In late January 1861, president-elect Abraham Lincoln was at home in wintry Springfield, Ill., contemplating his course. The South was seceding, the Union in danger of dying. In search of a quiet place to work on his Inaugural Address, Lincoln walked through streets of mud and ice to his brother-in-law's brick general store, Yates & Smith, near the corner of Sixth and Adams. Lincoln had told his friend and law partner, William Herndon, that he would need some "works" to consult. "I looked for a long list, but when he went over it I was greatly surprised," Herndon recalled. Lincoln asked for Daniel Webster's "Liberty and Union, now and forever!" oration, a copy of the Constitution, Henry Clay's speech on the Compromise of 1850—and the text of Andrew Jackson's Proclamation to the People of South Carolina.

Nearly thirty years before, in the winter of 1832–33, radicals in Charleston were raising an army to defend South Carolina's right to nullify federal laws it chose not to accept—the first step, Jackson believed, toward secession, and the destruction of the Union. Gaunt but striking, with a shock of white hair, a nearly constant cough, a bullet lodged in his chest and another in his arm, Jackson, 65 years old that winter, stood 6 feet 1 and weighed 140 pounds. "I expect soon to hear that a civil war of extermination has commenced," Jackson had said, musing about arresting the Southern leaders and then hanging them. Over a midday glass of whisky in the White House with an old friend, Jackson pounded a table as he pondered the crisis. Invoking "the God of heaven," Jackson swore to crush any rebellion.

Reading Jackson's words in a small, sparsely furnished upper room, Lincoln found what he needed: the example of a president who had rescued the Union from an armed clash with a hostile South. "Disunion by armed force is treason," Jackson had written, underscoring "treason." "Are you really ready to incur its guilt?
... Fellow-citizens, the momentous case is before you. On your undivided support of your Government depends the decision of the great question it involves—whether your sacred Union will be preserved and the blessing it secures to us as one people shall be perpetuated." Jackson won. The radicals stood down. Lincoln had his precedent.

As Americans go to the polls this week, they will be adding a new chapter to the long story of the modern presidency—a story that in many ways began with a man who is at once familiar and remote: Andrew Jackson, a kind of forgotten father of his country. In Jackson we can see the best of us and the worst of us, a style of presidential leadership that is at once inspiring and cautionary, for his fights remain our fights, his strengths our strengths and his weaknesses our weaknesses. Recalled mainly, if at all, as a mindless populist whose supporters trashed the White House on his Inauguration Day or as the scourge of the Indians, the real Jackson has been largely lost. Understood properly, however, Jackson should be seen as a man who helped make us who we are. To see him fully is to see ourselves more honestly.

The new president will be assuming an office and leading a political culture largely created by Jackson. Running at the head of a national party, fighting for a mandate from the people to govern in particular ways on particular issues, depending on a circle of insiders and advisers to help guide the affairs of the country, mastering the popular media of the age in order to transmit a consistent message at a constant pace, using the veto as a political, not just a constitutional, weapon and facing difficult confirmation battles in a Washington that is at once politically and personally charged—all are features of the modern presidency that flowered during Jackson’s tenure. He was also the first president to insist on the deference he thought due the chief executive as the only official elected by all the people—a distinction he believed made the White House, not Capitol Hill, the center of national power and national action.

The America of Andrew Jackson professed a love of democracy but was willing to live with inequality; aimed for social justice but was prone to racism and intolerance; believed itself one nation but was narrowly divided and fought close elections; and occasionally acted arrogantly toward other countries while craving respect from them at the same time. Jackson himself was capable of great good and great evil, of expanding democratic opportunity to some while simultaneously defending slavery and masterminding the removal of the Indians from their native lands.
Jackson had led the most improbable of lives. Soldier, brawler, duelist, lover and politician, he was the first American president to be the target of assassination, and the only one to attack his assailant. He was the first truly self-made man to become president. (Jackson was, to put it kindly, no scholar. When Harvard University voted to give the seventh president an honorary degree in 1833, a Massachusetts newspaper wrote that he deserved an "A.S.S." as well as an "L.L.D.") Before Jackson, it was possible to think of America without putting the people at the center of politics; after him, such a thing was inconceivable.

Orphaned at 14, Jackson never knew his own father, who died the year he was born. The Revolutionary War claimed the lives of his mother and his brothers. "I have been Tossed upon the waves of Fortune," he once wrote, and he spent his life seeking order amid chaos and authority among men. By the age of 35, the uneducated boy from the Carolina backwoods had become a practicing lawyer, a public prosecutor, a United States attorney, a delegate to the founding Tennessee Constitutional Convention, a United States congressman, a United States senator, a judge of the state Superior Court and a major general, first of the state militia and then of the United States Army.

In the glow of his victory over the British at New Orleans in 1815—as mythic a battle as Lexington and Concord—he became a fabled figure. Popular songs were written about him; the anniversary of the victory, Jan. 8, was a national occasion for Jackson banquets and Jackson parades. There were darker moments, too. He had massacred Indians in combat, fought duels, imposed martial law on New Orleans, executed deserters in his ranks and British subjects after he pre-emptively invaded Florida in 1818. He had married the love of his life, Rachel Donelson Robards, before she was divorced from her first husband. The scandal stayed with him through the decades, and he believed that the stress of the charges of adultery and bigamy killed his beloved, who died between the election and his Inauguration.

Dirty politics, populism, an outsider struggling to succeed the unpopular son of a president: there are more than a few coincidental echoes of the Age of Jackson in this season. The challenges he faced resonate in our own age. He believed the financial sector of the American economy was spoiled, corrupt and bad for the
overall health of the nation, and so he destroyed, at great length, great drama and great cost, the Bank of the United States. (The country descended into financial panic shortly after he left office.) He wanted the country to be a respected force around the world, and so he was quick to send forces to confront pirates, and he engaged in an epic diplomatic battle against France when the Chamber of Deputies refused to pay money it owed the United States. He thought the American Union sacred, and so he threatened civil war to put down the radicals in South Carolina. He was convinced that church and state should remain separate, and so he resisted calls for the formation of a "Christian party in politics," and was troubled by ministers who involved themselves in the political arena.

Jackson would not have been puzzled by a 24/7 news cycle, for politics—and the politics of celebrity and personality—was also an obsession in his era. A Scottish visitor to Albany, N.Y., in the late 1820s noted an American love of what he called "the spirit of electioneering, which seems to enter as an essential ingredient into the composition of everything." A Democratic senator in the Jackson years said, "The large masses act in politics pretty much as they do in religion. Every doctrine is with them, more or less, a matter of faith; received, principally, on account of their trust in the apostle."

Jackson has been explicitly raised in two contexts of late. Supporters of Sarah Palin have invoked his outsider persona—a provincial with little to no formal education, he ran against capital elites—in a bid to link her to one of the great figures in American history. The problem with the analogy is that while Jackson packaged himself as a champion of the people, he was a tremendously accomplished man with a long public record when he came to the presidency. He did not run on his inexperience, or his lack of connections in Washington. He campaigned as a sophisticated figure of Jeffersonian restoration, eager to destroy what he saw as corrupt intermediary institutions (such as the Bank of the United States and the federal establishment) in order to keep power as close to the people as possible within a strong Union. His was a complex political philosophy.

If there was one principle at the heart of Jackson's gospel, it was this, as articulated in his first annual message in 1829: "the majority is to govern." This was not, to say the least, the prevailing view of the American Founders, who had consciously created a republic, not a democracy. But Jackson believed that the people—the unconnected—deserved a larger role in public life, so he rewrote the script of American politics to give them one. And he did it through force of personal will. As president, Jackson said, he was the only "direct representative" of the people—congressmen came from districts, and senators were elected by state legislatures at the time—and therefore he was the most fitting tribune of the popular will. We take this vision of the presidency for granted now—that it is, in John F. Kennedy's phrase, "the vital center of action"—but before Jackson the office tended to be more subservient to Congress.

The context of Jackson's remark about the centrality of the majority was the relationship between the people and the president, which Jackson believed should be direct and uncluttered by the Electoral College or the House of Representatives. What if a majority was off on the wrong track? "Never for a moment believe that the great body of the citizens of any State or States can deliberately intend to do wrong," Jackson once said. "They may, under the influence of temporary excitement or misguided opinions, commit mistakes; they may be misled for a time by the suggestions of self-interest; but in a community so enlightened and patriotic as the people of the United States argument will soon make them sensible of their errors, and when convinced they will be ready to repair them." The task of democratic leadership was to cultivate opinion, then to
marshal and manage it. He never really doubted that he could ascertain the sense of the country. Challenged once, during a credit crisis in the Bank War, that his visitor knew more about the people than he did, Jackson cried, "The people? The people, sir, are with me." He was right; they usually were. Huge numbers of Americans, many of them only beginning to have a significant economic stake in the future of the country, believed Jackson represented their interests against the powerful few.

Jackson references have also flourished recently because of his relentless campaign against these entrenched financial interests—perhaps a model for the 44th president as he assesses how to address the (perennial) problem of greed on Wall Street. Jackson's hatred of the Bank of the United States was epic. The keeper of federal deposits, the bank, presided over by the brilliant, vain and aristocratic Nicholas Biddle, had private shareholders who profited from the institution, which was liberal with loans and retainers to lawmakers and other public officials who might be of use to the bank. Jackson had long distrusted banks of any kind—he had had a personal run of bad luck in his early business life—and especially disliked institutions he could not control. Biddle's bank was just that: beyond Jackson's reach. And so the president ultimately decided to veto the bank's recharter. There is a strong case to be made that, in doing so, Jackson made the wrong decision for the economy, but he was more interested in the politics of the question, and in a thundering message he framed the battle in democratic terms. "It is to be regretted that the rich and powerful too often bend the acts of government to their selfish purposes," Jackson said. "If it would confine itself to equal protection, and, as Heaven does its rains, shower its favors alike on the high and the low, the rich and the poor, it would be an unqualified blessing." But since it was not an unqualified blessing, then it required men like Jackson to set things to rights. It was not easy. Sick and exhausted amid the struggle, he told Martin Van Buren, "The Bank, Mr. Van Buren, is trying to kill me, but I will kill it."

He hated the bank but loved the Union. Within its bounds Americans could battle politically forever—but if it were to break apart, Jackson believed, all was lost. At the time of the crisis with South Carolina, in his Second Inaugural in March 1833, Jackson was explicit about the stakes of the moment. "The eyes of all nations are fixed on our Republic," he said. "The event of the existing crisis will be decisive in the opinion of mankind of the practicability of our federal system of government. Great is the stake placed in our hands; great is the responsibility which must rest upon the people of the United States. Let us realize the importance of the attitude in which we stand before the world. Let us exercise forbearance and firmness."

Jackson believed that "the intelligence and wisdom of our countrymen" would, in the end, provide "relief and deliverance" from the "difficulties which surround us and the dangers which threaten our institutions"—in every era. But he himself was not always intelligent or wise, and he did not always offer relief and deliverance from difficulties that faced those on the margins of American life. As a general and as president, he secured the borders, defeated South Carolina's move toward disunion and added millions of acres to the United States by taking land from Indians. He also defended slavery, thwarting abolitionist efforts, and his dealings with the Indian tribes—dealings that finally led to the Trail of Tears—were shameful. How to reconcile the champion of "the people" with a man capable of such things? Arthur Schlesinger Jr. once noted that retrospective selfrighteousness was both easy and cheap. Americans have always been willing to tolerate the morally intolerable. We should condemn Jackson for his moral failings but also remember that to condemn him is in many ways to condemn ourselves—for the abandonment of the inner cities, for the failure of our health-care system, for injustices of any kind.

The slave quarters at Jackson's home, the Hermitage, are near his tomb, a rebuke to the generations of white
Americans who limited crusades for life and liberty to their own kind, and a reminder that evil can appear normal to even the best men and women of a given time. The tragedy of Jackson's life is that a man dedicated to freedom failed to see liberty as a 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—belatedly, but by saving the Union, Jackson kept the possibility of progress alive, a possibility that would have died had secession and separation carried the day.

Ask Obama or McCain to name his favorite president and you get a predictable answer: Abraham Lincoln for Obama and Theodore Roosevelt for McCain. George W. Bush hopes that history will remember him not as a James Buchanan but as a Harry Truman. All these more familiar heroic presidents, though, have at least one thing in common: an admiration for Andrew Jackson. "Jackson had many faults," said Theodore Roosevelt, "but he was devotedly attached to the Union, and he had no thought of fear when it came to defending his country ... With the exception of Washington and Lincoln, no man has left a deeper mark on American history." President Roosevelt's cousin Franklin was also fascinated by Jackson. In 1941, a few months before America entered World War II, FDR equated his task with Jackson's battle to save the Union. "In his day the threat to the Federal Union came from within," FDR told the nation that spring. "In our own day the threat to our Union and our democracy is not a sectional one. It comes from a great part of the world which surrounds us, and which draws more tightly around us, day by day."

Roosevelt's successor, Harry Truman, was so absorbed by Jackson that Eddie Jacobson, Truman's partner in a failed haberdashery, once recalled that the future president was always off in a corner reading books about Jackson rather than tending to the few customers who did come in. "He wanted sincerely to look after the little fellow who had no pull," Truman said of Jackson, "and that's what a president is supposed to do." Jackson believed that, as did Truman—and as should we.


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