

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class Period: \_\_\_\_\_

## THE AMBIGUOUS DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA, 1800-1848

### Purpose:

This Crossroads Essay is an optional enrichment activity providing additional insight into the era. Many essential themes, concepts, and events are outlined in the essay; it serves as a valuable review tool before exams. Reading the article is assigned to all students. Completing the enrichment activity is optional.

### Assessment:

Concepts will be tested. Students who complete this activity before they take the corresponding unit test may earn up to 10 bonus points which will be applied to a daily or quiz grade in the corresponding unit.

### Directions:

Print this article and complete by hand using a highlighter and ink, or use PDFescape.com (or similar program) to create a digital version. If you are creating a digital version, replace highlighting with summarizing if you are unable to highlight or underline using the program. **As you read the article annotate in the spaces provided. Think CRITICALLY... go beyond simple/respective notes when analyzing themes.**

Annotate by:

- Highlighting the main ideas/arguments,
- identifying major themes (MAGPIES)
- identifying and explaining historical context
- defining terms you may not know.

<p><b>M</b> igration and Settlement  <b>A</b> merica in the World  <b>G</b> eography and the Environment  <b>P</b> olitics and Power  <b>I</b> dentity; American and National  <b>E</b> conomy; Work, Exchange, and Technology  <b>S</b> ociety and Culture</p>
---

### **Introduction: Democracy For Whom? Thematic and Methodological Focal Points**

In 1830, two Frenchmen visited the United States on a mission from their government; their formal assignment was to study and prepare a report on American prisons. One of them, **Alexis de Tocqueville**, had something else in mind; he seized the opportunity to **conduct a detailed investigation of the new American democracy**. Tocqueville confessed that, when he looked at the United States, he sought the image and the essence of democracy, a **political and social condition of equality that, he believed, all European nations and societies were fast approaching**. Foreigners often see a nation more clearly than residents do, and Tocqueville was the greatest exemplar of this fact: The product of his research and musings, ***Democracy in America*** (2 vols., 1835-1840), is perhaps the single best book on the United States written and an essential document of American history.

From today's perspective, the question is, "Democracy for whom?" Tocqueville agreed, for example, that America faced a serious and growing threat from the problematic relations among "the white, black, and red races" - Europeans, African-Americans, and Indians. **He also noted with disappointment that American women seemed to accept, and even to value, the submissive and passive role to which American men consigned them**. Moreover, Tocqueville's picture of the United States in the 1830s does not present the diversity that later historians have found in the new nation, focusing so much as it does on the thought, words, and deeds of power-wielding white men.

As we consider this period of American history, we must remember that the political, constitutional, diplomatic, and military history we used to study as the whole of American history is only part of the history of the American people...

The period **1800-1848 is well-suited to illustrate how complex, rich, and self-contradictory the materials of our nation's history are** -- how, for example, in a period celebrated for its democracy, the political population excluded most free African-Americans from the political process; how women's roles in public and private life constricted; how racial and religious prejudices, and ethnic rivalries and hatreds, cast an ironic, bleak light on professions of expanded democracy.

**Context for Tocqueville:** American defining itself, its identity and culture while battling over larger issues like slavery and state vs central authority.

**America in the world:** circumstances in U.S. that enabled U.S. democracy to work would happen in other areas including concepts of equality and mobility.

**Society & Culture...** He noted the contradictions of democracy in social caste of slavery and subjugation of women, and that very few challenged their subservient status.

**Context of era:** not only conflict, war, and expansion but also defining roles and issues on expanding what American democracy was.

## I. Jeffersonian Democracy (1800-1824)

---

In this period, the rule of the "Virginia dynasty" (Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe) brought the triumph of the **[Democratic] Republicans** -- usually called the "Jeffersonian Republicans" to avoid confusion with the Republican Party that began in 1856 -- and spelled the end of the **Federalist** party. These twenty-four years are crowded with "great events": the disputed election of 1800, the "midnight judges" in 1801, *Marbury v. Madison* and the **Louisiana Purchase** of 1803, the quelling of the **Barbary Pirates** and the **Hamilton-Burr duel** in 1804, the failed **impeachment of Justice Samuel Chase** in 1805, the **Embargo in 1807**, the **War of 1812**, the burning of Washington in 1814, the **Battle of New Orleans** and the **Treaty of Ghent** in 1815, *McCullough v. Maryland* in 1819, the **Monroe Doctrine** in 1823, and the disputed **election of 1824** (which brought a major party realignment in its wake). But what are the great themes that might be obscured by too-relentless focus on "great events"?

**First**, by the election of 1800, the American people accepted political parties as the focus of national public life. But the repudiation of the Federalists in that election, exacerbated by their repeated political defeats and leading ultimately to their disintegration as a political party by 1816, suggested briefly that American public life would be dominated by one-party consensus politics. Ironically, the supposed consensus dominated by the Republicans shattered after only eight years.

**Second**, the Republicans tried to reduce the role of the federal government in public life, causing a corresponding rise in importance of state and local governments. To be sure, these goals were not achieved across the board, nor were the Republicans uniform in their commitment to it. One major exception was the Jefferson administration's frantic, sweeping, and largely unavailing series of attempts to enforce the Embargo of 1807; this measure produced "big government" of a kind barely imagined by Alexander Hamilton in his most theoretical musings, and not paralleled until the Civil War in 1861-1865 and the New Deal in the 1930s.

**Third**, both federal and state courts developed judicial review as a key component of constitutional government. In the hands of Chief Justice John Marshall, the last great Federalist in national politics (and a particularly painful thorn in Jefferson's side), judicial review was a powerful and flexible instrument with which to bring about national constitutional supremacy over the states.

**Fourth**, under Jefferson's leadership in his first term, the United States grew prosperous and maintained its peaceful relations with most of the rest of the world. Unfortunately, during his second term, the nation experienced severe economic difficulties tied to Jeffersonian foreign policy -- especially the Embargo.

**Fifth**, the nation's commercial and manufacturing strength in the North grew slowly yet steadily. Both in its economic success and in the development and spread of economic dislocation and hardship for many working men and women, this growth helped spur the first stirrings of American labor in the direction of union organization.

**Sixth**, the revolutionizing of the cultivation of cotton in the South (due to Eli Whitney's cotton gin) dashed the hopes of enlightened Southern whites for the end of chattel slavery. The cotton gin helped to foster the expansion of slavery into the Deep South -- the so-called "cotton belt." Conditions in the Deep South exacerbated the brutality of slavery as a labor system -- while helping to entrench the interests of slave owners as the central determinants of Southern politics in the states and the nation, and augmenting the power of the slavery interest in national politics.

**Seventh**, the nation decisively began to grow westward. The acquisition of the Louisiana Territory in 1803 only provided official government endorsement and backing for what for two generations (at least since 1765, when the British attempted to seal off the region beyond the Alleghenies) had been a powerful social, economic, and demographic reality. Americans knew that their destiny lay westward, and hurried to embrace it. Assuming (as generations of later scholars have done) that the westward regions were empty wildernesses waiting for settlement, instead of the homelands of Indian nations with fundamentally differing ideas about the use and ownership of land, white emigrants sought to build a new, rough-hewn America beyond the mountains and throughout what they deemed the West (and what we now call the Middle West).

**Eighth**, diverging economic bases of life in the North, South, and West gave new impetus to the enduring problem of sectional rivalry. These issues were complicated by the growth of disunionist sentiment. Pressures for disunion varied with the particular political crises confronting the nation. In 1798-1799, the seeds of disunion were planted by the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions in 1798-1799. The New England states' resistance to the War of 1812 and the potentially disunionist Hartford Convention of 1814-1815 shifted the focus of disunionism to New England. Disputes between free and slave states on a national scale brought the crisis of Union to the breaking point in the Missouri crisis that led to the Missouri Compromise of 1820.

**Ninth**, the United States began to make wary ventures into world politics. The classic question of the "problem readers" on this topic is, "Were these diplomatic initiatives naively idealistic, or soundly realistic?" There is no easy or consistent answer. Some of these initiatives were notably successful -- for example, the Louisiana Purchase and the quelling of the Barbary Pirates. Others were partly or wholly failures -- the most famous being the Jeffersonian attempt (1805-1809) to bring peace to Europe by denying the warring powers American trade, a failure that culminated in the War of 1812. Near the close of the Jeffersonian era, the foreign policy of President James Monroe's administration, guided by Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, once more scored a notable triumph -- the closing of the American Hemisphere to European intervention to protect the new republics of Latin America from re-conquest by the European powers. This was the original meaning of the Monroe Doctrine (1823).

**Finally**, although Jeffersonian Republicans celebrated the growing democracy of America, they still conceived of politics and governance as concerns reserved for the educated, well-bred elite; the great body of the people was relegated to the role of appreciative observers who, at election time, would reward virtuous and public-spirited officials with re-election. The next period of the nation's history would shatter these complacent assumptions.

---

## II. Jacksonian Democracy, (1824-1840)

---

Beginning with the disputed presidential election of 1824, political dominance by the Revolutionary generation came to an end. The American people passed the torch to a generation of Americans who either experienced the Revolution as children or were born in the first years of independence. Moreover, the elitist republic of the Revolutionary generation was about to be supplanted by a new kind of polity -- the **Jacksonian democracy**, in which ordinary Americans (that is, ordinary white male Americans) would shoulder their way into political and economic power despite protests by social and political elites.

Even before Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., published his path breaking *The Age of Jackson* in 1945, but especially in the years after the Second World War, the Jacksonian era has been a favorite in textbooks as a proving-ground for historical interpretations. Historians have clashed repeatedly over such issues as: Was Andrew Jackson a democratic hero or a would-be tyrant? Were the Jacksonians backward-looking agrarians protesting against industrialization and centralization? Or were they defenders of demo democracy against entrenched special interests? Was Jacksonian democracy true democracy, or was it a democracy for white Protestant men only?

For example, even though state constitutional reforms of the 1820s and 1830s repealed property qualifications for voting and holding office, they imposed racial qualifications that disenfranchised African-Americans and preserved bars to women suffrage. Some states also experimented with laws abolishing or cutting back the old common-law doctrine of coverture, under which a married woman's legal identity and property merged with that of her husband; the successes of such states as New York in enacting **Married Women's Property Acts** in 1848 and later years only made more glaring the continuing refusal to deny women the vote and other political privileges and responsibilities.

The summary response to these questions is that, while the pendulum has swung decisively away from uncritical celebration of Andrew Jackson, his supporters, and his heirs, they are by no means the demonized villains that **National Republicans** such as **John Quincy Adams** thought them to be. Whatever historical consensus exists concedes some of the traditional Jacksonian virtues, such as resistance to concentrated economic power and social elites, but tempers those concessions by recognizing the Jacksonians' propensities for racist and ethnic bigotry, distrust of urban society and culture, and irresponsible economic policies.

Just as the nature of Jacksonian Democracy has been fertile ground for historical chair-throwing, so, too, the issues bound up in the question "Who opposed the Jacksonians?" have prompted vigorous historical disagreement: Were the **Whigs** -- the new party led by the great rivals, Senators **Henry Clay** of Kentucky and **Daniel Webster** of Massachusetts -- spokesmen for the monied, commercial, and manufacturing interests as opposed to the great body of the people? Or were they advocates of a strong, prosperous, united, democratic nation willing to use the power of the national government to achieve these desirable goals? Again, the emerging historical consensus seeks to achieve an even-handed synthesis of the best work of the Whigs' historical partisans and detractors, acknowledging both the public-spiritedness and public benefits of many elements of the Whig program and the economic and political self-interest that drove many Whig politicians, even the most eminent, and their supporters.

Other, more recent historians have asked an equally natural and important set of questions grouped around the inquiry, "If the **Jacksonian Democrats** were the winners, who were the losers?" Were the losers merely the "malefactors of great wealth"? While no consensus has emerged on this point, many of the best new historians of the Jacksonian period identify as losers:

- **African-Americans**, North and South, who became the victims of rampant racism and discrimination, both by law and in day-to-day life.
- **Indians**, both friendly and hostile. (The most notable victims in this category were, of course, the Cherokee people, who vainly attempted to demonstrate their civilization, their willingness to abide by the rule of law, and their entitlement to rights under law. But the government of Georgia, with the connivance of the Jackson administration, exiled them from their ancestral lands and drove them along the "Trail of Tears" to new "homelands" in Oklahoma.)

- **Workingmen** who found themselves victims of rapacious industrialists and promoters, and then of the severe economic slump of 1837, caused or sanctioned by Jacksonian economic policies?

**Sectional tensions**, and disputes between national and state sovereignty, continued and threatened to get worse in the Jacksonian era. In 1832-1833, South Carolina's defiance of the 1828 "**Tariff of Abominations**" revived and rubbed raw the bruised sentiments of disunion. As a complement to the exacerbation of sectional tensions and the growth of disunionist sentiment, in this period disunion in the South acquired intellectual champions, the foremost of whom was Senator (and, from 1825 through 1832, Vice President) **John C. Calhoun** of South Carolina. President Jackson's uncompromising opposition to Southern arguments for nullification and threats of secession -- the one phase of his Presidency that has won him admiration from historians of all camps (except "Old South" apologists) -- further complicated the question whether the Jacksonians favored state sovereignty at the expense of national power, both for Jacksonians and their adversaries and for later students of the movement.

The Jacksonian years and the decades that followed were as significant for nonpolitical developments as for the Jacksonian political upheavals discussed above.

- Successive waves of **immigration** from Ireland, Germany, and Central Europe (in particular, the Austro-Hungarian Empire) inundated the United States, enriching the ethnic, religious, and social diversity of the American people -- yet encouraging nativism, anti-Semitism, anti-Catholicism, and anti-immigrant hysteria.
- This period also produced the first stirrings of **American imaginative literature**, philosophy, and art of high quality, stimulated by (yet at the same time reacting to or even against) national pride and confidence. The twenty years or so beginning with the election of Andrew Jackson were the first stage of what historians have called the "**American Renaissance**," and the first flowering of a distinctively American culture.

(1) In this period, writers such as **Nathaniel Hawthorne** began to draw on the American past and present, rather than European models and traditions, as inspiration for a mature, truly American imaginative literature.

(2) **Ralph Waldo Emerson** and **Henry David Thoreau** pioneered the crafting of one of the first truly American schools of philosophy -- transcendentalism, which emphasized the individual's direct personal experience of the world and his or her ability to transcend the limitations of ordinary existence.

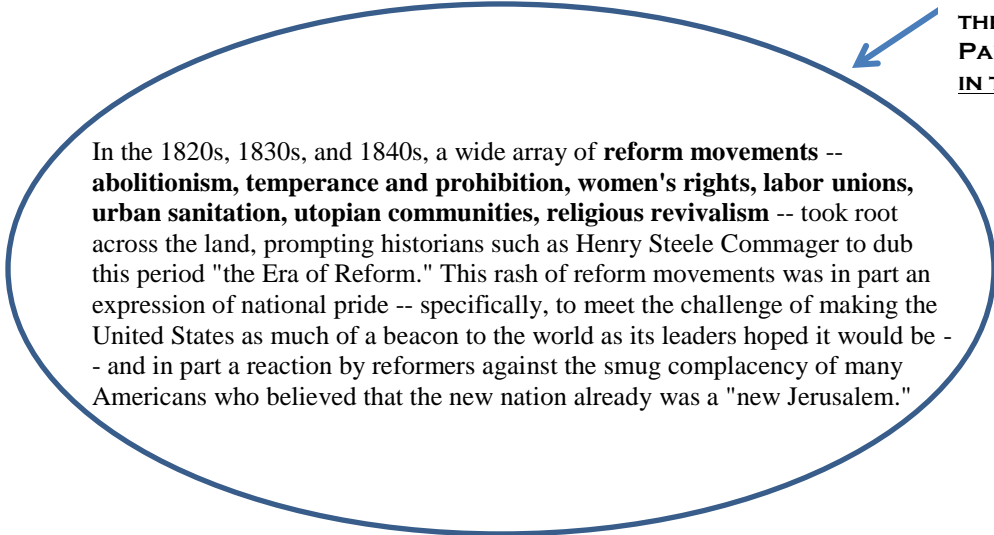
(3) American artists (such as the "**Hudson River School**" led by artists like **Thomas Cole**) demonstrated

- (a) that they could learn from and absorb the best that the arts of Europe had to offer,
- (b) that they could find artistic inspiration in the natural and artificial wonders of the New World, and
- (c) that the art these wonders inspired could stand up to the rigorous scrutiny of European taste.

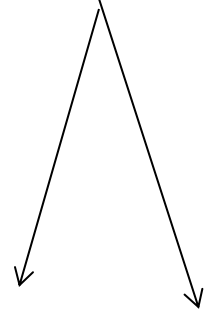
(4) This period fostered a renaissance of **American scientific and technological advances** -- improvement and widespread use of steam power, the invention and development of **railroads**, the growth of American **industrial power** and **mass production**, and so forth. Technological innovation and ingenuity -- which had been American characteristics since the days of Benjamin Franklin -- were now firmly ensconced as vital components of American culture.

(5) **American experiments** in creating and expanding public **schools**, colleges, and universities bloomed in this period, making the "increase and diffusion of knowledge" a quintessential American phenomenon. (The phrase is from the will of James Smithson, the British scientist who bequeathed his estate to the United States and thus provided the nucleus of what became the Smithsonian Institution.)

**MAKE SURE YOU UNDERSTAND EACH OF THESE MOVEMENTS AND WHAT THEIR GOALS AND ACTIONS WERE. PAUSE HERE AND EXPLAIN EACH ONE IN THE SPACE BELOW**



In the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s, a wide array of **reform movements** -- **abolitionism, temperance and prohibition, women's rights, labor unions, urban sanitation, utopian communities, religious revivalism** -- took root across the land, prompting historians such as Henry Steele Commager to dub this period "the Era of Reform." This rash of reform movements was in part an expression of national pride -- specifically, to meet the challenge of making the United States as much of a beacon to the world as its leaders hoped it would be - - and in part a reaction by reformers against the smug complacency of many Americans who believed that the new nation already was a "new Jerusalem."



### III. The Quarrelsome Heirs of Jackson, (1840-1848)

The defeat of President **Martin Van Buren** (Jackson's chosen successor) in 1840 did not mark the end of the **Jacksonian era**. Rather, Jackson's adversaries, the **Whigs**, tried to absorb and apply Jacksonian lessons and methods -- though with fragmentary and limited success. The **Jacksonian model of the Presidency** and the Jacksonian brand of national politics continued to dominate the nation through the 1840s, culminating in the nation's first aggressive war: the **War with Mexico [Mexican-American War]**, 1846-1848.

The war ostensibly was an American response to a Mexican military violation of the border that left several American and Mexican soldiers dead and wounded. It had deeper roots, however -- chiefly in the huge, fertile, and rich region known as **Texas**. In the 1820s, many Americans chose to settle in Texas, which then was part of the Mexican Republic. By 1836, a growing movement for Texan independence from Mexico (either as an independent republic or as a new state in the United States) led to a bold but at first suicidal revolt. The Mexicans' quelling of Texans at the Alamo, in San Antonio, galvanized Texans' desire to throw off Mexican rule -- and Americans' support of their Texan neighbors. From 1836 to 1845, Texas was an independent republic allied with the United States. When, in 1845, Texas joined the Union as a large and powerful slaveholding state, Mexicans feared that their land-hungry neighbors would seek more pieces of the fragile Mexican Republic. Similarly, though with less violence and more speed, American settlers in what is now California took advantage of the Mexican War to proclaim the independence of the **California Republic** (1848) -- which also, but more swiftly, joined the Union. (The land between the two former republics became the subject of the peace treaty that in 1848 ended the war). The **Mexican War** was unique, perhaps even unprecedented, and Americans knew it. It was the first time (except, perhaps for the War of 1812), that Americans precipitated a war. It was the first time (again except, perhaps, for 1812) that the nation fought a war for motives of territorial gain. The war was a training-ground for young officers and soldiers who, fifteen years later, would form the nuclei of the Union and Confederate armies. Because of the dramatic speed of the American victories, the Mexican War helped also to frame for many Americans the idea (sadly mistaken, as they were to learn) that war was quick, simple, and glorious.

**Proponents of the war** cheered it on as a battle of Protestant democratic civilization against a corrupt Catholic quasi-tyranny. They also hailed it as the last great act in which the United States would achieve its "**manifest destiny**" of spanning the continent as a free and prosperous colossus among nations.

**Opponents of the war** -- and there were many, among them John Quincy Adams, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and the young Abraham Lincoln -- regarded it as a blatant, cold-blooded act of robbery by which a large, powerful nation set out to steal half the territory of a smaller, weaker, innocent neighbor. They also suspected -- though with less justice -- that the war was a proslavery conspiracy designed to secure territories where slavery could be planted and where enough slave states could be organized under the Missouri Compromise to tip the balance decisively in favor of the slave states.

The issues posed by the war and the controversy over its justification and its spoils did not evaporate with the signing of the **Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo** in 1848. Rather, they helped to frame the context of American public life for the next twenty years. The land-hunger that drove the Mexican War and inspired the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo spurred American settlements and diplomatic saber-rattling elsewhere on the continent, most notably in the Pacific Northwest. Under the slogan, "54o40' [N. Latitude] or fight," American claims to that region -- not only present-day Washington, Idaho, Montana, and Oregon but large parts of Canada -- led to a series of diplomatic clashes with Great Britain. But the British were far stronger than the Mexicans were, and diplomacy averted a full-scale war between the United States and Britain.

**Support, Refute, or Modify Congressman Lincoln's view of the Mexican-American War. Defend your answer with evidence!**