an important and

controversial figure. Hero or villain, depending on perspective—and, more objectively, on which aspect of his life is under consideration. Like America itself, Jackson was exceptional but imperfect.”