GROWTH OF A NATION

Democracy in America

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Introduction

In 1814, a young lawyer and poet named Francis Scott Key witnessed the awesome shelling of Fort McHenry, in Baltimore, during the War of 1812. As British bombs exploded overhead, Key rightfully wondered whether the fort—and the United States, itself—would survive.

Out-gunned and out-numbered, Americans rose to the defense of their outpost. And, by the first light of dawn, Key could see the fifteen stars and fifteen stripes waving defiantly about the garrison, declaring the American victory.

So it was throughout the nation's early history. Time and again the fledgling republic faced challenges and embraced opportunities to achieve its destiny.

This is the story of an exhilarating era—when the United States set its historic course. This is the story of the Growth of a Nation.

Era of Good Feelings

The United States entered the War of 1812 as a divided country. But it emerged from the conflict with a heightened sense of political unity and national identity. This nationalism was revealed in many aspects of American life and culture during the period.

Authors like Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper introduced a new distinctly American style of literature. Magazines, such as the North American Review, hit the stands. And American painters like Thomas Cole, George Catlin, and John James Audubon translated uniquely American images onto canvas.

National pride wasn't limited to the arts, either. From the ashes of Washington, the "president's house" rose again as the White House. The U.S. Capital building was rebuilt with a green copper dome—reminiscent of the iconic structure we recognize today. And Congress enacted new tariffs to protect domestic merchants and manufacturers from foreign competition. War hero Stephen Decatur captured the patriotic mood when he declared, "Our Country! In her intercourse with foreign nations may she always be in the right; but our country, right or wrong!"

Republican candidate James Monroe was carried to the presidency by the current of national enthusiasm in 1817, and for a second term four years later. The last of the founding father generation, Monroe urged his countrymen to join together as "one great family with a common interestz" and vowed that "to promote this harmony...will be the object of my constant and zealous exertions." Across the country, many Americans seemed to agree with their new president.. Even in Federalist New England the press reported that an "Era of Good Feelings" had been ushered in.

In fact, the buoyant optimism was, perhaps, more imagined than real. A financial panic in 1819 triggered a general collapse of the American economy which persisted through 1821. The landmark Supreme Court case, McCulloch v. Maryland revived disputes over state versus federal power, and, the heated debate surrounding Missouri's application for statehood—the Missouri Crisis of 1820—reignited the explosive political conflict between free and slave soil.

Americans faced challenges from outside the country as well. In 1817, President Monroe ordered General Andrew Jackson to invade Spanish-owned Florida to put-down raids by native Seminole groups. Jackson and his men ruthlessly burned native villages and, exceeding their authority, captured the Spanish towns of St. Marks and Pensacola. Spain's King Ferdinand VII expressed outrage. But ultimately, his nation was unable to defend its

territory. In 1821, according to the terms of the Adams-Onís Treaty, Spain ceded Florida to the United States.

As Spain's dominion in North America dwindled, other European powers were eager to step in. In 1823, President Monroe boldly declared that the entire western hemisphere was "henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers." The proclamation—which in the 1850s was christened the Monroe Doctrine—became a cornerstone to U.S. foreign policy during the 19th and 20th centuries and one of President Monroe's most important achievements.

Missouri Compromise

Henry Clay's distinguished political career spanned five decades. When the Kentuckian first arrived in Washington in 1811, he made his name as a War Hawk, one of the congress members who led the United States into the War of 1812. But Henry Clay's lasting reputation was built on his success as a peacemaker. Time and again, his talent for creative compromise drew the nation back from sectional crisis and potential disunion.

In 1819, there were twenty-two states in the Union, eleven free states and territories in the North and eleven slave states and territories in the South. That same year Missouri, home to more than 10,000 enslaved people, applied for statehood as a slave state. For the first time since the nation's founding, the country contemplated the expansion of slavery into a new territory.

Northerners rallied to oppose Missouri's admission except as a free state. Southerners argued that if Congress abolished slavery in Missouri it would seek to eliminate the institution throughout the United States. Within a year, the stalemate had become a crisis. There was talk of southern secession, even civil war.

Ultimately, Henry Clay brokered a deal known as the "Missouri Compromise" which helped draw-down the tensions. The northern region of Massachusetts would become the free state of Maine. At the same time, Missouri would be admitted to the Union as a slave state. It was further decided that a boundary extending along latitude 36-30 would represent the Missouri Compromise line. With the exception of Missouri, the unorganized territory and future states north of this line would be free while those to the south would be open to slavery. This controversial measure preserved, if only for a few decades, the delicate balance between pro- and anti-slavery forces in the U.S. Congress.

John Quincy Adams

If James Monroe presided during the so-called Era of Good Feelings, his successor, President John Quincy Adams, governed during an era of bad feelings—very bad feelings.

In 1824 Adams and war hero Andrew Jackson both contended for the presidency under the banner of the Democratic-Republican party. Jackson won the popular vote, and he captured more electoral votes than any other candidate. But since no single candidate won a majority of electoral votes, the House of Representatives was left to decide the contest—and it declared Adams the winner. When shortly after his inauguration President Adams named House Speaker Henry Clay as his secretary of state, the defeated Jackson declared it a corrupt bargain and vowed political revenge.

John Quincy Adams was the son of America's second president, John Adams. Described as crusty and caustic by his foes, the nation's new chief executive was nevertheless brilliant and pragmatic. He embraced his job in the White House and broke new ground in the use of presidential power.

Adams supported the role of the federal government in funding projects and institutions that would improve the condition of society. He championed a plan for internal improvements known as the American System. This proposal called for building roads, bridges, harbors and canals to connect the regions of the country. Adams also urged the United States to become a leader in the arts and sciences through the establishment of a national university, the financing of scientific expeditions, and the construction of an astronomical observatory. Time and again, the president's proposals were rejected by a hostile Congress. And, in 1828, Adams too was rejected, by the American people, who elected his arch-rival Andrew Jackson to the presidency.

President Andrew Jackson

Andrew Jackson, the candidate of the newly forged Democratic party, won the 1828 presidential contest on the promise of "Equal rights for all; special privileges for none." The quick-tempered, flamboyant, Indian-fighting hero of the Battle of New Orleans drew his support from the "common people." He was elected to office by a groundswell of enthusiasm for popular democracy and the extension of voting rights to more Americans.

In the nation's early elections, voting was limited mostly to wealthy property owners. But by 1828 many states had extended suffrage—the right to vote—to more people. At least white male people. At the same time, women, American Indians, women, and most African Americans were barred from voting and would be for decades to come.

Jackson was a successful lawyer and slave-owning cotton planter. His Nashville estate, the Hermitage, encompassed more than a thousand acres. Nevertheless, Jackson had risen from humble beginnings and was deemed a "man of the people." This distinction was

confirmed by the wild public celebration following his first inauguration. The socialite and author Margaret Bayard Smith observed the raucous festivities: "Ladies fainted, men were seen with bloody noses and…such a scene of confusion took place as is impossible to describe….But it was the People's day, and the People's President and the People would rule."

During the presidential campaign, Jackson railed against political cronyism in the John Quincy Adams administration. But once he reached the White House, he wasn't above similar patronage. He fired many long-serving government officials and replaced them with campaign donors and other supporters. New York Senator William Marcy defended the president's right to clean house, proclaiming, "In politics as in war…to the victor belong the spoils of the enemy."

Constitutional Crises

Andrew Jackson claimed to be a staunch defender of limited government. But during his two-term presidency he vastly expanded the authority of the executive branch. On two issues in particular, the Nullification Crisis and the Bank War, Jackson's White House refused to be bullied or back down.

The Nullification Crisis arose when, in 1832, the South Carolina state legislature protested a controversial trade tariff that benefited northern manufacturers. Jackson's vice president, John Calhoun, authored an anonymous pamphlet arguing that the "tariff of abominations" should be null and void within his state's borders. As the matter intensified, Jackson proclaimed this states' rights challenge to be a genuine threat to the union. He dispatched military forces to Charleston, and warned "…if a single drop of blood shall be shed…I shall hang the first man I can lay my hand on…upon the first tree I can reach." The

crisis was defused when Henry Clay steered a compromise bill through Congress, though tariff policy would continue to be an polarizing political issue for the next generation.

The Bank War revolved around the Second Bank of the United States. The institution functioned as a government establishment, but it was private business, accountable not to the American people, but to its wealthy shareholders. President Jackson despised the bank and its powerful president, Nicholas Biddle. When Congress passed a bill to extend the bank's charter in 1832, Jackson vetoed it, telling his vice-president, Martin Van Buren, "The Bank is trying to kill me, Sir, but I shall kill it."

The president's veto represented an unprecedented use of executive power. Jackson's opponents derided him as "King Andrew the First." Biddle chided the veto saying, "It has all the fury of a chained panther biting the bars of his cage. It is really a manifesto of anarchy… and my hope is that it will contribute to relieve the country from the dominion of these miserable people."

The Bank War became the central theme of the 1832 presidential election, which pitted Jackson against Senator Henry Clay, who supported the bank. The campaign inspired a number of "firsts" in American politics. It was the first time a third-party entered the race, the newly-formed Anti-Masonic party. It was the first time a party held a national nominating convention.And, it was the first time a party adopted a formal platform, promoting its positions on the issues of the day. Jackson buried the competition. And in his second term, he buried Biddle's Bank once and for all. In a move that was of questionable legality, the president ordered federal funds to be slowly removed from the Bank, ensuring its eventual demise.

Indian Removal

When Andrew Jackson assumed office, he inherited a long and difficult relationship with the native inhabitants of the settlement frontier.

Following the American Revolution, the federal government began to recognize American Indian tribes as independent nations and vowed to acquire land from them only through negotiated treaties. Reflecting the prejudices of the era, Thomas Jefferson, wrote in 1785, "I believe…the Indian to be, in body and mind, equal to the whiteman." He felt that if

American Indians were made to adopt European customs then they would quickly “progress" from "savagery" to "civilization.”

Some tribes sought to assimilate to European–American culture by accepting christianity, adopting European systems of agriculture, and embracing other Anglo customs. A Cherokee silversmith named Sequoyah developed an alphabet for the Cherokee language. The Cherokee established a written legal code and constitution, and a newspaper called the Phoenix. The Cherokee—along with the Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole—were deemed by Anglo-European settlers as among the so-called Five Civilized Tribes. But civilized or not, the American Indians living east of the Mississippi River were literally pushed off the map during the Andrew Jackson era.

To hasten the process of Indian removal, in 1829 Jackson asked Congress to set aside “…an ample district west of the Mississippi" to receive American Indians willing to emigrate there from the East. His appeal led to the Indian Removal Act of 1830. The law provided sweeping assurances that relocation would be voluntary and that those who chose to leave their ancestral lands would be well-compensated.

On Capitol Hill, opponents of the measure saw it as an illegal land grab. Henry Clay declared that the legislation would “bring a foul and lasting stain upon the good faith, humanity, and character of the nation.” Others likened Jackson to a military chieftain and warned “…the concentration of power in the hands of the executive leads to despotism…”

Despite the legislative guarantees of the Indian Removal Act, the Jackson administration began the systematic removal of Eastern tribes through intimidation, coercion, and bribery. With few realistic alternatives, some tribes accepted the government’s orders and moved west. The Choctaw made the perilous journey from Mississippi beginning in 1830.

Two years later, the Creek of Alabama, the Chickasaw of Mississippi, and Seminole of Florida followed in their footsteps.

In Florida, some Seminoles, joined by runaway slaves, retreated to the Everglades and held-out against the U.S. Army for more than ten years.

On behalf of the Cherokee nation, Chief John Ross, appealed to the Supreme Court. In Cherokee Nation v. Georgia, Chief Justice John Marshall wrote the Cherokee had "an unquestionable and, heretofore, unquestioned right to the land they occupy…" But President Jackson refused to discharge the courts ruling, noting "John Marshall has made his decision; now let him enforce it."

The Cherokee were ultimately consigned to the same fate as their fellow nations. During the administration of Jackson's successor, Martin Van Buren, in 1838 the U.S. Army was ordered "to remove to the West" the remaining Cherokee Indians. About 20,000 Cherokee were forced from their homes and driven west on a forced march that came to be called the Trail of Tears. During the twelve-hundred mile journey one in four perished due to exposure, exhaustion, and starvation.

Van Buren, Harrison, and Tyler

Beginning in 1834, Andrew Jackson's opponents coalesced into a political party called the Whigs. Henry Clay and other Whigs had at least one thing in common—their hatred for the popular president. Despite its luster, the Whig Party failed to unite behind a single candidate in the 1836 election. As a result, Jackson's vice-president and hand-picked successor, Martin Van Buren, carried the day.

America's first truly forgettable president, Martin Van Buren—or “Van Ruin” as his detractors often called him—never escaped from the shadow of his larger-than-life predecessor nor an economic crisis brought on by too much easy credit and too little regulation of creditors. The president was hounded by other problems as well. Disagreement over western expansion, a diplomatic kerfuffle with Great Britain, and the nagging issue of slavery, left little doubt that Van Buren would be a one-term resident of the White House.

In 1840, the Whigs promoted war hero William Henry Harrison for president and John Tyler for vice-president. "Tippecanoe and Tyler too" went the campaign slogan—an allusion to Harrison's Indian-fighting past and Tyler's future as a presidential postscript. With the support of the South and the West, “Tip and Ty” won a sweeping victory. President Harrison's inaugural address clocked-in at a record one hour and forty-five minutes. Unfortunately, his term in office didn't last much longer. Harrison has the distinction of being the first sitting president to have his photograph taken—but not much else. After just thirty days, Harrison died of pneumonia and John Tyler was sworn in as president.

Widely derided as "His Accidency," President John Tyler wasted no time alienating the Whig party leaders who made his election possible. Ultimately, Tyler was expelled from the Whigs—driving a sectional wedge through the party. Henceforth, the Whigs would be the party of the North and the Democrats the party of the South. Tyler’s one enduring accomplishment was to establish an unofficial standard for presidential succession. The Constitution was unclear on the matter. But the “Tyler Precedent”stuck and was observed when other presidents died in office. The matter was settled more permanently with an amendment to the United States Constitution in 1967.

During this period, Americans found themselves divided in other, more complex ways as well. A backlash against Irish and German immigrants and Catholics gave rise to so-called nativist organizations. The most important of these was the anti-immigrant American Party—better known as the “Know-Nothings.” Founded around 1850, Know-Nothings were sworn to secrecy about the organization and vowed to “beware of foreign influence.” The party’s popularity peaked around 1855, when it won control of several state houses. The following year, the Know-Nothings nominated Millard Fillmore for president. But the party split over the issue of slavery and soon faded into obscurity.

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