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Andrew Jackson: Advocate of the Common Man

In 1829, Andrew Jackson, a lawyer and General from Tennessee, was inaugurated as the first President representing the Western states and the common man. The new statehood of some Western territories, the triumph of universal male suffrage in all states (except in Rhode Island), and the evolution of nominating conventions gave the common man more power in choosing and electing the President. A general euphoric feeling and democratic spirit lingered among the people after the Era of Good Feeling. Like Jefferson, Jackson strove to insure equal economic opportunity for all men and equal distribution of wealth. He despised the special privileges of the aristocracy and had an inveterate faith in democracy. However, the most profound aspect of Jackson's presidency was his political actions in the government. Representing the ideals of the common man and carrying out legislature to insure those ideals were two different tasks. Jacksonian democracy was characterized by a strong belief that anyone could do anything. His pressing, sometimes ruthless methods of achieving his political goals reflected his determination to represent the common man as seen in the removal of the Indians; however, on the average, the results of Jackson's actions were mediocre in their attempts to help the common man as seen in his policy with the Spoils System and the destruction of the Bank of the United States.

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Reflecting voice of public opinion Jackson's Indian Removal Act of 1830 entailed the brutal removal by force of the Native Americans from the lands east of the Mississippi River. The American public did not care about the Indians; therefore, Jackson did not care about them. Jackson insisted on the removal of the Indians because the Indian's lands could be cultivated by white settlers, and the Indians did not have to pay taxes, did not "own" land, and could not vote. Jackson represented the common man, and the Indians certainly did not fall into Jackson's definition of common men. The Seminole, Sac, and Fox tribes rose against their white oppressors in violent rebellion. However, the highly civilized Cherokee Nation in Georgia appealed to the Supreme Court. Chief Justice John Marshall justly decided that Georgia's law did not extend to the Cherokee Nation; therefore, the Cherokees did not have to move. Jackson flagrantly disregarded the Supreme Court's decision and ordered the removal of the Cherokees. The Trail of Tears from Georgia to the territory that is now Oklahoma marks the path the Cherokee Nation had to walk under gun point because of Jackson's mandate. By representing the common people, Jackson failed as a Chief Executive and Chief Diplomat. He did not enforce the decision of the Supreme Court and broke the treaties made with the Indians. His defiance of the Supreme Court was punishable by impeachment; however, the people's love for Jackson was so strong, they overlooked his crimes. Jackson's brotherhood with the people and dedication to represent public opinion superseded morality, humanity, and even the Constitution itself.

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In keeping with his democratic "anyone can do anything" principle, Jackson remodeled the bureaucratic infrastructure of the government. As party leader and voice of public opinion, he instituted his spoils system which was based on a rotation of civil servants every four years. Jackson argued that no man has any more right to an official station than another. He eliminated the representatives of the aristocracy and their stale ideas by firing 1200 old officials and hiring 900 new officials. The new influx of officials brought with them fresh ideas and represented the common man. Therefore, Jackson exquisitely reflected public opinion by instituting the spoils system. The spoils system did make the

government more closely tied to the people; however, Jackson's impetus for the spoils system was to reward loyal party workers. As political party leader, Jackson excelled because the men comprising the cabinet had political views similar to him. As chief administrator, Jackson's actions were not consummate because the new officials were not necessarily educated or experienced in carrying out official duties. The rotation system also created a lack of continuity in the government. Jackson may have succeeded in representing the common man, but he did not consult his cabinet for advice on a regular basis. Frequently he counseled informally with his Kitchen Cabinet which was comprised of middle to upper class citizens. For the most part, Jackson's implementation of the spoils system showed his dedication to upholding the interests of the common man, but his policies were not necessarily derived from his cabinet.

Once again, Jackson represented public opinion by waging war against the Bank of the United States. Although the bank had been debated from the standpoints of states rights vs. the federal government and democrats vs. Federalists since the time of Jefferson and Hamilton, Jackson made the destruction of the Bank his own crusade. Jackson viewed the Bank as an evil instrument of its aristocratic president, Nicholas Biddle. Jackson's grievances with the Bank were as follows: fraudulent issuance of paper notes without the appropriate back-up specie, too powerful and too conservative, most of the investors were foreign, state banks could manage the nation's money just as effectively, Biddle used the bank to influence political events, unconstitutional, and the upper class made profits at the expense of the working class. Even though the Bank had been declared constitutional in the trial McCulloch vs. Maryland and was effectively managing the government's finances, Jackson vetoed the Bank Bill of 1832. Jackson's landslide victory in the election of 1832 showed that the people supported his decision and gave Jackson the assurance that the Bank must be destroyed. Jackson destroyed the bank by diverting government funds into smaller state banks which became known as "pet banks". As the destruction of the Bank slowly progressed, private wildcat banks issued inflated paper money without the specie to back it. Land speculation and inflation escalated until Jackson issued his Specie Circular which demanded specie payments for land purchases; however, the wildcat banks did not have the specie to back their paper money. Therefore, inflated land prices plummeted and speculators lost money. The destruction of the bank also precipitated the Panic of 1837 signaling Jackson's poor performance as manager of economic well-being. The economic depression resulted from a lack of confidence in the state banks. The state banks had to curtail their loans because they issued too much inflated paper money. In this case, the economic depression following Jackson's destruction of the Bank was injurious to the common folk.

Andrew Jackson obstinately implemented democratic policies always in the best interest of the common man. At the time, the people sought a larger role in the government, and Jackson was the perfect President to turn the feelings of the people into true policy. Jackson's ruthless removal of the Indians demonstrated his adherence to the voice of public opinion even in the face of immorality. He hated the special privileges of the upper class and saw every man as equally capable. For example, he implemented the spoils system by replacing many full-life, career bureaucrats with average men. Jackson made a statement appointing average men to his cabinet, but he ironically did not always consult his cabinet. In the same way, Jackson destroyed the Bank of the United States because it strengthened the upper class's hold on the federal government, but the destruction caused the Panic of 1837 because the state banks did not adequately replace the Bank. All in all, the removal of the Indians exemplified Jackson's determination to represent the common man, but Jackson's policies did not necessarily help the common man as exemplified by the spoils system and the destruction of the Bank of the United States.