

Good essay about liberty and power: the politics of jacksonian america (new york:...

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Harry L. Watson, in *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America* looks at the time of the second party system as it existed nationally during the Jacksonian era. Watson, being fascinated by the Jackson administration's importance in establishing early American economy and political culture, explores the overall attitude of Jacksonian politics. This includes discussion of the Bank War, nullification, and the very nature of Andrew Jackson's personality and presidency, in order to elucidate upon Jackson's motivations and effectiveness as president. While the book does not delve into incredible detail on any one subject among these, Watson offers a cursory view at the general timbre of the Jacksonian era.

The thesis that the book holds is that, while the Jacksonian Democrats catered to nineteenth-century ideas of American elitism and its traditions, "at the same time, the rise of new party institutions tended to channel popular democratic energies in conservative directions, giving recognition to popular feelings while blunting their potentially disruptive consequences" (Watson 13). Among these consequences was the disastrous effect of manifest destiny - a hallmark of the Jacksonian era and Jacksonian Democracy, this concept essentially justified American xenophobia and racism. Due to this and other policies, this ostensibly liberal party was becoming more and more conservative in response to the sentiments of the people.

In the first chapter and concluding two chapters, an overview of the work itself is provided for context and tone, with the intervening chapters taking a segment of the Jacksonian era and covering it. Chapter 2 elucidates upon the Republic and Democratic takes on the Market Revolution, while Chapter 3

addresses the bargains that had to be made between Republican, Democrat and Whig to maintain democracy. Chapter 4 shows Jackson's election and his execution of his contradictory principles, while Chapter 5 addresses issues such as northern evangelicalism. Chapter 6 deals with the local politics of the time and how they were changing, including the roles of women, while Chapter 7 and 8 summarize these narratives in the form of analysis of his presidency and legacy. The book's organization fits well with its thesis, offering the opportunity for readers to look at the way the nation and the Jackson administration changed and shifted between the beginning and end of his presidency. By placing the events in chronological order, readers get a glimpse at how a nation changes its mind and its direction in a comprehensible order.

This book belongs firmly in the historical subfield of political history. The book argues that America took the direction it did primarily because of the actions of Andrew Jackson and his administration, placing diplomacy and politics as the central driving force of these changes in history. Watson takes a very evidence- and synthesis-based approach to his methodology, though he discusses little of theory or method - it is simply a straightforward narrative chronology of these issues, with a dash of skepticism about Jackson's benevolence toward his constituents and opponents peppered in throughout. There is also a bit of ethnocultural exploration of the issues inherent to the book, given the Jacksonian era's racial and cultural politics; while Watson affirms their existence, he claims that they "only tended to reinforce the previously established patterns of Jacksonian politics" (195). Watson mostly maintains a sense of objectivity in order to maintain

credibility in his assertions, though the evidence he uses lends itself quite well to his thesis of Jackson being a manipulator of liberty.

The historiography of Watson's book includes scholarly work from other political historians and Jeffersonian scholars), including works like Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. Watson's work primarily consults contemporary evidence, such as eyewitness accounts and writings, but he also consults many different social historians in their perspectives. Watson seems to rely more on the primary evidence than his secondary sources and other historians; his goal is to provide a fresher, more objective account of the era as it happened, while also seeing it reinterpreted through other historians (though he acknowledges and compares his views to that of other historians, such as Horsman). The most significant secondary sources for the book were Remini and Miles' *The Era of Good Feelings and the Age of Jackson*, which allows him to recontextualize the foreign perspective on Jacksonian America to make sure that the era was seen in a more objective light. An afterword written by Watson elaborates on other works that explore the era written by others. Of particular note are the other narrative works exploring Jackson's presidency and the role of women in the Jacksonian era, which he freely acknowledges and promotes. These works are important for raising the questions and controversies that Watson explores in his book, such as the conventional wisdom of Jackson's America and the differences between it and Jeffersonian America (271). The book also shows remarkable similarities with *Give Me Liberty!*, as it offers tremendous insight into Jackson's relationships with the Democrats and Whigs, as well as their fundamental differences; however, Watson's work focuses more concretely

on the duplicitous nature of Jackson's promises to them in order to get elected.

In light of the work of this book, Watson allows the reader to have a more cynical and realistic look at American history as our textbook encourages us. Jacksonian America was a time of prosperity and optimism, but this was typically given to the American people through the false promises and deceit of Andrew Jackson and his administration; the fact that America's success had such a high cost in terms of oppressing minorities, Native Americans and the poor is a recurring theme in the textbook and recent assessments of American history. To that end, the book adds needed perspective to both the Jacksonian era and our course as a whole. By exploring such a broad subject in needed depth, flow and context are provided to the reader, allowing them to have a better idea of exactly how Jackson ran his administration. Watson essentially provides the reader with the needed distinction that Jackson did mean well when attempting to bring about equality and liberty, even though the results were mixed.

As a work of historical nonfiction, the book is extremely effective; Watson accomplishes his purpose with great aplomb. Watson showcases the president as being a representative of small business and producers of economic goods; Jackson's goal was to safeguard his business interests against the economic development of the country and the changes that were happening as a result. While this put him at odds with the Whigs, who were more progressive, he maintained his position for the sake of maintaining a limit on states' rights, as Jackson writes: " Jackson was determined to preserve the Union and to make the federal government - in its proper

sphere - superior to the power of the states" (132). Watson showcases Jackson as a president primarily concerned with the economy, and paranoid about the Democrats and Whigs while sticking to his principles. The book presents many clear, strong and convincing arguments, particularly given the evidence he offers to support his points. The Whigs are given a thorough investigation, giving the reader insight into Jackson's enemies; far from the insidious enemies Jackson feared, Watson claims the typical Whig voter was "neither a patriarchal squire nor a deferential yeoman[but] a sober and hardworking husband and father, energetic and conscientious on the job, attentive to the needs of his family and receptive to the sanctifying power of faith" (220). It is very easy to agree with the author's assumptions and conclusions, as the painstaking research and scholarly support he provides in his work makes the credibility of his claims quite clear.

The book's strengths and weaknesses are very clear; the book's greatest advantage is its comprehensiveness, painting a more or less complete portrait of the Jacksonian era over the course of its pages. The evidence and historiography outlined in the book offers plenty of support for most of Watson's claims, making them difficult to dispute. There is a vast number of topics on which Watson elucidates, which makes it a great overview of the politics of the time; however, it does make it hard to elaborate more than on a surface level on each subject. Watson's work is comprehensive but somewhat basic; it works best as a guide from which to look further into specific aspects of that history (Watson's bibliographical essay helpfully serves as a guide).

If there is a weakness of the book, it is that it is extremely dry; there is not as much personality to guide the reading as might be desired, leading to a somewhat rote retelling of events. This might make it difficult for those unfamiliar in the subject to be drawn in to reading the book, making it better for someone with an intermediate understanding or interest in history. The formality of the prose is effective in disseminating information, but makes it harder to get invested in the material on a reader's level. To that end, it is difficult to recommend this book to a complete historical novice, despite its ability to provide a basic, to the point rundown of Jackson's presidency and America during that time. Readers curious about the subject, however, might find it extremely useful to them as a baseline from which to expand and look further into Jackson's run as president.