

Old Hickory Is Not Amused



When government becomes a trough, politics becomes a feeding frenzy

Seeing the use to which his name is being put, the ghost of Andrew Jackson cannot be amused. But, then, Old Hickory—brawler, dueler, warrior, Indian remover, slayer of the Second Bank of the United States—rarely was of a mind to be amused.

Because this Inaugural features an open house at the White House, comparisons are drawn with the riotous reception on Jackson's first day. Orange punch soaked the rugs, muddy boots ruined damask upholstery, drapes were torn and china was smashed until the mob was lured out onto the lawn by pails of liquor. It would be nice if, after his slightly Jacksonian open house, William Jefferson Clinton would emulate Jackson's Jeffersonian principles.

Jackson believed that active, interventionist government will, regardless of what it says or intends, be a servant of the strong. Today's Democrats need a dose of Jackson's disapproval of the scramble to make public power serve private interests. Today's Democratic Party stands for anti-Jacksonian governance. The party that celebrates itself at annual Jefferson-Jackson Day fetes should be embarrassed about this, and perhaps it is.

Consider "Democrats and the American Idea," a nifty new book of essays. Historian Harry Watson argues that today's party is not as at odds with Jacksonianism as "appearances might indicate." In spite of "the seemingly conflicting rhetoric of the Jacksonians and the New Dealers," Jackson and FDR "had similar purposes in mind," principally maintaining the "material social conditions" requisite for republicanism—independence and equality.

Please. Both Jackson and FDR did indeed see themselves as battling a business elite. But the New Deal's premise was that economic expansion and opportunity require government ascendancy over commerce. Jackson's premise was that the expansion of opportunity was threatened by regulations, subventions and privileges bestowed by ascendant government. The culture of democracy would be deepened by divorcing government from capitalism.

Jackson subscribed to the luminous creed Jefferson enunciated in his First Inaugural. All that "is necessary to close the circle of our felicities" is "a wise and frugal government, which shall restrain men from injuring one another, shall leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement." It was a Jacksonian editor who in 1837 declared that "the best government is that which governs least." The motto of the Washington Globe, the foremost Jacksonian newspaper, was "The World Is Governed Too Much." For Jackson,

politics was less about creation than prevention. Indeed. He used the veto more than his six predecessors combined.

Jacksonians wanted to make the promise of capitalism—material progress and upward mobility—compatible with Jeffersonian virtues, personal and civic, that Jefferson had said depended on preservation of a simple agrarian republic. Jacksonian reform aimed to extirpate policies that conferred advantages on special interests. Jackson, who rose from destitution to wealth, objected not to wealth but to certain ways of becoming wealthy. He feared the effect of favor-dispensing government on the citizenry's habits, morals and character. He thought that if government became a trough, politics would become a feeding frenzy. If you doubt Jackson's prescience, look around.

Clinton now says he can't keep his promise to halve the deficit in four years. Jackson said, "I stand committed before the country to pay off the national debt." The whole debt. And he did. Why is Clinton's modest goal impossible? Because professional politicians, sunk in careerism, will do nothing that might jeopardize re-election. This is an argument for term limits. Clinton opposes limits.

Jackson favored them. He believed in "rotation in office" because "I cannot but believe that more is lost by the long continuance of men in office than is generally to be gained by their experience." Experience, he thought, is overrated because public duties are, or should be made, "plain and simple." Today's career politicians, and the parasite class of lawyer-lobbyists who batten on them, want government made arcane and complex so that they can claim to be necessary. But in his ringing veto message regarding the recharter of the bank, Jackson thundered:

"It is to be regretted that the rich and powerful too often bend the acts of government to their selfish purposes . . . Equality of talents, of education, or of wealth cannot be produced by human institutions . . . but when the laws undertake to add to these natural and just advantages . . . to make the rich richer and the potent more powerful, the humble members of society . . . who have neither the time nor the means of securing like favors to themselves, have a right to complain of the injustice of their government."

Two fallacies: Modern government arises from a maelstrom of grasping by interests that are inflamed by government's myriad regulating and subsidizing activities. Modern government is made possible by two sentimentalist fallacies. One is that because there is majority rule, government acts only for the interests of majorities. The second is that government is disinterested and so does not have the human tendency to maximize one's own interests. Jackson knew better.

Today, as 160 years ago, government's favors are grasped primarily by organized factions that can afford to be articulately represented in the capital on the fringe of this continental nation, far from where most Americans live, minding their own business. That is why interventionist government inevitably tends to aggravate civic and social inequalities, making "the potent more powerful." That also is why the people most pleased about the restoration to power of today's extremely un-Jacksonian Democratic Party are members of Washington's parasite class. They know that activist government, busily allocating wealth and opportunity, generates opportunities for them to become wealthy by brokering favors. The more interventionist the government is, the more Congress and the bureaucracy become arenas in which career politicians and lawyer-lobbyists barter influence for affluence.

There are broad smiles today along Washington's K Street corridor, which is thick with "influence entrepreneurs," but there is a scowl on the gaunt face of the ghost of Andrew Jackson.