

*The Era of the Common Man*

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The first third of the nineteenth century in the United States of America is often referred to as “the era of the common man.” Many scholars and armchair historians hotly debate this reference to this period of American history. The question can be answered in many ways under different guidelines or interpretations. These guidelines must be clear before any attempt to rationalize an argument. Who was this “common man” exactly? This definition must be the foundation to understand the context of the times, and therefore the context of the argument. Viewed through the eyes of the populace during Jackson’s time and through the eyes of Jackson himself, that definition is clear: the common man is the working class white man. Whatever the moral arguments there are must be set aside to systematically wade through the evidence. Whatever pause this definition gives to the exclusion of blacks, both free and slave, and women must not be dwelt on. This “Age of Jackson” was truly “the era of the common man.”

Many points and arguments have been made, and will continue to be made to the contrary. The most notorious being Jackson’s handling of the “Indian Affair.” Jackson saw these indigenous people as his “red children” and he as their “White Father.” Jackson was a stern father and expected much of his “children”. Like many fathers of that generation he may have expected more from his “weaker” children, to prove their worth. Many Indians were simply hunting and gathering on some of the most prized and fertile land anywhere in North America. This would not do, and to make way for the common man who would exploit the land to its full potential, these wasteful warriors would have to be moved. The Cherokee had maybe the strongest argument for staying. A letter to the Senate and the House states: “Our people had abandoned the pursuits, the habits, and

the tastes of the savage, and had put on the vestments of civilization, of intelligence, and of a pure religion.”<sup>1</sup>

This dilemma did not break Jackson stride. Yes, the Cherokee were farming, but they were not all farming, and the ones that were were not farming for the good of the state or nation, but only themselves. The biggest threat to the common man was to have these independent tribal farmer’s no subject to the same state’s laws and taxes even though they lived in the same state. The Indian Removal Act enacted several laws leading to the trade of land west of the Mississippi river in exchange for their land in the east. That same document however also stated, “That it shall and may be lawful for the President to have the same superintendence and care over any tribe or nation in the country to which they may move.”<sup>2</sup>

This document did not come into existence overnight or without resistance. Indians throughout the land cursed the white man as a liar and a cheat. One leader of a band of resistance fighters was Black Hawk. After being captured Black Hawk gave a surrender speech full of eloquent words of how he and his people are not afraid to die and are not cowards. However this same speech gave many members of congress and the Army pause at the lines “I expected... [To] give you more trouble before I surrendered” and “I was determined to bring you into ambush.”<sup>3</sup> Here was blatant evidence that the Indians would further continue to be a problem to the common man’s attempt to settle the frontier. It should also be mentioned that Indians did not have to move, they could stay where they were, end their tribal ways and assimilate into America as an American citizen. There are arguments that they were second class citizens, but that is a moral issue. The Indian Issue had been part of every presidents term before Jackson, and each

had been able to ignore it or let it ride out in the obscure frontiers of the new republic.

Jackson faced the issue and with the good of the common man being his justification took the issue from the back burner and served it. His reasoning was fairly straightforward:

These were uncommon people, not the common man.

“If he was for the common man why didn’t he end slavery?” is a question asked by many. By the time Jackson came into office slavery had been an institution for generations. Again, each preceding president had managed to sidestep the issue. Jackson had enough foresight to see it tearing the union apart. The end of the Union Jackson could not allow and slavery continued as it had before. In 1844, a Mr. James Wood posts a “\$20 Reward” for his “negro man MARTIN” a “runaway.”<sup>4</sup> In 1855, Kentucky announced a “Great Sale of Slaves” including “3 Bucks [aged 20-26], 1Wench [42], 1 wench [23], 1Buck [52] and 17 Bucks aged from twelve to twenty.”<sup>5</sup> In a September issue of *The Illustrated London News* an illustration of a “slave auction at Richmond, Virginia” showed a young black woman on the auction block and a young black man being shown to those that had gathered for the sale.<sup>6</sup> How, then, could Jackson be for the common man when men and women were being sold like cattle? This is where moralist and those that presently fight for human rights get offended. During the age of Jackson blacks in general, and slaves in particular, were not viewed as men or women. They were indeed, cattle. Jackson saw more important things in front of him than whether or not livestock had the inalienable rights put forth in the Constitution. The rights or wrongs of that are not the issue; they weren’t included in the common man definition of the times, so they were not entitled to any of the benefits thereof.

Jackson presidency and the common man are reciprocal items of the same coin. One could not have existed without the other. Jackson would never have been elected by anyone else, and the people would have never been granted as much power over the government by any other president. Common men of the times were far too busy trying to survive than to worry about politics. Politics was a rich man's game. That is, until the election of 1824. Jackson did not want the presidency. He only ran after being persistently dogged by some of his closest friends. But after gaining so many of the popular votes in 1824 he felt sure that the public wanted him as their leader. The American people felt the same way. After having the election of 1824 "stolen" from him by the "Corrupt Bargain" Jackson diligently went after the Whitehouse. Jackson's common man backed him; they saw his loss in 1824 as a deception and dirty dealing done to one of their own, an act that no common man could stand for. This is evident in the percent of voter participation for the election of 1824 and the one of 1828. In 1824 the percent of voter participation was a little more than 25%. In 1828 the percent of voter participation skyrocketed to nearly 60%.<sup>7</sup>

Getting to the heart of Jackson plan for the common man is much easier however. One of the first steps taken by Jackson when he was finally elected in 1828 was a sort of changing of the guard. Following the election of 1824 and the "corrupt bargain" between Clay and Adams, Jackson felt he had to cut away some of the diseased parts of his government to allow the rest to grow. Jackson saw his defeat of John Quincy Adams in 1828 as a sign the people wanted change. Jackson never forgot who he was working for during his terms in office. Statistical evidence may support the "people wanted changes" theory. From the 1824 election to the one in 1828 the number of popular votes for

Jackson more than quadrupled from 153,544 in 1824 to 647,286 in 1828.<sup>8</sup> These numbers are popular votes counted of the day; that is majority white males of the country, again Jackson's common man.

In Jackson's first annual message to the Senate and the House of representatives, he laid out his plans for cutting away these diseased parts. Not only why he was doing so, but he also spelled out exactly how they became diseased in the first place. He looked at these men that held these federal jobs. Many were nearly as old as Jackson himself, and those that weren't took over the jobs their fathers had held before them. Jackson saw something in this that made him pause. This was the same hereditary line he was trying to break for the common man that voted for him. His first annual message stated, "Office is considered as a species of property, and government rather as a means of promoting individual interests than as an instrument created solely for the services of the people. Corruption in some and in others perversion of correct feelings and principles divert government from its legitimate ends and make it an engine for the support of the few at the expense of the many."<sup>9</sup>

Benjamin Perley Poore's *The Political Machine* quotes the *Telegraph*: "We know not what line of policy General Jackson will adopt. We take it for granted, however, that he will reward his friends and punish his enemies." Poore goes on to lament those removed from office. How they were "skilled penmen and skillful accountants", how they "never dreamed of demanding a month's vacation" and how "the quadrennial encounters affected only the heads of departments, and the results were matters of comparative indifference to the subordinate official drudges whose families depended on their pay for meat and bread." Poore does not, however, emotionalize the one thing that

Jackson saw as unforgivable in federal government: Poore writes, "...and the sons generally succeeded their fathers when they died or resigned." Jackson stepped in to rid this control on federal jobs and policy with what Poore calls the "democratic guillotine." After the "decapitations", Poore continues, "Many of them were left in a pitiable condition, but when the *Telegraph* was asked what these men could do to ward off starvation, the – insolent reply was, 'Root, hog, or die!'"<sup>10</sup>

Such "insolent replies" by the *Telegraph* would have been punctuated with resounding "Hurrahs!" throughout the working class. Many working men would have felt little pity for these "skillful penmen", whose "pitiable conditions" were much favored to long farm hours and even longer factory hours. Many of these people, the people of Jackson, would not inherit their work from their fathers, but work right along side of them in the fields or in the factories, just to make enough to survive. Waiting until a father passed or retired was not an option for many of the people that Jackson saw as his constituency. Jackson's political enemies saw this "spoils system" as corrupt a deal as the Adams and Clay bargain of the previous election. To Jackson the system made perfect sense. The people, as Jackson's employers, elected him to run the country; they, therefore, obviously agreed with his views and political agendas. To help institute these agendas, Jackson needed a cabinet of like minded individuals so that these ideals would not become deadlocked debates and die on the table in cabinet discussions. This is where Jackson's military history came into his politics. General Jackson needed an army of like minded soldiers, not a hodgepodge of volunteers and the "minute men" of the previous office holders.

Workingmen, Mechanics and Laborers in the north soon became the adopted brothers of the small farmers in the south. Each began to see how they could better their position in society with a man like Jackson at the helm of the country. In 1830 the Workingman's committee of Philadelphia drew up a report on the State of public Instruction in Pennsylvania. In it they state, "The original element of despotism is a MONOPOLY OF TALENT, which consigns the multitude to comparative ignorance, and secures the balance of knowledge on the side of the rich and the rulers." The working men looked around "on the glaring inequality of society, ...constrained to believe, the until the means of equal instruction shall be equa[lly] secured by all, liberty is but an unmeaning word, and equality an empty shadow, whose substance must be planted by an equal education and proper training in the minds, in the habits, in the manners, and in the feelings of the community...."<sup>11</sup>

These calls for class equality in education came in the middle of Jackson's first term in office. Without his rotation of office and his presence in the Nation few, if any, groups would have seen the benefit of organizing and taking their woes and complaints to their bosses, and making them public. For the first time since the beginning of the Market Revolution the worker's felt like they had someone on their side, that someone would listen. How fortuitous that it was the commander in chief of the United States of America.

Similarly, although nearly fifteen years later, the Boston Mechanics and Laborers would organize and publish a statement on the "Mutual Benefit Association on the formation of its Cooperative Society." This document aimed to "respectfully solicit your earnest attention to the numerous evils resulting from the absence of an efficient lien law

for the protection of mechanics and laborers from the rapacity of unprincipled contractors....” The Boston Mechanics used the language of Jackson to express that, “Monopoly has laid its ruthless hands upon labor itself and forced the sale of the muscles and skill of the toiling many, and under the specious name of “wages” is robbing them of the fruits of their industry. Universal monopoly is the bane of labor not less in America than in Europe...” The workers called for a rotation in office on par with that of Jackson’s resettling of the presidential cabinet. They go on to declare that “The direction and profits of industry must be kept in the hands of the producers. Laborers must own their own ships, sell their own stock, sell their own merchandise, and enjoy the fruits of their own toil.”<sup>12</sup> A generation, or even a president, ago these calls would have been answered by lay-offs and firings of entire groups of people and a hiring of new mostly immigrant workers who would not have complained so. Jackson, even though, he had been out of office for almost a decade, has sufficiently weakened the power of big business that it had no other choice than to give in to workers demands, allow them to unionize and decrease their acceptable work day. The power was still in the hands of the common man long after Jackson had ceased any policy making.

If Jackson is remembered for anything other than Indian Removal, it is for his intense hatred of the Bank of the United States. Earlier in Jackson’s life he had come into an inheritance from one of his uncles. The young Jackson soon squandered most of it on gambling and drink. What little he tried to put to good use in speculating and investments was taken from him either by the market or by questionable investors. Jackson always felt that it was the latter that was to blame. He also began to see that

anything that was not earned was not prized. A point that later would influence many of his decisions on changing government positions and attacking aristocratic monopolies.

Jackson saw the Second Bank of the United States as a powerful few holding sway over many. In his *Veto Message Regarding the Bank of the United States* in July of 1832, Jackson states bluntly that, "It [the bank] enjoys an exclusive privilege of banking under the authority of the General Government, a monopoly of its favor and support, and, as a necessary consequence, almost a monopoly of the foreign and domestic exchange." He continues, "Every monopoly and all exclusive privileges are granted at the expense of the public, which ought to receive a fair equivalent." Jackson also sees this re-charter as the political weapon it is and in closing states, "But this act does not permit competition in the purchase of this monopoly. It seems to be predicated on the erroneous idea that the present stockholders have a prescriptive right not only to the favor but to the bounty of the Government." He lists: "that more than a fourth part of the stock is held by foreigners and the residue is held by a few hundred of our own citizens, chiefly of the richest class."<sup>13</sup>

If nothing else Jackson did during his stay at the Whitehouse, nothing meant more to the common man than his inauguration party. After being elected as president of the United States of America, Jackson held a gala banquet at his new residence. Everyone in Jackson's constituency was cordially invited to attend.<sup>14</sup> Many of those who were non supporters of Jackson also would have attended. To their horror men would stand in the silk covered dining chairs in mud covered boots to get a glimpse of the man they elected. China was broken, furniture destroyed, until everything was moved outside. It is rumored that when the announcement came that the alcohol had been moved outside

many “common men” cleared the Whitehouse by jumping out the nearest window. Regardless of where the alcohol was, inside the Whitehouse was a fourteen hundred pound wheel of cheese brought in to serve the guest. People who were attending would simply cut off a piece a cheese and nibble on it while they toured the Whitehouse Grounds.<sup>15</sup>

A party for the people was held at the Whitehouse sponsored by the People’s Party. A “Monster” bank had been slew by General Jackson. Workers unionized, small farmers grew more, and people moved west, taking over mainly vacated Indian lands. The common man not only came into his own, but flourished with Jackson at the helm. The question is not whether or not life was fair for all humans when Jackson was president, or whether equality was given to all races, creeds, and sexes. The question is was the Age of Jackson the Era of the Common man. When looking at who the common men were and what they stood for, the answer, devoid of any racial or gender inequality arguments, is a resounding yes. Jackson knew that the power of a Democratic government must lie within the people. The people had elected him, and he was the tool to make the changes required by them. This he did without remorse or apology. No man without the convictions, fire, and determination that Jackson possessed could ever have been the people’s president, or give rise to the time known as the Era of the Common Man.

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Endnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> Source L
- <sup>2</sup> Source B
- <sup>3</sup> Source G
- <sup>4</sup> Source D
- <sup>5</sup> Source K
- <sup>6</sup> Source M
- <sup>7</sup> Source I
- <sup>8</sup> Source C
- <sup>9</sup> Source A
- <sup>10</sup> Source J
- <sup>11</sup> Source H
- <sup>12</sup> Source E
- <sup>13</sup> Source N
- <sup>14</sup> Source O
- <sup>15</sup> Source F