TAH Marathon, 2012

Sean Adams

**The Making of the Jacksonian "Common Man" in Politics**

Following the War of 1812, many Americans began to argue that since they had fought during the Revolution and the War of 1812 to preserve American liberty, they should be able to vote. They embraced the rhetoric of the Revolution and used it in order to force many states to eliminate property requirements. Suffrage reform in the early national period was associated with the new, less settled states--which were also the states where the Federalists were weakest. Vermont entered the union in 1791 (the first new state after the original 13) with virtually universal white manhood suffrage: All that was asked was that one live in the state a year and maintain "quiet and peaceable behavior." The following year, neighboring New Hampshire dropped its last effective qualification--a tax-paying requirement--and Kentucky entered without significant restrictions on adult white males. Every one of the six states admitted to the union between 1812 and 1821 entered with virtually universal white male suffrage. In 1817 Connecticut led the way among the older states, abolishing all property qualifications for white male suffrage. By 1824, only Virginia, Louisiana and Rhode Island preserved any significant restrictions on white male suffrage.

The struggle for an expanded male suffrage was fought on the landscape of "race" as well as class. Suffrage reform soon became the instrument, not only of extending the vote to

virtually all white men, but of excluding African American men from the vote and clarifying suffrage as a right of white citizenship. Every new state admitted from 1819 on specifically excluded African Americans from the vote, and older states that had once permitted a few propertied Black men to vote--New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut, for example—revised suffrage laws to exclude them. Whatever his occupation, by the 1820s, the American “common man” was white.

<Andrew Jackson—More than the $20 bill—Need to know his background>

Andrew Jackson had been born into a poor family in North Carolina. His father apparently deserted the family. His mother died while he was a young man. Although he would later become a famous military leader, a lawyer, an important politician in Tennessee and a land- and slave-owner, Jackson was always temperamentally an outsider: sensitive to insults, defensive, and distrusting. Success did not come easily. At one point on the way up Jackson accepted someone else’s IOU for services—and used it to buy goods for a general store he wanted to start. When the original singer defaulted, Jackson was thrown into bankruptcy—and spent years getting out of debt. Forever thereafter, he profoundly distrusted paper money—and the banks that put paper money into circulation.

He tended to take issues personally—he killed one man over a racetrack argument, he threatened to kill two others for calling him ambitious, and in 1817, when he was fifty, Jackson challenged General Winfield Scott as a “hectoring bully” and as one of the “intermeddling pimps and spies of the War Department.” Later in life, Jackson claimed that “I was born for a storm and calm does not suit me.”

The election of 1824 would certainly produce a storm for Jackson.

James Monroe neared the end of his term without clearly designating a successor—a circumstance that threw the matter entirely into the hands of the Republican caucus. This basically was the Republicans sitting in Congress. Several people were interested

Jackson (whose name had been forwarded by the Tennessee legislature)

John Quincy Adams (Monroe's secretary of state),

John C. Calhoun (Monroe's secretary of war),

Henry Clay (speaker of the House),

William H. Crawford of Georgia (Monroe's secretary of the Treasury).

Having the caucus decide the matter was presumed to favor Crawford, a long-time figure in national politics with well-organized support in Washington.

But this time, unlike earlier nominations, the other candidates simply pulled out, loudly disowning the caucus as a corrupt and irregular institution--the "great whore of Babylon," as Jackson himself put it. To accept nomination from the caucus was to prostitute oneself to an undemocratic process. This was in turn influenced by the broadening of suffrage that had occurred over the last 25 years. In 1800, for example, 5 of 16 states selected presidential electors by popular vote; by 1816 it was 10 of 19; by 1824 18 out of 24. By 1832, the number was one <South Carolina> So Congress was losing its control over the selection of the President.

So effective was the repudiation of the caucus system was that in the end only 66 of a possible 218 Republican members of Congress even attended. As expected, Crawford got the caucus nod, while the other potential candidates relied upon their own networks of supporters to organize their campaigns.

When the election itself was held, no candidate claimed a majority—-either of the popular vote or of the Electoral College. <go to map>

Jackson finished first, with

43 percent of the popular vote

99 electoral votes

had taken Louisiana, Alabama, North Carolina, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee, Indiana, and New Jersey.

Next was Adams,

who had swept New England,

tallying 30 percent of the popular vote and

84 electoral votes.

Crawford,

had suffered a stroke during the campaign,

managed only 41 electoral votes,

Clay

who took only Ohio, Missouri, and Kentucky—

came in last with 37 electoral votes.

Calhoun had dropped out to run for the vice presidency.

The election was thus thrown to the House of Representatives (12th Amendment), where members had to select from among the three candidates with the highest electoral count. Initially, Jackson—-the highest vote getter and the only candidate with anything like national appeal--was unperturbed. But by late December 1824 he was hearing rumors that Clay

was trying to throw the election to Adams. Although Adams did not receive a single popular vote in Kentucky, and although the Kentucky state legislature had directed its delegation to vote for Jackson, Clay used his prestige to override those instructions-—and to convince enough other states to follow suit to deny Jackson the election. With Clay behind him, Adams received the votes of 13 out of the 24 state delegations. Jackson received 7 and Crawford 4.

Jackson later charged that Adams had bought off Clay's support with the promise of the post of secretary of state. In fact, Adams quickly offered Clay that post. Even without that reward, however, Clay had good reasons for allying himself with Adams. First, Clay and Adams shared similar political philosophies of national expansion. In addition, Jackson and Clay vied for the same regional base. Clay claimed more personal motives—a concern about “the unfitness of Gen. Jackson for the Presidency.”

Jackson was furious: "Intrigue, corruption, and sale of public office is the rumor of the day,” he roared, charging that Clay and Adams had conducted “the bargain & sale of the constitutional rights of the people!"

The election had been stolen in a "corrupt bargain" brokered by insiders who debased the virtue of the republic and flagrantly disregarded the clear will of the electorate. In the place of the man of the people, the House had selected the man of old Boston, that preserve of elitism and privilege. Even more than Adams, the Jacksonians blamed Henry Clay, who was reviled as a “trickster” and as “the prime Filcher of the people’s highest gift.”

The Adams Presidency and the Gathering Forces of Democracy

Unfortunately for his own presidency, John Quincy Adams was not a canny politician.

Offering the State Department to Clay had been his first serious mistake. Although Adams may well have assumed that the election did produce a mandate for proponents of the American system, the selection of Clay not only looked like a payoff but also soon sent Calhoun supporters into the Jackson camp. Concerned that Clay's ascendancy might block his own eventual presidential ambitions, and beginning to recant his earlier, more nationalist views, Calhoun now charged that "the power and patronage of the Executive" was drowning out "the voice of the people."

Then Adams also nudged the fiscally conservative former supporters of William Crawford—-now led by New Yorker Martin Van Buren—-into the opposition, by laying out a huge program of internal improvements, including

a national university

a national observatory

a naval academy

as well as an elaborate system of roads and canals

—all supported by federal expenditures.

When even his own advisors cautioned him against the extravagance of his proposals, Adams got stubborn and included in his address to Congress a caution that Congress not be "palsied by the will of our constituents." His opponents protested that he intended to benefit the wealthy at the expense of the common people of America—an attack made more salient by his New England origins. Henry Clay, although already controversial for his presence in the Adams camp, asked "Is there no remedy within the reach of Government?" and spoke very openly in favor of an "American System."

Jackson's supporters attempted to further discredit Adams (and build support for Jackson) on the issue of the tariff. The tariff was a regional issue--unpopular in the South and much of the West, but increasingly popular in the manufacturing Northeast. Northern Jacksons proposed a tariff so outrageously high on raw materials (some of the rates went as high as 40 percent and 50 percent) that they were sure the East and West would eventually join with the South to defeat it. Van Buren played both ends against one another—the end result hopefully being a high tariff that would unify folks against Adams.

It was a risky plan and it backfired. In the end, New Englanders won a few modifications and concluded that bad protectionism was better than none at all. The Northeast swallowed the bitter pill and voted yes, and the Tariff of 1828 became the law of the land. Raised average rates substantially <30-50%> and gave southerners a rallying cry—Adams had helped pass the "Tariff of Abominations."

The Election of 1828

The campaign of 1828 was not for the squeamish. Both camps sought to manipulate the heightened religious sensibilities of the age. Adams' supporters—-who identified themselves as "National Republicans" to emphasize their faith in strong federal support of economic expansion--tarred Jackson as

a liar and a blasphemer,

uncouth, and

incapable of self-restraint. They charged that Jackson was a home wrecker who had “prevailed upon the wife of Lewis Roberts of Mercer county, Kentucky, to desert her husband, and live with himself, in the character of a wife." They further claimed that

“General Jackson's mother was a COMMON PROSTITUTE, brought to this country by the British soldiers! She afterward married a MULATTO MAN, with whom she had several children, of which number General JACKSON IS ONE!!!"

Jackson supporters retorted that Adams was a Sabbath breaker, a closet Federalist, and an unprincipled hypocrite who had been willing to buy the presidency and whose long residence in Europe had taught him a disdain for popular government. Without the strong leadership of Jackson, they predicted, within 25 years the American people would become “the slaves, not of a 'military chiefton,' but of such ambitious demagogues as Henry Clay." To make the point, Jacksonians began to refer to themselves as “Jackson Democrats.”

In the election, both parties relied heavily on newspapers and on national, state, and local party committees, but the Democrats—-led by Martin Van Buren, who had perfected these techniques in New York-—proved the more expert at the new party organization. In Nashville, Jackson himself was kept “constantly employed furnishing to various calls on me, the necessary facts and documents, to refute these various attacks." Meanwhile, Van Buren oversaw the creation of the Democratic equivalent of the benevolent network, closely coordinating the various levels of the campaign, from the local level to the county to the state. He pioneered the use of carefully choreographed "spontaneous" grass-roots demonstrations. Jackson supporters armed with American flags and placards calling for “Jackson and Reform” overran gatherings planned for other occasions (like Fourth of July celebrations) and converted

them into Democratic rallies. Van Buren also engineered the use of political imagery to evoke campaign themes. Jackson was referred to by his nickname, "Old Hickory" (for the hardest wood in the United States), Jackson committees were called “Old Hickory Clubs,” and campaign workers liberally distributed hickory sticks and canes to crowds at political events. Finally, Van Buren urged Jackson himself to become more visible in the campaign. In the past, candidates for the presidency had remained discretely in the background, professing great unworthiness even to be considered for such a high honor. Jackson himself had pursued this course in 1824, and he at first demurred in 1828. But when the Louisiana Democrats invited him to a celebration marking his victory over the British in the Battle of New Orleans, he accepted. As Jackson approached New Orleans by the Mississippi River, huge crowds (some people had traveled from as far as New Hampshire to see the candidate) lined the shores, the buildings, the wharves, and clung to the rigging of ships in the harbor. The event turned out to be, as one reporter proclaimed, "the most stupendous thing of the kind that had ever occurred in the United States."

When the votes were counted in 1828, Jackson had won a clear majority:

56 percent of the popular vote

and 178 electoral votes to Adams's 83.

Jackson had virtually swept the nation--with the exception only of New England, New Jersey and Delaware. Not only had he taken the South solidly, but he had also won Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York.

Jackson was elected by a strong cross-section of voters who identified—albeit in differing ways—with his stance as an outsider to and victim of established eastern elites. He

was most notably the candidate of westerners, migrants, settlers, and landowners who opposed eastern banks and congressional land policies. But Jackson also drew support from urban small merchants, professionals, and shopkeepers, as well as laborers and craftsmen, who believed that special privilege was denying them their fair chance at prosperity. A planter and a southerner, Jackson could claim the mantle of Thomas Jefferson and could cloak his new "democratic" party with the legacy of true republicanism: He favored limited government, feared growing concentrations of economic and political power, and seemed to share Jefferson's emphasis on the individual. A slaveowner, he drew the support of southerners who, despite Jackson's stand on the tariff, saw him as vastly preferable to the New Englander Adams.

But the victory proved bittersweet. Jackson's wife, Rachel, died almost immediately after the election. She had fallen ill after reading an anti-Jackson editorial. For the rest of his life, Jackson blamed his political opponents for her death.

In March of 1829, Jackson's inauguration occurred. Over 30,000 people showed up. Many of them were the rude frontiersman that styled themselves the "common men" of Jacksonian Democracy. After Jackson's brief inaugural speech, they basically stormed the White House, stood on chairs with their muddy boots to get a better look at their hero, spilled punch all over the place, and partook in a giant cheese that had been presented to the new president. Jackson actually snuck out the back door of the White House and ate dinner at his boardinghouse. Government officials finally got most of the spectators out of the White House after they dragged the barrels of liquor out on the lawn. When they looked around, they saw that "common men" did almost a thorough job of gutting the White House as had the British a

decade earlier. Thousands of dollars worth of china was smashed, and observers claimed that you could smell cheese for years afterwards.

Even in the pandemonium of the inauguration, the message of the new presidency was clear: "As the instrument of the Federal Constitution. . . ," Jackson declared in the opening of his address, "I shall keep steadily in view the limitations as well as the extent of the Executive power, trusting to discharge the functions of my office without transcending its authority." Lest anyone miss his meaning, Jackson recited the details of Adams' alleged misconduct in office and supplied a list of recommended reforms: fiscal restraint, an end to government patronage, the appointment only of men of "diligence and talent," and a constitutional amendment to remove "all intermediary agency in the election of President and Vice-President." In a direct slap at Henry Clay, he suggested that members of Congress voting to break a presidential deadlock should be disqualified from running for the presidency themselves. The task of his administration, Jackson announced, must be "the task of reform."

When he took office in 1829, Jackson was as fragile as he had ever been. The death of his recent wife was devastating, and he drew immediate criticism for his appointments in his cabinet—most of them were uninspired. Calhoun was VP; Martin Van Buren was Secretary of State. The other appointments were political cronies. <Sam Ingham in Treas; John Berrien as Att'y Gen.> For Secretary of War he chose an old friend, John Henry Eaton, of Tennessee, who wrote Jackson's campaign biography. Eaton created problems for Jackson from the beginning. He had married Peggy O'Neill Timberlake, a widow of dubious reputation—some of Jackson's cabinet members, particularly the wife of John Calhoun, refused to receive her socially. Jackson, who likened Peggy Eaton's problems to those of his beloved Rachel, spent a great deal

of time and energy trying to defend the reputation of his friend's wife. <mention the Allgor readings>

Some of his other appointments demonstrated bad judgement—Samuel Swartwout headed the New York customshouse, where the federal gov't collected half of its revenue. Swartwout helped himself to about a million dollars of the government's money and leaving for Europe. Jackson appointed Henry Lee (Robert E. Lee's older half-brother) to a diplomatic post, and Lee rewarded him with a scandal in which he impregnated his wife's sister. It took about two years for Jackson to shake all of this scandal, and to get the most obnoxious members of his administration out of sight.

In the meantime, Jackson faced another major threat from the South. So what's going on in the South? As you probably remember, much of the South in the early nineteenth century was energized by the expansion of cotton culture. But by the 1820s, the explosive growth of the cotton economy had slowed. The cotton market declined steadily over the decade. By 1828 prices were only about one-third of their 1815 levels.

By the mid 1820s, South Carolina politics were falling increasingly under the influence of a radical wing of the states' rights advocates, whose extreme suspicion of the federal government suggested a certain degree of paranoia. The tariff of 1828 provided a rallying point for this diffuse distrust of the federal government. Although not all parts of the south were equally harmed by the tariff (for example, Clay's Kentucky probably benefited from protections against hemp imports), potential increases in the prices of manufactured goods were especially threatening to states with failing economies, like South Carolina.

In the changing context of South Carolina politics, John Calhoun began to qualify his commitment to the new nationalism. In 1828 Calhoun wrote the South Carolina Exposition and Protest. Although the pamphlet was published anonymously, Calhoun made his authorship an open secret, hoping to gain standing among the radicals.

In the Exposition, Calhoun argued that the federal government was the creation of the states, "distinct political communities . . . acting in their separate and sovereign capacity," not of "the people" as an aggregate. In agreeing to create a federal government, Calhoun argued, the states had ceded some of their powers, but only conditionally. They had always reserved whatever powers were necessary to their survival as distinct entities. Should the policies of the federal government threaten the distinctive character of a state, that state had the right to assert its reserved sovereignty in defiance of the policies? It was at such a juncture, Calhoun argued, that the states of the South had arrived in 1828. They had become the "minority" culture, their interests and institutions endangered by "the unrestrained will of a majority." The "tariff of abominations" would gradually leach away the money and the independence of the South, subjecting the South to Northern tyranny.

There was much in United States history to support Calhoun's view.

- The states had existed before the federal constitution.
- Representation at the Constitutional Convention and ratification of the Constitution had been by state.
- And representation in the federal government continued to be on the basis of states--purely so, in the Senate, and on the basis of state population in the House.

Yet ever since Madison's crafting of the Bill of Rights, the direction of American politics had been to diminish the significance of state sovereignty. In the interval, the Hartford Convention had tarnished Calhoun's position with the stain of treason. And Calhoun argued

explicitly what the Federalists had dared only hint, that if all else failed, states always retained the right to withdraw from the compact.

By the late 1820s, many American politicians-—most notably, President Andrew Jackson--viewed the power of the federal government as arising directly from “the people,” not from a compact among the states.

Although a Southerner and a slave-holder, Jackson did not support nullification—perhaps because he saw HIMSELF as the embodiment of the people’s will and of the federal government, and therefore saw no cause for fear. In April 1830, he made his views plain. At a banquet celebrating Jefferson, and in the presence of a number of Southern leaders, he proposed the toast: "Our Union:" he declared, "It must be preserved." Calhoun apparently retorted: “Our Union—next to our liberty most dear.”

Jackson did agree with Southern complaints that tariff levels were too high and unfair to some sections of the country, and he joined in the call for tariff reform. Ironically, the resulting tariff only confirmed South Carolinian fears and set off the most serious constitutional crisis of Jackson's presidency. The Tariff of 1832 did lower duties on many goods to 1816 levels, but it did not lower protection on cotton, woolens, and iron.

In November of 1832, South Carolina radicals called a statewide convention whose delegates voted 6-to-1 that the tariffs of both 1828 and 1832 were null and void in South Carolina. The acts of the convention forbade the collection of the tariffs within the state of South Carolina.

For Jackson, the act of nullification transformed the crisis from a question of regional interests to a question of national union. In these terms, he found South Carolina's behavior

arrogant and mortifying. Jackson's response was quick and predictable. In December, he issued a proclamation in which he asserted his conviction that the union was a creation of the people, not the states. "The laws of the United States must be executed," he declared, "I have no discretionary power on the subject; my duty is emphatically pronounced in the Constitution." To emphasize his point, Jackson soon asked Congress for a law specifically affirming his right and responsibility to compel the collection of the tax in South Carolina--and to do so by force of arms if necessary.

<election of 1832>

With neither side blinking, Congress rushed to find a compromise. In early 1833, a new tariff was passed, gradually reducing duties over the next decade. But Congress did also pass the law Jackson had requested--known as the Force Bill. On March 2, 1833, Jackson signed both the new tariff law and the Force Bill, a pointed and sharp reminder to South Carolina that nullification and secession would not be tolerated. In 1832, South Carolina stood virtually alone--even among Southern states. The supporters of nullification had no choice but to withdraw their ordinance of nullification--and they did so. Lest anyone think the issue was over, however, they voted at the same time to nullify the Force Bill within the boundaries of the state of South Carolina.

Jackson's ideas about his role of president was really indicative of the new “democratic” politics of the times. "The President"--and no other branch of government--"is the direct representative of the American people," Jackson declared. Certainly, earlier presidents had claimed to represent the interests of the American people as a whole. But the nature of representation in the federal government had been assumed by most politicians to be indirect,

certain filters having been purposely put in place to sift out the greatest excesses of "the people." But Jackson's claim to directly represent the interests of the people made him susceptible to the criticism that he was acting as if he were royalty. <show image of "King Andrew" and the idea that the opposition now called themselves "Whigs">