

Andrew Jackson in the 21st Century

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A statue of the seventh President of the US Andrew Jackson is seen in Lafayette Park across from the White House on Oct. 30, 2008. Karen Bleier/AFP via Getty Images



By Jeffrey A. Tucker

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Commentary

Trying to gain a greater understanding of what is happening in the U.S. today, history provides some guidance.

We can skip most of the presidencies of the 20th century for comparison.

Ronald Reagan was more in the mold that Donald Trump is breaking.

Richard Nixon was popular but was hamstrung by the Vietnam War and the dollar crisis.

FDR was popular but his sweeping victory in 1936 reflected economic panic. While he had the House and Senate, he faced a hard barrier with the Supreme Court that struck down his beloved legislation.

Woodrow Wilson won in 1912 only because the opposition was split.

There is a greater prospect of fundamental change with the second Trump term than in any living memory.

For an illuminating comparison, let's return to the year 1824. Andrew Jackson ran for president and won a plurality of the popular and electoral votes. But he did not get the majority. The election was thrown to the House of Representatives, which produced a surprising result: John Quincy Adams became president thanks to the support of Henry Clay who was promised the position of Secretary of State.

That sense of being robbed of the presidency festered deeply among Jackson's fan base and he came back four years later, more fired up than ever. The election of 1828 was utterly sweeping. He ran an unapologetic populist campaign against the national bank and corrupt insiders in Washington. The turnout broke all records, and so did the results. Jackson won by a landslide, securing 178 electoral votes against John Adams' 83.

With this mandate, Jackson and his followers utterly destabilized Washington, firing vast numbers of executive bureaucrats who were considered disloyal, and fought the national bank while pushing for

gold and silver as money. His hiring of loyalists to top positions was decried as the “spoils system” that was ended fully by the Progressive Era, which amounted to a revenge of the professional bureaucrats.

The policies he pursued—keeping the government mostly constrained by the Constitution, keeping the peoples’ interests front and center, and devolving power to the states—prepared the ground for the United States to rise from a small post-colonial outpost to the world’s greatest economic and military power by century’s end.

There were two major missteps that have ruined his reputation in the history books. Jackson was a states’ right guy on all matters but for matters of the tariffs (he threatened an invasion of South Carolina during the so-called Nullification Crisis) and, in addition, he pursued a cruel policy regarding Native lands, which he ordered to be taken, leading to ghastly humanitarian results including the famous Trail of Tears.

That said, he did return government to the people and his impact on Washington was enormous, especially as regards his fight against the National Bank and paper money.

Murray Rothbard [summarizes](#) Jackson’s presidency as follows:

“It is difficult to generalize about Jackson; his fiery temperament, his capacity for bitter personal hatred, his autocratic taste for personal power which blossomed in his early military campaigns, and his weak grasp of political principles led him into many inconsistent and wrong-headed acts. Underneath these weaknesses, petty whims, hatreds, and inconsistencies, however, there is clearly discernible a basic set of political and economic principles. These were, in brief, the principles of pure Jeffersonian Democracy: thorough-going ‘hard money,’ with the eradication of inflationary paper money and reliance on gold and silver; laissez-faire-strict adherence to free enterprise in a market unhampered by government subsidies, tariffs, heavy bureaucratic expenditures, special privileges, or heavy taxation; firm insistence on states’ rights. In foreign policy, the guide is America first, last, and always, with no entangling alliances and an attitude of firmness,

cordiality, but profound suspicion toward all foreign countries, particularly Great Britain.”

Rothbard concludes: “Jackson deserves a cherished place in the hearts of all Americans: By the time Jackson left office, for the first time and the last time in the history of America, we had wiped out all of our public debt. Old Hickory’s success in liquidating the national debt is one of the most glorious accomplishments in American annals. And it provides us with a vital clue to the true nature of his political philosophy.”

This is the strongest historical precedent we have for the meaning of what is happening right now. Donald Trump astonished the world with his victory in 2016. His loss four years later followed the calamitous policy response to the arrival of a respiratory virus. Trump initially pushed for lockdowns. Once having changed his mind about the policy, he was unable to restrain the bureaucracies that had been unleashed on the population with the ostensible goal of minimizing infection and then forcing public adoption of an experimental shot.

There was a widespread belief among his supporters that something was sketchy about the 2020 results, which had been unduly influenced by mail-in ballots pushed by the CDC, which had said that standing in voting lines was too dangerous for the spread of the virus. Trump himself never tired of arguing that the election itself was stolen. While that claim was inadmissible in polite society, and never seriously considered by the courts, Trump’s team and his followers were thoroughly convinced that he otherwise would have won.

For four years, Team Trump plotted their return, with an election strategy based on three key pillars. First, they would work to minimize voter fraud and mail-in ballots, urging the passage of voter ID laws and cracking down on possible corruption of the rolls. Second, they would push disenfranchised voter blocs among men under 40 to get themselves registered and vote. Third, they would work to create a mass cultural movement deploying Trump to do what he does best, which is to rally people at mass events.

Later in the campaign, the Trump coalition grew dramatically with the inclusion of a parallel effort by Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. A lifetime litigator, RFK had written the most compelling books to explain how it is that Trump's first term came to be subverted by the pharmaceutical industry in combination with national-security bureaucracies. His broader interests have long concerned health freedom and the elimination of subsidies for big agricultural interests that had driven smaller and organic farmers to the margins of food suppliers.

Kennedy attempted to challenge sitting president Joseph Biden for the nomination but found himself locked out. Next he attempted an independent bid but found himself blocked at every turn, plus worried that his presence in the election would operate as a spoiler bloc that could put Biden back in power.

Once he decided to link up with Trump over issues of food and medical freedom, they both found common interests in battling Big-Tech censorship, which in turn attracted the interests of Elon Musk. This disruptive entrepreneur had purchased Twitter with the goal of turning it into a free-speech platform in defiance of all the throttling and bans of the years prior.

This combination of RFK, Jr., Trump, and Musk amounts to one of the biggest realignments in modern American history. It combines 1990s-era "crunchy liberalism," with a pro-peace America First foreign policy, with a 2000s-era disruptive tech focus, with a populist push against big everything (media, government, academia, medicine, corporations, finance).

Much of this realignment comes in the wake of the tumultuous years of Covid, in which businesses, schools, churches, and travel were shut in the name of health, with the very opposite result.

The modern incarnation of the Jacksonian movement has embodied itself in a series of popular acronyms that summarize the agenda: MAHA (Make America Healthy Again), MAGA (Make America Great Again), and DOGE (Department of Government Efficiency).

There is simply no chance that even the finest political prognosticator could have anticipated this merger of interests in defiance of all the old categories of left and right. As regards the old categories of race and religion, there has never been a popular political movement to draw from such a wide diversity of people, united more in their celebration of working-class interests than in opposition to professional and overclass hegemony.

Something very similar came together in the coalition that brought Andrew Jackson to power in 1828, complete with a storied past of struggle and triumph and a hard-core promise to return government to the people while taking it away from the privileged special interests. So far Trump's picks for his cabinet posts seem to be following the Jacksonian script as well: people loved by the base but loathed by the establishment. Jackson got away with the same mainly by leveraging his personal popularity and carefully deploying that political capital against all resisters.

Jackson made some terrible errors but also did good as president. There is much from which the Trump team can learn from this experience. There is every reason to believe that the next four years could be equally as disruptive and leave a permanent mark on the history of this nation.

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Jeffrey A. Tucker

Author

Jeffrey A. Tucker is the founder and president of the Brownstone Institute and the author of many thousands of articles in the scholarly and popular press, as well as 10 books in five languages, most recently "Liberty or Lockdown." He is also the editor of "The Best of Ludwig von Mises." He writes a daily column on economics for The Epoch Times and speaks widely on the topics of economics, technology, social philosophy, and culture.

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