

Unit 9 - Democracy in America

Focus Questions

1. What issues or ideas helped to promote a new sense of American nationalism in the 1820s, and what issues promoted sectionalist tensions?
2. How did Andrew Jackson embody the ideals of the new Democratic political party, and what were the major issues and controversies of his presidency?
3. How did race relations and patterns of discrimination—particularly against African Americans, immigrants, and Native Americans—change in the early nineteenth century?

Key Terms

Missouri Compromise

John C. Calhoun

Eaton Affair

Second Bank of the United States

Democratic Party

Panic of 1837

William Morgan

Indian Removal Act

Trail of Tears

Worcester v. Georgia

Introduction

On May 30, 1806, Andrew Jackson, a thirty-nine-year-old Tennessee lawyer, came within inches of death. A duelist's bullet struck him in the chest, just shy of his heart (the man who fired the gun was purportedly the best marksman in Tennessee). But the wounded Jackson remained standing. Bleeding, he slowly steadied his aim and returned fire. The other man dropped to the ground, mortally wounded. Jackson—still carrying the bullet in his chest—later boasted, “I should have hit him, if he had shot me through the brain.”¹

The duel in Logan County, Kentucky, was one of many that Jackson fought during the course of his long and highly controversial career. The tenacity, toughness, and vengefulness that carried Jackson alive out of that duel, and the mythology and symbolism that would be attached to it, would also characterize many of his later dealings on the battlefield and in politics. By the time of his death almost forty years later, Andrew Jackson had become an enduring and controversial symbol, a kind of cipher to gauge the ways that various Americans thought about their country.

9.1 – A Democratic Republic



George Caleb Bingham, *The County Election*. Reynolda House Museum of American Art.

Today, most Americans think democracy is a good thing and tend to assume the nation's early political leaders believed the same. After all, was not the American Revolution a victory for democratic principles? For many of the founders, however, the answer was no. A wide variety of people participated in early United States politics, especially at the local level, but ordinary citizens' growing direct influence on government frightened the founding elites. At the Constitutional Convention in 1787, Alexander Hamilton warned of the “vices of democracy” and said he considered the British government—with its powerful king and parliament—“the best in the world.”² Another convention delegate, Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts, who eventually refused to sign the finished Constitution, agreed. “The evils we experience flow from an excess of democracy,” he proclaimed.³ Too much participation by the multitudes, the elite believed, would undermine good order. It would prevent the creation of a secure and united republican society. The Philadelphia physician and politician Benjamin Rush, for example, sensed that the Revolution had launched a wave of popular rebelliousness that could lead to a dangerous new type of despotism. “In our opposition to monarchy,” he

wrote, “we forgot that the temple of tyranny has two doors. We bolted one of them by proper restraints; but we left the other open, by neglecting to guard against the effects of our own ignorance and licentiousness.”⁴

Such warnings did nothing to quell Americans’ democratic impulses in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Americans who were allowed to vote (and sometimes those who were not) went to the polls in impressive numbers. Citizens also made public demonstrations and delivered partisan speeches at patriotic holiday and anniversary celebrations. They petitioned Congress, openly criticized the president, and insisted that a free people should not defer even to elected leaders. In many people’s eyes, the American republic was a *democratic* republic: the people were sovereign all the time, not only on election day.

The elite leaders of political parties could not afford to overlook “the cultivation of popular favour,” as Alexander Hamilton put it.⁵ Between the 1790s and 1830s, the elite of every state and party learned to listen—or pretend to listen—to the voices of the multitudes. And ironically, an American president (holding the office that most resembles a king’s) would come to symbolize the democratizing spirit of American politics in the Jacksonian era.

9.2 – The Missouri Crisis

A more troubling pattern was also emerging in national politics and culture. During the first decades of the nineteenth century, American politics shifted toward “sectional” conflict among the states of the North and South, and later, the West. Since the ratification of the Constitution in 1789, the state of Virginia had wielded more influence on the federal government than any other state. Four of the first five presidents, for example, were from Virginia. Immigration caused by the market revolution, however, caused the country’s population to grow fastest in northern states like New York. Northern political leaders were becoming wary of what they perceived to be a disproportionate influence in federal politics by Virginia and other southern states. Furthermore, many northerners feared that the southern states’ common interest in protecting slavery was creating a congressional voting bloc that would be difficult for “free states” to overcome. The North and South began to clash over federal policy as northern states gradually ended slavery, but southern states came to depend even more on slave labor.

The most important instance of these rising tensions erupted in the Missouri Crisis. When white settlers in Missouri, a new territory carved out of the Louisiana Purchase, applied for statehood in 1819, the balance of political power between northern and southern states became the focus of public debate. Missouri already had more than ten thousand slaves and was poised to join the southern slave states in Congress.⁶ Accordingly, Congressman James Tallmadge of New York proposed an amendment to Missouri’s application for statehood. Tallmadge claimed that the institution of slavery mocked the Declaration of Independence and the liberty it promised to “all men.” He proposed that Congress should admit Missouri as a state only if bringing more slaves to Missouri were prohibited and children born to the slaves there were freed at age twenty-five.

Congressmen like Tallmadge opposed slavery for moral reasons, but they also wanted to maintain a sectional balance of power. Unsurprisingly, the Tallmadge Amendment met with firm resistance from southern politicians. It passed in the House of Representatives because of the support of nearly all the northern congressmen, who held the majority in that house, but it was quickly defeated in the Senate.

When Congress reconvened in 1820, a senator from Illinois, another new western state, proposed a compromise. Jesse Thomas hoped his offer would not only end the Missouri Crisis but also prevent any future sectional disputes over slavery and statehood. Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky joined Thomas in promoting the deal, earning himself the nickname “the Great Compromiser.” Their bargain, the **Missouri Compromise** of 1820, contained three parts.⁷ First, Congress would admit Missouri as a slave state. Second, Congress would admit Maine (which previously had been a

territory of Massachusetts) as a free state, thus maintaining the balance between the number of free and slave states. Third, the rest of the Louisiana Purchase territory would be divided along the 36°30' line of latitude—or in other words, along the southern border of Missouri. Slavery would be prohibited in other new states north of this line, but it would be permitted in new states to the south. The compromise passed both houses of Congress, and the Missouri Crisis ended peacefully.

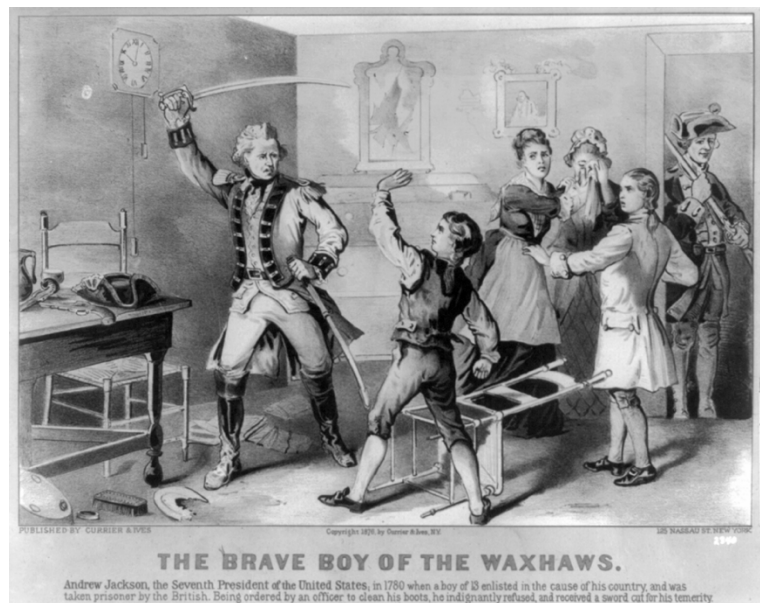
Not everyone, however, felt relieved. The Missouri Crisis made the sectional nature of American politics impossible to ignore. The Missouri Crisis split the Democratic-Republican party entirely along sectional lines, suggesting trouble to come. Furthermore, the Missouri Crisis demonstrated the volatility of the slavery debate. Many Americans, including seventy-seven-year-old Thomas Jefferson, were alarmed at how readily some Americans spoke of disunion and even civil war over the issue. “This momentous question, like a fire bell in the night, awakened and filled me with terror,” Jefferson wrote. “I considered it at once as the [death] knell of the Union.”⁸ In 1820, the Missouri Crisis did not result in disunion and civil war as Jefferson and others feared. But it also failed to settle the issue of slavery’s expansion into new western territories. The issue would cause even more trouble in years ahead.

9.3 – The Ascendancy of Andrew Jackson

The career of Andrew Jackson (1767–1845), the survivor of that backcountry Kentucky duel in 1806, exemplified both the opportunities and the dangers of political life in the early republic. A lawyer, slaveholder, and general—and eventually the seventh president of the United States—Jackson rose from humble frontier beginnings to become one of the most powerful Americans of the nineteenth century.

Andrew Jackson was born on March 15, 1767 on the border between North and South Carolina to two immigrants from northern Ireland. He grew up during dangerous times. At age thirteen, he joined an American militia unit in the Revolutionary War. He was soon captured, and a British officer slashed at his head with a sword after Jackson refused to shine the officer’s shoes. Disease during the war had claimed the lives of his two brothers and his mother, leaving him an orphan. Their deaths and his wounds had left Jackson with a deep and abiding hatred of Great Britain. After the war, Jackson moved west to frontier Tennessee, where he prospered despite his poor education, working as a lawyer and acquiring land and slaves. (He would eventually come to keep 150 slaves at the Hermitage, his plantation near Nashville.) In 1796, Jackson was elected as a U.S. representative, and a year later he won a seat in the U.S. Senate, although he resigned within a year, citing financial difficulties.

Thanks to his political connections, Jackson obtained a general’s commission at the outbreak of the War of 1812. Despite having no combat experience, General Jackson quickly impressed his troops, who nicknamed him “Old Hickory” after a particularly tough kind of tree. Jackson led his militiamen into battle in the Southeast, first during the Creek War, a side conflict that started between different factions of Muskogee (Creek) Indians in present-day Alabama. In that war, he won a



Images like this—showing a young Jackson defending his family from a British officer—established Jackson’s legend. Currier & Ives, “The Brave Boy of the Waxhaws,” 1876. Wikimedia.

decisive victory over hostile fighters at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend in 1814. A year later, he also defeated a large British invasion force at the Battle of New Orleans. There, Jackson's troops—including backwoods militiamen, free African Americans, Indians, and a company of slave-trading pirates—successfully defended the city and inflicted more than two thousand casualties against the British, sustaining barely three hundred casualties of their own.⁹ The Battle of New Orleans was a thrilling victory for the United States, but it actually happened two weeks after the Treaty of Ghent was signed to end the war. News of the treaty had not yet reached New Orleans.

9.4 – The Acquisition of Florida

In the early nineteenth century, Spain wanted to increase productivity in Florida and encouraged migration of mostly southern slave owners. By the second decade of the 1800s, Anglo settlers occupied plantations along the St. Johns River, from the border with Georgia to Lake George a hundred miles upstream. Spain began to lose control as the area quickly became a haven for slave smugglers bringing illicit human cargo into the United States for lucrative sale to Georgia planters. Plantation owners grew apprehensive about the growing numbers of slaves running to the swamps and Indian-controlled areas of Florida. American slave owners pressured the U.S. government to confront the Spanish authorities. Southern slave owners refused to quietly accept the continued presence of armed black men in Florida.

During the War of 1812, a ragtag assortment of Georgia slave owners joined by a plethora of armed opportunists raided Spanish and British-owned plantations along the St. Johns River. These private citizens received U.S. government help on July 27, 1816, when U.S. army regulars attacked the Negro Fort (established as an armed outpost during the war by the British and located about sixty miles south of the Georgia border). The raid killed 270 of the fort's inhabitants as a result of a direct hit on the fort's gunpowder stores. This conflict set the stage for General Andrew Jackson's invasion of Florida in 1817 and the beginning of the First [Seminole War](#).¹⁰

In 1818, Jackson launched an invasion of Spanish-owned Florida. As commander of the U.S. southern military district, he was acting on vague orders from the War Department to break the resistance of the region's Seminole Indians, who protected runaway slaves and attacked American settlers across the border. On Jackson's orders in 1816, U.S. soldiers and their Creek allies had already destroyed the "Negro Fort," a British-built fortress on Spanish soil, killing 270 former slaves and executing some survivors.¹¹ In 1818, Jackson's troops crossed the border again. They occupied Pensacola, the main Spanish town in the region, and arrested two British subjects whom Jackson executed for helping the Seminoles. The execution of these two Britons created an international diplomatic crisis. Most officials in President James Monroe's administration called for Jackson's censure. But Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, the son of former president John Adams, found Jackson's behavior useful. He defended the impulsive general, arguing that he had had been forced to act. Adams used Jackson's military successes in this First Seminole War to persuade Spain to accept the Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819, which gave Florida to the United States for \$5 million and other territorial concessions elsewhere.¹²

Florida was an early test case for the Americanization of new lands. The territory held strategic value for the young nation's growing economic and military interests in the Caribbean. The most important factors that led to the annexation of Florida included anxieties over runaway slaves, Spanish neglect of the region, and the desired defeat of Native American tribes who controlled large portions of lucrative farm territory. Any friendliness between John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson that resulted from the endeavor, however, did not survive long. In 1824, four nominees competed for the presidency in one of the closest elections in American history. Each came from a different part of the country—Adams from Massachusetts, Jackson from Tennessee, William H. Crawford from Georgia, and Henry Clay

from Kentucky. Jackson won more popular votes than anyone else but with no majority winner in the Electoral College, the decision was thrown to the U.S. House of Representatives. There, Adams used his political clout to claim the presidency, persuading Clay to support him. Jackson would never forgive Adams, whom his supporters accused of engineering a “corrupt bargain” with Clay to circumvent the popular will.

Four years later, in 1828, Adams and Jackson squared off in one of the dirtiest presidential elections to date.¹³ Pro-Jackson partisans accused Adams of elitism and claimed that while serving in Russia as a diplomat he had offered the Russian emperor an American prostitute. Adams’s supporters, on the other hand, accused Jackson of murder and attacked the morality of his marriage, pointing out that Jackson had unwittingly married his wife Rachel before a divorce from her prior husband was complete. This time, Andrew Jackson won the election easily, but Rachel Jackson died suddenly the following December, before his inauguration. Jackson never forgave the people who attacked his wife’s character during the campaign and blamed them for Rachel’s demise.

9.5 – The Nullification Crisis

Nearly every American had an opinion about President Jackson. To some, he epitomized democratic government and popular rule. To others, he represented the worst in a powerful and unaccountable executive, acting as president with the same arrogance he had shown as a general in Florida. One of the key issues dividing Americans during his presidency was a sectional dispute over national tax policy that would come to define Jackson’s no-holds-barred approach to government.

Once Andrew Jackson moved into the White House, most southerners expected him to do away with the hated Tariff of 1828, the so-called Tariff of Abominations. This import tax provided protection for northern manufacturing interests by raising the prices of European products in America. Southerners, however, blamed the tariff for a massive transfer of wealth. It forced them to purchase goods from the North’s manufacturers at higher prices, and it provoked European countries to retaliate with high tariffs of their own, reducing foreign purchases of the South’s raw materials.

Only in South Carolina, though, did the discomfort turn into organized action. The state was still trying to shrug off the economic problems of the Panic of 1819, but it had also recently endured the 1822 [Denmark Vesey](#) slave conspiracy, which had convinced white South Carolinians that antislavery ideas put them in danger of a massive slave uprising. Elite South Carolinians were especially worried that the tariff was merely an entering wedge for federal legislation that would limit slavery. Andrew Jackson’s own vice president **John C. Calhoun**, who was from South Carolina, asserted that the tariff was “the occasion, rather than the real cause of the present unhappy state of things.” The real fear was that the federal government might attack “the peculiar domestick institution of the Southern States”—meaning slavery.¹⁴ When Jackson failed to act against the tariff, Vice President Calhoun was caught in a tight position.

In 1828, Calhoun secretly drafted the “South Carolina Exposition and Protest,” an essay and set of resolutions that laid out the doctrine of [nullification](#).¹⁵ Drawing from the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions of 1798 and 1799, Calhoun argued that the United States was a compact among the states rather than among the whole American people. Since the states had created the Union, he reasoned, they were still sovereign, so a state could nullify a federal statute it considered

unconstitutional. Other states would then have to concede the right of nullification or agree to amend the Constitution. If necessary, a nullifying state could leave the Union. When Calhoun's authorship of the essay became public, Jackson was furious, interpreting it both as a personal betrayal and as a challenge to his authority as president. His most dramatic confrontation with Calhoun came in 1832 during an event commemorating Thomas Jefferson. At dinner, the president rose and toasted, "Our Federal Union: it must be preserved." Calhoun responded with a toast of his own: "The Union: next to our Liberty the most dear."¹⁶ Their political rift was not pretty and Martin Van Buren, a New York political leader whose skill in making deals had earned him the nickname "the Little Magician," replaced Calhoun as vice president when Jackson ran for reelection in 1832. Calhoun returned to South Carolina, where a special state convention nullified the federal tariffs of 1828 and 1832. It declared them unconstitutional and therefore "null, void, and no law" within South Carolina.¹⁷ The convention ordered South Carolina customs officers not to collect tariff revenue and declared that any federal attempt to enforce the tariffs would cause the state to secede from the Union.

President Jackson responded dramatically. He denounced the ordinance of nullification and declared that "disunion, by armed force, is TREASON."¹⁸ Vowing to hang Calhoun and any other nullifier who defied federal power, he persuaded Congress to pass a Force Bill that authorized him to send the military to enforce the tariffs. Faced with such threats, other southern states declined to join South Carolina. Privately, however, Jackson supported the idea of compromise and allowed his political enemy Henry Clay to broker a solution with Calhoun. Congress passed a compromise bill that slowly lowered federal tariff rates, and in turn South Carolina rescinded nullification for the tariffs but nullified the Force Bill.

The legacy of the Nullification Crisis is difficult to sort out. Jackson's decisive action seemed to have forced South Carolina to back down. However, the crisis also united the ideas of secession and states' rights, two concepts that had not necessarily been linked before. Perhaps most clearly, nullification showed that the immense political power of slaveholders was matched only by their immense anxiety about the future of slavery. During later debates in the 1840s and 1850s, they would raise the ideas of the Nullification Crisis again.

9.6 – The Eaton Affair and Politics of Scandal

Meanwhile, a more personal crisis during Jackson's first term also drove a wedge between him and Vice President Calhoun. The **Eaton Affair**, sometimes insultingly called the "Petticoat Affair," began as a disagreement among elite women in Washington, D.C., but it eventually led to the disbanding of Jackson's cabinet.

True to his backwoods reputation, when he took office in 1829, President Jackson chose mostly provincial politicians, not Washington veterans, to serve in his administration. One of them was his friend John Henry Eaton, a senator from Tennessee, whom Jackson nominated to be his secretary of war. A few months earlier, Eaton had married Margaret (Peggy) O'Neale Timberlake, the recent widow of a navy officer. She was the daughter of Washington boardinghouse proprietors, and her humble origins and combination of beauty, outspokenness, and familiarity with so many men in the boardinghouse had led to gossip. During her first marriage, rumors had circulated that she and John Eaton were having an affair while her husband was at sea. When her first husband committed suicide and she married Eaton just nine months later, the society women of Washington had been scandalized. One wrote that Margaret Eaton's reputation had been "totally destroyed."¹⁹

Although women could not vote or hold office, they played an important role in politics as people who controlled influence.²⁰ They helped hold official Washington together and, according to one local society woman, "the ladies" had "as much rivalry and party spirit, desire of precedence and authority" as male politicians had.²¹ These women upheld a strict code of femininity and sexual morality. They paid careful attention to the rules that governed personal

interactions and official relationships. John Eaton was now secretary of war, but other cabinet members' wives refused have anything to do with his wife. No respectable lady who wanted to protect her own reputation could exchange visits with her, invite her to social events, or be seen chatting with her. Most importantly, the vice president's wife, Floride Calhoun, shunned Margaret Eaton, spending most of her time in South Carolina to avoid her. Even Jackson's own niece, Emily Donelson, visited Eaton once and then refused to have anything more to do with her.

Margaret Eaton's social exclusion thus greatly affected Jackson, his cabinet, and the rest of Washington society. At first, President Jackson blamed his rival Henry Clay for the attacks on the Eatons. But he soon perceived that Washington women and his new cabinet had initiated the gossip. Jackson scoffed, "I did not come here to make a cabinet for the ladies of this place," and claimed that he "had rather have live vermin on my back than the tongue of one of these Washington women on my reputation."²² He began to blame the ambition of Vice President Calhoun for Floride Calhoun's actions, deciding "it was necessary to put him out of the cabinet and destroy him."²³

Jackson was so indignant because he had recently been through a similar scandal with his late wife, Rachel. Her character had also been insulted by leading politicians' wives because of the circumstances of her divorce and marriage to Jackson. Jackson believed that Rachel's death had been caused by those slanderous attacks. Furthermore, he saw the assaults on the Eatons as attacks on his authority.

In one of the most famous presidential meetings in American history, Jackson called together his cabinet members to discuss what they saw as the bedrock of society: women's position as protectors of the nation's values. There, the men of the cabinet debated Margaret Eaton's character. Jackson delivered a long defense, methodically presenting evidence against her attackers. But the men attending the meeting—and their wives—were not swayed. They continued to shun Margaret Eaton, and the scandal was resolved only with the resignation of four members of the cabinet, including Eaton's husband.



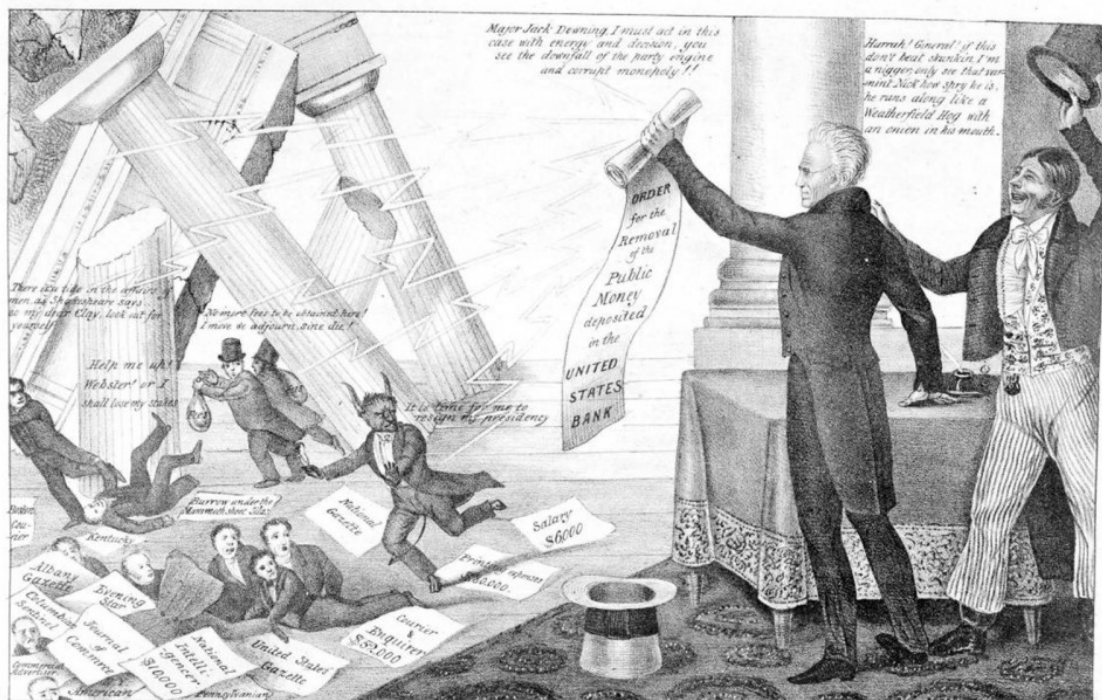
This photograph shows Eaton at a much older age. "Eaton, Mrs. Margaret (Peggy O'Neill), old lady," c. 1870-1880. Library of Congress.

9.7 – The Bank War

Andrew Jackson's first term was full of controversy. For all of his reputation as a military and political warrior, however, the most characteristic struggle of his presidency was financial. As president, he waged a "war" against the Bank of the United States. The charter of the controversial national bank that Congress established under Alexander Hamilton's financial plan had expired in 1811. But five years later, Congress had given a new charter to the **Second Bank of the United States**. Headquartered in Philadelphia, this bank was designed to stabilize the growing American economy. By requiring other banks to pay their debts promptly in gold, it was supposed to prevent them from issuing too many paper banknotes that could drop suddenly in value. Of course, the Bank of the United States was also supposed to reap a healthy profit for its private stockholders, like Philadelphia banker Stephen Girard and New York merchant John Jacob Astor.

Though many Democratic-Republicans had supported the new bank, some never gave up their Jeffersonian suspicion that such a powerful institution was dangerous to the republic. Andrew Jackson was one of the skeptics. He and many of his supporters blamed the bank for the Panic of 1819, which had become a severe economic depression. The national bank had made that crisis worse, first by lending irresponsibly and then, when the panic hit, by hoarding gold currency to save itself at the expense of smaller banks and their customers. Jackson's supporters also believed the bank had corrupted many politicians by giving them financial favors.

In 1829, after a few months in office, Jackson set his sights on the bank and its director, Nicholas Biddle. Jackson became more and more insistent over the next three years as Biddle and the bank's supporters fought to save it. A visiting Frenchman observed that Jackson had "declared a war to the death against the Bank," attacking it "in the same cut-and-thrust style" with which he had once fought the Indians and the British. For Jackson, the struggle was a personal crisis. "The Bank is trying to kill me," he told Martin Van Buren, "but I will kill it!"²⁴ The bank's charter was not due for renewal for several years, but in 1832, while Jackson was running for reelection, Congress held an early vote to reauthorize the Bank of the United States. The president vetoed the bill.



Draw'd Off from Nature by Tick Downing, Nephew to Major Jack Downing.
THE DOWNFALL OF MOTHER BANK.
 Printed & Publ'd by H.B. Robinson, 82 Courtlandt St. N. York.

"The bank," Andrew Jackson told Martin Van Buren, "is trying to kill me, but I will kill it!" That is just the unwavering force that Edward Clay depicted in this lithograph, which praised Jackson for terminating the Second Bank of the United States. Clay shows Nicholas Biddle as the Devil running away from Jackson as the bank collapses around him, his hirelings, and speculators. Edward W. Clay, c. 1832. Wikimedia.

In his veto message, Jackson called the bank unconstitutional and "dangerous to the liberties of the people." The charter, he explained, did not do enough to protect the bank from its British stockholders, who might not have Americans' interests at heart. In addition, Jackson wrote, the Bank of the United States was virtually a federal agency, but it had powers that were not granted anywhere in the Constitution. Worst of all, the bank was a way for well-connected people to get richer at everyone else's expense. "The rich and powerful," the president declared, "too often bend the acts of government to their selfish purposes."²⁵ Only a strictly limited government, Jackson believed, would treat people equally.

Although its charter would not be renewed, the Bank of the United States could still operate for several more years. In 1833, to diminish the bank's power, Jackson also directed his cabinet to stop depositing federal funds in it. From now on, the government would do business with selected state banks instead. Critics called them Jackson's "pet banks."

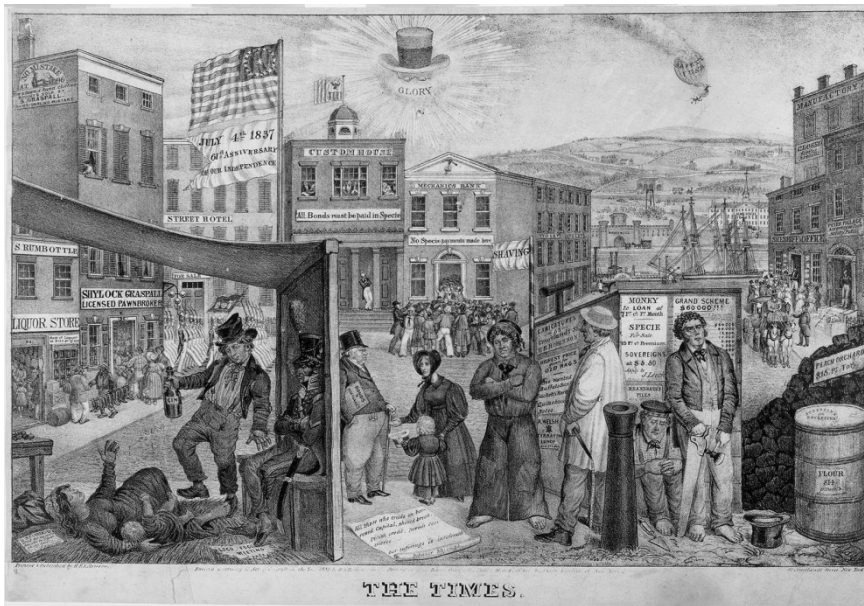
Jackson's bank veto set off fierce controversy. Opponents in Philadelphia held a meeting and declared that the president's ideas were dangerous to private property. Jackson, they said, intended to "place the honest earnings of the industrious citizen at the disposal of the idle"—in other words, redistribute wealth to lazy people—and become a "dictator."²⁶ A newspaper editor said that Jackson was trying to set "the poor against the rich," perhaps in order to take over as a military tyrant.²⁷ But Jackson's supporters praised him. Pro-Jackson newspaper editors wrote that he had kept a "monied aristocracy" from conquering the people.²⁸ By giving President Jackson a vivid way to defy the rich and powerful, or at least appear to do so, the Bank War gave his supporters a specific "democratic" idea to rally around. More than any other issue, opposition to the national bank came to define their beliefs. And by leading Jackson to exert executive power so dramatically against Congress, the Bank War also helped his political enemies organize.

Increasingly, supporters of Andrew Jackson referred to themselves as Democrats. Under the strategic leadership of Martin Van Buren, they built a highly organized national political party, the first modern party in the United States. Much more than earlier political parties, this **Democratic Party** had a centralized leadership structure and a consistent ideological program for all levels of government. Meanwhile, Jackson's enemies, mocking him as "King Andrew the First," named themselves after the patriots of the American Revolution, the Whigs.

9.8 – The Panic of 1837

Between 1834 and 1836, a combination of high cotton prices, freely available foreign and domestic credit, and an infusion of specie ("hard" currency in the form of gold and silver) from Europe spurred a sustained boom in the American economy. At the same time, sales of western land by the federal government promoted speculation and poorly regulated lending practices, creating a vast real estate bubble. Meanwhile, the number of state-chartered banks grew from 329 in 1830 to 713 just six years later. As a result, the volume of paper banknotes per capita in circulation in the United States increased by 40 percent between 1834 and 1836. Low interest rates in Great Britain also encouraged British capitalists to make risky investments in America. British lending across the Atlantic surged, raising American foreign indebtedness from \$110 million to \$220 million over the same two years.²⁹ However, as the boom accelerated, banks became more careless about the amount of hard currency they kept on hand to redeem their banknotes. Unfortunately for the Democrats (and most other Americans), the president's bank veto (which Jackson had hoped would reduce bankers' and speculators' power over the economy) aggravated rather than solved the country's economic problems.

Two further federal actions late in the Jackson administration also worsened the situation. In June 1836, Congress decided to increase the number of banks receiving federal deposits. This plan undermined the banks that were already receiving federal money, since they saw their funds distributed to other banks. Next, seeking to reduce speculation on credit, the Treasury Department issued an order called the Specie Circular in July 1836, requiring payment in hard currency for all federal land purchases. As a result, land buyers drained eastern banks of even more gold and silver. By late fall in 1836, America's economic bubbles began to burst and federal land sales plummeted. The *New York Herald* reported that "lands in Illinois and Indiana that were cracked up to \$10 an acre last year, are now to be got at \$3, and even less." The newspaper warned darkly, "The reaction has begun, and nothing can stop it."³⁰



Many Americans blamed the Panic of 1837 on the economic policies of Andrew Jackson, who is sarcastically represented in the lithograph as the sun with top hat, spectacle, and a banner of "Glory" around him. The destitute people in the foreground (representing the common man) are suffering while a prosperous attorney rides in an elegant carriage in the background (right side of frame). Edward W. Clay, "The Times," 1837. Wikimedia.

Runs on banks began in New York on May 4, 1837, as panicked customers scrambled to exchange their banknotes for hard currency. By May 10, the New York banks, running out of gold and silver, stopped redeeming their notes. As news spread, banks around the nation did the same. By May 15, the largest crowd in Pennsylvania history had amassed outside Independence Hall in Philadelphia, denouncing banking as a "system of fraud and oppression."³¹

The Panic of 1837 led to a general economic depression. Between 1839 and 1843, the total capital held by American banks dropped by 40 percent as prices fell and economic activity around the nation slowed to a crawl. The price of cotton in New Orleans, for

instance, dropped 50 percent.³² Traveling through New Orleans in January 1842, a British diplomat reported that the country "presents a lamentable appearance of exhaustion and demoralization."³³ Over the previous decade, the American economy had soared to fantastic new heights and plunged to dramatic new depths.

Normal banking activity did not resume around the nation until late 1842. Meanwhile, two hundred banks closed, cash and credit became scarce, prices declined, and trade slowed. During this downturn, eight states and a territorial government defaulted on loans made by British banks to finance internal improvements.³⁴

9.9 – Rise of the Whigs

The Panic of 1837 created an opportunity for the rise of a new Whig Party, which had grown out of different factions. One part came from the political coalition of John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay that opposed Andrew Jackson and the Democratic Party. The National Republicans, a loose alliance concentrated in the Northeast, had become the core of a new anti-Jackson movement. But Jackson's enemies were a varied group; they also included pro-slavery southerners angry about Jackson's behavior during the Nullification Crisis as well as antislavery Yankees. After failing to prevent Andrew Jackson's reelection, this fragile coalition formally organized as a new party in 1834 "to rescue the Government and public liberty."³⁵ Henry Clay, who had run against Jackson for president and was now serving again as a senator from Kentucky, held private meetings to persuade anti-Jackson leaders from different backgrounds to unite. He also gave the new Whig Party its anti-monarchical name.

At first, the Whigs focused mainly on winning seats in Congress to oppose "King Andrew" from outside the presidency but remained divided by regional and ideological differences. The Democratic presidential candidate, Vice President Martin Van Buren, easily won election as Jackson's successor in 1836. But the Whigs gained significant public support

after the Panic of 1837, and they became increasingly well organized. In late 1839, they held their first national convention in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

To Clay's disappointment, the convention voted to nominate not him but General William Henry Harrison of Ohio as the Whig candidate for president in 1840. Harrison was known primarily for defeating Shawnee warriors led by Tecumseh before and during the War of 1812, most famously at the Battle of Tippecanoe in present-day Indiana. Whig leaders viewed him as a candidate with broad patriotic appeal. They portrayed him as the "log cabin and hard cider" candidate, a plain man of the country, unlike the easterner Martin Van Buren. To balance the ticket with a southerner, the Whigs nominated a slave-owning Virginia senator, John Tyler, for vice president. Tyler had been a Jackson supporter but had broken with him over states' rights during the Nullification Crisis.

Although "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too" easily won the presidential election of 1840, this choice of ticket turned out to be disastrous for the Whigs. Harrison became ill (for unclear reasons, though tradition claims he contracted pneumonia after delivering a nearly two-hour inaugural address without an overcoat or hat) and died after just thirty-one days in office. Harrison thus holds the ironic honor of having the longest inaugural address and the shortest term in office of any American president.³⁶ Vice President Tyler became president and soon adopted policies that looked far more like Andrew Jackson's than like a Whig's. After Tyler twice vetoed charters for another Bank of the United States, nearly his entire cabinet resigned, and the Whigs in Congress expelled "His Accidency" from the party. The crisis of Tyler's administration was just one sign of the Whig Party's difficulty uniting around issues besides opposition to Democrats.



Andrew Jackson portrayed himself as the defender of the common man, and in many ways democratized American politics. His opponents, however, zeroed in on Jackson's willingness to utilize the powers of the executive office. Unwilling to defer to Congress and absolutely willing to use his veto power, Jackson came to be regarded by his adversaries as a tyrant (or, in this case, "King Andrew I".) Anonymous, c. 1832. Wikimedia.



The popular slogan "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too" helped the Whigs and William Henry Harrison (with John Tyler) win the presidential election in 1840. Pictured here is a campaign banner with shortened "Tip and Ty," one of the many ways that Whigs waged the "log cabin campaign." Wikimedia.

9.10 – Whigs and Anti-Masonry

The Whig coalition drew strength from several earlier parties, including some that harnessed American political paranoia. The Anti-Masonic Party formed in the 1820s for the purpose of destroying the Freemasons. Freemasonry, an international network of social clubs with arcane traditions and rituals, seems to have originated in medieval Europe as a trade organization for stonemasons. By the eighteenth century, however, it had outgrown its relationship with the masons' craft and had become a general secular fraternal order that proclaimed adherence to the ideals of the Enlightenment. Freemasonry was an important part of the social life of men in the new republic's elite. George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Andrew Jackson, and Henry Clay all claimed membership. Prince Hall, a free leather worker in Boston, founded a separate branch of the order for African American men. However, the Masonic brotherhood's secrecy, elitism, rituals, and secular ideals generated a deep suspicion of the organization among many Americans.

In 1820s upstate New York, which was fertile soil for new religious and social reform movements, anti-Masonic suspicion would emerge for the first time as an organized political force. The trigger for this was the strange disappearance and probable murder of **William Morgan** after he announced plans to publish an exposé called *Illustrations of Masonry*.³⁷ This book purported to reveal the order's secret rites, and it outraged other local Freemasons. The order launched a series of attempts to prevent the book from being published, including an attempt to burn the press and a conspiracy to have Morgan jailed for alleged debts. In September, Morgan disappeared after being forced into a carriage by four men later identified as Masons. When a badly decomposed corpse washed up on the shore of Lake Ontario in the autumn of 1827, Morgan's wife and friends claimed it to be William Morgan and buried it under that name. Other stories circulated that Morgan had been paid off to leave the country and agree never to publish his book; some later reported that Morgan was still alive and had been spotted outside of the United States. Most historians agree that the Freemasons most likely murdered Morgan, but his disappearance has never been resolved.

The Morgan story convinced many people that Masonry was a dangerous influence in the republic. The publicity surrounding the trials transformed local outrage into a political movement that, though small, had significant power in New York and parts of New England. This movement addressed Americans' widespread dissatisfaction with economic and political change by giving them a handy explanation: the republic was controlled by a secret society. In 1827, local anti-Masonic committees began meeting across the state of New York, committing not to vote for any political candidate who belonged to the Freemasons. This boycott grew, and in 1828, a convention in the town of LeRoy produced an "Anti-Masonic Declaration of Independence," the basis for an Anti-Masonic Party. In 1828, Anti-Masonic politicians ran for state offices in New York, winning 12 percent of the vote for governor.³⁸ In 1830, the Anti-Masons held a national convention in Philadelphia but after a dismal showing in the 1832 presidential elections, the leaders of the Anti-Masonic Party folded their movement into the new Whig Party. The Anti-Masonic Party's absorption into the Whig coalition demonstrated the importance of conspiracy theories in American politics. Just as Andrew Jackson's followers detected a vast foreign plot in the form of the Bank of the United States, some of his enemies could detect it in the form of the Freemasons.

9.11 – Nativism in American Politics

Nativism had already been an influential force, particularly in the Whig Party, whose members could not fail to notice that urban Irish Catholics strongly tended to support Democrats. American nativists also indulged in conspiracy theories and detected many foreign threats, but Catholicism may have been the most important. Nativists watched with horror as more and more Catholic immigrants (especially from Ireland and Germany) arrived in American cities. The immigrants professed different beliefs, often spoke unfamiliar languages, and participated in "alien" cultural

traditions. Just as importantly, nativists remembered Europe's history of warfare between Catholics and Protestants. They feared that Catholics would bring religious violence with them to the United States.

In the summer of 1834, a mob of Protestants attacked a Catholic convent near Boston. The rioters had read newspaper rumors that a woman was being held against her will by the nuns. Angry men broke into the convent and burned it to the ground. Later, a young woman named Rebecca Reed, who had spent time in the convent, published a memoir describing abuses she claimed the nuns had directed toward novices and students.³⁹ The convent attack was among many eruptions of nativism, especially in New England and other parts of the Northeast, during the early nineteenth century.

Many Protestants saw the Catholic faith as a superstition that deprived individuals of the right to think for themselves and enslaved them to a dictator, the pope, in Rome. They accused Catholic priests of controlling their parishioners and preying sexually on young women. They feared that Catholicism would overrun and conquer the American political system, just as their ancestors had feared it would conquer England. The painter and inventor Samuel F. B. Morse, for example, warned in 1834 that European tyrants were conspiring together to “carry Popery through all our borders” by sending Catholic immigrants to the United States. If they succeeded, he predicted, Catholic dominance in America would mean “the *certain destruction of our free institutions*.”⁴⁰ Around the same time, the Protestant minister Lyman Beecher lectured in various cities, delivering a similar warning. “If the potentates of Europe have no design upon our liberties,” Beecher demanded, then why were they sending over “such floods of pauper emigrants—the contents of the poorhouse and the sweepings of the streets—multiplying tumults and violence, filling our prisons, and crowding our poorhouses, and quadrupling our taxation”—not to mention voting in American elections?⁴¹ Later, anti-immigrant sentiment formed the American Party, also called the Know-Nothings, who sought and won offices across the country in the 1850s.

9.12 – Race Relations in Jacksonian America

More than anything else, racial inequality in the nineteenth century exposed the limits of American democracy. Over several decades, state governments had lowered their property requirements so poorer men could vote. But as northern states ended slavery, white Americans worried that free black men could also go to the polls in large numbers. In response, they adopted new laws that made racial discrimination the basis of American democracy. The Ohio River Valley set an early precedent for this trend in the decades after the Revolution as Kentucky and Tennessee emerged as slave states, while free states Ohio, Indiana (1816), and Illinois (1818) gained admission along the river's northern banks. Borderland negotiations and accommodations along the Ohio River fostered a distinctive kind of white supremacy, as laws tried to keep blacks out of the West entirely. Ohio's so-called Black Laws of 1803 foreshadowed the exclusionary cultures of Indiana, Illinois, and several subsequent states of the Old Northwest and later, the Far West.⁴² These laws often banned African American voting, denied black Americans access to public schools, and made it impossible for nonwhites to serve on juries and in local militias, among a host of other restrictions and obstacles.

At the time of the American Revolution, only two states explicitly limited black voting rights. By 1839, almost all states did. (The four exceptions were all in New England, where the Democratic Party was weakest.) For example, New York's 1821 state constitution enfranchised nearly all white male taxpayers but only the richest black men. In 1838, a similar constitution in Pennsylvania prohibited black voting completely. The new Pennsylvania constitution disenfranchised even one of the richest people in Philadelphia. James Forten, a free-born sailmaker who had served in the American Revolution, had become a wealthy merchant and landowner. He used his wealth and influence to promote the abolition of slavery, and after 1838 unsuccessfully filed a lawsuit to protect his right to vote. An English observer

commented sarcastically that Forten was not “white enough” to vote, but “he has always been considered quite white enough to be *taxed*.”⁴³

During the 1830s, furthermore, the social tensions that had promoted Andrew Jackson’s rise also worsened race relations. Almost four hundred thousand free blacks lived in America by the end of the decade.⁴⁴ In the South and West, Native Americans stood in the way of white expansion. And the new Irish Catholic immigrants, along with native working-class whites, often despised nonwhites as competitors for scarce work, housing, and status. Racial and ethnic resentment thus contributed to a wave of riots in American cities during the 1830s. In Philadelphia, thousands of white rioters torched an antislavery meeting house and attacked black churches and homes. Near St. Louis, abolitionist newspaper editor Elijah Lovejoy was murdered as he defended his printing press. Contemplating the violence, another journalist wondered, “Does it not appear that the character of our people has suffered a considerable change for the worse?”⁴⁵ Racial tensions also influenced popular culture. The white actor Thomas Dartmouth Rice appeared on stage in *blackface*, singing and dancing as a clownish slave named “Jim Crow.” Many other white entertainers copied him. Borrowing from the work of real black performers but pandering to white audiences’ prejudices, they turned cruel stereotypes into one of antebellum America’s favorite forms of entertainment.

As politics grew more democratic, leaders attacked old inequalities of wealth and power, but in doing so many pandered to a unity under white supremacy. Some white Americans in the 1830s, however, joined free black activists in protesting racial inequality. Usually, they lived in northern cities and came from the class of skilled laborers, or in other words, the lower middle class. Most of them were not rich, but they expected to rise in the world. In Boston, for example, the Female Anti-Slavery Society included women whose husbands sold coal, mended clothes, and baked bread, as well as women from wealthy families. In the nearby village of Lynn, many abolitionists were shoemakers. They organized boycotts of consumer products like sugar that came from slave labor, and they sold their own handmade goods at antislavery fund-raising fairs. For many of them, the antislavery movement was a way to participate in “respectable” middle-class culture, a way for both men and women to have a say in American life. Debates about slavery, therefore, reflected wider tensions in a changing society.

9.13 – Indian Removal in the Southeast

Following the War of 1812, most of the Great Lakes indigenous nations had been forced out of their ancestral homelands by military or diplomatic means. The major tribes of the Southeast—the Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Cherokee, and Seminole—increasingly adopted American cultural practices during that time period. *Evangelicals* proclaimed that the Cherokee were becoming “civilized,” which could be seen in their adoption of a written language and of a constitution modeled on that of the United States government. Mission supporters were shocked, then, when the election of Andrew Jackson brought a new emphasis on the removal of Native Americans from the land east of the Mississippi River. In many ways, though, this emphasis reflected several significant trends in

the nineteenth-century United States, including a perceived entitlement to westward expansion, a growing sense of white racial superiority, and the desire for Indian lands in the South that were, due to opportunities for mining and cotton cultivation, skyrocketing in value. Americans also held that Creek and Seminole Indians, occupying the area from the Apalachicola River to the wet prairies and hammock islands of central Florida, were dangers in their own right. After the Adams-Onís Treaty, planters from the Carolinas, Georgia, and Virginia seized Indians' eastern lands in Florida, reduced lands available for runaway slaves, and killed entirely or removed Indian peoples farther west. This became the template for future actions throughout the Southeast.

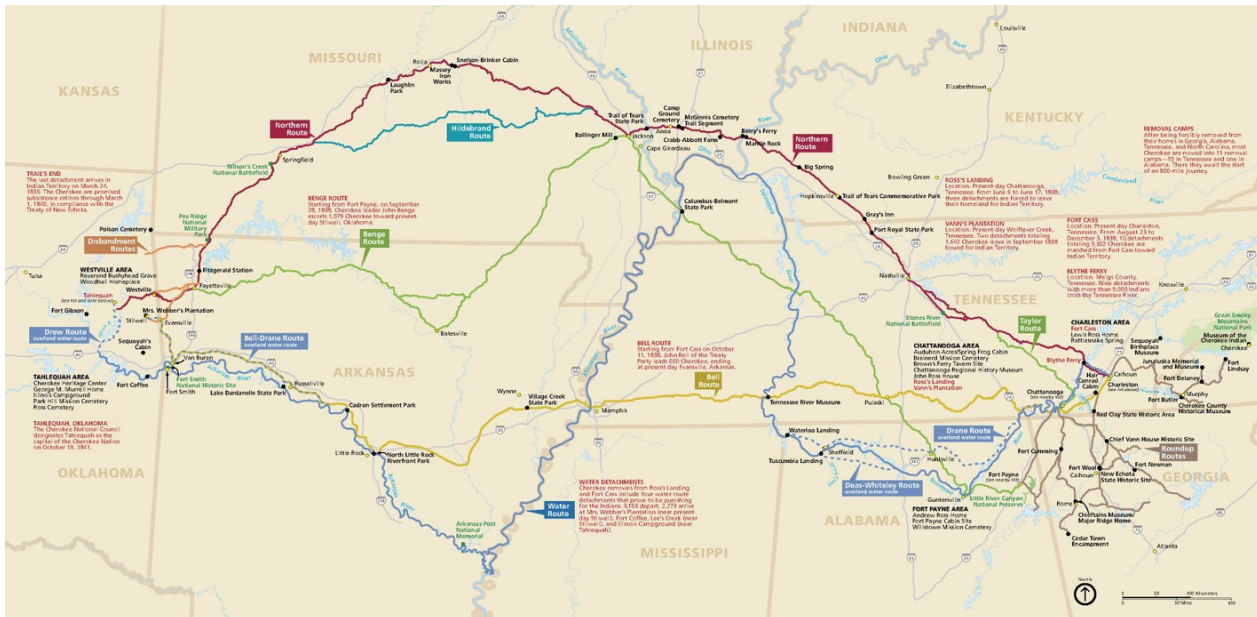
Presidents, since at least Thomas Jefferson, had long discussed removal, but President Andrew Jackson took the most dramatic action. Jackson believed, "It [speedy removal] will place a dense and civilized population in large tracts of country now occupied by a few savage hunters."⁴⁶ Desires to remove American Indians from valuable farmland motivated state and federal governments to cease trying to assimilate Indians and instead plan for forced removal.

Congress passed the **Indian Removal Act** in 1830, thereby granting the president authority to begin treaty negotiations that would give American Indians land in the West in exchange for their lands east of the Mississippi. Many advocates of removal, including President Jackson, paternalistically claimed that it would protect Indian communities from outside influences that jeopardized their chances of becoming "civilized" farmers. Jackson emphasized this paternalism—the belief that the government was acting in the best interest of Native peoples—in his 1830 State of the Union Address. "It [removal] will separate the Indians from immediate contact with settlements of whites . . . and perhaps cause them gradually, under the protection of the Government and through the influence of good counsels, to cast off their savage habits and become an interesting, civilized, and Christian community."⁴⁷

At the same time, the law was met with fierce opposition from within the affected Native American communities as well as from some white Americans. Jeremiah Evarts, one of the leaders of the American Board, wrote a series of essays under the pen name William Penn urging Americans to oppose removal.⁴⁸ He used the religious and moral arguments of the mission movement but added a new layer of politics in his extensive discussion of the history of treaty law between the United States and Native Americans. However, Martin Van Buren created a lobby called the "Board for the Emigration, Preservation, and Improvement of the Aborigines of America." In Van Buren's rhetoric, Native Americans in the Southeast were unfit for "civilization" and moving west of the Mississippi River would be the most humane option to preserve Native populations. After several months of debate, the controversial Act was passed in Congress and signed into law by President Jackson, who described it as an act of "philanthropy" in his State of the Union address that year.

Policies of Indian removal were accomplished through a series of treaty negotiations and forced evacuations that went on for several years. The Choctaw were the first targets for removal when they were forced from their Mississippi lands in 1830. In 1832 the Chickasaw and Creek nations followed them, and while Cherokee resistance to the policy remained strong throughout the decade, they too were forced to march to lands in eastern Oklahoma in the late 1830s. The Florida Seminoles were steadfast in their refusal to leave and engaged in a Second Seminole War against the United States for nearly a decade. Free black men and women and escaped slaves also occupied the Seminole district, a situation that deeply troubled slave owners. Indeed, General Thomas Sidney Jesup, U.S. commander during the early stages of the Second Seminole War, labeled that conflict "a negro, not an Indian War," fearful as he was that if the revolt "was not speedily put down, the South will feel the effect of it on their slave population before the end of the next season."⁴⁹ Florida became a state in 1845 and settlement expanded into the former Indian lands.

9.14 – The Trail of Tears



The Trail of Tears map shows one of the most shameful episodes of American history, today preserved as the Trail of Tears National Historic Trail. U.S. National Park Service.

The experience of the Cherokee was particularly brutal. Despite many tribal members adopting some Euro-American ways, including intensified agriculture, slave ownership, and Christianity, state and federal governments pressured the Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek, and Cherokee Nations to sign treaties and surrender land. Many of these tribal nations used the law in hopes of protecting their lands. Most notable among these efforts was the Cherokee Nation's attempt to sue the state of Georgia. The Cherokee defended themselves against Georgia's laws by citing treaties signed with the United States that guaranteed the Cherokee Nation both their land and independence. The Cherokee appealed to the Supreme Court against Georgia to prevent dispossession. The Court, while sympathizing with the Cherokee's plight, ruled that it lacked jurisdiction to hear the case (*Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* [1831]). In an associated case, **Worcester v. Georgia** (1832), the Supreme Court ruled that Georgia laws did not apply within sovereign Cherokee territory.⁵⁰ Regardless of these rulings, the state government ignored the Supreme Court and did little to prevent conflict between settlers and the Cherokee.

Jackson wanted a solution that might preserve peace and his reputation. He sent secretary of war Lewis Cass to offer title to western lands and the promise of tribal governance in exchange for relinquishing of the Cherokee's eastern lands. These negotiations opened a rift within the Cherokee Nation. Cherokee leader John Ridge and his father, Major Ridge, believed removal was inevitable and pushed for a treaty that would give the best terms. Others, called nationalists and led by John Ross, refused to consider removal in negotiations. The Jackson administration refused any deal that fell short of large-scale removal of the Cherokee from Georgia, thereby fueling a devastating and violent intratribal battle between the two factions. Eventually tensions grew to the point that several treaty advocates were assassinated by members of the national faction.⁵¹

In 1835, a portion of the Cherokee Nation led by Ridge, hoping to prevent further tribal bloodshed, signed the Treaty of **New Echota**. This treaty ceded lands in Georgia for \$5 million and, the signatories hoped, limiting future conflicts between the Cherokee and white settlers. However, most of the tribe refused to adhere to the terms, viewing the treaty as illegitimately negotiated. In

response, Ross pointed out the U.S. government's hypocrisy. "You asked us to throw off the hunter and warrior state: We did so—you asked us to form a republican government: We did so. Adopting your own as our model. You asked us to cultivate the earth, and learn the mechanic arts. We did so. You asked us to learn to read. We did so. You asked us to cast away our idols and worship your god. We did so. Now you demand we cede to you our lands. That we will not do."⁵² President Martin van Buren, in 1838, decided to press the issue beyond negotiation and court rulings and used the New Echota Treaty provisions to order the army to forcibly remove those Cherokee not obeying the treaty's cession of territory.

Harsh weather, poor planning, and difficult travel compounded the tragedy of what became known as the **Trail of Tears**. Sixteen thousand Cherokee embarked on the journey; only ten thousand completed it.⁵³ Not every instance was of removal as treacherous or demographically disastrous as the Cherokee example, but over sixty thousand Indians from the Southeast were evacuated prior to the Civil War.⁵⁴ The removal of Native Americans to western territories was devastating for their populations. Many families delayed departure until the last minute, or until the U.S. military forced them to leave, meaning they were unprepared for the arduous overland journey. Infectious diseases, dehydration and malnutrition, exhaustion, and injuries claimed the lives of thousands during the journey. Moreover, the challenges these decimated societies faced creating new patterns of subsistence in the West led to long-lasting cycles of poverty, suffering, and dependence. Despite the disaster of removal, tribal nations slowly rebuilt their cultures and, in some cases, even achieved prosperity in Indian Territory. Tribal nations blended traditional cultural practices (including common land use systems) with western practices including constitutional governments, common school systems, and an elite slaveholding class that lasted through the Civil War era.

9.15 – Conclusion

In 1828, Jackson's broad appeal as a military hero won him the presidency. He was "Old Hickory," the "Hero of New Orleans," a leader of plain frontier folk. His wartime accomplishments appealed to the pride and growing sense of nationalism among many American voters at a time when the franchise was expanding dramatically. However, the Jacksonian era also illuminated a number of contradictions that belied images of national identity and unity. Over the next eight years, Jackson and his newly formed Democratic party would claim to represent the interests of ordinary white Americans, especially from the South and West, against the country's wealthy and powerful elite. This attitude would lead him and his allies into a series of bitter political struggles, the crucible of truly partisan politics in America.

The Whig Party succeeded in electing two more presidents after Van Buren's administration but remained deeply divided, and the party's problems grew as the issue of slavery strained the Union in the 1850s. Unable to agree on a consistent national position on slavery, and unable to find another national issue to rally around, the Whigs broke apart by 1856. At the same time, changes in race relations, social class divisions and privileges, and the autonomy of Native American nations challenged the nation's growing sense of popular democracy. The ultimate question was whether American democracy had room for people of different races as well as religions and classes. Some people said yes and struggled to make American society more welcoming. But the vast majority of white Americans, whether Democrats or Whigs, said no.

9.16 – Reference Material

This chapter was edited by Jonathan Wilfred Wilson, with content contributions by Myles Beaupre, Dea Boster, Christopher Childers, William Cossen, Adam Costanzo, Nathaniel C. Green, Robert Gudmestad, Spencer McBride, Kevin Waite, and Jonathan Wilfred Wilson.

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