Thousands of Americans converged on the U.S. Capitol to watch Andrew Jackson take the oath of office. Then they followed him home to the White House, where the crowd lunged for refreshments, broke furniture, and spilled food and wine. For his own safety, Jackson had to be spirited away to a hotel room.

Such familiarity with a president was a sign of changing times. Unlike the previous six presidents who had grown up with a level of wealth and privilege, Jackson had been born in a frontier cabin in the Carolinas to struggling immigrant parents. Orphaned by the age of 14 and poorly educated, he was the image of a self-made man. He was the “People’s President.”

Jackson had campaigned for office on the promise of reform. During his two terms, he faced two major controversies. One was over nullification. The other involved a fight with the Second U.S. Bank. Jackson used the power of the presidency to enact his policies.

Nullification raised the question of whether a state could refuse to obey a federal law. In November 1832, South Carolina declared the nation’s tariffs of 1828 and 1832 on foreign-made goods null and void. South Carolina warned that if force were used to collect the tax, it would “proceed to organize a separate government,” which Jackson considered an act of treason. No individual state had the right to secede from the Union. The people of South Carolina, and of all the states, owed their first allegiance to the U.S. government.

Jackson threatened to use force to make South Carolina’s citizens obey the U.S. Constitution and all U.S. laws. The issue was resolved when Congress passed the Compromise Tariff in March 1833, which gradually reduced the import tariff rate over 10 years.

Jackson also emerged victorious in his battle with the Second Bank of the United States. This victory, however, ultimately proved harmful to the growing nation.

The federal government had chartered the Bank of the United States in 1816, after difficult financial issues resulted from the War of 1812. All federal income from taxes and land sales were deposited in the bank. Jackson distrusted the bank’s special privileges, vast powers, and advantages it gave to the wealthy few. In July 1832, he vetoed the bill for the bank’s recharter. He ordered all new deposits to be put into smaller, pro-Jackson banks. Funds still in the Bank of the United States were to be used to pay the government’s bills until they were exhausted.

The bank’s president fought back and called in loans, which nearly created a financial panic. By the
time the battle over a national bank ended in 1836, both the U.S. Bank and the nation’s stable banking system were dead. The nation faced currency chaos, panics, and depressions for years to come.

Jackson’s presidency also established a policy of Native American removal. Jackson wanted to free up land in the Southeast for settlement by small farmers. In 1830, the Indian Removal Act gave the federal government the power to force Native Americans to relocate to land west of the Mississippi River.

The Jacksonian Democracy changed the course of American government. Jackson championed the causes of the common people and brought more people into the political process while also showing a strong commitment to the Union. He believed that the position of president held great power, and the role of the executive office emerged stronger after his terms.
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