# Politics in Antebellum America

### The Revolution of 1800

Did you happen to miss the news that America fought another Revolution in 1800? No fear—that's just the term given to the sudden transfer of power from the Federalist to the Democratic Republican Party in 1800, with the election of Thomas Jefferson. The Alien and Sedition Acts hadn'tgiven the Federalists a very good rep for fairness and liberty, and the nation decided to try a different track.

In a last-ditch attempt to keep some Federalists in power, Adams had made several **"midnight appointments"**—last minute fillings of government offices—but Jefferson refused to acknowledge them. He also set out to weed out as many Federalists in the government as possible, replacing them with Democratic Republicans. Their hour had arrived.

Someone else's hour had arrived as well—the Supreme Court. This was become it came under the leadership of**Chief Justice James Marshall,**by all accounts a powerhouseof a legal mind. His court (which actually spanned multiple presidencies, from Jefferson to Jackson) made two major adjustments to the American government.

First, the decision in **Marbury v. Madison** (1803) established the institution of **judicial review**. In other words, the Supreme Court gave itself the power to declare federal laws unconstitutional. Shocking. Before, the judiciary branch hadn't been as strong as the other two—now, though, it was definitely an integral part of the checks and balances.

Secondly, the decision in **McCulloch v. Maryland**(1819) enforced the supreme power of the federal government over state governments—still a hotly contested issue.

Perhaps the hour had also arrived for the nation itself.Because Jefferson's presidency saw the greatest increase in American lands in all of American history, before or since. In 1802, he bought the **Louisiana Purchase**from France—for a paltry $15 million.

"Hold up," you may be saying, "that's kind of a lot, especially in those times." Yes….but this wasn't only Louisiana he was buying. At that time, "Louisiana" included a massive tract of land [from present-day Louisiana all the way to Canada](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4d/LouisianaPurchase.png). That's only three cents an acre—to double the size of America. Plus, it included the lucrative port city of New Orleans, right at the mouth of the Mississippi River.

Why on earth did Napoleon want to give that all up? He had just gotten entangled in a war in Europe, and had had to deal with a massive slave revolt in Haiti—he was feeling less than enthusiastic about France's overseas empire. This was great news for America. The excited nation sent two famous explorers, **Meriwether Lewis and William Clark,**to explore the vast new territory and publish all the notes they collected on the land, the plans, the animals, the weather, and the Native Americans for all the excited settlers who were itching to move west.

In 1804, Jefferson ran for re-election…and won. In 1800, he had actually tied for the presidency with his running mate, Aaron Burr. This was because, in that time, the man who won the most votes on a ballot became president, and the second-place winner became vice president. In the case of Burr and Jefferson's tie, Alexander Hamilton (who hatedBurr) helped coax the legislature (who was to have the deciding vote) to choose Jefferson.

The government then prevented such a slip-up from occurring again by passing the **12th Amendment**in time for the 1804 election, calling for separateballots for the president and vice president.

However, the Democratic Republicans alsochose not to run Burr again on any ticket. Angered, he ran for governor of New York—and lost that too. Convinced that Hamilton had sabotaged both elections, he challenged him to a duel and killed him. There died one of America's greatest men—so great, in fact, that [a fantastic rap song](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WNFf7nMIGnE)was written about him and performed in front of President Obama.

Jefferson's second term wouldn't be as smooth as his first. This was mostly because Britain and France kept bugging America. Since 1805, the two European powers had been at war (thanks to the Little Man with the Big Plans, Napoleon), and Britain continuedto impress American sailors.

Jefferson was righteously angry, but he couldn't do anything, because pitting the American navy against the British would be like trying to attack a battleship with a [rubber ducky](http://www.florentijnhofman.nl/dev/project.php?id=104). Contemporaries actually dubbed it "The Mosquito Fleet."

Jefferson instead decided to boycott British goods and passed the **Embargo Act of 1807,**which stopped American foreign trade. The intentionwas to hurt Britain and France's economies (with an end goal of stopping their harassment of ships), but neither of those countries cared. American goods weren't all that important to them. All it did was give a whopping blow to the American economy, and make everyone mad at Jefferson—especially northern merchants and southern farmers who relied on foreign trade for their livelihoods.

Jefferson wasn'tpleased with the way things went. Like Washington, he decided two terms were enough (in that time, a president could run for as many as he wanted). His secretary of state, James Madison, became the second Democratic Republican president

### Mr. Madison's War: The War of 1812

Madison inherited Jefferson's problems with France and Britain—and Britain's harassment, in particular, worsened steadily. Americans started to clamor for war, especially **War Hawks**like **Henry Clay**and **John C. Calhoun.**These were Southerners and westerners who wanted a war with the British because they were hungry for the western territories that British forts still squatted on.

So, in 1812 Madison declared war. We'll be honest: the War of 1812 is fairly hard to remember. The Revolution, Civil War, World War II, and even the Mexican-American War are all memorable because there were distinct results.However, the War of 1812 had some important consequences, too. Here's the main stuff you need to know about it.

It was the last major conflict with the Native Americans in the East—after this war, they would no longer pose a large, violent threat in that region. "Wait" you're thinking, "Wasn't this an American v. Britain war?" Yup—and the British decided that Native American support would be an excellent advantage. Ohio Valley Native Americans, led by Chief **Tecumseh,**had become increasingly unified against the encroachments of settlers onto their lands. Britain promised the Native Americans their own, separate confederacy in the west if they helped them win the war.

**The Battle of Tippecanoe**ultimately dashed those hopes when **General William Henry Harrison**totally destroyed a tribal settlement at Tippecanoe, and Tecumseh was killed in battle. The Native Americans removed westward—and Americans celebrated their triumph against the Indian threat in the northwest.

The battle against the British didn't go as well, though. By "not well," we mean that the Brits actually invaded Washington D.C., burned the capital, andset the White House on fire. The only reason the war ended, , was because the war between England and France ended (with Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo). After that, the British lost the reason they were fighting in the first place.

**The Treaty of Ghent**was super disappointing—it ended in a draw. The two countries agreed to stop fighting, return all conquered territories, and settle a boundary between Canada in the U.S.

So what? Why even learn about this silly war in the first place? First of all, because of the victory that it didinclude over the Native Americans. Secondly, it fostered New England manufacturing. With America at war with England, it became less and less reliant on British goods. That opened the doors to enterprising American manufacturers, and so the economy took a definite turn. The war was misleadingly called the "Second War of Independence" (mostly because it was yet anotherwar that boiled down to "Hey Britain, get out of here") but that term canbe useful when you think that it made American marketsmore independent of Britain.

Something else important happened. In 1815, **General Andrew Jackson**won a stunning victory against the British at the **Battle of** **New Orleans**. By stunning, we mean the onlygood victory of the entirewar. Unfortunately, the Treaty of Ghent had already been signed, so it was totallypointless.

Why do we care? First, it renewed American morale and made Andrew Jackson a hero. The people lovedhim—so much, in fact, that he would be able to ride that tide of applause to political power.

Secondly, it sealed the coffin on the Federalist Party. They were so bummed at the way the war was going that they actually met at the **Hartford Convention**to discuss completely rewriting the constitution—or even seceding. When news of Jackson's triumph spread, Americans began to see the Federalists as traitors (not to mention[Debbie Downers](http://www.hulu.com/watch/19280/saturday-night-live-debbie-downer-birthday-party)) and they lost so much support that they dissolved.

So, to summarize: War of 1812 = goodbye Native Americans, goodbye Federalists—hello New England manufacturing business, hello Andrew Jackson.

### The Era of Good Feelings: Monroe's Presidency

During Monroe's presidency, everyone had such a good time and were such good friends that America was one big picnic known as the "era of good feelings."

Okay, that's not true. In fact, it's downright wrong. The period has that nickname because party politics had ended—the Democratic Republicans were the onlyparty. However, it was still a period of economic tension and the stirrings of sectional tension, and the nation saw the first ripples in the pond that would erupt into the storm of Civil War. The slavery issue began to rear its ugly head.

The first "bad feelings" and sectional tensions arose with the economic changes Monroe planned. He has big plans to make America a powerhouse, strong enough to compete with Europe. Yet Americans were still reliant on European goods. Hoping to stimulate American manufacturing, Monroe convinced Congress to pass **The Tariff of 1816**—America's first "protective tariff" that put a 20% duty on imports.

**John C. Calhoun**led the outcry in the South, saying the government was playing favorites: the tariff was an unfair boon to northern merchants and a blow to southern farmers. Even many Northerners were against it, saying their wee manufacturing industries weren't ready to have the umbilical cord to England cut. Others, led by Kentuckian **Henry Clay,**thought it was a great way to transform the nation.

Clay's brainchild was called the **American System.**This would include a new charter for the BUS, more protective tariffs, and "internal improvements" like roads and canals. America wanted to be a union, but it wasn't connected enough—it took a whopping 50 days to travel from New York to Cincinnati. Monroe, though, didn't think the federal government had constitutional power to do that. Remember, he was a Democratic Republican—a fan of teeny-tiny, weak federal governments.

One of the reasons people were talking about better ways to connect the country was because it was expanding at an insanely rapid pace. The Second Bank of the U.S. was excited to capitalize on this opportunity, and went crazy speculating on western lands. Problem was, it over-speculated, causing inflation—and this was made worse by the trade dips caused by the tariff. The BUS tried to counter this by demanding cash from state banks, but western "wildcat" banks didn't have it—they mostly catered to farmers who notoriously had lots of debt. The **Panic of 1819**resulted in lots of mortgage foreclosures and business collapses.

The nation still liked Monroe, however, so he was elected to a second term in 1820. He also had his own way to deal with westward expansion, which went hand-in-hand with his whole Plan-to-Make-America-Big-And-Strong Plan: the **Monroe Doctrine.**

This can be seen as one of the most audacious statements the US ever made. It demanded that Europe stay out of the Americas, adding that in return the US would stay out of Europe's fights. Plus, it claimed its own right to interfere in the affairs of any country in its "own" hemisphere. Team America: Western Hemisphere Police.

What's amazing is that this all went uncontested. The reality is that America could never have enforced it—its military was a puny little thing compared to Europe's. The fact is, however, that Europe wasn't all that interested in bothering itself with the Americas anymore. They had proven bothersome and rebellious, and at this point Spain was dealing with Central and South America's own revolutions. Europe was ready to throw in the towel in disgust.

The Americans could puff out their chests and tell each other that the Monroe Doctrine had worked. "Isolationism" would become official American foreign policy all the war until World War I. From then on, the west would still cause tons of rage, mud-slinging, and fights—but that would all happen between Americans, not Americans and Europeans. The first of these was the **Missouri Compromise.**

In 1819, the "Great Compromise" had worked nicely in American government. Small and large, northern and southern—and, more importantly now, slave and free—states were equally represented in Congress. Then Missouri had to come on in and attempt to ruin everything by requesting to become a state. Senator Talmadge of New York jumped at the opportunity. He proposed the **Talmadge Amendment**that would prohibit any more slaves from entering the state, andwould free all the children of slaves when they turned 25.

The South was whipped into a frenzy. Thanks to Eli Whitney's invention of the **cotton gin**, the cotton industry in the South had become the biggest, most booming, most lucrative in the whole economy. More cotton brought more slaves, which married the South to the institution even more. Anything that even smelledof anti-slavery laws in America caused them to howl.

Thankfully, a man called Henry Clay was in the government. He was the author of almost all the major compromises that kept the north and south out of war for so long. He proposed the Missouri Compromise: Missouri would be admitted as free, the state of Maine would be created as free, and slavery would be abolished in all states north of the **36˚30' line**.

Northerners and Southerners applauded. They smiled at each other again. They shook hands. However, the compromise had actually created a linethat separated North from South, slave from free. The waters calmed for 20-something years, but the monster of slavery, with all its dangerous, divisive issues, lurked underneath.

### Andrew Jackson and Popular Democracy

Poor old **John Quincy Adams**. He was an incredibly intelligent man and a great politician—but he doesn't appear on the AP exam all that much. In fact, the only time he usually appears is linked with the name of an AP superstar: Andrew Jackson.

This is because it was their presidential squabbles that ushered in the era of popular democracy. By 1820, most states had instituted **universal male suffrage. Congressional caucuses**chose the nominees, but with so many men now voting, it was possible for lesser-known candidates to run and be chosen on the basis of the popular vote. A candidate no one now remembers, poor old William Crawford, was chosen by the Democratic Republican party, but Andrew Jackson won the most popular and electoral votes.

This meant that no one man had won the election, though four—Crawford, Jackson, Henry Clay, and John Quincy Adams—had run. The House of Representatives met to decide, and chose Clay. He had a rep as a great politician and a solid dude, while Andrew Jackson was a war hero with a rep for being passionate, loud, and belligerent.

Of course, Jackson blew his top. He called Adam's election a **corrupt bargain**between him and Speaker of the House Clay, who had supported him. Not being the kind of fellow to either bow out respectfully or fume in silence, Jackson immediately started making plans for the next election. This time, he decided, he would win by gaining the support of the entire nation.

Jackson started politically campaigning in a way no one had ever seen before. He made his own political party, the**Democrats,**and organized parties, picnics, and festivals where he made sure everyone had a lot of fun, received free swag, and heard about his policies. It worked: he won the election of 1828 and ushered in what is called**Jacksonian Democracy:**an era of unprecedented popular interest and involvement in government.

People loved Jackson. The White House was so crammed with people during his inauguration that things were broken and mud was spattered all over nice furniture. Those who didn't like him called him "King Mob," and complained that he abused the **spoils system**(giving people government jobs if they gave him political favors). Others greatly admired Jackson for being such a strong president, and for so boldly ignoring Congress and the Supreme Court in his bull-headed push for his policies

One of these was **Indian Removal,**legalized by an act passed in 1830. Many Americans felt that the whole civilize-the-Native Americans-plan had failed. In fact, however, the Cherokee Nation in the South had developed a written language, constitution, and agricultural economy. The problems arose both when American demand grew for more lands on which to grow cotton for the booming new industry, and when gold was discovered on Indian lands in Georgia. People began clamoring for all the Native Americans to be immediately booted out and resettled in Oklahoma.

The Supreme Court (under John Marshall, still), actually sided with the Native Americans when they contested this in **Cherokee Nation v. Georgia**and**Worcester v. Georgia,**but the problem with the Supreme Court is that it can't actually enforceanything. Jackson ignored them, and all the Eastern Indian tribes either left on their own or were forced out by the army.

The Cherokees were some of the last holdouts, but in 1838, the US Army forced thousand out of their homes at gunpoint. They walked west along what came to be known as the **Trail of Tears**west, many thousands dying along the way of disease, starvation, and exposure.

The funny thing about Jackson was that although he was a Democrat and so claimed to be againstbig government, he exercised his own, executive authority more than any other president before him. Ironically, he usually flexed government muscle in order to reducegovernment muscle.

One example was the controversy of the **Second Bank of the United States.**Its charter was due for renewal, but Jackson hated it—he felt it gave the North unfair advantages and the government too much power. He killed it by vetoing Congress's re-charter and depositing federal funds in state banks. Plus, distrustful of speculation and money that wasn't in cold, hard, reliable cash, he issued the **Specie Circular**that required people to pay cash for government land. That basically sucked all the gold and silver into a black hole, causing a money shortage that led to the **Panic of 1837.**

The South had a rather bad time during Jackson's presidency. Not because he had it in for them, but because a number of events hurt their economy and society. First, the **Tariff of 1828,**which the South called **The Tariff of Abominations,**put a tax on British imports that made southern consumers quite desperate. They started whispering about nullification, and then when the **Tariff of 1832**was passed, South Carolina actually didnullify it. Jackson was all for states' rights, but he felt this was absurd. He threatened to send in troops, but the "Great Compromiser" (Henry Clay again.) poured oil over troubled waters and the issue subsided. Sort of. Southerners continued to claim nullification rights until to the Civil War.

To make matters worse, the institution Southerners were fighting so hard to protect started to rise against them. In 1831, a slave preacher called **Nat Turner**led a rebellion that killed 60 whites, including women and children. Turner had been taught to read, and held that the Bible and visions from God had told him to lead a liberation movement.

Turner was executed, but slave conspiracy fears swept the nation. In the South hundreds of slaves—some with no idea of the rebellion—were executed, searches were done of slave communities, and restrictive laws called **black codes**prevented blacks from congregating or learning to read, and prohibited whites from educating them. Even in the North, conspiracy fears led to the arrests of blacks andwhites blamed for planning more rebellions.

Jackson's presidency was followed by a few presidents who, sadly, no one cares about anymore: **Martin** **Van Buren,**who made the Panic of 1837 worse, **William Henry Harrison**who died of pneumonia contracted from walking home from his inauguration, and **John Tyler**who went so against his own party's wishes that no one wanted to re-elect him. These presidents belonged to a new party: the **Whigs.**They had formed in opposition to Jackson's party and believed strongly in big government. They also believed in interference: government, they felt, was supposed to dabble in and regulate social and economic affairs.

This was well suited for America's entry onto a new economic stage—the **market economy—**and the massive transformations that would sweep the nation and prep it for industrialization.

## Sample Questions

1. The significance of the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions were

A) they succeeded in the repeal of the Alien and Sedition Acts  
B) they asserted a state's right to secede if the federal government proved tyrannical  
C) their signing by a number of states indicated the first, unified threat to the federal government  
D) they stated a state's right to nullify federal laws  
E) they signaled the demise of the Federalist Party

The correct answer is (D).

When the Federalists passed the Alien and Sedition Acts, which made it illegal for anyone to bad-talk their party (which happened to run the government), many people were outraged. Jefferson and Madison (two anti-Federalists) drafted the resolutions, saying that a state could nullify an unconstitutional law like that. It didn't work—and no other state signed them—but it is important because that whole nullification issue would raise its head again later. Southerners were especial fans of bringing it up.

2. Jacksonian politics was characterized by

A) a laissez-faire federal attitude to state politics  
B) a significant increase in executive power  
C) a relatively weak and inactive Supreme Court  
D) increased power for the federal government  
E) commitment to Henry Clay's "American System"

The correct answer is (B).

This is a trick question. Sorry. It's Jackson's own fault for being such a trickster. He claimed to be a Democrat, advocating small federal government and state's rights. This didinform some of his policies, like his opposition to the B.U.S. (and therefore a part of the "American System"). But, still, no other president before him had taken on such power—Jackson was an executive heavyweight. He ignored his Supreme Court when it ruled against Indian removal, he ordered Congress around, and he even bullied the states. When several of them tried to nullify a tariff, he told them to settle down or he would send in the troops.