

Ben D'Amore
Book Review
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American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House

When I first started teaching about Andrew Jackson, I asked my students to sum up their understanding of Jackson in a few words. Most referenced Jackson's stubbornness with dealing with the National Bank or his removal policy of the "Civilized Tribes" of the southeast. One student, however, summed up what I knew of Jackson perfectly, calling him a "badass". Initially, I wanted to chastise him for using profanity in my classroom. On second thought, however, his statement met what I had taught him about Jackson: how he was slashed across the face as a boy for refusing to polish a British soldier's boots, and how he participated in many duels, killing a man and having a bullet lodged in his lungs for the rest of his life. "Badass" was indeed an apt description of Jackson. For the next few years, I was only able to briefly cover Jackson, and stuck mostly to the "badass" motif. After the course, I looked in my bookshelf and realized that someone had given me a biography of Jackson for the previous Christmas. Jon Meacham's American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House (with a statement of praise from Daniel Walker Howe) expanded my knowledge of Jackson well beyond the "badass" I had learned and had been teaching my own students. American Lion shows a more intimate side of Andrew Jackson, with large sections focusing on his relationship with his wife, his loyalty to his Secretary of War, John Eaton, during the "Peggy Eaton" affair, and his affection for his extended family, particularly his niece Emily and nephew Andrew.

Despite the majority of the book being dedicated to Jackson's time in the White House, Meacham does spend time early in the book looking at the relationship between Jackson and his wife Rachel. Rachel was born into a wealthy family who had helped in the founding of Tennessee, while Jackson was born into relative poverty, his father dying before he was born, and his mother and a brother dying while Jackson was still a child. The unlikely pair met in their early twenties and were married soon after. For Rachel, it was her second marriage, a fact that would cause many problems in the future, as the paperwork for her first marriage had not been finalized when she and Andrew were married (Meacham 21-22).

Jackson showed both his hot-headed and his sensitive sides with Rachel. They married soon after meeting and wrote frequent letters to each other while Andrew was away on business. By all accounts he was very much in love with Rachel and loved to be by her side. This didn't mean that he always listened to her. He frequently disregarded her requests to cut trips short and would still act out on his violent tendencies despite her protests.

Jackson participated in at least two duels over Rachel. The first occurred in 1803 when someone claimed that Jackson's only contribution to the country was "taking a trip to Natchez with another man's wife." The second occurred in 1806 and originated during a horse race, when another man insulted Rachel over a discussion of the results of the race. While the first duel occurred in no injuries and a satisfaction of honor, the second included the death of Jackson's opponent and a serious injury to Jackson. The bullet would remain in Jackson's body for the rest of his life (Meacham 25-26).

While the dueling was of no surprise to me, his genuine love for Rachel was surprising. This was not a marriage of convenience, this was a marriage for love. Throughout his life, he defended Rachel against charges of adultery and polygamy, even when they occurred during his second run for president in 1828. Rachel died soon after he was elected (before inauguration day), and her loss haunted him throughout his time in the White House.

Jackson's loyalty to his wife despite her supposed infidelities indirectly played a role in the Peggy Eaton "affair" with his Secretary of War John Eaton. His wife, Margaret "Peggy" Eaton, was widely regarded as a flirt, whose first husband supposedly committed suicide over an affair that she was having while he was at sea. The rumor around Washington was that John Eaton had only married Margaret because she was pregnant (even though she wasn't pregnant), and that they had checked into a hotel together before her husband killed himself. Jackson's critics had claimed that he and Rachel had also slept together in a hotel before her divorce was finalized. Partly because of this, and partly out of loyalty to an old friend (Eaton), he defended the Eatons against the barbs and comments of Washington society. Jackson had encouraged their marriage and his loyalty to Eaton prevented him from simply dismissing Eaton to end the affair. Jackson went as far as ordering his niece Emily to either accept Margaret into the White House or return to Tennessee. Emily (showing some of her uncle's stubbornness) decided to return home instead of receiving Margaret at the White House (Meacham 67-68, 107-09).

Even though it would have been much easier to find a new Secretary of War, Jackson stood by the Eatons throughout the entire affair. His loyalty to them was

absolute, even when faced with overwhelming disagreement. This mentality extended to his politics as well (insistence on killing the bank, insistence on removing the Civilized Tribes from their lands). While loyalty might not be one of the characteristics I would have thought of when talking about Jackson, his supporting of the Eatons (even over his own family) showed that loyalty meant more than taking the easy way out of a situation.

Most surprising to me was Jackson's devotion and caring for his extended family. Rachel and Andrew did not have any children of their own, so nieces and nephews became like their own children. Although the book does not mention any medical reason why they did not have any children of their own, they did want children and happily adopted one of their nephews, whom they named Andrew Jackson Junior. Andrew and Rachel even adopted a young boy from the Creek Indian Nation whose family Jackson had killed in battle. Throughout the book Jackson was always happiest when surrounded by children. He rejoiced when his niece Emily, whom was living in the White House, had a child, spending hours playing with the young ones. He went as far as decorating the White House for Christmas specifically for Emily's children, and inviting his Cabinet over to be their entertainment (Meacham 34-35, 319-20)!

Since Rachel died before he took office, Emily and Andrew's daughter-in-law Sarah served as the unofficial First Ladies of the White House. Family meant everything to Andrew, and he was pained whenever he was apart from his son, niece or nephew (named Andrew, who was married to his first cousin, Emily). The book explores this dynamic in a way that no textbook can. While a textbook focuses on Jackson's presidency from a political point of view, the book spends copious amount of time

looking at his family relations and how they affected his life during his time in the White House.

Andrew Jackson is a deeply divisive President. His mantra of “representing the people” helped to redefine the role of the President as someone who could go against Congress if it was for the will of the people. He would fight against anyone in the government, from his own Cabinet to Congress, to the Supreme Court to his own Vice President. The politics of his presidency, while fascinating, tend to be well covered by textbooks and other sources. The looks into his personality, his loyalty to friends and family, and his love of his wife are the real valuable parts of this book. In the classroom, we tend to focus on the “big events” and not on the personal relations of our nation’s leaders. Jon Meacham does an excellent job of covering the “big events” as well as looking at the smaller things which fully describe the accomplishments of a distinguished leader like Andrew Jackson.