The History Paper: Andrew Jackson and his influence on 19th century American Nationalism

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The concept and idea of nationalism historically have been used to explain or define a range of militaristic, political and ideological movements in various times and places. the idea of nationalism itself has undergone many changes since the 18th century and brought about significant impacts on the development of nations, in particular, America. American nationalism in the 18th and 19th century was a product of the philosophies and policies of American leaders, such as Andrew Jackson, whose influence on nationalism led to the formation of a particular set of ideas that ultimately manifested themselves in the form of American expansionism and exceptionalism, which continues to have a significant impact on the way America saw itself and formed its foreign policy.

Historically, the term ‘nationalism’ has been used to refer to two trends; an attitude which a nation’s members hold with respect to valuing their shared national identity and secondly, any action that the nation’s members undertake to achieve or seek self-determination[[1]](#footnote-1). The 19th century saw an expansion of the role of nationalism within different nations. One key influencer of nationalistic aspirations was the American Revolution. The new order for the ages was the bold claim of the new nation born out of the revolution, in which the individuals who participated had a great zeal and determination to make their new nationhood experiment successful and serve as a beacon for the rest of the world. As the American constitution was founded, the people belonging to the new nation genuinely believed that they had created "a more perfect Union". America was united by a secularized religious spirit, which was founded upon an idea rather than a geographical territory[[2]](#footnote-2). It was a concept alien to medieval political thought, and a manifestation of the reformation and enlightenment era’s pursuit of individual rights and prosperity that attached to the colonizing experience, a zeal that previously only established religions could provide. Thus, when older Zions in London and Rome had failed, Boston became the new Jerusalem[[3]](#footnote-3).

Eventually, after a series of governments, American politics entered a new era after the election of Andrew Jackson in 1828 which completed the experiment that had begun at the time of the Revolution. Jackson himself had participated actively in the American Revolution, and his sense of the world was shaped by the values he gained, but the new shape he gave to the nation would have astounded the Founding Fathers[[4]](#footnote-4). The conditions of the 19th century placed a burden on the ideals of the revolution which now required to be reworked because of the immense geographic, religious and economic changes that were taking place during the era.

Andrew Jackson became the 7th president of the United States between 1829-1837, and the first candidate to win from the Democratic Party. He was a populist leader whose reputation was built as a result of direct appeal to the voters who believed his promise to put an end to the corruption in Washington[[5]](#footnote-5). As he entered into power, his policies and understanding of nationalism profoundly shaped the character of the US. It entered America into the era of Jacksonian democracy and Jacksonian nationalism, which was not just a 19th century political ideology attributed to Andrew Jackson but became an expression of the new cultural, social and religious values that now emanated from populist American folk culture and was held by a significantly large portion of the people[[6]](#footnote-6). The new nationalism that formed the American outlook was characterized by a deep sense of common destiny and common values. An initial manifestation of the idea was the extermination and removal of the native Indians. The new romantic conception of the US that the Jacksonian nationalists adopted expressed a homogenous national identity under which all alternatives, regardless of how peripheral or local they were, had to be subjugated. The new nationalists reframed many state constitutions based on their new values and asked that judges be elected rather than appointed. A geographic expansion was favored at the national level, which was justified by the idea of manifest destiny. Moreover, the Whig party at that time, as well as the Jacksonian nationalists at the time, agreed that any wars over slavery should not take place[[7]](#footnote-7).

Andrew Jackson had from the start preferred the cause of the white settlers over the native Indians. His pro-white sentiments were reflected in a chain of policies which began with the forced eviction of Native-Americans from their historical lands. In 1830, the Indian Removal Act was signed by Jackson that authorized the government to relocate Indian tribes in the South and East, across the Mississippi River’s west. The new nationalists rejected the multicultural idea of America and saw it as anachronistic and dangerous[[8]](#footnote-8). The conventional idea of the US being a dynamic mix of constantly negotiated relationships between different communities was discarded, in contrast to George Washington's idea of a nation in which Indians, as well as Whites, would engage together in the nation-building process. Unlike Jackson, George Washington who only believed in using force against hostile Natives and as a last resort, preferring to forge treaties with different Indian tribes and authorities to reach a peaceful accommodation between white settlers and native Indians[[9]](#footnote-9). The ethnic cleansing policy that Jacksonian nationalists adopted would have appalled Washington who envisioned assimilating native Indians with white society for a peaceful co-existence.

On the other hand, the new features of national identity in the Age of Jackson was being Christian, English-Speaking and having a European descent. The policies also helped assimilate immigrants from Europe integrate with the cultural and folk values of American that idealized individualism, home ownership, entrepreneurialism, and democracy. Another core value of Jacksonian nationalism was honor, which was a characteristic of the Scottish-Irish descent settles in the US, who took great pride in their identity despite living in poverty[[10]](#footnote-10). Jacksonians would identify with hard-working, self-made businessmen who rose to the top without connections or inherited wealth on the basis of their talent, knowledge, and experience which they mix with honest work[[11]](#footnote-11). Individualism and equality were further core principles in the new national honor code but which also involved accepting certain principles and social mores such as honest, sexual decency, loyalty to the family, monogamy and properly raising children.

As US nationalism began to flourish after the Revolution, there was a need to prove that the American experiment was successful. Although the 1812 War served as a decisive victory, a vast improvement in the national economy, territorial acquisition, population increase and technological advancement in manufacturing and transportation would significantly reinforce a strong image of American nationalism. A strong central government that had accumulated greater power as opposed to the state power became seen as the growth of America itself[[12]](#footnote-12). Reduced state rights and a condemnation for sectionalism became to be seen as nationalism. An idealistic notion of human perfectibility combined with nationalism resulted into the idea of Manifest Destiny. The idea suggested that to extend democratic institutions and liberty across the entire continent was a duty owed to America, a notion that became powerful amidst a sense of racial and cultural superiority[[13]](#footnote-13). Eventually, White Americans saw themselves as having a natural or a divine right to expand westwards and carry the ideals of Protestantism and self-government.

The ideology of Manifest Destiny which emerged from nationalism carried one of the deepest impacts on American history. It was more of a movement that systematically embodied beliefs and concepts which powered American culture and American life then[[14]](#footnote-14). The expansionism in the 1840’s was dramatic, nationalistic as well as aggressive in which national superiority, divine providence, and exceptionalism drove the expansion. In 1818, Andrew Jackson under the instructions of President Monroe entered military forces into Florida and ruthlessly punished seminal natives for joining the Spanish forces and bearing arms[[15]](#footnote-15). He justified the aggression through a philosophy which was familiar to them in concept but not yet in name. The reasoning was that since the Floridas constituted American territory, therefore it was America’s destiny to have a hold in it[[16]](#footnote-16). Similarly, Americans living in the Deep South saw it their natural right to want and acquire more fertile land. Consequently, they just started setting on Florida territories without political permission or approval and began farming its lands. The arrogance and expansionist philosophy led Americans to believe that they had a natural right to have any land they desired. Thus, the expansionism brought with it extensive cultural, moral, social, economic and ideological changes in the states as well as the people[[17]](#footnote-17).

The concept of Manifest Destiny was not different from nationalism but an extension or a manifestation of it. In the Jacksonian nationalist interpretation, there was little denial about the American impulse to expand an empire. They justified it as “American wars were always just wars: they occurred only when citizens had to defend themselves against those who, out of lust for power or devotion to ideology or even a simple affinity for evil, sought to enslave them”[[18]](#footnote-18). Americans are unique among today’s western nation-states in the aspect that they continue to define their nation by a sense of mission and creed in which they equate their own interests with that of humanity at large, that starts to inform the global posture they adopt. It is another form of historic American exceptionalism and ethnocentrism in which Jacksonian nationalism played a divisive yet an important role by alienating non-White communities and reinforcing a particular image. It progressed into an expansionist ideology of Manifest Destiny that created not only a sense of superiority and exceptionalism in America but also won it extensive land and resources.

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