

# The jacksonian character

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full The Jacksonian Character Introduction Edward Pessen (1921-92), an expert in American history, was a Jacksonian scholar specializing in the study of social mobility. He published *The Jacksonian America: Society, Personality and Politics* in 1985 (Homewood, Ill.: Dorsey Press). In the second chapter in it entitled *Jacksonian Character: A Contemporary Portrait of American Personality, Traits, and Values*, Pessen has described Andrew Jackson's personal traits and values briefly and cast them across the contemporary American society. In this essay, I will summarize Pessen's article, examine its strengths and weaknesses, offer my own opinions about the article and endeavor to show how the article relates to the materials discussed in Class 1301.

## 2. Article Summary

Pessen says foreign visitors to America such as Tocqueville, Charles Dickens, Harriet Martineau, Frances Trollope and others viewed Andrew Jackson, the seventh president of the United States (1829-37), as a child of the frontier, democrat, egalitarian, entrepreneurial, speculative profit seeker, conservative, conformist, violent, materialist and chaste republican. They thought these traits and values epitomized American society. While some of these visitors had such nice things to say about Americans as handsome, gentle, pleasant, trusting, and self-less (p. 30), most of them had a rather negative perception of Americans. To them, Americans were dull, cold and cruel (p. 11); violent, selfish, and thin-skinned (p. 12); and clever but shallow (p. 15). Americans were dirty, unrefined, drunkard and speculative (pp. 18-22); egalitarian, moral from outside but prudish (p. 23-24); and anti-tradition, apathetic to intellectual accomplishments, and disinterested in principles (pp. 27-31). Pessen agrees with the visitors that a Jacksonian American, "<https://assignbuster.com/the-jacksonian-character/>

possibly" a materialist, entertained bigotry supplemented by cruelty and cupidity, vanity and boastfulness; he was blissfully unaware of any complex situation, disinterested in principles (p. 31). However, Pessen does not agree that a Jacksonian American was a child of the frontier, an inner-directed conformist, and a chaste republican looking longingly to the past (p. 30).

### 3. Strengths

Pessen's article has three remarkable strengths. First, by presenting a whole array of views of contemporary European visitors, Pessen helps us understand American society from their perspective and experiences. Secondly, he also offers his own views so the readers have a different viewpoint to draw informed and objective conclusions. Thirdly, the article written in journalistic style makes an interesting reading on history and society.

### 4. Weaknesses

Pessen's article suffers from two major weaknesses. First, Pessen has failed to make scholarly citations and quantitative analysis to make his points especially when he contradicts the observations made by the visitors. This makes his points weaker than the other side. Secondly, the article lacks coherent organization that scholarly papers often follow and it reads like a shallow journalistic account of such an important issue.

### 5. Opinion

Every society is more complex than foreign visitors tend to find in their short visits and limited experience. American society is no exception. Views of such visitors reflect their observations based on what they see and what they experience, without the benefit of research and deep insight. Visitors' background, biases and bad experiences in the country they visit often

unduly influence their views and comments.

American society is more complex than most foreigners have described in their travelogues. It is multicultural and multilingual, having a combination of different values and lifestyles. It is also full of contradictions. For instance, it is both materialistic in pursuit of money and happiness and spiritual in its view about god and religion. Foreigners often fail to grasp such complexities. This is apparent in the comments of the European visitors described in Pessen's article.

#### 6. Article's Relation to Class 1301

Pessen's article has a direct relevance to Class 1301. That class discussed Andrew Jackson as a person as well as president of the United States. Jackson had an aggressive personality; he fought against aristocracy; expanded the spoil system; killed the national bank; supported slavery and relocated Native Americans. This was the broad frame of reference in which European visitors were casting American society during the Jackson presidency and thereafter.

#### 7. Conclusion

Edward Pessen partly agrees with the comments of European visitors that contemporary American society reflected some of the Jacksonian traits and values, including materialism, bigotry, vanity, and lack of interest in principles. He also finds that some of their comments about Jacksonian American being a conformist, chaste republican and child of the frontier were not correct. The strength of Pessen's article lies in his ability to present both sides of the coin in a comprehensive fashion. The glaring weaknesses of his presentation lie in not offering made scholarly citations and quantitative findings. However, the article is very useful to understand American society <https://assignbuster.com/the-jacksonian-character/>

not only during President Jackson's time but also now.

#### Works Cited

Pessen, Edward, *Jacksonian America, Society, Personality, and Politics*.

Revised Edition. Homewood, IL.: Dorsey Press, 1985.