

Example of book review on andrew jackson and the bank war: a study in the growth ...

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Robert V. Remini's *Andrew Jackson and the Bank War: A Study in the Growth of Presidential Power*, published in 1967, discusses the Bank War of the early 1800s, in which the controversy of re-chartering the Second Bank of the United States (BUS) during Jackson's administration left Democrats and Republicans quarreling with each other over issues of social equality and the role of government in the economy. Remini's thesis is that Andrew Jackson's resistance to the re-chartering of the BUS is seen by Remini as no mere historical footnote, but "the single most important event during the entire middle period of American history" (Remini 177). To that end, the author synthesizes the events and contexts of the Bank War to show just how important that controversy was.

Remini's primary framework for the Bank war is not economic, but political - the Bank of the United States featured a great number of opponents, not just Jackson. To be sure, economists opposed the bank, including rising businessmen and entrepreneurs who felt threatened by the restrictions on paper money that the Bank insisted upon, people who advocated for hard money, and those who felt the Bank's activities fell outside the jurisdiction of the Constitution. However, Remini's political argument centers around the BUS becoming a personal matter for Jacksonian Democrats to strengthen their position and the party as a whole, as well as a sharp example of Jackson's own political agenda.

Remini's account of the Bank War starts out as a battle of wits between President Jackson and BUS president Nicholas Biddle, the author painting Jackson as hard-nosed and immovable. Jackson was 61 years old by the time he took his first term in office in 1829, and had already developed grudges

against banks as a result of his time on the frontier; he saw them as poor money-handlers who did not understand finance and its complexities. Jackson had a furious temper, which he often took out on his enemies; he was merciless on the battlefield as well, whether he fought against his own political opponents or the Indians. Likewise, Remini shows that Biddle is no soft-shoe - he was equally as stubborn as Jackson, but had the benefit of his wealth, his good looks, and knowing just what his bank offered to the country as a whole. At the same time, his vanity and arrogance made him less than an effective politician. Remini shows these two stubborn individuals butting heads as symbolic of the bitter and difficult conflicts that made up the Bank War.

Remini's perspective on the Bank War is well-reasoned and succinct; he does not hold to the more extreme positions of either side, which are commonly used in the historiography of this subject with regards to the War's central conflict. Other scholars (including Govan) believe that Biddle was in the right, and his innocence was undercut and ravaged by the barbaric tyrant Andrew Jackson; conversely, he does not celebrate Jackson as the savior of the United States who was completely justified in his assault on Biddle. Jackson shows his opportunism in Remini's account, as he is both willing to compromise and all too eager to close doors to compromise as soon as Biddle demonstrates his own initiative. As soon as Jackson was re-elected, he leveraged the goodwill and energy that came with that strong support by the American people to pursue his agenda and kill Biddle's BUS. With these kinds of details, Remini shows his understanding of both men's positions, and provides a reasoned account of the Bank War's origins and responsibilities

therein.

According to Remini, Jackson was intemperate and aggressive, and was most certainly the person solely responsible for causing the war. Jackson's own prejudices against the banks, as well as their role in the Panic of 1819 left him champing at the bit to limit Biddle's powers. However, by the time 1832 came along, he was not sure how exactly this would come about; he left it open for compromise and negotiation with his opponents to figure out a good way to limit these powers. He was in the middle of these deliberations when Biddle approached Congress with a vote for re-charter in 1836 at Henry Clay's advising - the first of many mistakes Biddle would make. By doing this so soon, Jackson vetoed the bill as an election issue; this also provided him with the encouragement he needed to pursue the issue, bolstered by his landslide re-election.

Remini uses this conflict to hammer home the themes of the Bank War's relationship and effect on presidential powers - he believes that the Bank War expanded and enhanced the president's ability to influence economic policy greatly. He notes that Jackson set a great number of precedents during this event, including using the veto to dismiss the bill, dismissing Cabinet members, usurping control of the nation's economy, and furthering the idea that the President is the representative of the people, and must act in their interests. After this point, Congress had to make sure that they kept the President's opinion in mind when proposing legislation, and the president had the ability to corral their party around a pet issue. Jackson's behavior in the Bank War, according to Remini, elevated the President beyond a prime minister into an aggressive and assertive leader, who became a vital

component of a democratic government.

These precedents are celebrated by Remini, but Jackson does not escape criticism in any way - though it can be said that Remini oversells Jackson's importance, especially given the relative weakness of his successors in the wake of the strong men who preceded him. This is a strange remark on this issue, especially as Remini's central argument is that Jackson strengthened the power of the President. It is also difficult to say that the federal government was strengthened by this affair, as the result of the Bank War led to the decentralization of the banks, leaving them to the states. Jackson, as an activist, allowed the government's authority to be strengthened, but his other marks on legislative policy can be seen as ineffective.

In conclusion, Remini's account of the Bank War is comprehensive and somewhat even-handed, though some of his remarks can often be overly favorable of Jackson's contributions to the Presidency. The principal figures involved in the Bank War - Jackson and Biddle - are given appropriate context and motivation, and shows just how dramatic this fight was. The author clearly presents the political and financial complexities that were at play during the Bank War, and offers a well-balanced portrayal of the events themselves (despite mostly focusing on the White House). Remini's work is a capable and comprehensive account and history of the Bank War.

References

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