

Trump turns to American history

The strange political afterlife of Andrew Jackson

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The White House, led by its fascistic top advisor Stephen K. Bannon, is attempting to cast Donald Trump as the reincarnation of the seventh American president, Andrew Jackson. Trump has hung a portrait of Jackson in the Oval Office.

Last Wednesday, Trump visited Jackson's Tennessee plantation, the Hermitage, on the occasion of the 250th anniversary of Jackson's birth. "Inspirational visit, I have to tell you. I'm a fan," Trump said of Jackson. Speaking in Detroit earlier the same day, the president asserted that "my election was most similar to his."

As a preliminary matter, Trump's election more closely parallels that of Jackson's opponent John Quincy Adams in the election of 1824. Like Trump, Adams lost the popular vote by a wide margin. But Adams gained the White House instead of Jackson after Kentucky Senator Henry Clay threw his support behind the candidate from Massachusetts in a House of Representatives vote on February 9, 1825.

Bannon, a student of Italian fascism who is closely tied to the "white nationalist" far-right, is behind Trump's embrace of Jackson, who was elected in 1828 and served as president from 1829 to 1837. "[L]ike Jackson's populism, we're going to build an entirely new political movement," Bannon said in November after Trump's victory. Bannon and White House adviser Stephen Miller have reportedly given Trump books to study on the seventh US president.

Such historical comparisons always say much more about the present than they do about the past. The question is, of all presidents, why does the White House seek to drape Trump in the mantle of Andrew Jackson?

Jackson is an important figure, but no one could ever say of him, as Marx did of Lincoln, that he was "one of the rare men who succeed in becoming great without ceasing to be good." Jackson, unlike Lincoln, was not known to exercise the quality of mercy. While Lincoln commuted more death sentences than all other American presidents combined, Jackson, in his pre-presidential career as a military commander, reveled in carrying out executions of deserting soldiers, Indians, and, in one case, two British civilians.

Jefferson, who knew Jackson, called him "a dangerous man" who was "most unfit" to be president, pointing in particular to his disregard for the law and his notoriously violent temper. "He could never speak on account of the rashness of his feelings," Jefferson said of Jackson. "I have seen him attempt it repeatedly, and as often choke with rage."

The man becomes his age. Among the Enlightenment generation of 1776, Jefferson articulated the most radical and egalitarian impulse of the American Revolution. Lincoln's political genius arose from his recognition that the Civil War was the culmination and "fiery trial" of the American Revolution's promise of equality. In their great documents and speeches, Jefferson and Lincoln both presented their ideals in international terms, invoking the "decent respect to the opinions of mankind"

(Jefferson) and viewing national events as components in a larger historical drama in which America appeared to be "the last, best, hope" (Lincoln).

Jackson, the dominant politician in the period separating the two revolutions, embodied something far different.

Jackson took office in 1829 after the end of the "Era of Good Feelings," a period falling roughly between the War of 1812 and the end of the James Monroe administration in 1825. This was an era of profound social and economic change, marked by such economic and industrial achievements as the construction of the Cumberland Pike and the Erie Canal. The growing complexity of the American economy brought about significant changes in social relations, including closer links between the agricultural economies and market towns, increasing social differentiation, and the growing power of Northern industry.

Jackson was a reactionary figure whose *modus vivendi* depended on burying, as much as possible, the powerful contradictions building up during this period—especially those having to do with slavery—which would ultimately find resolution in the Civil War.

Jackson presented himself as a "man of the people." However, parties and politicians must be assessed not by what they say about themselves, but by what they objectively represent.

His Democratic Party emerged out of the period of Republican domination stretching through the administrations of the Virginia Dynasty of Jefferson, Madison and Monroe. The Democrats were a political union of the Southern slaveholding aristocracy, sections of American capitalism associated with state-level banking and the lucrative cotton trade, and corrupt big city political machines such as New York's Tammany Hall that were emerging in the North. It was, in other words, a party of the most reactionary forces in American society.

The political art of the early Democrats consisted in their ability to hide the controversy over slavery behind a veil of nationalism, racism and populist demagoguery, and thereby subordinate many farmers and workers of the North to a reactionary program largely dictated by the Southern planter class, of which Jackson was an extremely wealthy member.

The controversy over slavery, which first erupted with the debate over whether Missouri would be admitted as a slave state in 1819, was temporarily resolved through national expansionism, which the Democratic Party motivated ideologically with the concept of "Manifest Destiny." It asserted the right, even sacred duty, of Americans to possess all the lands of North America, whether they were inhabited by Indians or claimed by Britain or Mexico.

The dispute over who would inherit the lands of the West—the sons of the slaveowners or the sons of the yeoman farmers of the North—could be thus delayed. Yet in the main, territorial expansion was designed to benefit the Southern planter class. This began under Jackson with the

appropriation of the fertile lands of the southeast in Georgia, Alabama and Florida, taken from the so-called Five Civilized Tribes of the Southeast—the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek and Seminoles—in a forced exodus to Oklahoma remembered as “the Trail of Tears.” In executing this policy, which today would be called “ethnic cleansing,” Jackson notoriously defied a Supreme Court injunction.

Then there was Jackson’s populist demagoguery in the so-called “Bank Wars” against the re-chartering of the Bank of the United States. Jackson and the Democrats were not opponents of finance in general, but were aligned with state-level banks and favored decentralized and inflationary monetary policies.

Jackson’s phony anti-bank politics provided a false explanation for the first major financial crisis in US history, the Panic of 1819, which arrived simultaneously with the crisis over Missouri. Agriculture in the North had been given a great push forward by the Napoleonic Wars, increasing the prices of American food crops. This in turn drove up the price of land, feeding a speculative frenzy that burst with the Panic of 1819.

Thousands of banks collapsed, and many tens of thousands of overextended farmers and businessmen were ruined. The mysteriously powerful calamity, which hit like a force of nature, was little understood. The trauma even triggered the religious fervor that “burnt over” the rural areas in the 1820s, known as the Second Great Awakening.

Finally, Jackson and the early Democrats had to contend with the first stirrings of the working class. In the 1820s, together with the emergence of the slavery issue and the upheaval wrought by the panics of 1819 and 1825, the old guild system, by which apprentices learned a trade, advanced to the status of journeymen and hoped to one day become masters, collapsed.

Ancient methods and rites of labor vanished. Masters no longer worked side-by-side with journeymen and apprentices. They became rich employers of wage-earners, joined by growing streams of impoverished immigrants. The American Revolution’s promise of equality, for which the urban artisans had fought in organization such as the Sons of Liberty, allying with Jefferson and Madison against Hamilton and Adams, seemed to have been betrayed.

In the 1820s, the beginning of “the Age of Jackson,” the first strikes and trade unions appeared in the cities. Then, in the late 1820s, came the sudden emergence of dozens of local political parties, generally taking the name Workingmen’s Party. The largest appeared in the two biggest cities, New York and Philadelphia, where they won broad support among workers and challenged the new Democratic Party for political control. [1]

In response, the northern Democrats, led by Jackson’s vice president and successor, Martin Van Buren of New York, attempted to dissolve the class issue into a vague anti-elitist and, for the first time in US history, racist politics. The northern Democrats acted through the new species of career politician, the sprawling “Penny press,” made possible by developments in printing technology, and the most popular form of entertainment of the day, blackface minstrelsy, which lampooned Whigs, abolitionists, free blacks and slaves.

The plausibility of the Democratic Party ideology was aided by the two-party system itself. Factory owners, seeking tariff protection from British competition and the promotion of infrastructure, oriented to the Whigs. Small numbers of free blacks and abolitionists repulsed by the Democratic Party’s shameless racism joined them.

This explains a striking paradox of American history. Just as the right to vote was extended in the North to all white men, without property qualifications—proudly championed by Jackson and the Democrats—it was denied or even stripped away from free black men. In many northern states, including Pennsylvania, African American men did not earn the right to vote until after the Civil War. So savage was the Democratic Party’s racism, blacks were denied the right even to settle in entire states, Illinois and Iowa included. [2]

The effectiveness of this politics made the Democratic Party the stronger of the two antebellum parties until the late 1850s, with the Democrats generally controlling the presidency, the legislature and the Supreme Court, and dominating most state governments, South and North. Jackson was a nationalist whose support for slavery did not stop him from opposing South Carolina in the nullification crisis of 1832, in which the planter elite of that state threatened secession rather than accept a tariff bill designed to support northern manufactures. Jackson’s threats to use military force against the state prevented—or rather, delayed—its attempted secession.

Bannon is not unique in trying to appropriate Jackson’s legacy. Until recently, Jackson was held up by American *liberals* as an icon, a characterization most famously put forth by historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. in his enormously influential *Age of Jackson*, which appeared in 1945. Schlesinger presented Jackson as a tribune of the people, and his Democratic Party as the party of “the common man.”

Like Bannon today, Schlesinger had political motivations. During the years the author researched and wrote *Age of Jackson*, Roosevelt’s Democratic Party shifted to the right, abandoning the New Deal and preparing to purge from its ranks left elements in and around the Communist Party, with which it had been allied.

The Harvard historian wrote about Jackson and the Democratic Party of the 1820s and 1830s in order to present the mid-20th century Democrats—the party that dropped nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, interned the Japanese and suppressed the strike wave of the 1930s and 1940s—as a “peoples’ party.”

At about the same time the *Age of Jackson* appeared, the Democratic Party spearheaded the anti-Communist purges of the 1940s and 1950s, which began in the trade unions and later spread to Hollywood and academia. In essence, the attack was not against individuals, but against the idea, which had gained wide acceptance during the Great Depression, that there existed a class struggle. The consequences of the anti-socialist witchhunt for American intellectual and cultural life have been incalculable.

Schlesinger’s hagiography of Jackson played its role in all of this. The Harvard historian, a personal friend and advisor to John Kennedy, was a major intellectual representative of what has been called “liberal anti-communism.” Soon after the *Age of Jackson*, beginning in the late 1940s, state Democratic Party organizations began to hold “Jefferson-Jackson” fundraising dinners.

The times have changed. The intellectuals grouped around the Democratic Party today, Schlesinger’s academic descendants, have quietly disavowed Jackson while carrying out a much noisier attack on Jefferson and the American Revolution itself, portraying them as racist and hypocritical. Jackson’s visage is to be removed from the twenty-dollar bill in favor of abolitionist Harriet Tubman and the Jefferson-Jackson fundraisers decommissioned.

There is nothing progressive in any of this. The rejection of Jackson is not a repudiation of Schlesinger’s false presentation of him as a reformist and tribune of the people. It is an indication that the Democratic Party has abandoned its former posture as a party of reform attuned to the needs of working people, in which the Jacksonian myth played a central role. The Democratic Party’s program today consists largely of appeals to a privileged, affluent upper-middle class on the basis of race, gender and sexual orientation.

This has cleared the historical field for Bannon and Trump, who are more blunt in seeking to exploit the reactionary essence of Jackson and his politics than Schlesinger.

However, the president and his political guru need only follow the history lesson a few years further past the Age of Jackson to understand Jacksonian politics’ total and catastrophic failure. The nationalism of “Jacksonian democracy” may have delayed the eruption of the colossal

contradictions of the antebellum, but it did not prevent it.

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Footnotes

[1] Bruce Laurie, *Artisans into Workers, Labor in Nineteenth-Century America*. University of Illinois Press, 1997.

[2] Leon Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860*, University of Chicago Press, 1965.



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