Age of Jackson: Crash Course US History #14

Crash Course: U.S. History
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Hi, I'm John Green. This is Crash Course U.S. History and today, after last week's bummer on slavery, we turn to a happier topic: the rise of democratization in the U.S.

This was also known as the age of Jackson. No, Stan, not that Jackson. No, no, Stan, c'mon, seriously. No! Nah! No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, yes! That Jackson, Andrew Jackson!

(Intro)

=====Extending Voting Rights (0:33)=====

Sorry, I just had to check my collar.

Right, so you'll recall the initial democracy of the United States wasn't terribly democratic. Almost all voters were white, male land-owners.

Mr. Green, Mr. Green! That's just radically unfair.

Exactly, Me from the Past, but between 1820 and 1850, this started to change. State legislatures lowered or else eliminated the property qualifications for voting, which allowed many more people to vote, so long as they were, you know, both white and male.

Mr. Green, Mr. Green! So, I'd be in, right? Yeah, that seems reasonable.

Yeah, Me from the Past, quick privilege check. One of the reasons we study history is so that you can learn that people like you are not actually at the center of history, even though, you know, you've been taught that.

But anyway, the whole idea of owning land as a prerequisite for voting is sort of Jeffersonian. An individual who works his own land can be truly independent because he doesn't need to rely upon markets to acquire stuff or, God forbid, wages to give him money with which to buy stuff.

No, he makes his own stuff, and he doesn't need anybody... except for slaves, and also women to make shoes and clothes and to cook food and also make children.

But, in light of the Market Revolution, the idea of excluding wage workers seemed very outdated. The idea of excluding women and non-white people, though, still quite popular.

But this defining characteristic of the age of Jackson really had very little to do with Andrew Jackson himself, because by the time he became president in 1829, every state except for North Carolina, Virginia, and Rhode Island had already gotten rid of their property requirements. In fact, that's probably why he got elected.

=====The Era of Good Feelings (1:56)=====

Right, so you recall that America's mostly fake victory in the War of 1812 and the subsequent collapse of the Federalist party ushered in the "Era of Good Feelings," which was another way of saying that there was basic agreement on most domestic policies.

The American System was a program of economic nationalism, built on 1) federally financed internal improvements - like roads and canals, what we would now call infrastructure. 2) Tariffs, to protect new factories and industries, and 3) A national bank that would replace the First Bank of the United States, whose charter had expired in 1811.

You'll never guess what we called this second bank, unless you guessed that we called it the Second Bank of the United States.

The main supporters of this American System were are old friend John C. Calhoun and our new friend, Henry Clay. Both were Jeffersonian Republicans, which isn't surprising, because that was the only political party, but it's kind of surprising because the American System had nothing to do with the agrarian republic that Jefferson had championed. But whatever, this was the Era of Good Feelings, so we're gonna go with it.

By the way, this nationalism also extended to foreign affairs. After Latin America won its independence from Spain, President Monroe made a speech proposing that Europe shouldn't try to retake colonies in the Western hemisphere. And if they did, we would, like... do stuff. This so-called Monroe Doctrine also said that the U.S. would stay out of European wars. Ha, ha, ha, ha, that is HILARIOUS!

But we did live up to the other end of it. You'll remember when the British came for the Falkland Islands, we were like, "This shall not stand." Just kidding, we were like, "Go ahead."

Right, so the last Era of Good Feelings president was John Quincy Adams, who was quite the diplomat and expansionist. He actually wrote the Monroe Doctrine, for instance.

But, in fact, it turns out that not all feelings were good. There was significant disagreement over three main issues:

First, many people felt that the federal government shouldn't invest in infrastructure, like James Madison, who'd initially supported those bills, ended up vetoing one of them that included a big spending increase to finance roads and canals. Now, the roads and canals did get built, but in the end, most of the financing fell to the states.

There were also big problems with the Second Bank of the United States, which, you know, is why you cannot visit a branch of it these days, but we'll get to that in a minute.

And lastly, there was the perennial issue of slavery. In this case, the problem started, as so many problems do, in Missouri.

=====The Missouri Compromise (3:56)=====

So in 1819, Missouri had enough people in it to become a state, but, despite the fact that there were already more than 10,000 slaves there, a New York Congressman named James Tallmadge made a motion to prohibit the introduction of further slaves into the proposed state.

It took almost two years to work out the John C. Calhoun-storm that blew up after this. Actually, it took more than that: it took until the end of the Civil War, basically.

But, in the short run, Missouri was allowed to enter the Union as a slave state while Maine was carved out of Massachusetts to keep the balance of things.
But the Missouri Compromise also said that no state admitted above the 36º30' line of latitude would be allowed to have slaves, except of course for Missouri itself, which, as you can see, is well above the line. Anyway, this solution to westward expansion worked out magnificently, provided that you enjoy civil wars.

So, Thomas Jefferson - who, by the way, was still alive, which gives

you some context for how young the nation truly was - wrote that the Missouri Compromise was, "Like a fire bell in the night that awakened and filled me with terror. I considered it at once the death knell of the Union."
Eventually, almost. But in the short term, it did meant he rise of political parties.

=====The Democrats (4:58)=====

So, America was becoming more democratic, but if there was only one political party, that democratic spirit had nowhere to go. Fortunately, there was a tiny little magician named Martin Van Buren. They really did call him the "Little Magician," by the way, also the "Red Fox of Kinderhook." But we remember him as the worst-haired president.

So, despite having been president of the United States, Van Buren is arguably more important for having invented the Democratic Party. He was first to realize that national political parties could be a good thing. So, I mentioned that Martin Van Buren was known as the "Little Magician," and I know this sounds a little bit silly, but I think it's telling.

You see, Van Buren was only the second American president with a well-used nickname, and the first was his immediate predecessor, Andrew Jackson, or "Old Hickory." Why does this matter? Well, when you're actually having to campaign for office, as all presidential candidates did after the election of 1828, and you're trying to appeal to the newly enfranchised common man, what better way to seem like a regular guy than to have a nickname?

I mean, if you think this is crazy, just think of the nicknames of some of our most popular presidents: "Honest Abe," "The Bull Moose," "The Gipper."

Even our lesser-known presidents had nicknames: "Young Hickory," "Handsome Frank," "Old Rough 'n Ready," "Big Steve." James Buchanan, and I am not making this up, was "Old Public Functionary." "Who you gonna vote for?" "Oh, I think the Old Public Functionary. He seems competent." As it happens, he wasn't.

So, by now you're probably wondering, 'Where does Andrew Jackson fit into all of this?' When we last caught up with Jackson, he was winning the Battle of New Orleans shortly after the end of the War of 1812. He continued his bellicose ways, fighting Indians in Florida, although he was not actually authorized to do so, and became so popular from all of his Indian killing that he decided to run for president in 1824.

The election of 1824 was very close and it went to the House, where John Quincy Adams was eventually declared the winner, and Jackson denounced this as a corrupt bargain. So, in 1828, Jackson ran a much more negative campaign. One of his campaign slogans was, "Vote for Andrew Jackson, who can fight, not John Quincy Adams, who can write."

Adams's supporters responded by arguing that having a literate president wasn't such a bad thing, and also by accusing Jackson of being a murderer, which, given his frequent habit of dueling and massacring, he sort of was. So, as you can see, the quality of discourse in American political campaigns has come a long way.

Anyway, Jackson won. Jackson ran as the champion of the common man, and in a way he was. I mean, he had little formal schooling and, in some ways, he was the archetypal self-made man.

=====The Whigs (7:15)=====

Jackson's policies defined the new Democratic Party, which had formerly been known as the Jeffersonian Democratic-Republican. So who were these new Democrats? Well, generally, they tended be lower- to middle-class men, usually farmers, who were suspicious of the widening gap between the rich and the poor that was one of the results of the Market Revolution. And they were particularly worried about bankers, merchants, and speculators, who seemed to be getting rich without actually producing anything. Stop me if any of this sounds familiar.

This vision probably would have carried the day, except a new party rose in response to Jackson's election: the Wigs. No, Stan, the Whigs. Yes. The American Whigs took their name from the English Whigs, who were opposed to absolute monarchy. And the American Whigs felt that Andrew Jackson was grabbing so much power for the executive branch that he was turning himself into King Andrew.

So, the Whigs were big supporters of the American System and its active federal government. You know, tariffs, infrastructure, etc. The greatest support was in the northeast, especially from businessmen and bankers, who benefited from those tariffs and the stability provided by a national bank. And they also thought the government should promote moral character, because that was necessary for a person to act as a truly independent citizen.

So Jackson's policies must have been pretty egregious for them to spawn an entirely new political party. What did he actually do as president? Well, let's go to the Thought Bubble.

=====Thought Bubble: Jackson Presidency (8:28)=====

Let's start with nullification. So, in 1828, Congress passed the Tariff of 1828, because they were not yet in the habit of marketing their bills via naming them with funny acronyms.

Jackson supported this, in spite of the fact that it benefited manufacturers.
The tariff raised prices on imported manufactured goods made of wool and iron, which enraged South Carolina, because they'd put all their money into slavery, and none into industry.

So, unlike northerners, who could avoid the higher prices by manufacturing sweaters and pants and such at home, South Carolinians would have to pay more. They were so angry at this "Tariff of Abominations" that the South Carolina legislature threatened to nullify it.

Jackson didn't take kindly to this affront to federal power, but South Carolina persisted, and when Congress passed a new tariff in 1832, one that actually lowered the duties, the Palmetto State's government nullified it. Jackson responded by getting Congress to pass the Force Act, which authorized him to use the Army and Navy to collect taxes.

A full-blown crisis was averted when Congress passed a new tariff in 1833 and South Carolina relented. This smelled a bit of dictatorship, armed tax collectors and all, and helped to cement Jackson's reputation as a tyrant, at least among the Whigs.

And then we have the Native Americans. Much of Jackson's reputation there was based on killing them, so it's no surprise that he supported Southern states' efforts to appropriate Indian lands and make the Indians move. This support was formalized in the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which Jackson supported.

The law provided funds to relocate Cherokees, Chickasaws, Choctaws, Creek, and Seminole Indians from their homes in Georgia, North Carolina, Florida, Mississippi, and Alabama. In response, these tribes adopted a novel approach and sued the government.

And then, the Supreme Court ruled that Georgia's actions in removing the Cherokees violated their treaties with the federal government, and that they had a right to their land. To which Jackson supposedly responded by saying, "John Marshall has made his decision. Now let him enforce it."

So, Jackson set the stage for the forced removal of the Cherokees from Georgia to Oklahoma, but it actually took place in the winter of 1838-1839 under Jackson's successor Van Buren. At least one quarter of the 18,000 Indians died on the forced march that came to be known the Trail of Tears.

=====Mystery Document (10:38)=====

Boy, Thought Bubble, you do know how to end on a downer, but thank you.
But Andrew Jackson also changed our banking system. Just as today, banks were very important to the industrial and mercantile development of the U.S.

And at the beginning of Jackson's presidency, American banking was dominated by the Second National Bank, which you'll remember, had been established by Congress as part of the American System. Oh, it's time for the Mystery Document?

The rules here are simple. When I inevitably fail to guess the author of the Mystery Document, I get shocked with the shock pen.

"The powers, privileges, and favors bestowed upon it in the original charter, by increasing the value of the stock far above its par value operated as a gratuity of many millions to its stockholders ... Every monopoly and all exclusive privileges are granted at the expense of the public which out to receive a fair equivalent. The many millions which this act proposes to bestow on the stockholders of the existing bank must come directly or indirectly out of the earnings of the American people ..." Stan, I know this one! "... It is not conceivable how the present stockholders can have claim to the special favor of government should [the bank's] influence become concentrated, as it may under the operation of such an act as this, in the hands of a self-elected directory ... Will there not be cause to tremble for the purity of our elections[?]"

It is Andrew Jackson's Veto of the Charter of the Second Bank of the United States! YES!

=====Bank War (12:00)=====

So in 1832, bank leader Nicholas Biddle persuaded Congress to pass a bill extending the life of the Second U.S. Bank for 20 years. Jackson thought that the Bank would use its money to oppose his re-election in 1836, so he vetoed that bill.

In fact, the reason I knew that was from the Veto message is because it talks about the bank as an instrument to subvert democracy. Jackson set himself up as a defender of the lower classes by vetoing the Bank's charter.

Now, Whigs took exception to the idea that the president was somehow a more democratic representative of the people than the legislature, but in the end, Jackson's view won out. He used the veto power more than any prior president, turning it into a powerful tool of policy. Which it remains to this day, by the way.

So, the Second Bank of the U.S. expired in 1836, which meant that suddenly, we had no central institution with which to control federal funds. Jackson ordered that money should be dispersed into local banks, unsurprisingly preferencing ones that were friendly to him.

These so-called "pet banks" were another version of rewarding political supporters that Jackson liked to call "rotation in office." Opponents called this tactic of awarding government offices to political favorites "the spoils system."

Anyway, these smaller banks proceeded to print more and more paper money, because, you know, free money. Like, between 1833 and 1837, the face value of bank notes in circulation rose from $10 million to $149 million, and that meant inflation. Initially, states loved all this new money that they could use to finance internal improvements, but inflation is really bad for wage workers. And also, eventually, everyone.

=====Jackson's Legacy (13:28)=====
So, all of this out-of-control inflation, coupled with rampant land speculation, eventually led to an economic collapse, the Panic of 1837. The subsequent depression lasted until 1843, and Jackson's bank policy proved to be arguably the most disastrous fiscal policy in American history, which is really saying something.

It also had a major effect on American politics because business-oriented Democrats became Whigs, and the remaining Democrats further aligned with agrarian interests, which meant slavery.

So, the age of Jackson was more democratic than anything that came before, and it gave us the beginnings of modern American politics. I mean, Jackson was the first president to really expand executive power, and argue that the president is the most important democratically elected official in the country.

One of the things that makes Andrew Jackson's presidency so interesting, and also so problematic, is that he was elected via a more democratic process, but he concentrated more power in the executive in a thoroughly undemocratic way.

In the end, Andrew Jackson probably was the worst American president to end up on currency, particularly given his disastrous fiscal policies, but the age of Jackson is still important. And it's worth remembering that all that stuff in American politics started out with the expansion of Democracy.

Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

=====Credits (14:36)=====

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller. The script supervisor is Meredith Danko. Our associate producer is Danica Johnson. The show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer and myself. And our graphics team is Thought Cafe.

If you have Libertage caption suggestions, please leave them in comments, where you can also leave questions about today's video that will be answered by our team of historians.

Thanks for watching Crash Course, and as we say in my hometown, Don't Forget To Be Awesome.

What?!