

# THE PEOPLE'S

OFTEN OVERLOOKED, ANDREW JACKSON PLAYED A COLORFUL AND CRUCIAL ROLE IN SHAPING THE FATE OF A FLEDGLING NATION—A ROLE THAT IS ONLY NOW BEING GIVEN ITS DUE

BY JON MEACHAM

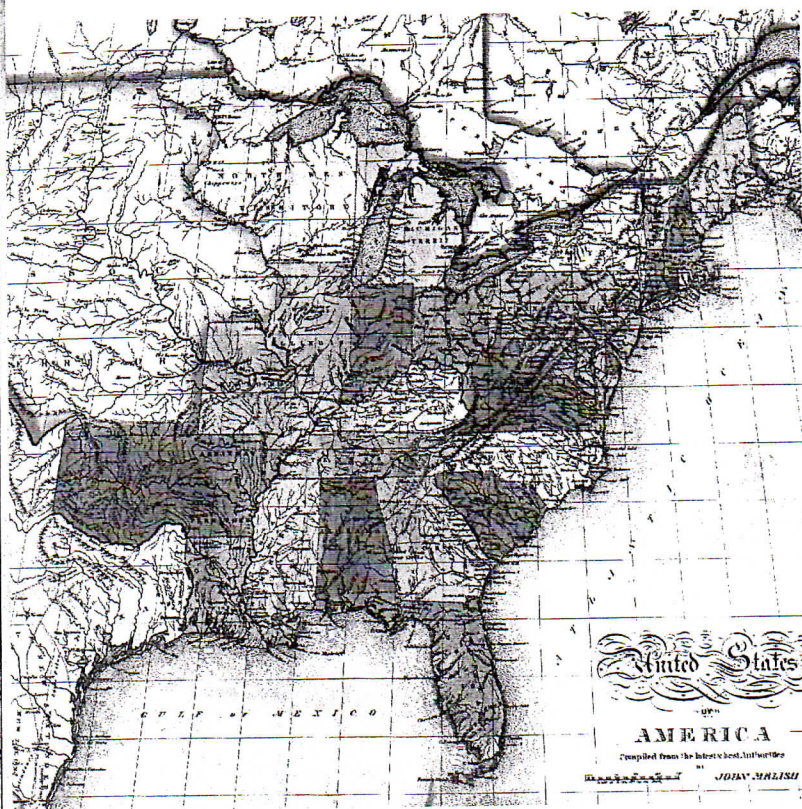
**O**ne of America's most important and most controversial leaders, Andrew Jackson is also one of our least understood. Recalled mainly as the scourge of the Indians and as the acknowledged hero of the 1815 Battle of New Orleans, he is only dimly remembered in the popular imagination, too far out of mind to be instructive or intriguing.



# PRESIDENT



**FEARLESS LEADER**  
Andrew Jackson  
at the Battle  
of New Orleans



### GROWING PAINS.

America as it was in the early 19th century

*Yet of the great early presidents and founders, Andrew Jackson is in many ways the most like us. In the saga of the Jackson presidency, one marked by both democratic triumphs and racist tragedies, we can see the American character in formation and in action. To understand him and his time helps us to understand America's perennially competing impulses. Jackson's life and work—and the nation he protected and preserved—were shaped by the struggle between grace and rage, generosity and violence, justice and cruelty. Here, in an excerpt from American Lion, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Jon Meacham tells why Andrew Jackson should be given a more exalted place in this nation's pantheon of great presidents.*

A source of inspiration to Abraham Lincoln on the eve of the Civil War, revered by Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt, and hailed by Harry S. Truman as one of the four greatest presidents—along with George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Lincoln—Jackson expanded the powers of the presidency in ways that none of his six predecessors had. He was the first president to come from the common people, not from an educated elite, and he never ceased to see himself as their champion. He was the first to build what we would recognize as a political party. He was the first to maintain a large circle of private advisers—what was called his Kitchen Cabinet—to help make policy. And he was the first

**ANDREW JACKSON**  
1829–1837

to insist on the deference he thought due the chief executive as the only official elected by all the people. It was a distinction he believed made the White House, not Capitol Hill, the center of national power and national action.

The country that Jackson presided over from 1829 to 1837 was smaller than one might think, surrounded by once and possibly future foreign foes. There were 24 states in 1828. Arkansas and Michigan would be admitted late in Jackson's presidency, with Florida coming in just before his death in 1845 and Texas not long after. The British had the nation hemmed in to the north, in Canada; Britain and Russia had claims to the Pacific Northwest. The Gulf of Mexico worried Jackson as an invasion route for a foreign power.

Beyond the physical threats, Jackson saw more oblique but no less dangerous perils. Before Jackson, power tended toward the elites, whether political or financial. After Jackson, power was more diffuse, and government, for better and for worse, was more attuned to the popular will. He may not have consciously set out to leave such a legacy, but he made the case for democratic innovation and popular engagement in politics at a time when many in Washington would have preferred that the people play the role they were assigned at Philadelphia in the summer of 1787: as voters who cast their ballots and then allowed intermediary institutions—from the state legislatures that elected U.S. senators to the Electoral College, which chose presidents—to make the real decisions. Jackson wanted to give the people a more dramatic part to play, and he rewrote the script of public life to give them one.

It would be both glib and wrong to say that the Age of Jackson is a mirror of our own time. The cultural, political, moral, and intellectual universe Jackson inhabited has to be viewed on its own terms. Still, there is much about him and about his America that readers in the early 21st century may recognize. His was an age of fascination with politics, patriotism, gossip, and religion; both "My Country, 'Tis of Thee" and "Amazing Grace"

took root in the popular culture during Jackson's presidency. The America of Andrew Jackson was a country that professed a love of democracy but was willing to live with inequality, that aimed for social justice but was prone to racism and intolerance, that believed itself one nation but was narrowly divided and fought close elections, and that occasionally acted arrogantly toward other countries while craving respect from them at the same time.

He was the most contradictory of men. A champion of extending freedom and democracy to even the poorest of whites, Jackson was an unrepentant slaveholder. A sentimental man who rescued an Indian orphan on a battlefield to raise in his home, Jackson was responsible for the removal of Indian tribes from their ancestral lands. An enemy of Eastern financial elites

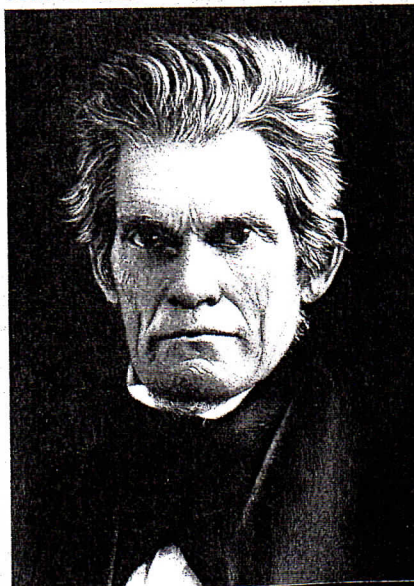
# SOUTHERN SEDITION

In 1833, long before the Civil War began, South Carolina was already threatening to secede from the Union, and Andrew Jackson was determined to stop it

It looked like war. In his rooms on the second floor of the White House, in the flickering light of candles and oil lamps, President Andrew Jackson was furious and full of fight. He had just been re-elected to a second term as America's seventh president, and South Carolina was defying him. He hated it, for he believed to his core that the state was about to destroy the nation. For Jackson, the crisis was not only political. It was personal. Four hundred and fifty miles down the Atlantic seaboard from Washington, in Charleston, radicals were raising an army to defend South Carolina's right to nullify federal laws it chose not to accept—the first step, Jackson believed, toward secession and the destruction of the Union. "I expect soon to hear that a civil war of extermination has commenced," Jackson said, musing about arresting the Southern leaders and then hanging them.

Gaunt but striking, with a formidable head of white hair, a nearly constant cough, a bullet lodged in his chest, Jackson, 65 years old that winter, stood 6 foot 1 and weighed 140 pounds. Over a midday glass of whiskey in the White

JOHN C. CALHOUN



House with an old friend, Jackson pounded a table as he pondered the crisis: "By the God of Heaven, I will uphold the laws." Week after week, he threatened to field a formidable force, and he knew who should lead them. "When everything is ready, I shall join them myself," Jackson said.

At Boston's Faneuil Hall, Daniel Webster, the great Massachusetts senator, rallied to the president's defense, denouncing South Carolina's defiance in epic terms: "It is nothing more nor less than resistance by force—it is disunion by force—it is secession by force—it is Civil War!" The danger was real, for there was nothing foreordained about the future of American democracy in the Jackson years. The nation itself, dating from the Declaration of Independence, was barely half a century old. Now, as Jackson began his fifth year in the White House, the United States might collapse into fratricidal conflict, and foreign powers—always a threat—watched with anticipation. In a private letter in the winter of 1833, Richard Wellesley, the Marquis Wellesley and elder brother of the Duke of Wellington, hoped for "the dissolution of the American confederacy, which I think would be a great benefit to the civilized world."

Dispatching troops and a warship, the Natchez, to Charleston, Jackson, the general whose steadfastness in adversity and against the British in the War of 1812 had earned him the nicknames "Old Hickory" and "the Old Hero," was determined to keep America together. He loved the Union with a consuming devotion. In the radicals' camp, Robert Woodward Barnwell, a South Carolina congressman, passed along reports that Jackson was set on war if the state defied him. "Nothing but blood will satisfy the old scoundrel," Barnwell said. Jackson's



SEN. DANIEL WEBSTER

own vice president, John C. Calhoun, had resigned and taken up South Carolina's cause. Though the immediate issue was money—South Carolina felt oppressed by federal tariffs, which it wanted to lower—the real question, everyone knew, was about power and, ultimately, about slavery. If Jackson won the showdown, then Washington would be stronger and the South weaker, and a stronger Washington meant a greater threat to the future of what Calhoun called "the peculiar domestic institution of the Southern states."

Watching the crisis grow, Webster said, "I am prepared any day to hear that matters have come to blows in Charleston." It was rumored that excited radicals in South Carolina were buying medals emblazoned "John C. Calhoun, First President of the Southern Confederacy," and readers of the *Columbia Telescope* in the state capital considered this fiery plea: "The present is not a time for cold temporizing policy .... THIS UNION MUST BE DISSOLVED."

To save the country required strength, subtlety, and a sense of what the broader American public wanted. "I will meet all things with deliberate firmness and forbearance," Jackson said, "but woe to those nullifiers who shed the first blood." He would be patient, but he would do what it took. As president, Jackson believed he bore the duties of a father who alone carried the responsibility for protecting the nation. —J.M.

# A TRAGIC VICTIM

*Tormented by allegations of adultery and bigamy, Andrew Jackson's wife, Rachel, died before she reached the White House*

Since the very early days of the republic, presidential campaigns have been full of vicious, personal attacks. But some of the most destructive campaign mudslinging of all time was aimed at Rachel Donelson, wife of Andrew Jackson.

Rachel had separated from her jealous and abusive first husband, Lewis Robards, in 1788 and was working in her mother's



RACHEL DONELSON JACKSON

boardinghouse in Nashville when she met Andrew Jackson and fell passionately in love with him. They married in 1791, believing, they said, that Robards had filed a petition for divorce in December 1790. In reality, the divorce became final in 1793, which meant that Rachel, unwittingly or not, committed bigamy during the first years of her marriage to Jackson. Although the matter was eventually resolved legally, the murky details of her remarriage remained a topic of gossip for the rest of her life. Forever after, Jackson

staunchly defended any perceived slights to her honor, even at times fighting duels and eventually killing one man, Charles Dickinson, in Kentucky in 1806.

When Jackson ran for president in 1828, the 38-year-old scandal resurfaced and became a major issue in his campaign to unseat John Quincy Adams. Newspapers such as the *Cincinnati Gazette*, which supported Adams, and the *United States Telegraph*, which supported Jackson, hurled charges and countercharges at one another over Rachel's marital history. She was called all sorts of names, such as "black wench" and "profligate woman," by her detractors and was deemed unfit to be the wife of the new president. While on a trip to Nashville to buy her inauguration gown, she learned in detail about all the lurid allegations that had been made against her. The revelations had a devastating effect.

Although Jackson won the election, the viciousness of the attacks took a heavy toll on the new first lady-to-be. Within days of the news of Jackson's victory, Rachel collapsed, with a feeling of intense pain in her left shoulder, arm, and breast. She died after suffering a heart attack a few days later, on December 22, and was buried on Christmas Eve in the garden of the Hermitage, the Jacksons' property near Nashville. She was laid to rest in the same gown she had planned to wear to her husband's presidential inauguration.

Andrew Jackson was highly distraught at the loss of his wife and blamed his political enemies for her death. A line from her epitaph reads: "A being so gentle and virtuous slander might wound, but could not dishonor." —Amy D. Bernstein

and a relentless opponent of the Bank of the United States, which he believed to be a bastion of corruption, Jackson also promised to die, if necessary, to preserve the power and prestige of the central government. Like us and our America, Jackson and his America achieved great things while committing grievous sins.

Jackson was the only American president to take a bullet in a frontier gunfight and the only one who tried to assault his own would-be assassin. An uneducated boy from the Carolina backwoods, the son of Scots-Irish immigrants, he became a practicing lawyer, a public prosecutor, a U.S. attorney, a delegate to the founding Tennessee Constitutional Convention, a U.S. congressman, a U.S. senator, a judge of the state Superior Court, and a major general, first of the state militia and then of the U.S. Army. The glow of his victory over the British at New Orleans in 1815—as mythic a battle as Lexington and Concord—transformed him into a fabled figure. Popular songs were written about him; the anniversary of the victory, January 8, was a national occasion for Jackson banquets and Jackson parades.

There were darker moments, too. He had massacred Indians in combat, fought duels, and imposed martial law on New Orleans, imprisoning those who defied him. He had married the love of his life, Rachel Donelson Robards, before she was divorced from her first husband. The scandal of his marriage stayed with him through the decades, and he believed that the stress of the charges of adultery and bigamy ultimately killed her.

Commanding, shrewd, intuitive yet not especially articulate, alternately bad-tempered and well-mannered, Jackson embodied the nation's birth and youth. He came from virtually nothing, yet had married into, and helped define, Tennessee aristocracy. He could seem savage, yet he moved in sophisticated circles with skill and grace. In December 1814, with the Battle of New Orleans at hand, a leading hostess was disturbed to learn that her husband had invited Jackson to dinner. After warning her other guests about this "wild man of the woods," the lady was stunned to find Jackson both elegant and charming. "Is this your backwoodsman?" her friends asked after Jackson left. "He is a prince!"

Ferocious in defense of the people and things he loved, Jackson was equally fierce, and often ruthless, in the pursuit of anyone or anything he believed to be a threat to the world as he saw it. He dominated the times, and the evidence of his strength and the aura of his authority led some to think of him as the "Old Lion"; to others, he was "the lion of Tennessee."

For all his vices—and he had many—Jackson refused to accept defeat, either in his own life or in the life of the country. Surrender was unthinkable, for surrender meant an end to the story, and he believed America's story and his own were still unfolding. Jackson's saga would end only when he was buried

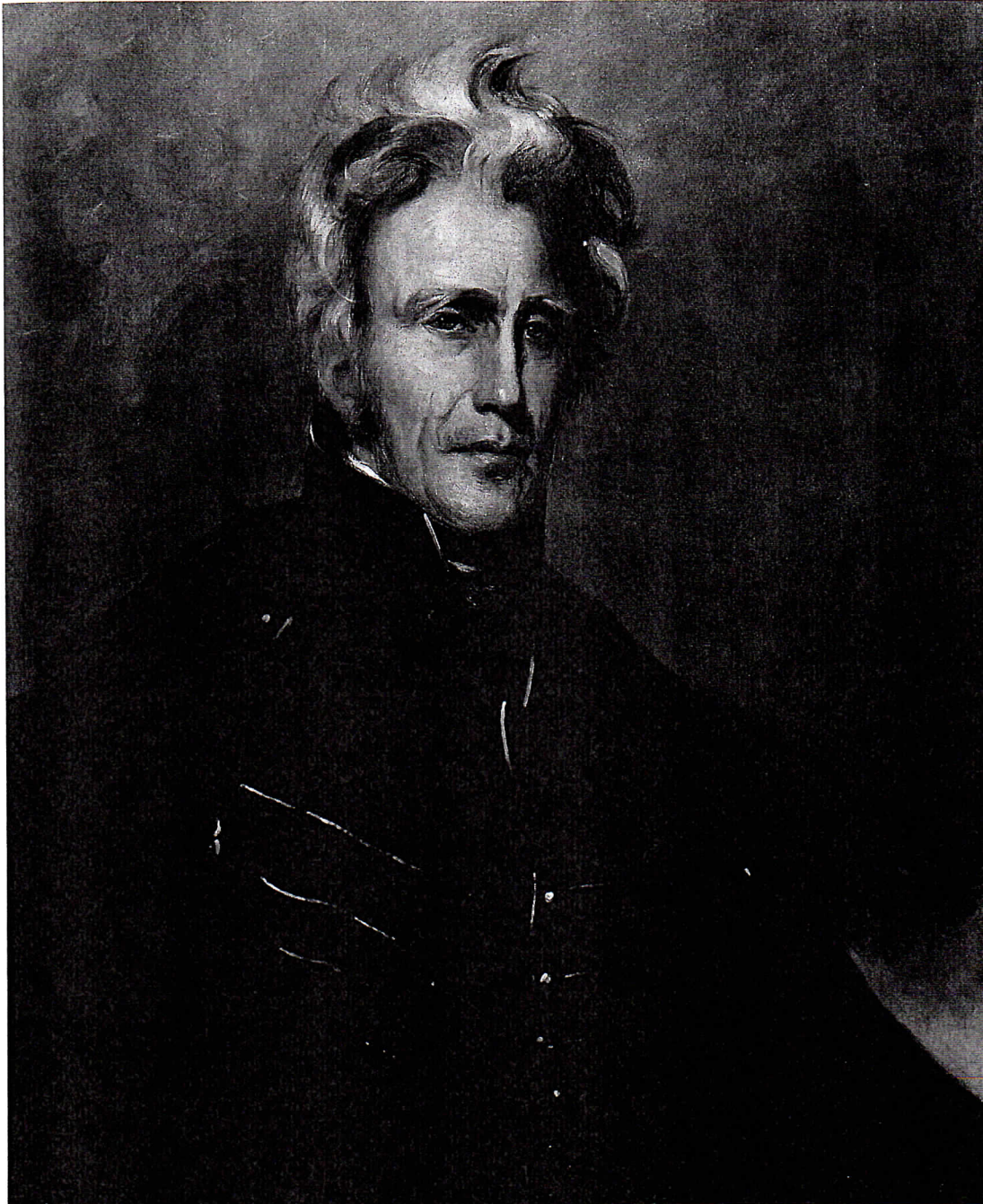
in the corner of his wife's garden in Tennessee. America's, he insisted, would never end.

"I, for one, do not despair of the Republic," he would often say, adding: "The Republic is safe." Another aging former president took a dimmer view. "My hopes of a long continuance of this Union are extinct," John Quincy Adams, the sixth president—who was the son of the second—told his diary.

Steadiness of faith was, in the long run, as illuminating and essential as sophistication of thought. The art of leadership required both, as did the nation. Life

in the arena was rough and tiring, yet Jackson savored the fight and found solace in the unending work democracy demanded of its champions. "I was born for a storm," Jackson once said, "and a calm does not suit me." It was a good thing he felt this way, for defending and shaping America was not easy. But for Andrew Jackson, nothing ever had been.

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#### LOVE MATCH.

Andrew Jackson (near left) was distraught when his beloved wife, Rachel (opposite), died in 1828.