

Andrew Jackson: hero or villain?

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of October 25, 2021)

Let's look at one of Tennessee's three United States presidents, Andrew Jackson. He served from 1829 to 1837.

The other two were, James K. Polk and Andrew Johnson. All three have locations where you can visit their history. I have been to all three, Polk's home and Museum in Columbia, Johnson's home in Greenville is a National Historic Site, and the Hermitage in Nashville. Polk is buried at the Tennessee State Capital, Johnson is buried in the Andrew Johnson National Cemetery in Greenville, and Jackson is buried at the Hermitage. There has been an effort to move Polk to Columbia.

The following comes from Daniel Feller, an authority on Andrew Jackson, and is provided to us by Carolyn Krause.

Consider Andrew Jackson, the seventh president of the United States whose Hermitage estate near Nashville is a tourist attraction. Was the lawyer, soldier, and statesman whose image appears on our \$20 bills a hero or villain? Or a bit of both?

These questions about the famously controversial Tennessean (especially in the last five years) were explored by Daniel Feller in a recent talk to attendees of the Friday Lecture series of the Oak Ridge Institute for Continued Learning. Feller, who retired from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville in 2020, is Distinguished Professor in the Humanities Emeritus and Editor/Director Emeritus of "The Papers of Andrew Jackson." Feller came to UTK as a professor of history and became the third Jackson project director in 2003.

"This project at UT has been going on for half a century to collect, arrange and publish all of Andrew Jackson's extant records—that is, everything he wrote, everything that was written to him and everything that was written for him. We have been creating a historical record for historians, pundits, biographers and screenwriters."

He showed the ORICL class Volume 11, which covers Jackson's presidential year of 1833, and he announced that the next volume, Volume 12 (presidential year of 1834), will be sent to the University of Tennessee Press at the end of October. It will be the last volume with Feller's name on it. Jackson (1767-1845) was president from 1829 through 1837.

Those who consider Jackson a hero will list these accomplishments. He served in both houses of Congress, representing Tennessee, and was a justice on the Tennessee Supreme Court. He served as a general in the U.S. Army. His victories in battles against the Creek and Seminole tribes expelled the Indians from lands in present-day Alabama and Georgia and led to the annexation of Florida from Spain. (He later successfully advocated the annexation of Texas.) In the War of 1812 against the British, his troops won the Battle of New Orleans in 1815, making him a war hero.

As president, he sought to advance the rights of the "common man" against a "corrupt aristocracy," taking actions such as vetoing the reauthorization of and later dismantling the Second Bank of the United States, which he believed benefited the wealthy at the expense of ordinary Americans.

"He's the first president to consider himself as the people's representative in government," Feller said. "He founded the first mass political party, the Democratic Party." In 1835, he became the only president in U.S. history to pay off the national debt.

Since the 1970s, Feller noted, two hot-button issues have made Jackson particularly controversial: his attitudes and actions with respect to slavery and Indian removal. Those are among the reasons why people have proposed replacing his image on the \$20 bill with that of former President Ronald Reagan or once-enslaved abolitionist Harriet Tubman. Even so, according to Wikipedia, "surveys of historians and scholars have ranked Jackson favorably among U.S. presidents."

Andrew Jackson: hero or villain?

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of October 25, 2021)

In 1804, he bought a 425-acre farm and the slaves working there. He named the new home for his wife and him the Hermitage. Eventually, he became a wealthy plantation owner.

"He showed affection for a handful of his Black slaves," Feller said. "He punished other slaves by having them whipped. Slavery was taken for granted in the environment Jackson grew up in. The people around him didn't think it was wrong to own slaves. In Tennessee buying slaves and a cotton plantation was what you did when you moved up.

"And yet there were abolitionists at the time who proclaimed that slavery is wrong. The abolitionists mounted their publicity campaign against slavery on Christian grounds in the exact years of Jackson's presidency. He chose to denounce them for disturbing the peace and tried to shut them up."

Jackson also implemented the forcible removal of Native Americans from their ancestral homelands, including the Choctaw, Cherokee, Chickasaw, Creek and Seminole tribes. According to Feller, Jackson did not "invent Indian removal," as has been alleged erroneously in many publications. Indians were being pushed out, enslaved, or killed by English settlers in Massachusetts in the late 1600s.

Compelling Indians to move from the Southeast to west of the Mississippi River originated with the fifth president, James Monroe. He announced to Congress that Indian removal is settled national policy because "it is good for the Indians." (The main reason for the Indian deportation was to free up land so white settlers could grow cotton, a major source of income for plantation owners with slaves.)

"Indian removal did not start and end with Jackson," Feller said. "It is true that he prioritized Indian removal in a way that no previous president had. It was the first policy on his agenda when he came to Washington in 1829.

"The Indian Removal Act that Congress passed in 1830 loosely gave Jackson the authority to do what he wanted to do. It was the only major piece of legislation passed during his entire eight years as president at his particular urging."

Although the Indians were promised payment for their land and property and free transportation to a safer place where they were guaranteed security and sustenance, "the practical reality was quite different," Feller said. "The removal was coerced."

During the multiple migrations (later referred to as the "Trail of Tears"), many Indians died of starvation or disease since there was a cholera epidemic at the time.

Jackson wanted Indian removal to occur as quickly and cheaply as possible. But the worst abuses happened in 1838 during Martin Van Buren's presidency, Feller said. That's when the Cherokees were rounded up by military force and compelled to move to Oklahoma.

So, how should we judge Jackson? During the Trump administration, people talked past one another as they disagreed on Jackson's actions and attitudes. Feller described the disagreements this way: "Jackson was the great champion of the common man. No, he was an ethnic cleanser. He was a spokesman of democracy; no, he was a racist slaveholder.

"Donald Trump said, 'I'm just like Andrew Jackson. I'm a great popular hero. I'm hated by the establishment, but I am loved by ordinary Americans.' And Trump's critics said, 'Yes, you are just like Andrew Jackson. You're an ignoramus, you're a demagogue and you're a racist bigot.'

"As a historian, I was appalled by the historical ignorance on both sides," Feller continued. Some of these critics included writers for the national media who erroneously stated that Jackson was a violent man who fought anywhere from 14 to 100 duels (based on an anti-Jackson political pamphlet) when, in fact, he fought only one duel.

Andrew Jackson: hero or villain?

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of October 25, 2021)

One question to be considered, said Feller, is this one: "Do we judge a man by his standards or by ours? At one extreme it's clearly unfair to hold a man up to a standard of conduct that no one in his time upheld." He noted that former Presidents George Washington and Thomas Jefferson also had been slaveholders.

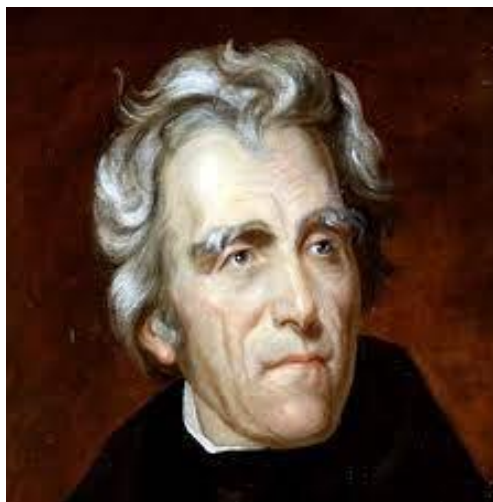
Another question, he added, is the one about his actions and our opinion of him based on our own moral standards or political stances on current issues.

"Who is the real Andrew Jackson?" Feller asked. "Villain or hero? Perhaps a bit of both. The real point is not to decide how to judge Jackson. Jackson is dead."

Historians have denounced Jackson, he asserted, to show how morally superior they think they are. "I find that moral certitude without knowledge or wisdom to back it up is no virtue," Feller said. "It leads only to arrogance and self-righteousness. The end result that makes this exercise worthwhile is not that it leads to a verdict on Jackson but to a greater understanding of ourselves." And that understanding, he added, includes our moral values that we should act upon.

Thank you, Professor Fellers, for the insightful look at how Andrew Jackson is perceived today. I especially appreciated his comments regarding the tendency to try and judge by standards other than those of the time when that person lived and to use moral standards or political stances on current issues. What great thoughts and ones we would all do well to keep in mind when we tend to question the actions of people who lived in another time.

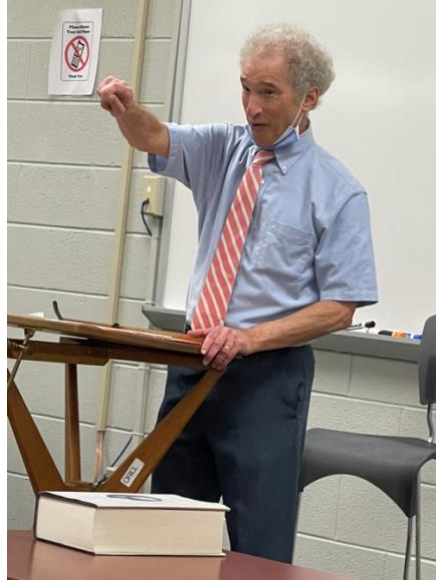
Thanks Carolyn, for bringing this discussion to Historically Speaking.



Andrew Jackson seventh US President

Andrew Jackson: hero or villain?

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of October 25, 2021)



Daniel Feller speaks to an ORICL class about “The Papers of Andrew Jackson” project that he has led at the University of Tennessee since 2003