

The Jacksonian Era

1829 - 1837

Major Themes:

Indian Removal/Trail of Tears
Jacksonian Democracy
States Rights/Nullification

Presidencies:

Andrew Jackson – 1829 - 1837

Overview:

Jackson is a different breed of cat than America had yet seen. That is to say, he was not a wealthy aristocrat like the Founding Fathers, rather, he was a common man, who rose through the ranks of the Army and achieved his national fame from the Battle of New Orleans during the War of 1812 and for his role in fighting Indians, especially in Florida in 1819. The newspapers made him famous and he rode that fame eventually into the White House.

He hated the idea that wealthy financial interests could dominate an economy and use that dominance to exploit and control the lower classes. To Jackson, democracy was supposed to be something different than it had been – not a Jeffersonian paternalist idea, where those who were “most able to govern, did so” and for the benefit of the uneducated, unwashed masses. Jackson believed the role of government was to control the wealthy’s influence, and to limit the restrictions the federal government put on individuals’ opportunity and ability to succeed. In the best case scenario, he believed government should help to create that opportunity for the common folk like himself.

So when Congress passed the **Indian Removal Act** in 1830, it meant several things. One, it meant that the country was heavily racist and discriminatory against Native Americans – and it was. Two, it meant that the “five civilized tribes” the Act targeted for removal had something Jackson and the rest of the country wanted – namely – good farmland that would be open for cotton farming and small yeoman farmers to occupy. It also meant that runaway slaves could no longer find refuge on the Cherokee Nation – a sore point with southern plantation owners.

Not everyone agreed with this idea. After all, members of the five tribes were *citizens* of the United States. Fully assimilated, they spoke English, farmed, were practicing Christian, and had blended and intermarried with the White population over the years so that almost everyone in the tribe was mixed blood to some degree, including John White, Chief of the Cherokee, who was only 1/8th Cherokee. Senator Davy Crockett of Kentucky voiced his objections rather loudly to the Act, wondering that if government could take away land from citizens, what would stop them from taking Crockett’s or anyone else’s land. Either these natives were citizens with legal rights or they were not. The Act passed easily without Crockett’s help, but then the Supreme Court stepped in, telling Jackson that the Act and the later Indian Removal on the Trail of Tears were unconstitutional. Jackson merely ignored the Supreme Court and did it anyway – something that

today would easily be an impeachable offense. That's how strong hatred against natives was at the time.

Crockett returned home to campaign for re-election, was defeated largely because of his stance on the IRA, and left the country to live in Texas.

There were other issues of Jacksonian Democracy as well, including the establishment of the Second Bank of the United States. Federalist-minded activists and politicians favored a strong bank that could stay afloat, and provide business loans that would help to develop the country. Jackson believed this was just a power grab by the rich to concentrate money in their hands, and then use that against the poor people he championed. He vetoed the bank.

Jackson's first Vice President, John C. Calhoun, was from South Carolina and was a hardcore states' rights advocate who was afraid of the power of the federal government, especially when it came to the southern economy and slavery. So when the Congress passed what Calhoun called the "Tariff of Abominations", he flipped out a little bit. See, a tariff is a tax on imports, and this one was a tax on British textiles (clothing). The tax would make British textiles more expensive and American textiles more attractive to buyers because they were cheaper. So it was protecting American jobs in the textile industry, which was almost entirely in Boston and New York. Sounds good, right? Well the only thing Britain could do is retaliate, so they put a tariff on America's biggest export to them: cotton. So now our tariff helped the North and hurt the South, and it passed anyway. So Calhoun went nuts and his hair got even crazier. He proposed the doctrine of Nullification, a continuation of Jefferson's earlier idea in the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions that said states could reject federal laws they felt were unconstitutional. Nothing really came of Calhoun's threat except he and Jackson had a falling out and Calhoun wasn't Vice President for the second term, but it reflected how sectionalism in the country was growing even in the 1830's.

Texas declared independence and waged war to separate from Mexico starting in 1835, but the US paid little attention. In the last part of Jackson's presidency, he carried out the Trail of Tears with military force, evacuating most of the surviving members of the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek and Seminole Indians from across the South and ordered them marched to Oklahoma – at that time unsettled frontier country. 13,000 Indians made the journey, and only 9000 survived it. Obviously one of the more obscene chapters in our country's history and a stain on the record of Jackson and the democracy he claimed to favor.

In other news, 1831 marked the start of modern abolition, with William Lloyd Garrison establishing his newspaper *The Liberator* and starting a long crusade against slavery. In 1837, Frederick Douglass was sent to the slavebreaker (see primary source).