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Andrew Burstein. *The Passions of Andrew Jackson.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003. xxi + 292 pp. $25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-375-41428-2.

Reviewed by Donald B. Cole (Professor Emeritus, Phillips Exeter Academy)
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The Frontier President

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Andrew Jackson has always commanded passionate attention. As a frontier lawyer-soldier, he was loved by his friends and hated by his enemies. As president, he was idolized by his followers, who called him the Old Hero, and detested by his opponents, who considered him a despot and pilloried him with some of the most savage cartoons in American political history. Biographers have responded in the same way. James Parton called him a tyrant and blamed him for the start of the political spoils system. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., saw him as an early-day Franklin D. Roosevelt, while Robert V. Remini portrayed him as the founder of American empire, freedom, and democracy. Andrew Burstein offers still a different interpretation.

Andrew Burstein is Professor of History at the University of Tulsa and the author of three previous books on American political culture. He is part of a school of historians who approach the study of politics in cultural rather than political terms. These writers place more emphasis on the emotions, sensibilities, language, personality, and memory of the people and their leaders than on political parties, elections, governmental policy, and political ideas.[1] In *The Passions of Andrew Jackson*, Burstein uses the personality of Old Hickory to interpret the political history of the early republic. Jackson is an important subject because he was the only president to have spent much of his early life on the frontier, and his presidency came at a key moment in the shaping of the American culture.

This is an engaging book that sparkles with imaginative use of source materials, vivid prose, and original insights. More than half of it is devoted to Jackson's years in the old Southwest and the ways in which this "Formative Frontier" shaped his personality (p. 3). Those years were marked, as Professor Burstein describes in colorful detail, by "violence and volatility," "law and disorder," cruelty toward slaves, scorn for Indians, and the common assumption that "self-preservation" and "force of personality mattered greatly" (pp. 17, 21, 24, 25). The frontier society was held together by male institutions, notably an aggressive code of honor, networks of friendships, and the brotherhood of Freemasonry. As the author sees it, Jackson emerged from this environment a violent, blustering, rigid frontiersman, quick to take offense and defend his honor, who looked for vindication, held grudges, sought total solutions to problems, and would accept only one answer–his own.[2]

These themes continue through the rest of the book, as the author shows the impact of Old Hickory's personality on the history of the old Southwest and on his presidency. Burstein organizes much of his material around Jackson's relationship with a number of friends, including John Henry Eaton, Sam Houston, and Edward Livingston, and almost as many enemies–among them Henry Clay and Thomas Hart Benton, who was first friend, then enemy, then friend again.[3] His emphasis on Livingston is refreshing, for he has been much overlooked, though it is an overstatement to compare his role to that of Hamilton in Washington's presidency or to call him Jackson's "favorite speechwriter" (pp. 193, 220). Livingston served only two years in Jackson's administration and contributed to only two of his eighteen formal papers (Amos Kendall contributed to ten).[4]

Professor Burstein buttresses his image of Jackson by comparing him with famous figures, such as Shakespeare's Coriolanus and King Richard III and American icons Washington and Jefferson. Like the "rigid" Coriolanus, he "resisted any way but his own" and "would sooner die than compromise a principle" (p. 230). In the election of 1828, Jackson's opponents condemned him for his execution of six militiamen by calling him another Richard III, who had ordered "the deaths of his brother, his own wife, two nephews, and others whose loyalty came into question" (p. 168). Jackson, Washington, and Jefferson, the author insists, shared a common "percep-

tion that virulent enemies were plotting against them" (p. 219).

Although this book is a penetrating, thought-provoking study of the American frontier and the early Andrew Jackson, it has two significant drawbacks. First, it exaggerates the violent frontier characteristics in Jackson's personality and overlooks certain, more stable traits–firmness, courage, idealism, shrewdness, even occasional indecision and willingness to compromise–that came to the fore during his presidency. Although Jackson often had difficulty getting along with members of his official cabinet, he worked harmoniously with the members of the Kitchen Cabinet. He did not often vent his anger (though he occasionally feigned anger) on those who opposed him. Martin Van Buren disagreed with him on many issues, yet remained Old Hickory's favorite and his handpicked successor. He gave great leeway to Livingston and Louis McLane in his second cabinet, even though they disagreed profoundly with him on the Bank of the United States. He did not always hold grudges. Thomas Hart Benton, once his bitter foe, was admitted back into the fold, and during the nullification crisis, Jackson considered forming a Union party that would have included long-time foe Henry Clay.

Such behavior suggests a number of very likely possibilities: that Jackson's personality was more complex than Professor Burstein allows; that Jackson mellowed as he grew older; and that the pressures of party politics forced him to change his ways. Although Old Hickory was not as politically minded as his chief advisers, Van Buren and Kendall, he became increasingly involved in politics while in office. Perhaps the greatest accomplishment of his administration and Van Buren's was the formation of a two-party political system that provided a vehicle for democracy.

This commitment to politics forced Jackson to see nuances, agree to compromises, and make political decisions that he would never have considered in his early years. Although he blustered about invading South Carolina and hanging John C. Calhoun during the nullification crisis, he did neither, but sat back and let political party leaders fashion a compromise that saved the Union. Again, during the crisis over removing the federal deposits from the Bank of the United States, he was so anxious to hold his party together that he let several members of the cabinet openly oppose his policy without forcing them to resign.

Second, Professor Burstein does not convince this reviewer that President Jackson's passions had more influence on his political actions than did his political beliefs and party politics. On two questions–the removal of the Indians and the Peggy Eaton affair–he does make a reasonable case that Jackson's self-absorbed, paternalistic, moralistic personality was largely responsible for his policies. On a third topic–foreign policy–he points to Jackson's hot-tempered "bullying tactics" in dealing with France (p. 278), but does not take up overall foreign policy. Aside from the outbursts against France, Jackson's diplomacy was carried on with moderation and skill. And even the French affair was settled with concessions on both sides.

Although Burstein is silent on internal improvements, I think he would have found it difficult to attribute policy on that issue to the president's violent personality. Early in his administration, Jackson vetoed a number of federal internal improvement bills in order to reassure his southern supporters, who had constitutional and economic reasons for opposing them. But before his two terms were up, he had responded to northern and western pressure by spending large sums on similar projects.

On the two major issues of the day–nullification and the Bank of the United States–politics as well as political and economic ideas trumped passion. Professor Burstein concedes the point on nullification, calling Jackson's handling of the crisis his "noblest action" (p. 194). But on the Bank he overreaches by putting the blame on "Jackson's impulses," his hatred of Henry Clay, and his feeling that the Bank was "morally suspect" (p. 199). Jackson, to be sure, did have these feelings about the Bank, but the Bank War was far more complex than that. Much was at stake. The Bank of the United States dominated the economy in the early nineteenth century, far more than any comparable private institution does today. Its capital was twice that of the annual expenditures of the federal government. It had the power to destroy state banks by calling in their loans. Did Americans really want a private bank that large and powerful controlling their economy? Apparently not, because once the Bank's charter expired in 1836, nothing like it was ever established again. (The Federal Reserve system has a combination of public and private features.) Jackson vetoed the bill to recharter the Bank, not because he was an angry, emotional man who held a grudge against the Bank's president, but because he considered it a privileged, monopolistic, and undemocratic corporation.

Professor Burstein wrote this book because he believed that Jackson's personality had "all but vanished" over time, leaving him "an amorphous figure ... to a majority of Americans" (pp. xiii, xiv). He was correct.

Americans do not know enough about Jackson, or for that matter about most American presidents. His book offers an original view of Jackson the man, but by exaggerating the violent characteristics in Old Hickory's personality and by downplaying the importance of politics and political ideas, he has left his readers with an incomplete image of Jackson the president.

Notes

[1]. For other books of this type, see Andrew Burstein, *Sentimental Democracy: The Evolution of America's Romantic Self Interest* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1999); and Joanne B. Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

[2]. A recent book on Jackson and the Southwest is John Buchanan, *Jackson's Way: Jackson and the People of the Western Waters* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2001).

[3]. For a study of Jackson and some of his closest friends, see Lorman A. Ratner, *Andrew Jackson and His Tennessee Lieutenants: A Study in Political Culture* (Westport: Greenwood, 1997).

[4]. Richard P. Longaker, "Was Jackson's Kitchen Cabinet a Cabinet?" *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 44 (1957): pp. 103-104.

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