

David W Fletcher, Spring 2002

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ROBERT V. REMINI'S *THE LEGACY OF ANDREW JACKSON:
ESSAYS ON DEMOCRACY, INDIAN REMOVAL, AND SLAVERY*¹

This small book evolved from Remini's presentations on Andrew Jackson at the Walter Lynwood Fleming Lectures at Louisiana State University in 1984. To discuss Jackson's legacy, Remini felt compelled to "select three subjects that were especially significant and about which there was controversy, misunderstanding, or lack of appreciation" (3). Accordingly, Remini chose the questions of democracy, Indian removal, and slavery. He feels that Jackson made a positive contribution to the development of democracy, especially the direct election of government officials, and that recent interpreters have minimized Jackson's role in the adoption of majority rule. In his interpretation of Jackson's policy of Indian removal, Remini seeks a more balanced viewpoint that credits some of the nobler ideas at work in the government's treatment of American Natives. About the tricky issue of slavery, Remini develops a contextual understanding of Jackson as a "man of his times," and he explores Jackson's reactions to both abolitionists and nullifiers that illustrate his beliefs in popular self-government and the inviolability of the Union. While Remini sees both good and bad in Jackson's legacy to democracy, Indian removal, and slavery, he highlights the good in order to demonstrate that Jackson's political career "substantially advanced the spirit of democracy in the nation and added

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grace and vigor to the presidential office” (6). Remini is Professor of History and Research Professor of the Humanities at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Remini argues that the central question of the Jacksonian period concerns the process by which the tenets of democracy replaced the tenets of republicanism. Jackson played a very intentional role in this debate between traditional aristocratic leaders and those who espoused the ideology of direct rule by the people, a debate dramatized by the democrats as a struggle between liberty and power. Although intensely nationalistic, Jackson worked against the dangers to individual freedom and state sovereignty in the “moneyed aristocracy” of a powerful central government. He also sought to eliminate the danger of a national debt that put government in servitude to the creditor class. But, as Remini shows, the “corrupt bargain” between John Adams and Henry Clay to “steal” the presidential election of 1824 affected Jackson’s political thinking more than anything else. Jackson believed that Congress removed the presidential election from the voice of the electorate and that state representatives voted contrary to the popular will. After this, Jackson consistently fought for government by the people or direct majority rule in contrast to the Founding Fathers’ idea of the consent of the governed. Remini nicely develops how this change in Jackson affected his attitude toward the Supreme Court, Congress, and government in general, for example, unrestrained judicial review, the principle of rotation, the spoils system, procedures for elections, term limits for members of Congress and the President, and the doctrine of instruction. Remini opines that Jackson advanced democratic ideas that placed him well

ahead of the times—ideas that have appealed to “populists, progressives, New Dealers, and all manner of reformers who care about equality and liberty” (44).

On the negative side, though, Remini remarks that “the contradictions and ambivalences [in Jackson’s beliefs and actions] begin with Jackson himself” (39). Because of his strong character, he tended to view himself and himself alone as the embodiment of the popular will. This often put him in a conflictive role with political opponents and even his peers. Further, Jackson never thought about extending political equality to blacks, Indians, or women, and in this respect, he simply sought to preserve freedom through a principle suitable to the times—male, white majoritarianism (41). But on the whole, Jackson’s political legacy is remarkable in its broad appeal across the political spectrum, its spirit of egalitarianism, its commitment to democratic rule, and its optimism about public virtue, individual liberty, and civic pride (43). In this respect, Remini presents a cogent argument that “Jackson himself has rightly been credited with setting the framework—at least psychologically—for all national action that succeeded him . . . a legacy few presidents or statesmen can rival” (44).

In his short book, Remini develops two other important issues concerning Jackson’s legacy—Indian removal and slavery. From the modern point of view, Jackson’s actions can be seen as racist and contrary to his beliefs about liberty and equality. But Remini argues that Jackson acted passionately according to more noble motivations. True, Jackson did not question the inferiority of peoples of African and Indian ancestry, and in this belief he remained a child of his times. But in his policy of Indian removal, Jackson firmly thought he gave the tribes the best

possible chance of survival, since assimilation in territories that were being rapidly settled by whites seemed inevitable. By removing the tribes to a “safe haven” west of the Mississippi River, Jackson felt “he deserved the gratitude of both the red and white races for solving a problem that no previous president had dared to tackle” (82). In his development of this perspective, Remini begins with Jackson’s early involvement with the Indians in his role as a military commander. By 1820, Sharp Knife, as Jackson was known to the Indians, concluded that both national security and the preservation of Indian identity necessitated a policy of Indian removal westward. Later, in his role as president, this belief guided Jackson’s consistent approach to the problem in spite of legislative and judicial opposition. Remini tells the fascinating story about the politics of Indian removal in a compelling fashion with brevity and clarity. The good intentions of Jackson and others certainly resulted in great human misery and suffering, but Remini raises the interesting question of the appropriateness of Jackson’s approach in light of the survival of tribes like the Cherokees versus the total disappearance of “any number of other ‘dead tribes’” (80).

The problem of evaluating Jackson’s role in the matter of slavery, as Remini admits, is much more difficult. Even though Jackson did not question the morality of subjecting humans of a different race to bondage, Remini shows how he conducted his administration on the basis of strong feelings about national security, the sanctity of the Union, and personal rights of property ownership [albeit limited to white males]. In Jackson’s mind, since the Constitution allowed slavery, the legitimacy of slavery could not be debated. From this premise, Jackson dealt with

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both abolitionists and nullifiers, whom he believed raised the issue of slavery only to thwart democracy and the sovereign will of the people. Remini admits the moral weakness of Jackson's pro-slavery stance, but he makes a plausible case to consider a more favorable legacy in this aspect of Jackson's administration.

In summary, Remini takes three crucial issues and weaves a picture of Jackson's role that is generous and favorable. He does so in a remarkably concise way, as he gathers details from the personal and official correspondence of Jackson and others. He also interacts with interpretive studies of earlier and more recent times. In these lectures, Remini gives the reader an excellent introduction to what is primary in Jackson's legacy as president as well as a more positive point of view about two issues that often are seen as taints upon the Jacksonian legacy.