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Jon Meacham's *American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House*

When compiling an inventory of the most influential or important presidents in the history of the United States of America there are a few names which most people would include. Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln are the most common figures to top that list. Depending on one's political leanings it could also include either or both of the Roosevelts, Eisenhower, Truman, or perhaps more recent candidates such as Kennedy, Reagan, or Clinton. However, soon to be former editor of Newsweek magazine Jon Meacham argues in his biography of Andrew Jackson that *Old Hickory* deserves consideration to be included amongst the top tier of U.S. chief executives. His *American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House* does not claim to be a comprehensive look at Jackson's life. Neither does he attempt to explain in great detail the country during Jackson's time; "This book is not a history of the Age of Jackson but a portrait of the man and of his complex relationships with the intimate circle that surrounded him as he transformed the presidency."¹ Although Meacham does acknowledge some of Jackson's faults, the case he builds for his deserving a more exalted place in American History is centered on Jackson's force of personality, his role in shaping America's political landscape, and what Meacham sees as his misunderstood and underappreciated legacy.

¹ Meacham, Jon. *American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House*. New York: Random House, 2008. p. xix

There are a few areas where most modern historians, and quite a few of his contemporary critics see Andrew Jackson as less than admirable. Jackson was an unrepentant slaveholder and his vehement support of Indian removal and the consequent Trail of Tears does not cast him in a very sympathetic or courageous light. Meacham does not deny these shortcomings, though he does address them primarily towards the end of his book. He writes;

Jackson, who believed in the virtues of democracy and individual liberties so clearly and so forcefully for whites, was blinded by the prejudices of his age, and could not see- or chose not to see, for other Americans of the age did recognize the horror of the way of life Jackson upheld- that the promise of the Founding, that all men are created equal, extended to all.²

Meacham does not necessarily view these negative attributes of Jacksons as evidence of a weakness of character. He sounds like somewhat of an apologist when he states "...Jackson was not a president of consistent principle. He was a politician, subject to his own passions and predilections, and those passions and predilections pressed him to cast his lot with those with whom he agreed on the question at hand- slavery- which meant suppressing freedom of speech."³ Supporting slavery and causing tremendous suffering to the indigenous population of America, even in the mid-nineteenth century, is hard to explain away as simply a personal predilection. Meacham obviously needed to address these issues while discussing Jackson's life, and while he did not shy away from the subjects altogether he does seem to treat Jackson and his shortcomings with kid gloves.

² Ibid, p.303

³ Ibid, p 304

In stating his case for Jackson Meacham seems particularly impressed with the caliber of man that Andrew Jackson was. He chronicles his triumphs from the Battle of New Orleans through his many legislative skirmishes with Clay, Calhoun, and the other political heavyweights of the age. He argues that Jackson possessed a personality that that set him apart from the average politician; “By projecting personal strength, Jackson created a persona of power, and it was this aura, perhaps more than any particular gift of insight, judgment, or rhetoric, that propelled him forward throughout his life.”⁴ Jackson’s humble beginnings are explained as less of a detriment to his political aspirations than the inspiration for his intestinal fortitude. In Meacham’s view Jackson embodies one of the classic American archetypes; that of the self-made man. He is also portrayed as the consummate patriarch and patriot; “Jackson valued two things in life above all others: his country and his family. He saw little distinction between the two, and his instinct to fight and to defend both-to be a father twice over-drove him from his obscure birth in the Carolinas to the pinnacle of power.”⁵

The book does a very good job at peeling away the layers behind the famous kitchen cabinet and exposing many of the intrigues of the Jackson White House. At times, however, Meacham gives so much information about those surrounding Jackson that the book seems to lose its focus. The Margaret Eaton affair in particular takes up entirely too much of Meacham’s interest. Although it certainly helps illuminate the dysfunction and infighting that characterized much of the first Jackson term, after a while there is only so much Washington gossip that one can take. Margaret Eaton and her scandalous reputation threaten to overshadow the story Meacham is trying to tell.

⁴ Ibid, p. 26

⁵ Ibid, p. xviii-xix

However there is a plethora of information about Jackson's closest relatives and confidantes and how they served him on a personal and political level. Meacham explains why so many people, many of whom had their qualms about him, had such deep affection and belief in Jackson; "They might not always agree with him, they might cringe at his excesses and his shortcomings, but at bottom they believed he was a man of strength who would set a course and follow it, who would fight their battles and crush their enemies."⁶ Meacham also celebrates Jackson's adventurous spirit and defends him from critics who dismiss him as too much of a loose cannon. He argues the fact that in many ways he was not the typical politician, and this served him well. Jackson is not portrayed as reckless and impulsive, but rather as a shrewd man who took calculated risks; "Had Jackson been a truly wild man- blustery, threatening, and senselessly violent, both in his emotions and in his actions- then he would not have risen so far...on the whole Jackson gambled only when he liked his odds, and when he had taken care to protect himself from the worst that could happen."⁷

The next argument that Meacham puts forth on behalf of Jackson concerns his unique place in American political history. Time and time again it is pointed out that Jackson derived, or at least believed he derived, much of his political clout from the people. This stands in marked contrast to the men who immediately preceded him in office, who are portrayed as highly suspicious of the electorate. Meacham describes the capital's reaction to this provincial outsider coming in to occupy the White House; "To many in established Washington-a city and culture of nearly three decades' standing, with roots stretching to the first Adams and to Jefferson- Jackson's arrival signaled the destruction of the rule of the nation in an atmosphere of geniality and gentility."⁸

⁶ Ibid. p. 60

⁷ Ibid, p. 212

⁸ Ibid, p. 54

Meacham also maintains that Jackson provides a blueprint for future candidates who aspire to the highest office. Although during the founding generation it was considered uncouth to openly campaign for political office, that strategy may have been losing its effectiveness. He offers; “Jackson’s success suggested that the ambitions of the men who would be president would be best served by total immersion in the mechanics and the substance of political life.”⁹ Of course it is not only a personal story of political triumph that Andrew Jackson was a part of. He is also often given credit for largely helping to found the very idea of the modern political party. Meacham concedes that political parties existed before Jackson, but writes; “Party organization was not new, but the machine...was larger and more complicated than any previous American political operation. And this early machine depended upon Andrew Jackson as its engine- a human engine that could inspire, charm, cajole, persuade, and, when necessary, coerce.”¹⁰ Meacham spends a lot of time on Jackson’s battle of wills against Henry Clay of Kentucky and John C. Calhoun of South Carolina. Neither man is portrayed in the book in a terribly flattering light. Jackson is given the lion’s share of the credit for handling the Nullification crisis, and is generally depicted as a politician who would achieve his goals by any means necessary. In the introduction Meacham describes the political landscape of the country during Jackson’s time in words that sound eerily prophetic. It would not be very difficult to imagine him describing the United States of 2010 in much the same way;

The America of Andrew Jackson was a country that professed a love of democracy but was willing to live with inequality, that aimed for social justice but was prone to racism and intolerance, that believed itself one nation but was narrowly divided and fought close

⁹ Ibid, p. 85

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 188

elections, and that occasionally acted arrogantly toward other countries while craving respect from them at the same time.¹¹

The fact that Andrew Jackson emerges triumphantly from this set of political circumstances seems to suggest that he is more worthy of accolades than many historians have been willing to concede.

This leads to Meacham's final argument; namely that Andrew Jackson has left a legacy that should be recognized beyond his inclusion on the twenty dollar bill. He argues that the heritage of Jacksonian Democracy should not be looked upon as politicians cravenly following the whims of the people. Meacham writes; "For generations, Americans have thought of Jackson as the quintessential man of the people, a president who might not have been too uncomfortable with mob rule. Such a view, however, does a disservice to Jackson..."¹² Modern day politicians who only follow opinion polls and have no resolve of their own do not follow in Jackson's footsteps according to Meacham. He leaves absolutely no doubt as to where he stands on Jackson's place in the post-founding generation. Meacham does not equivocate when he writes; "He was, rather, the great politician of his time, if success in politics is measured by an affirmation of the majority of the people in real time and by the shadow one casts after leaving the stage."¹³ Meacham defends Jackson against modern day naysayers who attempt to minimize his powers of political persuasion. He argues that there is a lot more to Jackson than the tough old man who would be willing, or perhaps even keen, to use force to settle disputes and dissuade his enemies. Meacham counters this idea; "...Jackson is sometimes painted the way his contemporary enemies (mistakenly) thought of

¹¹ Ibid, p. xxi

¹² Ibid, p. 134

¹³ Ibid, p. 230

him- as a trigger happy warrior raging against Calhoun in the White House, eager to march south and fight.”¹⁴

There is another point about the looming catastrophe about to befall the United States where Meacham feels Jackson is not given enough credit. Although the Civil War is going to come eventually, Meacham argues that Jackson should receive more recognition for forestalling the horrible conflict during his time in office. Many historians point to his handling of the Nullification crisis as one instance where he was willing to fight if necessary to keep the Union together. However, Meacham postulates a more important role for Jackson than just the meeting the challenge presented by the Radicals of South Carolina. He goes so far as to say; “A different, less emotionally nationalistic president in these middle years of the Republic might not have been able to balance the forces of respect for the essential rights of the states with a devotion to the cause of the Union.”¹⁵ Here the reader sees Andrew Jackson succeeding in a way that Abraham Lincoln will fail to do when he is elected president. The comparison is not unintentional. Meacham is willing to concede to some of Jackson’s weaknesses when he discusses his legacy. However he tempers this criticism with praise; “The tragedy of Jackson’s life is that a man dedicated to freedom failed to see liberty as universal, not a particular, gift. The triumph of his life is that he held together a country whose experiment in liberty ultimately extended its protections and promises to all...”¹⁶ That is granting Jackson an awful lot of credit for seemingly every good thing to happen in the country since the middle of the nineteenth century. Ultimately he argues that Jackson’s largest impact may have been on the men who follow him in the White House. Meacham references Lincoln consulting Jackson’s proclamation against nullification when working on his own first inaugural address. He

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 246

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 250

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 359

also makes the case that Jackson changed the office of the presidency forever, and that other extraordinary men have taken their place at the helm of the United States because of this. He writes; “Jackson has inspired some of the greatest men who have followed him in the White House—presidents who have sought to emulate his courage, to match his strength, and to wage and win the kinds of battles he waged and won.”¹⁷

Jon Meacham has written a very engaging and readable biography of the seventh president of the United States. Like many biographers he seems to have become quite enamored of his subject. Despite a fascination with the gossip and social challenges of official Washington, which during the first half detracts from the focus of the book, the reader comes away with a much better understanding of Andrew Jackson. Jackson plays many roles during his long life. He is a hero to Tennessee and a scourge to the Cherokee. He is a grieving widower and beloved uncle who at times could be extraordinarily cold to his family. He is a war hero who helps to prevent a war between the states. He attacks the National Bank with the same ferocity that he attacked the British in New Orleans. He continually gets the better of men, like Henry Clay and John C. Calhoun, who think themselves his superior. He considers himself the ultimate protector of the American people but is derided by critics as King Andrew the First. Meacham puts forth a strong argument that no matter what one’s political leanings may be, Andrew Jackson is a president worthy of more consideration than he has received over the years.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 356