

14.2 The Inauguration of Andrew Jackson

On March 4, 1829, more than 10,000 people from every state crowded into Washington, D.C., to witness the inauguration of their hero. The visitors overwhelmed local hotels, sleeping five to a bed and drinking the city dry of whiskey. “I have never seen such a crowd here before,” observed Senator Webster. “Persons have come 500 miles to see General Jackson, and they really seem to think the country has been rescued from some...disaster.”

Many of the people flocking into the capital were first-time voters. Until the 1820s, the right to vote had been limited to the rich and well-born. Only white men with property, it was said, had the education and experience to vote wisely.

The new states forming west of the Appalachians challenged this argument. Along the frontier, all men—rich or poor, educated or not—shared the same opportunities and dangers. They believed they should also share the same rights, including the right to vote.

With the western states leading the way, voting laws were changed to give the “common man” the right to vote. This expansion of democracy did not yet include African Americans, Native Americans, or women. Still, over one million Americans voted in 1828, more than three times as many as voted in 1824.

Many of these new voters did believe that they had rescued the country from disaster. In their view, the national government had been taken over by corrupt “monied interests”—that is, the rich. Jackson had promised to throw these rascals out and return the government to “the people.” His election reflected a shift in power to the West and to the farmers, shopkeepers, and small business owners who supported him.

After Jackson was sworn in as president, a huge crowd followed him to the White House. As the crowd surged in, the celebration turned into a near riot. “Ladies fainted, men were seen with bloody noses, and such a scene of confusion took place as is impossible to describe,” wrote an eyewitness, Margaret Bayard Smith. Jackson was nearly “pressed to death” before escaping out a back door. “But it was the people’s day, and the people’s president,” Smith concluded. “And the people would rule.”

14.4 Jackson’s Approach to Governing

Jackson approached governing much as he had approached leading an army. He listened to others, but then he did exactly what he thought was right.

The Kitchen Cabinet Unlike earlier presidents, Jackson did not rely on his cabinet for advice. He made most of his decisions with the help of trusted friends and political supporters. These advisors were said to meet with him in the White House kitchen. For this reason, they were known as the “kitchen cabinet.”

The rich and well-born looked at the “kitchen cabinet” with deep suspicion. In their eyes, the men around the president were not the proper sort to be running the country. One congressman accused Amos Kendall, Jackson’s closest advisor, of being “the President’s...lying machine!” Jackson ignored such charges and continued to turn for advice to men he trusted.

The Spoils System Jackson’s critics were even more upset by his decision to replace many Republican officeholders with loyal Democrats. Most of these **civil servants** viewed their posts as lifetime jobs. Jackson disagreed. Rotating people in office was more democratic than lifetime service, he said, because it gave more people a chance to serve their government. After a few years in office, civil servants should “go back to making a living as other people do.”

Jackson’s opponents called the practice of rewarding political supporters with jobs the **spoils system**. This term came from the saying that “to the victor belong the spoils [prizes] of war.” They also exaggerated the number of Republicans removed from office. Only about 10 percent of all civil servants were replaced, and many who were dismissed from their jobs deserved to be. One was an official who had stolen \$10,000 from the Treasury. When he begged Jackson to let him stay in office, the president replied, “Sir, I would turn out my own father under the same circumstances.”

But Jackson could put patriotism above party loyalty. One dismissed postmaster started to undress to show the president his wounds from the Revolutionary War. Jackson snapped, “Put your coat on at once, sir!” The next day, the postmaster got his job back.

14.5 The Nullification Crisis

Jackson's approach to governing was tested by an issue that threatened to break up the United States. In 1828, Congress passed a law raising **tariffs**, or taxes, on imported goods such as cloth and glass. The idea was to encourage the growth of manufacturing. Higher tariffs meant higher prices for imported factory goods. American manufacturers could then outsell their foreign competitors.

Northern states, humming with new factories, favored the new tariff law. But southerners opposed tariffs for several reasons. Tariffs raised the prices they paid for factory goods. High tariffs also discouraged trade among nations, and planters in the South worried that tariffs would hurt cotton sales to other countries. In addition, many southerners believed that a law favoring one region—in this case, the North—was unconstitutional. Based on this belief, John C. Calhoun, Jackson's vice president, called on southern states to declare the tariff “null and void,” or illegal and not to be honored.

Jackson understood southerners' concerns. In 1832, he signed a new law that lowered tariffs—but not enough to satisfy the most extreme supporters of states' rights in South Carolina. Led by Calhoun, they boldly proclaimed South Carolina's right to nullify, or reject, both the 1828 and 1832 tariff laws. Such an action was called *nullification*.

The constitutional issue of nullification had been raised by the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions 30 years before. But now South Carolinians took the idea of states' rights even farther. They threatened to **secede** if the national government tried to enforce the tariff laws.

Jackson was outraged. “If one drop of blood be shed there in defiance of the laws of the United States,” he raged, “I will hang the first man of them I can get my hands on from the first tree I can find.” He called on Congress to pass the Force Bill, which allowed him to use the federal army to collect tariffs if needed. At the same time, Congress passed a compromise bill that lowered tariffs still further.

Faced with such firm opposition, South Carolina backed down and the nullification crisis ended. However, the tensions between the North and the South would increase in the years ahead.

14.6 Jackson Battles the Bank of the United States

Jackson saw himself as the champion of the people, and never more so than in his war with the Bank of the United States. As you learned in Chapter 13, the Bank was partly owned by the federal government, and it had a monopoly on federal deposits. Jackson thought that the Bank benefited rich Eastern investors at the expense of farmers and workers as well as smaller state banks. He felt that the powerful Bank stood in the way of opportunity for hopeful capitalists in the West and other regions. He also distrusted the Bank's president, Nicholas Biddle, who was everything Jackson was not—wealthy, well-born, highly educated, and widely traveled.

The Bank's charter was due to come up for renewal in 1836, and Jackson might have waited until then to “slay the monster,” as he called it. But Henry Clay, who planned to run for president against Jackson in 1832, decided to force the issue. Clay pushed a bill through Congress that renewed the Bank's charter four years early. He thought that if Jackson signed the bill, the president would lose votes from farmers who shared his dislike of banks. But if Jackson vetoed the bill, he would lose votes from businesspeople who depended on the Bank for loans. What Clay had forgotten was that there were many more poor farmers to cast votes than there were rich bankers and businesspeople.

Jackson vetoed the recharter bill. Even though the Supreme Court had ruled that the Bank was constitutional, Jackson called the Bank an unconstitutional monopoly that existed mainly to make the rich richer. The voters seemed to agree. Jackson was reelected by a large majority.

Rather than wait for the Bank to die when its charter ran out, Jackson decided to starve it to death. In 1833, he ordered the secretary of the treasury to remove all federal deposits from the Bank and put the money in state banks. Jackson's enemies called these banks “pet banks” because they were run by the president's supporters.

Delegations of business owners begged Jackson not to kill the Bank. Jackson refused. Slaying the Bank, he believed, was a victory for economic democracy.