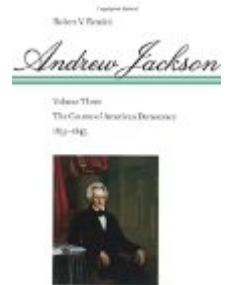
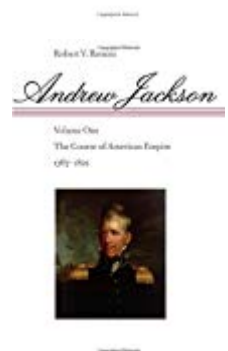


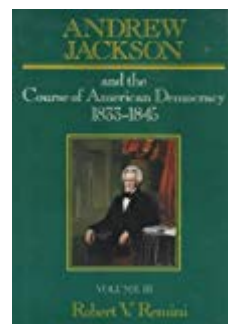
Robert V. Remini. *Andrew Jackson: The Course of American Freedom, 1822-1832, Vol. 2 of 3.* New York: Harper & Row, 1984. xvi + 469 pp. \$17.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8018-5913-7.



Robert V. Remini. *Andrew Jackson: The Course of American Empire, 1767-1821. Vol. 1 of 3.* Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. xxxi + 502 pp. \$17.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8018-5911-3.



Robert Vincent Remini. *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Democracy: 1833-1845.* New York, N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1984. xxiii + 638 pp. + 8 pp. of plates \$27.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-06-015279-6.



Reviewed by R. Scott Burnet

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Surely, few Americans are more deserving of a multi-volume biography than Andrew Jackson, military hero, seventh President of the United States, and the dominant political figure of his age. Whatever suspicions some historians may harbor about narrative biography as a form, most would grant that an understanding of Jackson's life, actions, and thought is essential to an under-

standing of the era which bears his name; with Jackson, more than any other President, seemingly trivial personal whims, prejudices, and peccadilloes were magnified into very public matters of great political and cultural moment. To join a recent explosion of massive scholarly biographies of politicians, writers, actors, and others, the Johns Hopkins University Press has reprinted, for the

first time in paperback, Robert V. Remini's monumental three-volume biography of Jackson, first published by what was then Harper & Row in 1977, 1981, and 1984. Both specialists and general readers should welcome the reappearance in print of these impressive, well-researched, and entertaining volumes. Not surprisingly, after many years of immersion in Jacksoniana, Remini almost reflexively portrays Old Hickory in a favorable light, but a passionately pro-Jackson account, however unconvincing at times, can still be enlightening to readers, such as this reviewer, with a longstanding aversion to the Old Hero. (Much of my childhood, it should be said, was spent in Nashville, where Jackson's name and image are still almost oppressively commonplace; I soured on Old Hickory long before I became a professional historian.)

The first volume covers the first fifty-four years of Jackson's life, from his childhood to his tenure as governor of the Florida Territory. This volume contains some of the most original material of the three. Remini has done much to straighten out the details of many incidents in Jackson's early years which had long been encrusted with myth and folklore, or simply forgotten or ignored because of a paucity of sources. Most important is Remini's research into Jackson's marriage to Rachel Donelson. This is not simply a matter of antiquarian or romantic interest. The circumstances of the marriage were hotly debated and became a potent political issue; Jackson, moreover, was convinced that accusations of improprieties (bigamy, specifically) brought about his beloved wife's death soon after his election to the Presidency in 1828, and he never forgave the politicians who made those accusations. Remini suggests that one powerful reason for Jackson's sensitivity concerning the legal status of his marriage--and his towering rages against anyone who dared question his account of the event--was that Jackson and Rachel Donelson had, indeed, abandoned Nashville for Natchez (then in Spanish territory) and lived as husband and wife while she

was still married to another man. This occurred a year before Jackson later claimed it had, at a time when Jackson could not have been, as he later maintained, under the misapprehension that a divorce had been granted.

Although not as scathing in his portrayal of early Tennessee politics as such historians as Thomas Perkins Abernethy and Richard Hofstadter, Remini does a masterful job tracing Jackson's rise through the cutthroat world of frontier politics from ambitious young lawyer to trusted lieutenant of corrupt boss William Blount. Moving from law and politics to a second career as a military leader, first in the Tennessee militia and then in the regular Army, Jackson achieved national fame for his campaigns against the Native nations of the Southeast and, especially, for his defeat of the British at New Orleans in 1815. Remini provides clear and convincing accounts of these campaigns, balancing praise of his battlefield courage and tactical skill with well-founded criticism of his occasional strategic errors and his obsessive determination to secure removal, by force or treaty, of the Indian nations within the United States and to wrest Florida and other territories from Spain. Marred somewhat by an annoying use of supposedly dramatic sentence fragments, the first volume offers the most nuanced interpretation of the three, as well as sound analysis of the formation of Jackson's complex character.

The second volume, *The Course of American Freedom*, covers a much more limited period, the ten years encompassing Jackson's rise to national political prominence, his controversial defeat for the Presidency in the House of Representatives in 1824, his triumphant election in 1828, and his first term as President. Remini again provides a compelling narrative based upon extensive knowledge of manuscript and newspaper sources, but in this volume he announces an overarching thesis: The "Era of Good Feelings" should really be regarded as America's first "Era of Corruption." In a biography of Andrew Jackson, of course, this

means that Jackson's passionate belief in the decline of virtue among politicians, sparked largely by his fury over the so-called corrupt bargain between Henry Clay and John Quincy Adams which deprived Jackson of the Presidency in 1824, was essentially correct and his reform goals were justified, sincere, and consciously revolutionary. Remini regards this interpretation as shockingly revisionist, but few recent historians have portrayed this period as a genuine "Era of Good Feelings" characterized by political cooperation, public virtue, and an end to partisanship. The personality-based factionalism which temporarily succeeded the First Party System was, and has routinely been portrayed as, rife with malfeasance, manipulation, and unbridled ambition--not unlike the Tennessee politics of Jackson's earlier career. Remini presents what is often a narratively complex but interpretatively simplistic portrait of a spotlessly honest General Jackson courageously striving to advance the interests of the common man against his almost uniformly corrupt and reactionary opponents. Aside from a new preface to the first volume, Remini has not revised these volumes; had he done so, this hostile characterization of Jackson's opponents would likely have been moderated because, since the original publication of the Jackson volumes, Remini has written large-scale biographies of anti-Jacksonians Henry Clay and Daniel Webster.

The third and final volume, *The Course of American Democracy, 1833-1845*, concludes the story of the Nullification Crisis and the Bank War, and then follows Jackson through his second term and his efforts, after he left office, to aid and influence his party and his chosen successor, Martin Van Buren. Perhaps most striking in this final volume is the realization that Jackson was in nearly constant pain and discomfort throughout the peak years of his power, much of which resulted from a bullet from an old tavern gunfight which remained lodged in his chest. Episodes of coughing and hemorrhaging could leave him confined to his White House chambers for weeks, but he

was almost always able to muster the power of will to conduct business and greet visitors.

During this period, the personal following surrounding Jackson coalesced into the Democratic party. Remini reminds readers that Jackson shaped the party not simply by force of personality but by his outspoken commitment to certain principles. Although personally wealthy (at least until his adopted son squandered much of that wealth), Andrew Jackson was consciously and sincerely devoted to working men, both agricultural and industrial, and to the democratization of American government--that is, to opening government to all (white male) Americans and to crushing the influence of quasi-aristocratic cliques. Jackson's ideas crystallized during his Presidency and his hostility to all banks--not simply the Bank of the United States (the "Monster")--became party doctrine. Banks, to Jackson, deprived working men of their independence as well as their money and allowed financiers undue influence over public affairs. Widening the suffrage, Jackson believed, had not only secured his election as the champion of the People but would guarantee that eventually virtue and justice would triumph. Jackson insisted upon limited government and public economy, except where the power of the Presidency was needed to protect the interests of the People. Remini does an admirable job clarifying Jackson's own ideas; although he quite properly criticizes Jackson's economic ignorance, Remini also makes a largely convincing case for Jackson as a serious political thinker and not a naive frontiersman.

Too often, however, Remini equates Jackson's beliefs with those of his entire party; given Jackson's dominance, this is not an illogical equation by any means, but it is still misleading. Seeking to refute accusations that the Democratic party was the party of rising, ambitious men of business rather than of workingmen, Remini provides evidence of Jackson's own commitment to the interests of workers; what Jackson believed, of course,

may not have been what all members of his party believed. American parties have always been diverse coalitions whose members support common goals with a multiplicity of motivations. As even Remini's own evidence suggests, for example, many Democrats did not share Jackson's opposition to all banks, and subsistence farmers and factory workers--both groups objects of Jackson's sympathy--were not always in accord. Some Democrats considered themselves progressive reformers striving to end aristocratic privilege, while others considered themselves conservatives fighting the "innovations" of Whiggish social reform; both groups could wholeheartedly support Democratic policies of limited government. While one would hardly turn to a Jackson biography for a detailed discussion of party ideology, greater attention to such works as Rush Welter's *The Mind of America* (available when these volumes originally appeared) might have produced a more subtle interpretation. Reprinting the Jackson biography without updating, moreover, deprives Remini of the opportunity to discuss the hotly debated interpretation of Charles Sellers in *The Market Revolution*, an interpretation with which Remini might be expected to have some sympathy. In addition, Michael Holt's forthcoming history of the Whig party will likely make Remini's portrayal of the dynamics of the Jacksonian party system seem especially simplistic.

That said, no historian has done so much to illuminate the labyrinthine personal relationships among Jackson's family, friends, cabinet, and staff. Remini rightly criticizes Jackson's choices in appointments and his poor judgements of character. His loyalty to friends such as Secretary of War John H. Eaton shaped and even created many of the controversies of his administration; the personal relations of these men with Jackson also often determined their political future, as those who broke with Jackson over personal matters found their way into Whig ranks. At the same time, Remini--with equal justice--details the extraordinary managerial skills of such successful appointments

as Amos Kendall, Jackson's second Postmaster General. No other historian has devoted such attention to Jacksonian foreign policy, especially the drawn-out squabble with France. No other biographer has achieved a more nearly complete understanding of Jackson's personality, and certainly few have placed such emphasis on his religious beliefs. On even the most familiar major events, such as the Nullification Crisis, or the Bank War, Remini has new evidence and original insights, especially relating to Jackson's own actions and motivations. He can convey at least a bit of sympathy for Old Hickory to even the most anti-Jackson reader; readers, whatever their views on Jackson, will at least emerge with a solid grasp of Jackson's character and ideas. Whatever quibbles this reviewer and other readers may have, these three volumes constitute one of the great American biographies.

This review was commissioned for H-Pol by Lex Renda <renlex@uwm.edu>

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