

Jon Meacham's *American Lion* delves into the life of the controversial historical figure Andrew Jackson. Our seventh president, Jackson has been admired for his embracing of democratic principles and for demonstrating strong leadership while in the White House. He has also been reviled as an overreaching executive who destroyed Native American culture in the Eastern United States and dismantled a major source of financial stability in the United States. Meacham tries to sort through this complex man. He embraces the complexity of this historic figure by addressing his negative attributes and by extolling his accomplishments. In so doing, he provides a well researched, engaging narrative that provides a wealth of information about Andrew Jackson. A great strength of the book is the way in which he deals with Jackson's personal relationships. He also provides a good deal of information about events that occurred during Jackson's Presidency. While this information makes this book an excellent resource, it does have a significant limitation. Even though Meacham tries to provide balance in his analysis of Jackson, some of the credit that he gives to Jackson might be considered by some to be a bit inflated. However, regardless of any limitations the book may have in providing too much praise on Jackson, it can still be a very effective resource for a classroom teacher.

Meacham's book makes for an outstanding historical resource. It provides a wealth of information and many anecdotes about a significant figure in our history who is often remembered for simply being the hero of New Orleans and for his treatment of Native Americans. Meacham goes well beyond these events to provide an in-depth study with interesting insights into Andrew Jackson's life. The book provides quite a bit of background. It discusses the struggles of Jackson's upbringing as an orphan, and connects those challenges to his focus on his family later in life and to his unfulfilled desire to have a child of his own blood

(34). It demonstrates the contradictions in his life such as his being a devout man while at the same time participating in duels, organizing social occasions with prostitutes and participating in cockfights (17).

A great strength of the book is the depth in which Meacham discusses Jackson's personal relationships. Well beyond the story of his marriage to Rachel. It provides insight into his relationship with the Donaldson's, his niece and nephew that provided family support to the widower Jackson during his time in the White House. It also provides interesting anecdotes about his relationships with his political rivals such as his meeting with a cold John Quincy Adams after their first presidential contest. The books also provides detailed accounts of his rivalry with Henry Clay, detailing his anger and disdain over the corrupt bargain and Clay's concerns regarding his view that Jackson could do harm to a still evolving republic (44-45). The book also provides depth of information regarding his public battle with Nicolas Biddle, describing the personal zeal he exhibited when he removed deposits from the bank (272); and his emotions regarding the censure that followed (337). Meacham's ability to tell the human side of historical events may best be seen in his handling of the Eaton Affair where he provides insights into the intrigues of Washington society by developing the stories of the real life characters of Peggy Eaton, Floride Calhoun and Louisa Adams, and the impact that Washington society had on the leadership of the nation (70-71). The book does an excellent job of portraying Jackson as a person, but it also has much more substance than simply a study of Jackson's personal relationships; it also provides a wealth of information pertaining to the major events of Jackson's Presidency.

Some of the events that Meacham handles well include the changes in electoral politics, details pertaining to the tariff and the Nullification Crisis, and Jackson's challenge to the National Bank, along with the removal of the Cherokees. The book does an excellent job of placing the elections of 1824 and 1828 into historical perspective. It shows that these elections were turning points, moving away from the original application of the Electoral College (which limited the influence of the masses) into a more democratic institution (43-44). The book also supplies the reader with interesting details pertaining to the tariff issue of the late twenties and early thirties; an event that often is not directly associated with him in textbooks probably due to the larger than life statesmen participating in the events. The book provides interesting background on the Webster- Hayne debate along with an entertaining anecdote of an amiable encounter that happened between the two men after Webster made his famous speech in 1828 (130). The book also shows Jackson's role in trying to "resolve the [tariff] issue rather than to inflame it" (236). It provides in-depth details pertaining to the debate regarding the National Bank. Meacham's description of the battle depicts the personal power struggle that took place between Jackson and Nicolas Biddle who was the head of the bank. Jackson believed that the bank was controlled by political opponents of his, and Biddle believed that his authority exceeded the grasp of the president (103). There is also an excellent account of the events surrounding Indian Removal. In this section, Meacham clarifies the often misquoted statement pertaining to the Worcester v Georgia case that "Marshall has made his decision, now let him enforce it". In reality what he said was that "The decision of the Supreme Court has fell still born, and they find that it cannot coerce Georgia to yield to its mandate." (204). It is interesting

and enlightening information similar to this that makes this book more than a worthwhile resource. Despite this strength, however, the book does have some limitations.

One of the weaknesses of the book is the validity of some of the statements that Meacham makes about the historical significance of Jackson's presidency. He states that Jackson "Expanded the presidency in ways that none of his predecessors had (XVIII). His support for this statement can certainly be challenged. First, he states that Jackson was the first president not to come from the educated elite and because of this, he was a champion of the common man. This statement does not take into account the extent of Washington's education (certainly when compared to the educational pedigrees of Jefferson and Madison). It also does not consider that while John Adams was certainly well educated, he did not come from the true upper echelon of Massachusetts society. The statement also does not consider Jackson's own socio-economic position. He was orphaned at a young age, and did have a challenging youth, but he became a rather wealthy individual living at the Hermitage supported by slave labor. While he may have captured the imagination of the middling classes of the time, he most certainly lived a level of existence well beyond those of most Americans. Jackson was different in one regard, however. He was from the western frontier. His philosophies were certainly in-synch with many of these new settlers. A focus on this aspect of his background may have led to a more significant analysis of Jackson's historical significance.

Another one of Meacham's claims is that Jackson was the first to build a political party (143). While the official organization of parties such as the Democrats and the Whigs developed during this period. Such divisions had existed since Washington's administration, which carried through to the first Adam's administration with the development of the

Federalist and Democratic-Republican parties. In addition, even though one could certainly argue that the Democratic Party coalesced around Jackson and his polarizing actions, a well organized opposition came from people such as Webster and Clay, who became prominent figures in Jackson's rival Whig Party during this period.

Meacham also states that Jackson was the first to insist on deference to the position of the President (355-357). While some, like Jefferson, may have despised some of the European trappings of national leaders, others such as John Adams advocated for a high degree of prominence to be associated with the position. Washington certainly demanded deference like few others, but unlike Jackson, he earned it through his personal attributes. Maybe because Jackson had such strong opposition throughout his political career it was necessary for him to be so aggressive in exerting some of the untapped power of this still relatively new political position. Regardless, he was certainly not the first president to try to elevate the position's authority.

Lastly, Meacham credits Jackson with the increase in political participation of the time (43). While it is true that this increase was still limited to white males, changes such as the selection of members of the Electoral College were certainly significant. But, Jackson may have been more of a beneficiary of these changes than a driving force for change. These changes were made on a more local level and given the voting patterns of many of the newly enfranchised population; it seems to be at least as much of a pragmatic decision to support such reforms as it was a philosophical one.

Even though the Meacham's' assessments of Jackson's achievements can be debated, the book provides such a wealth of information that it can be an excellent resource for the

classroom. Excerpts from the book taken from previously discussed topics would be useful. Also, using information from the book to discuss commonly held beliefs could be debated. One example of this could be the image of Jackson as not being well educated. The book makes the point that he was reasonably well educated. He was certainly no Jefferson or Adams, but he “read more than he is given credit for” (18). Discussions with students about how perceptions develop and how there can be multiple views of a person or topic can help students to understand the complexity of historical figures. The book also can be used as an inspirational tool for students. It can always be good for students to see the youthful flaws of individuals who become successful later in life, and Meacham’s description of the young Jackson as a person whose prospects were not auspicious being “unbalanced, excitable, insecure and defensive...” could provide such an example (10).

*American Lion* can provide the reader with a wealth of information pertaining to Andrew Jackson’s personal and public lives. It is an interesting and well researched account of one of the major figures in Antebellum America. While the author’s evaluation of Jackson can be questioned, the book would be an excellent source of information for any teacher preparing lessons on this period of American History.

## Works Cited

Meacham, Jon. *American Lion*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2009. Print.