

Handout Week Two: Before the Storm Mick Chantler, Instructor

Andrew Jackson and the Transformation of American Politics

“I was born for a storm, and a calm does not suit me.” Andrew Jackson

Andrew Jackson, Donald Trump’s favorite President, rewrote the rule book for American leaders. A rip-roaring two-fisted man of the people, “Andy” (his nickname is significant in itself: no one would have thought addressing our earlier Presidents with such folksy informality) fought duels, gambled, engaged in bloody street brawls, threatened to hang anyone who crossed him, and was technically a bigamist. But far from disqualifying him for the highest office, such picaresque escapades only made him more popular with ordinary Americans. During his two terms in office, (1829-1837) he reshaped the presidency, and helped turn it into a powerful fulcrum of executive power. He would become the most influential Chief Executive until Abraham Lincoln’s administration. While his stock has fallen in recent years, he is still considered one of America’s most game-changing politicians.

On the positive side, Jackson preserved the Union during its greatest crisis since the nearly disastrous war with England in 1812-15. South Carolina threatened to disregard, or “nullify” the federal tariff of 1828. Jackson’s response was something along the lines of “Over my dead body.” In taking such a firm stand against the Palmetto State’s cavalier disregard of the law of the land, Jackson temporarily stemmed the drift toward national disintegration. He helped form the Democratic Party, still the longest living political party in our nation’s history, and in the process gave millions of ordinary Americans the confidence that someone in Washington had their back. Common people could identify with their Tennessee hero, because in truth he was one of them. Hailing from the backwoods of Carolina, he was the first president to come from an undistinguished background. He built his career by scorning the polished elites of his time.

Like most nineteenth century Americans, Jackson was a bundle of contradictions. A champion of extending the blessings of freedom and

democratic equality to poor backcountry white men, he was an unabashed slaveholder and a ferocious persecutor of Indians. (He would promulgate the infamous policy of “removing” Native Americans from their immemorial hunting lands east of the Mississippi, an act which most of us today would call “genocide.”) Yet this ruthless Indian slayer could demonstrate a remarkable humanitarian sentimentality at times: he once rescued an Indian orphan on a battlefield, and took him home and raised him with his family. A complex man indeed. As biographer Jon Meacham puts it, “Like us and our America, Jackson achieved great things while committing grievous sins.