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TAH: A More Perfect Union

Final Project

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Meacham's *American Lion* and Jackson's Constitution

∞Introduction∞

For my final project I chose to read Jon Meacham's *American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House* and analyze President Jackson's take of the Constitution during his time as President. The reasoning was twofold: to obtain a deeper understanding of the Age of Jackson, and also to read one of the books assigned to my Advanced Placement U.S. History course as a summer reading this year (assigned by a previous instructor).

Throughout the *A More Perfect Union* Institute, the common themes of the intent of the Founders, the manner in which the Constitution was constructed, and the interpretation of the Constitution throughout time were thoroughly examined and analyzed—from the question of slavery, to the major and minor players at the Constitutional Convention, to the Enlightened philosophy that acted as a foundation and guide for the document. From these themes, the general consensus was that the Constitution was an imperfect masterpiece, constructed under the guise that this form of government was as solid an outcome as any human being could expect from the various personas, interests, and knowledgeable minds that met in the humid summer environs of Philadelphia in 1787. As Thomas Jefferson stated to T.M. Randolph, Jr. that same year:

Though we may say with confidence, that the worst of the American constitutions is better than the best which ever existed before in any other country, and that they are wonderfully perfect for a first essay, yet every human essay must have defects. It will

remain, therefore, to those now coming on the stage of public affairs, to perfect what has been so well begun by those going off it.¹

Jefferson's point that the document was flawed and was constructed with the intent to evolve was echoed by other Founders, namely George Washington, who wrote to his nephew Bushrod Washington a similar sentiment:

The warmest friends and the best supporters the Constitution has, do not contend that it is free from imperfections...I do not think that we are more inspired, have more wisdom, or possess more virtue, than those who will come after us.²

In regards to the evolution of the Constitution, no other President would alter its course more so than Andrew Jackson. Jackson's view of the Presidency, as an agent of the people's will, sometimes to the point of ignoring the Constitution completely, changed the role of the President and deeply affected the actions of those that would follow in his footsteps. Whether good or bad, Jackson would act in what he felt was in the best interests of the American people. Because of this, he is a figure either revered or despised, depending on one's convictions. Jon Meacham, in a Pulitzer-Prize winning effort, eloquently describes Andrew Jackson as a man and as President. Oftentimes, these two roles—Jackson the man and Jackson the President—could be identified as one and the same. The fibers of Jackson's being, a loyal, stubborn, passionate leader would serve as the context for many of his decisions. These decisions would alter not only the Presidency, but the course of the American Republic itself.

∞Meacham's *American Lion*∞

Meacham's *American Lion* successfully weaves the complex and contradictory persona of Jackson throughout his work. On the one hand Jackson was deeply loyal,

¹ Eyer Robert Coates, Sr, ed., "Thomas Jefferson on Politics and Government," <http://etext.virginia.edu/jefferson/quotations/jeff1000.htm> (accessed Sept 17, 2010).

² Micheal Kammen, ed., *The Origins of the American Constitution: A Documentary History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 83.

passionate, and headstrong; described as “Ferocious in defense of the people and things he loved...and equally fierce, and often ruthless in pursuit of anyone or anything he believed to be a threat to the world as he saw it.”³ On the other he was a contradiction; a man who saw himself as a champion of freedom and democracy while at the same time held slaves and drove Native Americans from their land.

While the task of deconstructing this persona is a difficult one, Meacham does so with skillful research and a gifted pen. In order to understand elements of Jackson’s persona, Meacham delves into the many scars of emotional grief and pain in his life, one of which strikes shortly after he is elected to his first term as President in 1828, with the loss of his beloved wife, Rachel. Further, the loss of not one, but two brothers during the Revolutionary War also account for Jackson’s rugged, passionate persona. His toughness is captured in one particular incident, when fourteen-year-old Jackson is in a confrontation with a British officer, threatening sword in hand, who implored the young man to polish his boots. Jackson boldly refused, and requested to be treated as a prisoner of war.⁴ Further the influence of his mother who died in 1781 while Jackson was still a young man, Presbyterianism, and the heroic virtues of Sir William Wallace, read in Jane Porter’s *The Scottish Chiefs*, are a few examples described by Meacham as important foundations of his unshakeable character.

Jackson was also unafraid to duel when he or his family were threatened. In one incident, Jackson would kill his opponent, Charles Dickinson, only after Dickinson was allowed to fire first. With his bullet lodged in Jackson’s chest, which would remain there for all of his life, Jackson returned fire and dropped Dickinson to the ground for good.

³ Jon Meacham, *American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House* (New York: Random House Trade Paperback Edition, 2009), xxii.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12. Jackson states “Sir, I am a prisoner of war and claim to be treated as such.”

Meacham describes incidents such as these, which serve as building blocks to Jackson's "persona of power". This persona was further enlarged and solidified at the Battle of New Orleans. As a 45-year-old general during the War of 1812, he would lead his volunteer force of over 2,000 men at New Orleans to a heroic victory in battle against the British.⁵ According to Meacham, it was this persona of power that "...perhaps more than any other gift of insight, judgment, or rhetoric, that propelled him forward throughout his life."⁶ It would endear Jackson to his friends and at the same time wreak havoc on his political opponents; some of which included the formidable John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, Henry Clay of Kentucky, and ex-President John Quincy Adams of Massachusetts.

With these portrayals, painted by Meacham, we gather what makes Andrew Jackson tick. Understanding the man's motivations and personal character help the reader understand his decision-making as President. And Jackson's Presidency would have no shortage of controversial decisions. For example, Jackson felt the Presidency of John Quincy Adams was corrupt and served the aristocrats of the United States. He sought to change this by attacking the institutions that maintained the elitist status quo. One institution was the Second Bank of the United States, which he felt held the public's money, but was not subject to public control. Right or wrong, in the end, Jackson would prevail in killing the Bank, carrying through what he felt was the will of the American people.

Jackson also refused to allow nullification. While South Carolina sought to usurp federal power on tariffs (known to South Carolinians as the Tariff of Abominations), Jackson felt it was a dangerous step toward separation from the Union. As he states: "It is the

⁵ Although the battle on January 8, 1815 occurred after the Treaty of Ghent was signed, officially ending the war, news would not reach New Orleans for several weeks. Despite this, "Old Hickory" as many of his soldiers called him, would score his decisive victory and secure his place in the pantheon of U.S. military history.

⁶ Ibid, p. 26.

durability of the confederation upon which the general government is built that must prolong our liberty. The moment it separates, it is gone.”⁷ This demonstrates Jackson’s unequivocal devotion to the Union, and one cannot help but see his heroic qualities in this regard.

However, the ugly parts of Jackson also rear its head throughout *American Lion*, none more so than when reading of Jackson’s treatment of Native Americans. Jackson’s hubris is on full display when he describes himself as the “Great Father” of the Indians, giving the impression that he knew what was best for them. As the South sought more land, conflict with Indian tribes, like the Creek, Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Seminole became inevitable. Jackson’s answer to the Indian Question was simple: to survive, the Indians must surrender and leave. The strength of the United States depended on its expansion, and there was no room for the Indians in this equation.

On May 26, 1830, the Indian bill would pass, leading to their forced, harrowing Westward journey. Many perished along the way.⁸ It was a brutal incident highlighting Jackson’s duality; the hero of the people was at times a stubborn, reckless, and blunt realist to others that did not fit his vision of the United States. Despite the fact that Supreme Court Chief Justice John Marshall would rule that the anti-Cherokee laws were “repugnant to the Constitution, laws, and treaties of the United States,” Jackson would famously reply “Well, John Marshall has made his decision, now let him enforce it.”⁹

In terms of the Founders and the Constitution, Meacham makes a fair point that the Philadelphia Convention did not have the intention of establishing the rule of the majority. In fact, they sought to check popular will by means of the Electoral College, election of senators by state legislatures and limited suffrage. The Republican system of checks and balances not

⁷ Ibid, p. 77.

⁸ Ibid., p. 145-52.

⁹ Ibid., p. 203-04.

only established checks on the Executive, Legislative, and Judicial, but also on the people at large as well.¹⁰ During Jackson's time, nearly all states had established universal suffrage, which caused an increase in the number of voters at the time Jackson ran in 1828 and 1832.¹¹ Jackson saw this as a time when the "whim of the powerful" would take a backseat to the "will of the people". In his eyes, the voters provided the mandate needed for the President to unite the nation and direct its affairs.

While the Constitution was seen as an evolving document, Jackson brought it to a new level and interpreted it in a new light. Like Jefferson, who extended the role of the President, acting on the acquisition of the Louisiana Territory for the best interests of the people, so too would Jackson in utilizing the Presidency as a powerful vehicle to affect change for the masses. However, he took this role further than Jefferson. Jackson was tipping the scales between the American Republic and Democracy toward the side of Democracy. The first six presidents of the United States vetoed a total of nine bills. Jackson would veto a dozen.¹² The use of the veto would become the tool which future Presidents like Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and FDR, would utilize to keep Congress and lawmakers in line. Jackson was revolutionary in establishing this trend.

Meacham highlights this throughout *American Lion* and the reader obtains a greater appreciation for Jackson's place in U.S. history. While the Supreme Court felt the construct of the Bank was constitutional, Jackson disagreed. In a letter concerning the Bank:

The authority of the Supreme Court must not, therefore, be permitted to control the Congress or the Executive when acting in their legislative capacities, but to have only such influence as the force of their reasoning may deserve.¹³

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 44.

¹¹ Ibid. Voter turnout increased from 27 percent in 1824 to 57 percent in 1828.

¹² Ibid., p. 140.

¹³ Ibid., p. 211.

The political opposition chided Jackson, labeling a “King Upon the Throne.” But the people would overwhelmingly vote him to a second term. According the Meacham, “...the king understood what the commoners wanted, and needed. They wanted a champion...”¹⁴

Jackson’s views on the Constitution culminate in his December 10, 1832 proclamation regarding the issue of nullification. In it, he states that ““We the People” had formed the Union that produced the Constitution, as opposed to the Southern theory that the Constitution was a compact between the states in which individual rights were paramount.”¹⁵ He, as President, was the embodiment of the people. Though he was brash, controversial, and seemingly unruly, his decisions were purposeful. In essence, he was a masterful politician. In Meacham’s words:

He could be brutal in his application of power, but he was not a brute. He could be unwavering, but he was not closed-minded. He was, rather, the great politician of his time, if success in politics is measured by the affirmation of a majority of the people in real time and by the shadow one casts after leaving the stage.¹⁶

Jackson’s influence for future President’s was immense and Meacham’s portrayal of Jackson helps the reader understand this immense scope. Though controversial he would leave an indelible mark on the role of the President and the relation of it to the American people. His interpretation of the Constitution in this regard was very different than what the Founding Fathers had envisioned. Though he had his exclusions, Jackson envisioned the “People” in broad, expansive terms. He was a champion of American Democracy. In the end, the fact that a powerful, controversial figure such as Jackson could be President, and exit the post with the government still in tact, serves as a testament to the ability of the Constitution to change and evolve over time.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 219.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 229.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 230.

☞Bibliography☞

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