

David W Fletcher, Spring 2002

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HARRY L. WATSON'S *LIBERTY AND POWER:
THE POLITICS OF JACKSONIAN AMERICA*¹

Watson's look at the politics of the Jacksonian period, from roughly 1815 to about 1850, surveys the political party system of democracy that evolved in an "atmosphere of social and economic confrontation" (15). He notes that by this time "a strident egalitarianism" had surfaced as "the staple of American political rhetoric," so that foreign observers like Michel Chavalier saw "a new and more democratic strain [in] the fabric of American experience" (5). The growth in political organizations, public involvement in politics, and lasting political parties in government and the electorate marked this dramatic change away from the republicanism of the Founding Fathers. These fundamental political changes accompanied social and economic adjustments that "put strains on the older political framework" (8). As a result, the need to resolve controversial problems, like the slavery question, offered "an incentive to political innovators who could piece together a more effective political order."

Jackson himself, according to the author, played a key role as "the symbolic leader of [this] American political transformation." His administration provided "the catalyst" or "the ideological basis" for such a rapid transformation toward "a new kind of republicanism" (9). With vivid jargon and a sense of urgent conviction, Jackson combined the themes of equality and democracy, and this had tremendous popular appeal. He used "the popular language of

¹New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1990; paperback, 275 pages with introduction, essay on sources, and index.

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republican political morality” to champion liberty versus the threat from a corrupt aristocracy (10). The time was right for this direction, as “new ideas and inventions in transportation and communication began a process of dramatic economic development.” Watson also notes “an extensive revival of religion swept through Protestant American,” and “projects for social reform germinated in the new environment of religious benevolence” (7).

But the rapid changes, along with entrenched social realities, proved too great even for the likes of Old Hickory. At its best, “Jacksonian politics expressed a contradictory version of democracy, . . . since direct popular democracy never [became] a reality.” In the party system, “wealthy men led both parties and men of average means comprised the majority in both” (12). At its worst, for Indians, slaves, and women, “‘Jacksonian democracy’ was not democratic at all” (13). Nevertheless, the Age of Jackson witnessed more than a clash between aristocratic and democratic passions, a division that Tocqueville had acknowledged. According to the author, Tocqueville erred by playing down the role of distinct political ideologies whereby “Jacksonian politicians carried on a serious policy debate about the future of the Republic and the nature of its society and economy” (5).

Liberty and Power in a general way tries to get at Tocqueville’s “error” through a chronology of important themes and events—the Market Revolution, the characteristics of early republicanism and religious and literary challenges to its practice, the “corrupt bargain” of the presidential election of 1824, the work of Jackson to preserve the Union through the period of Indian removal and the nullification crisis, Jackson’s war with the Bank of the United States and

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its promoters, the local and national political coalitions that had developed by 1836, the presidencies of Van Buren, Harrison, and Tyler, and select aspects of the Second American Party System. Even so, Watson surely develops these themes and events sociologically, as he brushes views of the culture and the economy on his kaleidoscopic political canvas. Sometimes he paints the picture with a lot of specifics, i.e., statistics. Sometimes he draws a sweeping conclusion with no evidence to support it [i.e., “Southern exports created the demand for a thriving shipping industry based in the Northern port cities,” 21]. Either way, he always leaves the reader in a lurch, since the book includes no documentary evidence (except an essay on sources, 255-265).

Watson’s sociological approach often resembles the rambling of an old professor who seems quite pleased to develop the theme with a series of long, tangential asides. He occasionally allows the reader a brief glimpse at the issue of liberty versus power (see 83, 95, 97, 120, 128, 133, 147, 169, 209, 253), but the organizational structure of his main theme is neither tight nor thoroughgoing. For example, how do the social conditions of early nineteenth century America relate to the “political controversy over economic development” (35)? In chapter one, Watson certainly gives a good reading of socialization in pre-Jacksonian America and its lack of strict egalitarianism, as Tocqueville believed. But he fails to make an unequivocal connection between the economics of everyday life as experienced by the masses and the politics of economics as devised and debated by leaders in business and government (see 34-41). The latter no doubt affected the former via policy formulation and implementation, but there is no certain

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causal link from the former to the latter, or at least Watson does not offer such. Without showing any connection, why does Watson spend so much time discussing the former? And he does not raise the issue of liberty versus power anywhere in chapter one. Perhaps he believes the reader can read between the lines!

To his credit, though, Watson presents a challenging work that raises questions about the impact of social and economic changes on the politics of the Jacksonian era. He details the dispute over the national bank (chapter five), and he shows the importance of local organizations like the Anti-Mason Party to political developments at the national level (chapter six). Clearly, he fills a gap by offering a complex view of the democracy under the three presidents who succeeded Jackson (chapter seven), and he summarizes nicely key characteristics of the Second American Party System and themes of comparison and contrast between Democrats and Whigs (chapter eight). But overall, the book fails to engage the reader with a clear, definitive thesis about the ideologies of liberty and power in Jacksonian America. The book at best presents an overview of Jacksonian politics against the backdrop of the era's socioeconomic realities. But without any documentary notes, the book hardly merits a more critical reading.