White Man’s Democracy

Jacksonian Democracy
Jackson’s strong actions regarding the nullification crisis, the national bank, and Indian removal were controversial but generally popular with the electorate.

Video: The Jackson Presidency

The Jackson Presidency examines President Jackson's core beliefs and analyzes his actions during the nullification crisis and the Bank War. President Jackson's decision to kill the Bank of the United States was a classic case of liberty vs. power, a dispute that is examined in the latter part of the video.

Look for answers to these questions when watching the video:

• What were Andrew Jackson's core beliefs? What was his agenda as president?
• What was the philosophical and political basis for nullification? Why did South Carolina advocate this position by the late 1820s and act upon it in the early 1830s?
• How and why did President Jackson respond to the nullification as he did? Why did this situation become a constitutional crisis? What were the results of the crisis? What did the crisis portend?
• Why and how did President Jackson dismantle the Bank of the United States? Was this a wise decision? Was it popular? What were the economic and political results?

Video script:

Music introduction

Actor, Andrew Jackson: “I am governed by principle alone. . .”

Harry Watson, University of North Carolina: One of Jackson’s core beliefs and values was that he was the best man to represent the will of the American people, so that he had an enormously close identification with the masses if you will and thought that whatever he wanted must be what they want to.
Now some uglier aspects of his core values would certainly be racism because he was a strong believer in African-American slavery. He was a strong believer that Native Americans had no right to hang onto land that White Americans wanted. I don't think he ever gave the movement for women’s suffrage any serious thought at all in his life.

Narrator: When Andrew Jackson assumed the presidency, he had little to lose: his health was ravaged, and he was convinced that the viciousness of the campaign had killed his beloved wife, who had died six weeks after the election.

In deep mourning, he marched into the White House armed with steely resolve, demanding absolute loyalty. And the loyalty of his cabinet members was put to the test almost immediately when John Henry Eaton, Jackson's secretary of war, married Peggy O'Neal, the daughter of a tavern keeper.

The wives of the other cabinet members, led by Mrs. John C. Calhoun, aggressively snubbed the young Irish beauty. This behavior enraged Jackson, who made it clear that any attack upon Mrs. Eaton was an attack upon him. Jackson never forgave his Vice President John C. Calhoun for the role he played in this affair, and it may have influenced Jackson’s response to a major event of his administration: The Nullification Crisis.

Richard Ellis, State University of New York: States’ rights was a very, very important belief that Americans had coming out of the revolution. After all, much of this got codified to a certain extent, in terms of doctrine, by the Virginia-Kentucky resolutions; which argued in effect that the United States’ constitution was a compact among the states and that if the federal government overstepped its bounds, the states had a right to declare these laws unconstitutional.

Narrator: The state of South Carolina, acting on the advice of John C. Calhoun, proceeded to nullify the federal tariffs of 1828 and 1832. This action put the issue of states' rights squarely on the table. South Carolina argued that the federal government had overstepped its authority by using the import taxes to prop up northern industries at the expense of southern agricultural interests.

Harry Watson: Jackson agreed with Calhoun that the federal government was a government of limited powers but he drew the limits in a different place than Calhoun did. Jackson believed that if Calhoun was right, then the federal government essentially had no power at all and would fall apart, then each state would have to arm itself against its neighbors. There would be wars
between them. And in the midst of this anarchy and chaos, people would turn to a dictator who could at least guarantee them peace and quiet. So Jackson thought that Calhoun’s nullification policy was not only a faulty interpretation of the Constitution, he thought that it was an anarchical disaster that would destroy democracy itself.

Richard Ellis: It became a crisis because when South Carolina actually nullified the tariffs of ’28 and ’32, Jackson really wanted to go down to South Carolina with military force. And he was gonna hang these people. He saw this as treasonous and he was gonna hang them. Any time you start talking about the president of the United States hanging the vice president of the United States, you have a constitutional crisis.

Narrator: The crisis was dissipated when South Carolina backed down and repealed its nullification of the tariffs. Meanwhile, Henry Clay put forward a compromise bill designed to lower tariffs gradually.

Actor, John C. Calhoun: “The struggle, so far from being over, is not more than fairly commenced.”

Richard Ellis: The theory that Calhoun developed was that a state, a single state had a right to declare a federal law unconstitutional. Whereupon the federal government, the only thing it could do would be to amend the constitution to give it the power to do things that had been declared unconstitutional. And then South Carolina would have a right to leave the Union. This was a new idea connected with states’ rights, the idea of secession. States’ rights and secession were not linked together until you get the nullification crisis.

Music introduction

Actor, Andrew Jackson: “The government should shower its favors alike on the high and the low but when the laws undertake to make the rich richer and the potent more powerful, the humble members of society have a right to complain of the injustice.”

Narrator: In another showdown, Jackson attacked the federal bank, the legacy of Alexander Hamilton, by refusing to re-charter it. Nicholas Biddle, president of the bank, called Jackson’s public veto message “A Manifesto of Anarchy”.

Actor, Nicholas Biddle: “This worthy president thinks that because he has scalped Indians, he is to have his way with the bank.”
Narrator: Convinced that he could use Jackson’s words against him, Henry Clay made copies of the veto message and distributed them as campaign literature in the presidential election of 1832. But it was Jackson, not Clay, whose finger was on the pulse of the people.

Harry Watson: Banking for Jackson was a way for a tiny elite to seize the wealth of the country and strip ordinary people of their liberty. So it was a classic issue of liberty versus power for Jackson and the bank of the United States was the biggest bank of all and it was the most privileged bank of all.

Narrator: In 1832, Jackson won reelection by a landslide. In 1834, against the recommendation of his entire cabinet, he arranged to have the federal government’s deposits withdrawn from the bank of the United States and placed in various state banks. In 1836, the bank died as its charter expired. Once again, Jackson had his way.

End of video.

**Video: The Panic of 1837**

This video briefly describes the events that led to the first great depression in America.

Look for answers to this question when watching the video:

- What were the causes and effects of the panic of 1837?

**Video script:**

Music introduction

Actor, Diarist: “Saturday, March 4, 1837. This is the end of General Jackson’s administration—the most disastrous in the annals of the country.”

Narrator: Shortly after Jackson left office, a series of economic crises plunged the nation into a depression. Cotton prices plummeted. The stock market collapsed. Bank closures swept the country. By the summer of 1837, 90% of Eastern factories had shut down. That winter, the urban streets were filled with the homeless, many of whom froze to death.

John Steele Gordon: Well, the panic of 1837 was the first great financial panic in American
history, and it came about because of speculation in land on the western frontier. When Jackson killed the second bank of the United States, federal notes could not be used as bank reserves because there weren't any anymore. Jackson also issued what was known as the “specie circular”, in which he would not allow land owned by the federal government to be sold for anything except gold and silver. This brought the land speculation to a screeching halt. That caused many of the banks, local banks which were involved in the speculation, to collapse and or to withdraw funds from New York and the other big eastern cities. That caused those banks to contract and call in their loans and the thing quickly spiraled down into this first a great panic and the Great Depression.

End of video.

Video: Trail of Tears

The horrific forced march of Cherokee Indians from their home in Georgia to reservation territory west of the Mississippi River is described in Trail of Tears. The analysis of President Jackson's controversial decision and its effects are also discussed.

Look for answers to these questions when watching the video:

• What factors explain Jackson's Indian policy? How did President Jackson and Congress try to implement this policy? What choices did the Indian tribes in the Northwest and Southeast have?

• How had the Cherokee Indians adapted to Anglo-American culture? What steps did the Cherokee Indians take to resist removal?

• What was the Supreme Court's decision in Worcester v. Georgia? How did President Jackson respond to this decision? Why did he respond in this manner?

• What decisions finally led to the forced removal of the Cherokee? From what part of the country were the Cherokee and other tribes being removed? Where were they sent? What happened on the Trail of Tears?

• What were the short-term and long-term effects of Indian removal to the West?
Video script:

Music introduction, Native Americans singing

Actor, Native American: “The Cherokees are not foreigners but original inhabitants of America. They now inhabit and stand on the soil of their own territory and the states by which they are now surrounded have been created out of the land which was once theirs.”

Theda Perdue, University of North Carolina: Under the Washington administration and indeed all the administrations down to that of Andrew Jackson, the United States had dealt with the Cherokees as though they were a sovereign power. That is, they dealt with them as a distinct nation. Andrew Jackson, however, believed that this was an absurdity. The United States simply should dictate terms to native people and force them to follow those terms.

Narrator: Andrew Jackson favored the rapid settlement of western and southern lands by whites. He felt that previous efforts to promote the assimilation of Indian peoples had failed.

Theda Perdue: The civilization program sought to convert native people into cultural replicas of Anglo-Americans. The United States government promoted this by funding agents who went to live among Southern Indians to teach them how to farm. I always find that rather amusing because native people had been farming for at least three or four thousand years by then.

Narrator: The Cherokee were more receptive than most Native American peoples to adapting European ideas to their way of life. Most dramatic, perhaps, was the creation of a Cherokee alphabet.

Chad Smith, Cherokee Nation: By 1826, the Cherokee Nation had published its newspaper, “The Phoenix”, in Cherokee and in English. By 1830, we passed a Constitution and Georgia was absolutely galled at the effrontery of the Cherokee nation to establish a constitutional government within its borders.

Narrator: Jackson’s first State of the Union message promoted the idea of removing Native Americans from their lands within the territorial United States. The removal act of 1830 called for the relocation of 500,000 Indian peoples to territory west of the Mississippi.

Actor, Congressman David Levy of Florida: “If they cannot be emigrated, they should be exterminated.”
Narrator: President Jackson met with chiefs in the South and urged them to relocate “voluntarily,” offering large sums of money and land. The Choctaws, the Creeks, and the Chickasaws negotiated resettlement, but none of them ever saw any of the promised federal money. The Seminoles retreated into the swamp land of Florida where, from 1835 to 1842, they fought U.S. Troops. Ultimately, only a few hundred eluded death or capture. Meanwhile, the Cherokee Nation tried every available avenue to resist the Removal Policy.

Theda Perdue: The vast majority of Cherokees did not want to go West and the Cherokee’s leadership, primarily Chief John Ross, fought very hard against removal.

Chad Smith: The wisest option was to talk, to negotiate. When that failed they began to lobby. They had a very significant lobby through the churches, through those who wished well for the Indians in the Northeast. Ralph Waldo Emerson joined that effort and wrote some dramatic prose objecting to the removal.

Theda Perdue: They fought removal in a number of different ways but perhaps the one that has come to the attention of historians most clearly is their fight in the Supreme Court.

In 1832, Worcester vs. Georgia was handed down by the Supreme Court which recognized that the Cherokees did have sovereign rights. This was an enormously important decision because it nullified Georgia law within the Cherokee Nation. What happened, of course, was that the state of Georgia refused to obey the decision. The Georgia legislature established a lottery and began distributing Cherokee land to its own citizens.

I think that Jackson’s views on Indian removal were extraordinarily well known and when the Supreme Court handed down its decision in Worcester vs. Georgia, I think that most people understood that Jackson would do little to enforce the decision of the court. Consequently, when Georgia chose to ignore the decision, the United States government did nothing.

Narrator: In October of 1838, the forced migration of 18,000 Cherokees began.

Actor, Native American: “Families at dinner were startled by the sudden gleam of bayonets in the doorway and rose up to be driven with blows and oaths along the weary miles of trail that led to the stockade. Men were seized in their fields or going along the road, women were taken from their wheels and children from their play.

Chad Smith: They lost people in the stockades. They lost them on the cold walk in the dead of
winter of 1838 to 1839. Four thousand died, the weak, the infirm, the elderly, trapped in ice in Illinois.

It separated families and it broke communities up, so the historic patterns of villages and families and clans was disturbed. It was a holocaust. Many times the pain is so deep it takes generations and generations to express. Sometimes it takes a seventh generation to finally uncover and release that historic grief.

We’ve come to believe that the Cherokees have a great legacy. And that legacy is we’re a people that face adversity, survive, adapt, prosper, and excel. And you can see that best in the trail of tears episode; because after such a horrific removal, we get to Indian territory and we rebuild our government.

Narrator: But many Cherokees would never forgive Andrew Jackson for the loss of their homelands.

Chad Smith: Many Cherokees registered as Republicans only because Andrew Jackson was a Democrat. Many Cherokees several generations ago would not carry a $20 bill because of their hatred of Jackson.

Theda Perdue: The effect of Indian removal for Whites was that it was one more step toward making the United States a white man’s country. Indian removal coincides with the development of very strict racial codes in the South which limited the rights of free Blacks. It coincides with a period in which women actually lose political rights. It is a period in which the United States becomes more democratic for adult White men but less democratic for everyone else.

End of video.

**Activity: Check Your Understanding**

Explains that Andrew Jackson thought John C. Calhoun's position on nullification would lead to anarchy. In the 1820s, John C. Calhoun developed a process to implement nullification in South Carolina. But Jackson believed nullification was a threat to the union, as did Abraham Lincoln almost thirty years later. President Jackson also believed the Bank of the United States represented an elite threat to people’s liberty. The President believed the bank had too much
power. He reasoned that it limited access to loans and money needed by common people. For him, the “Bank War” was a question of liberty versus power. Historians believe Jackson’s policy of Indian removal became another step toward making the United States a white man's country. By moving large groups of American Indians west of the Mississippi River, more land became available for settlement by non-Indian people. At the same time, slavery was becoming more entrenched and expanding in the South. Women had few rights; white men had opportunities in Jackson’s America, but others faced barriers.