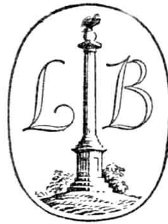
THE AGE OF *JACKSON*

By Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.



BOSTON

Little, Brown and Company · 1946

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TO

MARIAN

The feud between the capitalist and laborer, the house of Have and the house of Want, is as old as social union, and can never be entirely quieted; but he who will act with moderation, prefer fact to theory, and remember that every thing in this world is relative and not absolute, will see that the violence of the contest may be stilled.

— George Bancroft

FOREWORD

THE WORLD crisis has given new urgency to the question of the "meaning" of democracy. If democracy is indeed to be the hope of the future, we know now that we must have its lineaments clearly in mind, so that we may the more surely recognize it and the more responsibly act upon it. For some the questioning has taken the form of a search for the immutable moral abstractions of the democratic faith. Such an inquiry meets profound human needs, even if it rarely succeeds in getting far along its own path. But, for the student of history, the "meaning" of democracy is likely to assume a form at once far more simple and far more complex. The key to that meaning is rather to be sought in the concrete record of what democracy has meant in the past. What range of possibilities has it, in fact, unfolded? What methods has it found legitimate? What have been its values and its resources?

The world after victory will contain internal, as well as external, perplexities of the utmost difficulty and importance. We do not yet know how in detail the American democracy will move to meet them; but this we do know, that, if it is to remain a democracy, its moods, methods and purposes will bear a vital relation to its attack on similar (if less intense) crises of its past.

Democracy has recommended itself above all other modes of organizing society by its capacity for the peaceable solution of its internal problems. Its flexible political and social structure, with the premium placed on tolerance, bargaining and compromise, has on the whole kept alive enough hope for discontented minorities to deter them from taking up the option of revolution. The great exception in our history was a question so crucial that perhaps it could have been solved in no other way. (We know now that it is an illusion that wars have always been unnecessary.)

But the crisis of the second order – the time of bitter social tension which somehow escapes the final flare-up – constitutes democracy's great triumph. The resources which have enabled the American democracy to surmount such crises in the past will be drawn on to the full in the near and shadowed future. The actual issues, political and

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economic, of Jackson's day have now an almost Arcadian simplicity. Nonetheless they went to the roots of many of the democratic ambiguities, opening up and probing questions whose recurrence a century later testifies to their continuing significance for a free society.

The heritage of Andrew Jackson, as President Roosevelt has said, is "his unending contribution to the vitality of our democracy. We look back on his amazing personality, we review his battles because the struggles he went through, the enemies he encountered, the defeats he suffered and the victories he won are part and parcel of the struggles, the enmities, the defeats and the victories of those who have lived in all the generations that have followed." [1]

In the days of Jackson, as in all periods of rapid social adjustment, there was a close correspondence between the movement of politics and the movement of ideas. This work attempts to examine the politics more or less in terms of the ideas; and, in the course of the study, it has seemed that Jacksonian democracy, which has always appeared an obvious example of Western influence in American government, is not perhaps so pat a case as some have thought; that its development was shaped much more by reasoned and systematic notions about society than has been generally recognized; and that many of its controlling beliefs and motives came rather from the East and South than from the West.

The clash of ideas in these years reveals, moreover, a number of characteristics of democracy in transition. It may help perhaps in building up a conception of the peaceable "revolution" by which our democracy has, save for the tragic exception, thus far avoided the terror of violent revolution.

History can contribute nothing in the way of panaceas. But it can assist vitally in the formation of that sense of what is democratic, of what is in line with our republican traditions, which alone can save us.

ARTHUR M. SCHLESINGER, JR.

May 7, 1944
Washington, D.C.

[1] Franklin D. Roosevelt, *Public Papers and Addresses*, S. I. Rosenman, arr., VII, 41.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THIS book is the outgrowth of a series of lectures entitled "A Reinterpretation of Jacksonian Democracy" delivered at the Lowell Institute in Boston in the fall of 1941. I am profoundly indebted to my father, Arthur M. Schlesinger, for his wise counsel and keen criticism. Bernard DeVoto, Frederick Merk and my mother, Elizabeth Bancroft Schlesinger, have contributed to my understanding of the pre-Civil War period. I wish also to express my gratitude to the Society of Fellows of Harvard University, which made my researches possible, and in particular to Lawrence J. Henderson and to A. Lawrence Lowell, who greatly enriched my insight into the interplay of historical forces. Although I cannot believe they would altogether have liked my conclusions, I hope that they would have respected the methods by which they were reached. I am grateful to Charles A. Beard, who generously placed at my disposal his notes on the Jacksonian era. The librarians of the Harvard College Library, the Massachusetts Historical Society, the Library of Congress and the New York Public Library were of great assistance. My wife, Marian Cannon Schlesinger, has been a source of inestimable help and encouragement at all times.

A. M. S., JR.

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Published September 1945
Reprinted September 1945 (three times)
Reprinted October 1945 (twice)
Reprinted November 1945
Reprinted December 1945
Reprinted January 1946 (twice)
Reprinted March 1946
Reprinted June 1946
Reprinted October 1946

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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I PROLOGUE: 1829

FOR THE White House the new year began in gloom. The President's wife spent a sleepless and painful night, and Mr. Adams, waking at daybreak, found the dawn overcast, the skies heavy and sullen. He prayed briefly, then fumbled for his Bible and turned to the Book of Psalms, reading slowly by the yellow light of his shaded oil lamp. "Blessed *is* the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful." On he read to the ultimate assurance. "For the Lord knoweth the way of the righteous: but the way of the ungodly shall perish."

The familiar words assuaged disappointments of four years. To an Adams, the first psalm seemed almost a personal pledge. "It affirms that the righteous man is, and promises that he shall be, blessed," he noted with precise gratification in his journal, and went to his desk for his usual early-morning work. As his pen began to scratch across the paper, the lamp, its oil low, flared for a moment, then flickered out. Mr. Adams sat in the gray light.[1]

It was no year for righteous men: everywhere they sat in darkness. Two months before, General Andrew Jackson had been elected President of the United States. The ungodly were now in the ascendancy, and those who walked not in their counsels had little but Scriptures for consolation. "There is more effrontery," Samuel Clesson Allen, retiring Congressman from Massachusetts, had exclaimed, ". . . in putting forward a man of his bad character — a man covered with crimes . . . than ever was attempted before upon an intelligent people." The good Reverend Robert Little, pastor of the Unitarian Society of Washington, sadly chose his text: "When Christ drew near the city he wept over it."[2]

The retiring President put on a brave front at his last reception; but, too weary for his walks along the Potomac, he now sought his

[1] J. Q. Adams, *Memoirs*, C. F. Adams, ed., VIII, 89.

[2] S. C. Allen to Samuel Lathrop, May 14, 1828, Miscellaneous Papers, Pennsylvania Historical Society; anon., *William Winston Seaton of the "National Intelligencer,"* 210.

exercise on horseback, while his wife prepared to move from the executive mansion. The appearance of Mr. Clay, the Secretary of State, shocked the capital. One visitor, on a January afternoon, found the small drawing room in the Clay house bright with lamps and blazing fire, but its inhabitants deep in melancholy. Mrs. Clay, mournfully pacing the room, whispered, "He sleeps." Stretched full length on the sofa lay Henry Clay, thin and white, covered from head to foot with a dark cloak, which looked like "a black pall." Through the parties of January and February he masked his dejection under frigid smiles.[3]

Uncertainty about the future increased the official gloom. Mr. Webster, the distinguished Senator from Massachusetts, scrawled a memorandum for friends at Boston: –

> Gen. J. will be here abt. 15 Feb. –
> Nobody knows what he will do when he does come. . . .
> My opinion is
> That when he comes he will bring a breeze with him.
> Which way it will blow, I cannot tell. . . .
> My *fear* is stronger than my *hope*.[4]

* * *

From faraway states the people came to Washington – local politicians, newspaper editors, war veterans, curiosity seekers, enthusiasts for Jackson, and just the people. *Their* hope was stronger than their fear.

They found a scattered, straggling city. The 91,665 feet of brick pavement, of which the old citizens boasted, was inadequate to the mud of February, and the boots of the mob slogged excitedly, patiently, wearily about the town, to snatch at the rumors and gawk at the sights and plague the friends of Jackson. Hospitable taverns served them endless draughts of gin slings, gin cocktails, sherry cobblers, mint juleps, snakeroot bitters, timber doodle and eggnog. Local theaters entertained them with rare divertissement. Some went to the Amphitheatre to watch George Washington Dixon, "the celebrated Buffo Singer," first of the great black-face artists, who sang "Push-a-Long Keep Moving" or "The Hunters of Kentucky" and soon would delight the land with "Zip Coon" and the haunting "Coal Black Rose," twanging his banjo and breathing out his insistent strains. The more "high-toned" preferred bewitching Clara Fisher at the

[3] Margaret B. Smith, *The First Forty Years of Washington Society*, Gaillard Hunt, ed., 256–257.

[4] Note by Webster, February, 1829, Daniel Webster, *Letters*, C. H. Van Tyne, ed., 142.

Theatre, the girl who had won all London before she was twelve and now, an enchanting seventeen, was winning America. Steamboats were named after her, and racehorses, drinks and Negro babies. Soon there would appear the great Edwin Forrest, mightiest actor of the day, whose swelling muscles and rumbling voice and heroic passion as Brutus and Virginius thrilled the galleries in dramas of democratic martyrdom in ancient Rome.

The crowd drifted to inspect Mr. Jefferson's library, on exhibition at the auctioneer's before it went on sale to pay the debts of his estate. It admired the elegant "Transparent Panoramic View of West Point and the adjacent scenery" at the Rotundo on the corner of Pennsylvania Avenue and Thirteenth Street. It peered through the celebrated solar microscope. It looked with amazement on the cat with the face of a Greek hero.

Gossip was incessant. Had you heard about Frances Wright, of Scotland and Nashoba, Tennessee, and her alarming views on religion and society? New York, Philadelphia and now neighboring Baltimore quivered with indignation at her presence. And there was always the latest quip about Major Eaton of Tennessee, and his New Year's Day bride, the notorious Margaret O'Neale Timberlake. ("There is a vulgar saying of some vulgar man, I believe Swift, on such unions," the ribald New York Congressman, C. C. Cambreleng, had written to his intimate friend Martin Van Buren, " – about using a certain household . . . and then putting it on one's head.")

If other entertainment languished, Congress was inexhaustible: the Senate, dignified and decorous, and the House, with members lolling back in armchairs, laughing, coughing, spitting, rattling newspapers, while some poor speaker tried to talk above the din. For a few there were the formal banquets, beginning as late as five-thirty or six, with rich courses served in quick succession – soup, bass, turkey, beef smothered in onions, mutton, ham, pheasant, ice cream, jelly, fruit – washed down by a steady flow of sherry, pale and brown, madeira and champagne.[5]

But, above all, there were the reports on the progress of General

[5] For Cambreleng's remark (the elisions are his own), Cambreleng to Van Buren, January 1, 1829, Van Buren Papers (Professor Bassett has noted that Cambreleng probably meant Montaigne, J. S. Bassett, *Life of Andrew Jackson*, 459 n.). For Washington early in 1829, see the *National Intelligencer*, *United States Telegraph* and *Niles' Register* for these months. For Congress, see, e.g., Robert Dale Owen in the *Free Enquirer*, May 12, 1832; John Fairfield to his wife, December 15, 1835, John Fairfield, *Letters*, A. G. Staples, ed., 33; George Combe, *Notes on the United States of North America, during a Phrenological Visit in 1838–9–40*, I, 271. For a typical banquet, see Fairfield to his wife, January 24, 1836, Fairfield, *Letters*, 81–83.

Jackson. For one terrible day in January, Washington had trembled at the rumor of his death, till Duff Green printed an authoritative denial in the *United States Telegraph*, the Jackson organ; and on February 11 the President-to-be finally arrived. People noted him as a tall, gaunt man, his face wrinkled with pain and age, his thick gray hair turning snow-white. His eyes were sad and heart empty from the recent death of his wife, and his right hand ached from the hard grips of admirers along the way. Through the three weeks before inauguration he quietly consulted with advisers and chose his cabinet.

The skies were clouded on the fourth of March, but the sun broke through as General Jackson left for the Capitol, and a soft southwest wind played over the noisy crowd awaiting him. The old man, wearing a plain black suit and a black cravat, stiffly delivered his inaugural address to the excited gathering. A shrewd Kentucky newspaperman, on from Frankfort for a job in the new government, reported the mood of the crowd. "It was a proud day for the people," Amos Kendall wrote his paper. "General Jackson is *their own* president." But Justice Story, John Marshall's close friend and disciple on the Supreme Court, reported another mood in accents of despair. "The reign of King 'Mob' seemed triumphant." [6]

The friends of Mr. Adams had no monopoly on pessimism. Martin Van Buren, just resigned as Governor of New York to become Jackson's Secretary of State, made his way to the capital amidst discouraging tidings. Levi Woodbury of New Hampshire roused him from bed, late on a March night, in New York, to pour glum prophecies in his ear. At Philadelphia he had a cheerless talk with Edward Livingston and his wife, both old friends of the President. At Newcastle, Louis McLane of Delaware, who had expected a cabinet post, met his steamboat, every line of his face stamped with disappointment. Rushing to take Van Buren's arm, he harangued him over the feebleness of the administration and hinted that he had better get out before becoming involved in its wreck.

It was after dark when Van Buren reached Washington. His coach hardly arrived at the hotel before office-seekers surrounded it. They pursued him inside, flocking relentlessly into the room where he lay on a sofa, weary from the journey. The Secretary of State listened to them patiently for an hour, then dismissed them to go to the White House.

[6] *Argus of Western America* (Frankfort), March 18, 1829; Story to Sarah Waldo Story, March 7, 1829, W. W. Story, *Life and Letters of Joseph Story*, I, 563.

A solitary lamp shone in the vestibule, and a single candle flickered in the President's office, where the old General sat with his intimate from Tennessee, Major Lewis. Jackson was in bad health, tired, uncertain where to turn for loyalty or support. "His friends have no common principle," Daniel Webster had written back to New England, "– they are held together by no common tie." But when Van Buren entered the room, his face brightened and his eye flashed. He rose invincibly to offer his cordial greeting. Van Buren's doubts dropped away in a surge of warmth and confidence in the resolute old man.[7]

The young republic faced its critical test. Could it survive the rule of the people? Or were Webster, Clay, Adams and the friends of Van Buren right in their anticipations of disaster?

John Randolph of Roanoke spoke a prevailing mood with wild intensity. "The country is ruined past redemption," he cried; "it is ruined in the spirit and character of the people." Was there any hope for the future? "There is an abjectness of spirit that appals and disgusts me," he declared in despair. "Where now could we find leaders of a revolution?"[8]

[7] Martin Van Buren, *Autobiography*, J. C. Fitzpatrick, ed., 229–231; Webster to Ezekiel Webster, February 23, 1829, Webster, *Letters*, 142; Emily Donelson to Polly Coffee, March 27, 1829, Pauline W. Burke, *Emily Donelson of Tennessee*, I, 164, 178.

[8] Randolph to J. Brockenbrough, January 12, February 9, 1829, H. A. Garland, *Life of John Randolph of Roanoke*, II, 317–318.

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