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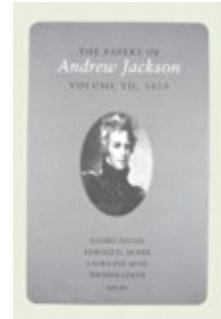
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Andrew Jackson. *The Papers of Andrew Jackson, Volume VII: 1829.* Ed. Daniel Feller, Harold D. Moser, Laura-Eve Moss, and Thomas Coens. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007. 864 pp. \$79.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57233-593-6.

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Old Hickory Takes Office: New Views from the Archives

In February 1829, as he awaited formal notification of his election as president of the United States, Andrew Jackson penned a scorching reply to the congressional committee that would bring him the news. The first draft encapsulated his understanding of what had happened in the transformative election of the previous year: “The people of their own mere will brought my name before the nation for the office of President of these U. States. They have sustained me against all the torrents of slander that corruption & wickedness could invent, circulated thro subsidized presses and every other way supported by the patronage of the government; and by a large majority of the virtuous yeomanry of these U. States have elected me to fill the presidential chair. Such call, under such circumstances, I cannot hesitate to obey, I accept the office given me by the free & unbiased suffrage, of a virtuous people, with feelings of the highest gratitude” (p. 42).

This passage captures virtually every element of Jackson’s beliefs about his election. He had not sought the office, the people had called him spontaneously, his opponents were evil and corrupt insiders who turned the government’s power against the people’s will, his supporters were “the virtuous yeomanry,” and duty compelled him to answer their summons to save the Republic. Modern historians would challenge every element of this compelling myth, but few quotations could express so vividly the ideas and emotions that the nation’s seventh president brought with him to the White House.

And few pronouncements could have raised more hackles or waved more warning flags about Old Hickory’s temperament if these words had become public just as Jackson prepared to take office. It was far better to affect an air of solemn dignity, retain the element of surprise, and smite the people’s enemies without warning. Listening to his friends or his own better judgment, the fiery general filed his draft away and delivered an anodyne substitute that appeared in the *United States Telegraph* on February 17, 1829.

The publication of previously hidden gems like this one demonstrates the value of the latest volume in *The Papers of Andrew Jackson*, the first to appear under the direction of its new editor in chief, Daniel Feller. Jackson’s draft long awaited scholars in the Library of Congress, but the new volume brings it to a wider audience, opening a deeper and broader understanding of Jackson and his era to readers far beyond Washington.

Volume 7 of *The Papers of Andrew Jackson* thus expands dramatically our store of readily accessible Jackson material. The seven volumes of John Spencer Bassett’s *The Correspondence of Andrew Jackson* (1926-35) published 88 items from the year 1829, while this volume of the *Papers* contains 440. Most of the newly published documents have long been available to scholars, either among Jackson’s papers in the Library of Congress or in the microfilm edition of that collection, but the present editors have scoured other collections for new material

and generously served all students of the period by printing their richest discoveries in this series. A detailed calendar at the end of the volume lists all the 1829 Jackson papers they located, whether included in the volume or not.

Several prominent themes and preoccupations dominate the paper record of Jackson's first year in office. As with any new president, questions of patronage absorbed enormous administrative attention. The issue was especially fraught in Jackson's case, for Jacksonians famously blamed their defeat in 1824-25 on official corruption, especially the alleged "corrupt bargain" that put John Quincy Adams in the White House and Henry Clay at the head of the State Department. As they saw it, the federal government was filled with corrupt holdovers from previous administrations who perverted their powers to control elections and defy the will of America's "virtuous yeomanry." Determined to correct what he saw as a mortal threat to republican government, Jackson vigorously applied the doctrine he called "the rotative principle in office," which his enemies eventually branded as the "spoils system" (p. 61).

While omitting innumerable routine job applications, this volume amply documents the inner workings of rotation in office. Even before taking office, Jackson declared to his Cabinet appointees how he wanted them to execute his mandate. "The late political struggle exhibited the people acting against an improper use of the patronage in the hands of the executive branch," he declared, and instructed them "to dismiss all officers who were appointed against the manifest will of the people" or worked "against the freedom of state elections" (p. 60). Taking the hint, local editors and party operatives immediately complained that "most of our State Officers have ... taken an active part in favor of the Aristocracy" (from Indiana, p. 31), that "almost all the Offices ... are held by your enemies ..., and the enemies of the republic" (from Kentucky, p. 33), and that voters groaned under "those officers who have made ... their own interest the sole object of their ambition" (from Connecticut, p. 19).

Determined "to purify the morals of the country," Jackson pounced on cases of genuine graft but also listened when the "manifest will of the people" was less compelling (pp. 62, 61). The librarian of Congress, for example, did not lose his job from his own misdeeds but from those of his friends, for editor Duff Green charged that "he belongs to, and acts with [a] little knot of corrupt aristocrats" (p. 172). A disappointed Alabamian denounced his rival's friends and father as Adams men,

in order to "twist the stream of patronage from him to me" (p. 309). Another baldly sought what he called a "sinecure" for the sake of "wealth prosperity and distinction" and because "'the friends of the Military Chieftain' had as well have it as his enemies" (p. 206). He got the job. Others claimed preferment on the merits of their relatives, like the son of a Connecticut man who had been jailed under the Sedition Act. Rewarding a steady stream of such applicants, Jackson somehow still insisted that his choices had nothing to do with politics. He only required his appointees "to execute their offices for the public benefit," he assured Ninian Edwards of Illinois, "& when found wielding them for any political effect, they will be removed regardless of who may have recommended them" (p. 525).

Such statements inevitably make us ask if Jackson was consciously and massively hypocritical or gripped by towering self-deception. The new president's reactions to other incidents point to the latter. As these pages amply document, Jackson obdurately defended the reputation of Margaret Eaton, wife of his secretary of war, in the face of near-unanimous protests from his trusted friends and advisors. He also refused to listen when Martin Van Buren warned against the appointment of Samuel Swartwout as Collector of Customs for the Port of New York, yet Swartwout became the first man to steal one million dollars from the U.S. Treasury (pp. 177-178). Virginia ally Thomas Ritchie earnestly assured the president that "I go for reform—but what is reform? ... It is surely not to put out a good & experienced officer, because he was a decent friend of J. Q. Adams, in order to put in a heated partizan ... [who] chos[es] [sic] to dub himself on that account the friend of Reform" (p. 131). Such pleas went unheeded. Invincibly convinced of his own righteousness, Jackson was virtually incapable of detached self-criticism, frequently confused his convictions with objective truth, and repeatedly conflated the people's interests with his own.

Jackson was not always deluded, however. Other portions of this volume demonstrate that Jackson early made up his mind about issues that did not erupt into controversy until later, sometime much later. In a June letter to John Overton, for example, Jackson charged the Bank of the United States with political interference and described a "National Bank," exclusively owned by the federal government and resembling Van Buren's independent treasury, as "the only way, that a recharter of the present U.S. Bank, can be prevented" (p. 271).

The same missive called for Indian removal and the

acquisition of Texas. Venting a sense of grievance that later reappeared in the Hayne-Webster debates and in James K. Polk's call for the "reannexation" of Texas, Jackson charged that the Adams-Onís treaty had deliberately sacrificed Texas to "cripple the rising greatness of the west" (p. 270). Following through, he then instructed his minister to Mexico, Joel Poinsett, to seek the purchase of Texas, even to the Rio Grande, anticipating the events that led to the Mexican War in 1846. His reasoning included a prediction that American settlers in Texas would refuse to be governed by Mexico, a prophesy fulfilled by Sam Houston and other Jacksonian émigrés in the Texas Revolution of 1836. Jackson toyed with the idea that the new territory could harbor eastern Indians or a colony of free blacks, but he also foresaw that the Texans' "wants and habits ... will be similar to those of the people of Louisiana," hinting that the new territory could permit the expansion of slavery (pp. 370-371).

Feller and his editorial team have performed a massive research effort in uncovering new Jackson docu-

ments, collating old ones, and presenting them to interested readers. Their identifications of individuals named in the texts are fully but not excessively detailed and are especially helpful. The portrait of the seventh president that emerges from their labors is not dramatically different from the sketches of earlier biographers, but if anything, their Jackson is more resolute, foresighted, and contradictory. We clearly see that Jackson's key decisions on Indian removal and the Bank War owed little to caprice or personality clashes, for they were settled by the time he took office. Acutely analyzing the logical direction of events, Jackson not only chose his own policies but also anticipated the goals and programs of his successors, like the independent treasury, the annexation of Texas, and the spread of slavery. At the same time, he was astonishingly blind to his own and his friends' shortcomings, especially to the blatant ills of the spoils system. Students of the Jackson era owe a heavy debt of gratitude to Feller and his editorial staff for making these contrasts so visible.

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