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**THE PRESIDENCY OF  
ANDREW JACKSON  
WHITE HOUSE POLITICS  
1829-1837**

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## 4 Elaborating a Program

In the midst of the storms that wracked the White House, Jackson set about formulating a program in keeping with his resolve to restore Jeffersonian principles to government. Affirming the values of limited government, individual initiative, and moral constraint as essential elements of republican society, he displayed a keen sensitivity to the corrosive effects of special privilege, monopoly, and excessive government power. By harking back to the ideals of an earlier period, Jackson's program evoked nostalgia for a pristine agrarian world, which doubtless contributed to its appeal. At the same time, however, it proved a resilient and effective instrument for adjusting the divergent and competing interests of an expansive and pluralistic nation.<sup>1</sup>

As Jackson charted his course, he established the pattern of decision making that would mark his presidency. While seeking counsel from a number of men, he relied especially on Van Buren, Kendall, and Blair. But the president himself remained the hub of activity and generally initiated policy. Although he often personalized the opposition and claimed to be the innocent victim of its attacks, it would be simplistic to say that he merely reacted vindictively and in self-defense to the actions of others. Rather, his instinct was to reach out for issues, to formulate the context of debate, and to oversee the controversy to its conclusion.<sup>2</sup> As a result, there commenced, in Amos Kendall's somewhat exaggerated words, a "general shaking . . . which was destined, after a long agony to separate parties on original principles, much better defined and understood than they were even in the days of Jefferson."<sup>3</sup>

When the twenty-first Congress assembled in December 1829, John Quincy Adams, observing the indeterminate nature of politics, predicted that before long "a new organization of parties" would take place. "There are combustibles enough: they only want kindling; and the torches are at hand," he noted. Among the explosive possibilities, Adams listed "the Indians." Indeed, the notion that Jackson's Indian

policy would spark controversy was widely accepted, and the official Jackson organ, Duff Green's *Telegraph*, forecast that Indian removal would "no doubt, be one of the subjects agitated" by Congress.<sup>4</sup>

The relations of the southern Indian tribes with federal and state governments had been one of the few issues distinguishing Adams from Jackson in the campaign of 1828. During his presidency, Adams had become embroiled in a controversy with Georgia over the removal of the Creek Indians. Claiming that a removal treaty negotiated by federal commissioners and certain Creek chiefs was illegal, Adams refused to countenance it and renegotiated a second treaty, one somewhat less favorable to the state. When Georgia officials, led by Governor George M. Troup, complained loudly and refused to recognize the new pact, Adams announced to Congress that Georgia's actions were "in direct violation of the supreme law of this land." Despite the militancy of his message, however, Adams rejected his cabinet's suggestion that he send troops to uphold federal laws and treaties. He did not doubt the right, only the expediency, he said. Instead, he concluded another treaty in early 1828 which ceded the disputed land to the state.<sup>5</sup>

At the time of Jackson's inauguration, attention continued to be focused on the southern Indian tribes, especially the Cherokees who in 1827 had adopted a constitution proclaiming them an independent nation with complete sovereignty over tribal land in Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Alabama. Having adopted an agricultural way of life as well as other trappings of white civilization, the Cherokees were determined to preserve their tribal integrity and land. But Georgia was equally adamant. As a leading politician noted, the Cherokees occupied "some five or six millions of acres of the best lands within the limits of the State," rendering it obvious that "the resources of Georgia could never be extensively developed" until settled by "an industrious, enlightened, free-hold population." Arguing that the Indians could not create an independent nation within the state's borders, and reminding the federal government that it had agreed in 1802 to extinguish the Indian title as soon as possible, Georgia officials resolved to undermine tribal unity and to encourage removal by extending the laws of the state over the tribe. Georgia acted shortly after Jackson's election, and Alabama and Mississippi passed similar legislation before the new president was inaugurated.<sup>6</sup>

Jackson wasted little time in indicating his support for the position of these southern states. He told a member of the Georgia delegation to inform the Cherokees that the state possessed a right to extend its jurisdiction over them, and that "it was for them to make their election, to go west of the Mississippi, and possess land which they and their children should not only possess forever, but have the friendly and protecting arm of the United States government thrown around them, or abide the consequences of such rules of action as Georgia might prescribe for their government." Secretary of War John Eaton conveyed the same message directly to the Cherokees. "The arms of this country can never be employed, to stay any state . . . from the exercise of those legitimate powers which . . . belong to their sovereign character," he announced.<sup>7</sup>

It was not until his December 1829 message, however, that Jackson elaborated on his policy. Drafted with the aid of Kendall and Donelson, the message recorded the dismal results of previous Indian policy in attempting both to civilize and to remove eastern tribes. It skillfully argued against Cherokee independence, and employing the rhetoric of states' rights principles, claimed for the southern states the same right to rule over their Indian population as that held by the states of Maine or New York. Should the federal government countenance the Cherokee position, Jackson alleged, it would follow "that the objects of this Government are reversed, and that it has become a part of its duty to aid in destroying the States which it was established to protect." In order to avert calamity, Jackson recommended the setting apart of an area west of the Mississippi to be guaranteed to removing tribes in exchange for their lands in the East. Those remaining in the states would be subject to their laws and "ere long become merged in the mass of our population."<sup>8</sup>

Jackson's recommendation was hardly novel. American Indian policy since the Federalist period had variously emphasized removal as well as civilization and assimilation. Adams himself, no doubt in frustration, had urged its consideration in his last presidential message. Jackson's proposal, therefore, was not so much a radical change in purpose as a shift in emphasis. Efforts at civilization would now be conducted in the West, where the Indians would be removed from the baleful influence of white frontiersmen, and the federal government

would now more vigorously stimulate removal by refusing to recognize tribal integrity east of the Mississippi.<sup>9</sup>

Jackson's conclusion that removal made sense for white men, Indians, and the nation derived from years of involvement in Indian affairs. Recent scholarship has made clear that he was not simply the Indian-hater depicted in standard texts. Although ethnocentrism and his early frontier and military experiences made him no admirer of Indian life, his view of these peoples was also shaped by Jeffersonian humanitarian and states' rights traditions, concern for national security, and a vision of an industrious agrarian republic.<sup>10</sup>

In the decade following the War of 1812, Jackson had personally presided at more than half the major treaty negotiations and had exerted considerable influence over federal Indian policy. As early as 1817, he had questioned the legitimacy of Indian treaties and, in denying tribal sovereignty, had established a justification for the assertion of federal and state legislative authority over the tribes. He called treaty making "an absurdity" since Indians were "the subjects of the United States," and he explained the practice as an expedient which had been adopted when the federal government was weak and which could now be abandoned in favor of legislative policy. As president, Jackson simply extended this argument, claiming that the failure of the *states* previously to extend their jurisdiction over the Indians had also been a matter of weakness and had not involved the renunciation of sovereignty over their internal population.<sup>11</sup>

Jackson had also urged upon President Monroe the necessity for removing Indians westward and concentrating the remaining population in small areas in the East. Such a policy, he asserted, would aid national defense by placing white men on American borders in the South and Southwest. Equally important, it would replace a primitive, savage, and hunting population with a progressive white society. "What is the value [*sic*] of the soil, compared to the value of the population that section of the country will maintain," Jackson wrote in encouragement to his friend John Coffee, who was negotiating a cession treaty with the southern tribes. "Labour is the wealth of all nations."<sup>12</sup>

But Jackson also believed that removal was equally advantageous to the American Indian. Reflecting a Jeffersonian desire both to treat

them liberally and to introduce elements of white culture, Jackson considered removal "just and humane." In the West, "free from the mercenary influence of white men, and undisturbed by the local authority of the states," the tribes could either reaffirm their customs or, preferably, adopt civilized ways. The government would do its share, exercising "parental control" over their interests and helping to perpetuate their race. Failing to perceive the growing complexity and market orientation of Cherokee society, Jackson contended that only a few Indians had managed to adopt the white man's customs, and he distinguished them from the mass of "real" Indians who still "retained their savage habits" and who would benefit from removal. To Jackson, the minority "whitemen and half breeds" exploited "the annuities, the labours, and folly of the native Indian," and represented the same kind of "corrupt and secrete combination" of privileged interests that he encountered in contending against the Bank and internal improvements logrolling.<sup>13</sup>

Whatever the Indians' fate in the West, however, Jackson was adamant that the states had full sovereignty over their land and population, and that the central government must protect this right even if it meant reducing its power in areas where some claimed it could legitimately act. "An absolute independence of the Indian tribes from state authority can never bear an intelligent investigation," he argued, reminding his secretary of war that actual Indian title to the land would nullify the states' grants of their western domain to the federal government. "Such a doctrine would not be well relished in the West," he warned.<sup>14</sup>

Jackson's solicitude for the Indians' welfare, therefore, was heavily laced with elements of paternalistic coercion, and, with no evident recognition of the iniquities involved, he manipulated the granting of annuities, withdrew federal protection against intruders, refused to enforce the Intercourse Act of 1802, and threatened to make the Indians pay the costs of removal themselves if they did not sign cession agreements quickly. And always in the background was his refusal to interpose the federal government between the states and the Indians. The rhetoric of Jackson's program emphasized its philanthropic ideals, but the substance revealed a great deal of manipulation and effectual coercion.<sup>15</sup>

Jackson's determination to make Indian removal his first major

policy was probably dictated as much by his familiarity with the problem as by the critical situation existing between the southern states and their tribes. Van Buren recalled that Jackson took up the Indian problem "at the earliest practicable moment," and that removal "was emphatically the fruit of his own exertions. . . . There was no measure, in the whole course of his administration of which he was more exclusively the author than this." Jackson himself acknowledged that removal "was a measure I had much at heart and sought to effect because I was satisfied that the Indians could not possibly live under the laws of the state." He also supervised the removal process "with great vigilance," a chore he found "the most arduous part of my duty."<sup>16</sup>

What assistance Jackson required came at first primarily from his western aides. Eaton, whom Jackson had placed in the cabinet largely for personal reasons, was appropriately situated in the War Department, where his close relationship with Jackson and his experience in Indian affairs made him an effective spokesman for the president. It was generally assumed in the early days of Jackson's administration that on this issue Eaton was "better informed of the views and policy of the executive than any other individual. . . ." He helped draft Jackson's initial announcement of removal to the Cherokee Nation in the spring of 1829, as well as Jackson's special message of February 1831 explaining his refusal to enforce the Intercourse Act of 1802.<sup>17</sup> Eaton's Tennessee colleagues, Lewis and Donelson, were also in evidence when Indian affairs were discussed, and Donelson's hand is visible in a number of presidential messages dealing with removal. Kendall, who had once favored a policy of assimilation, "civilizing and christianizing our savages" by settling white families among them, also contributed substantially to Jackson's presidential messages.<sup>18</sup>

As far as can be determined, Van Buren took a decidedly subordinate role in Indian policy. He advised Jackson on constitutional questions relating to removal and endorsed emigration as "the wisest and in the end most humane policy." But he acknowledged Jackson's primacy in this matter, recalling that the president consulted him "chiefly to the manner of doing what he thought ought to be done," and he could hardly have been enthusiastic about identifying himself too closely with a measure that stirred considerable humanitarian opposition in New York and Pennsylvania. He, as well as his followers in

the Albany Regency, would consistently emphasize the voluntary and philanthropic aspects of removal and work arduously to bring a peaceful resolution of Georgia's conflict with the Cherokees.<sup>19</sup>

Jackson's announcement of a new Indian policy generally elicited warm applause from key groups of supporters. Duff Green spoke of its enlightened philanthropy, emphasized its benefits to the South and West, and categorized its opponents as "traders, runaway negroes . . . refugee whitemen, and half breeds." The influential Richmond *Enquirer* indicated southern support for Jackson's "respect . . . to the unalienated rights of the States," while Van Buren's organ, the Albany *Argus*, complimented the president for finding a plan that satisfied both the "interested states" and "the philanthropist."<sup>20</sup>

But removal also sparked the first major political battle of Jackson's presidency, helping to distinguish Jacksonians from their opposition. Tennessee's John Bell, a friend and neighbor of John Eaton and a supporter though not an intimate of the president, sponsored a removal bill in the House, while another Tennessean, Hugh Lawson White, proposed a similar bill in the Senate.<sup>21</sup> Debate began in the spring of 1830, when opponents of the measure charged that Jackson had withdrawn protection from the Indians and made federal treaties subordinate to state laws. They emphasized the coercive implications of the plan, denounced the "mercenary motives" of the South and Southwest, and defended the Indians' right to the soil and to independence from state authority. Even at this early stage in Jackson's presidency, the nascent opposition explored the theme of executive tyranny, criticizing the president for his "exclusive interpretation of treaties" and his "abusive exercise of . . . power" in failing to provide against possible bribery and fraud in the removal process.<sup>22</sup>

Jackson supporters, led by the Georgia delegation, retorted that treaties had never made the Indians sovereign, that Georgia retained control over its lands and peoples, and that removal was a humane policy for "a race not admitted to be equal to the rest of the community." Opposition to removal, they alleged, was largely motivated by partisan feelings.<sup>23</sup> Administration forces were well prepared for the contest. Jackson had personally supervised the composition of the House Committee on Indian Affairs, and the two relevant committee chairmanships were safely in the hands of the loyal Tennesseans White and Bell. Moreover, Speaker of the House Andrew Stevenson

was always ready to break a tie vote, as he did on three important occasions, to save the removal bill.<sup>24</sup>

The fate of the Indian bill remained in question throughout the spring of 1830. Daniel Webster noted the "great state of *uncertainty*" in Washington during this first legislative session following Jackson's victory. Not only were former Adams men active, but there were ominous signs that some Jacksonians, bitter about Indian removal as well as the unfavorable response by Jackson leaders in Congress to internal improvements projects, were deserting to the enemy. These two issues were closely joined because advocates of the latter insisted that the considerable expense of removing Indians gave an additional cause of complaint to those who considered internal improvements measures burdensome and unconstitutional. Congressman William Stanbery of Ohio, elected as a Jackson man, explained his opposition to the Indian Removal bill on the grounds "that its passage would strike a death-blow to the whole system of internal improvement," and he claimed that the measure "received the support of all the enemies of internal improvement."<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, most of the heated debate over Indian removal occurred in the interval between the passage of the Maysville Road bill and Jackson's announcement of his veto. Some opposition members cleverly tried to delay a vote on removal long enough for Jackson to be compelled either to sign the Maysville bill and save his Indian plan or to send in his veto and risk the loss of votes by outraged internal improvements advocates. Webster, for example, maintained that the action of administration friends in killing another internal improvements measure, combined with the "expected" Maysville veto, would hurt the president. In fact, he asserted, "I should not be at all surprised, if the conduct of the President & his friends, on these two measures should be the means, with Heaven's blessing, of preventing the passage of the Indian Bill." And it was Hezekiah Niles's conviction that if the Maysville Road veto had "appeared half an hour previous to the final vote on the Indian bill, *it would have been rejected by a much larger majority than that by which it was carried.*"<sup>26</sup>

Encouraged by the knowledge that the Indian bill was a "leading measure of the executive," Jackson supporters overcame strong resistance and narrowly passed the measure on 26 May 1830, one day before Jackson issued his Maysville Road veto. It passed the Senate by

a vote of 28 to 19, and the House by 102 to 97. An analysis of the vote indicates that the strongest support for removal came from the Southeast, Southwest, and the border-West region, which divided 63 to 16 in favor. The Old Northwest, the Middle Atlantic states, and New England were opposed. But regional alignments were not perfect, and party considerations weighed heavily in some cases. New Hampshire, for example, voted unanimously in favor of removal. Maryland and Indiana also backed Jackson, and New York gave him a substantial minority. This combination of sectional and partisan affiliation yielded Jackson his small majority on the bill. It was his only major legislative triumph of his first term, and the *Telegraph* celebrated its passage by asserting that "next to the reform of abuses, and the payment of the public debt, it will stand forth as one of the great measures of national policy, which will distinguish the administration of President Jackson."<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless, there had been defections, especially among northern Jackson men. Since party lines were still in an embryonic stage, it is difficult to determine the extent to which Jackson's Indian policy bred rebellion, a matter further complicated by the connection between Indian removal and internal improvements. It seems likely, however, that Indian removal contributed to the alienation of Stansbery, David Crockett of Tennessee, and some members of the Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and New York delegations. Moreover, many who cast their votes with the president had little enthusiasm for his policy, and some congressmen thought that they had been betrayed in their expectation that support for Indian removal would be reciprocated by Jackson's approval of the Maysville Road bill. When the House received the veto message, there immediately arose the question of whether the Indian bill had not actually passed into the president's possession so that a reconsideration might take place. Webster reported "unusual excitement" in the House. "There is more ill blood raised, I should think, than would easily be quieted again."<sup>28</sup>

Jackson later blamed Calhoun's friend, Treasury secretary Samuel Ingham, for the "divisions of Pennsylvania on the Indian question," and it is true that Ingham considered the president's plan inimical to Pennsylvania's pride in "the fair and humane manner in which she had acquired her territory from the aborigines—not by cutting their throats and murdering them, as most of the other states had done." But

Jackson clearly underestimated the moral scruples that many northerners felt towards the implicitly coercive nature of Indian removal. Loyal Jacksonians like Henry Muhlenberg and James Buchanan of Pennsylvania either voted against or abstained from voting on the bill. And according to Van Buren, the policy cost the Democrats "eight or ten thousand voters" in western New York in 1832.<sup>29</sup>

Just as Adams had foreseen, Indian removal became one of the issues that drew party lines during Jackson's presidency. As early as the spring of 1830, shortly after passage of the Indian Removal bill, Adams viewed the measure as part of a concerted effort to diminish the power of the federal government to do good. "The Indians are already sacrificed . . . ; domestic industry and internal improvement will be strangled; and when the public debt will be paid off and the bank charter expired, there will be no great interest left upon which the action of the General Government will operate," he lamented. Adams's concerns were shared by Jackson's opponents, and the National Republican platform, which accused the president of failing to uphold treaty rights and of leaving the Indians "entirely at the mercy of their enemies," made Indian removal an issue in the 1832 election.<sup>30</sup>

But Jackson, convinced that removal was the only way to arrest the deterioration of the Indian tribes, pursued his policy with vigor.<sup>31</sup> With the arrival of Francis Blair to edit the *Washington Globe*, he had an enthusiastic spokesman who shared his convictions. Blair had been in Kentucky when Jackson initiated his policy, and though he had reservations about Georgia's militancy, he endorsed Jackson's proposal and attacked Clay and the opposition for manipulating the issue to foment sectional hostility between North and South. By advocating colonization for blacks while opposing it for Indians, Blair charged, Clay was "willing to catch at the prejudice of the non-slaveholding States and pay any price for their support. He would divide our country upon the Slave question, the Indian question, or any other question, so that he might lead the majority to subserve the views of his private ambition."<sup>32</sup>

Immediately upon arriving in Washington, Blair continued his sallies. Indeed, his association with Jackson seemed to harden Blair's views, and during the winter of 1831, he published a three-month series of essays defending Jackson, Georgia, and the other southern

states in their contest with the Indians. He justified Georgia's assertion of authority over the Indians as consistent with states' rights, accused the Supreme Court of adopting "the nullifying doctrine in a new shape" by trying to annul the criminal jurisdiction of a state, and argued that Georgia and other southern states had only followed the example of northern states like Massachusetts and New York. He conceded that earlier treaties had misled the Indians into thinking they were independent nations, but, he continued, those agreements had violated the legitimate rights of Georgia and were therefore "unconstitutional . . . as to her, entirely null and void." The president's removal plan was the proper "reparation for the bad faith of this government," and failure to adopt it would only lead to further demoralization and even the extermination of the Indians.<sup>33</sup>

Blair also touched upon themes of special appeal to the West, glorifying removal in the name of the irresistible westward movement of "progress." "Who can arrest the march of our population to the West?" the *Globe* asked in one editorial. "HE only, who can thrust out his arm and arrest the sun in its course. It will roll on, until stopped by the western ocean." To resist this current would make "our teeming fields . . . become a howling wilderness, our comfortable habitations give place to rough regions, and our twelve millions of civilized, christian and happy people be swept from the face of the earth that a few savage pagans and the beasts on which they live, may resume their ancient dominions."<sup>34</sup>

At the same time, Blair persisted in characterizing opposition to removal as the work of "hypocritical politicians" and misguided philanthropists. As was so often the case, the *Globe* emphasized the narrow political motivations of Jackson's foes, accusing them in particular of trying to embarrass the administration by promoting division between the North and South. Indian removal, it claimed, had been "converted by Mr. Clay and his partisans into a political question for the purpose of increasing the dissensions between the different portions of the Union." To counteract such efforts, Blair exploited northern racial phobias, asking whether northerners would permit "free Blacks" to colonize and establish independent governments within their state limits, and warning of the possibilities of race war if the federal government should intervene in the affairs of states to protect distinct groups. "If the general government has a right to make treaties

with the Indians living within the States, because they are red, it has an equal right to make treaties with the negroes because they are black," he argued. While it would be an exaggeration to assert that Blair treated Indian removal as having the same importance as the Bank War, he did nevertheless contrive a potent defense, skillfully blending the themes of states' rights, unionism, economic progress, racism, and philanthropy against what he considered the efforts of ambitious and hypocritical politicians to halt progress, endanger the Indians, and promote sectional division.<sup>35</sup>

Over the course of Jackson's eight years in office, the United States ratified some seventy treaties and acquired about 100 million acres of Indian land at a cost of approximately 68 million dollars and 32 million acres of land in the West. The Creeks, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Cherokees were among the tribes that agreed to removal, but Jackson did not focus exclusively on the South. Especially after the Black Hawk War of 1832, he also urged settlements with the weaker tribes of the Old Northwest. One after another, northern as well as southern tribes joined the migration westward. It was with evident satisfaction that Jackson announced at the end of his presidency that he had managed both to save "this unhappy race" and to remove a long-standing obstacle to state improvement.<sup>36</sup>

Indian removal was among the earliest policies to give greater ideological and structural coherence to the Democratic party. It was particularly popular in the South and Southwest, where it promised assistance in ridding the region of a population which was considered inferior and an obstacle to economic growth. Furthermore, Jackson's insistence on disclaiming federal powers which infringed on state authority reassured southerners who worried that the consolidation of power in Washington could unsettle domestic relations. "The jurisdiction claimed over one portion of our population may very soon be asserted over another," Georgia's George M. Troup declared of those who defended the Indians, adding that "in both cases they will be sustained by the fanatics of the north." And Thomas Ritchie cautioned that northern efforts on behalf of the Cherokees threatened "another Missouri Question."<sup>37</sup>

Yet even Ritchie recognized that the Indian question was more than a sectional one. It was also "a party question," and support for Indian removal became a distinguishing feature of the emerging Democratic

party. Although the *Globe* acknowledged that some genuine Jackson men did not support the removal bill, it generally tied opposition to removal with "factious motives." Many northern Democrats, therefore, endorsed the policy despite their own moral scruples and the fear of antagonizing humanitarian sentiment. Consequently the Indian Removal bill helped differentiate the emerging parties, a circumstance borne out by the strong relationship between areas that voted against the bill and those that supported Adams in 1828 and would later support the Bank.<sup>38</sup>

To some extent, however, Indian removal stands apart from most of Jackson's other programs. As an issue of his earliest days in office involving problems familiar to westerners, it was the only program of his presidency in which he relied upon his longtime Tennessee advisers, especially Eaton. Moreover, Jackson seems to have treated Indian removal as distinct from the general impulse of his presidency to restore Jeffersonian principles to government. At the time of his inauguration, he did not mention it among the policies and principles he intended to implement. Nor was it cited among his accomplishments in the document that served as the Democratic party's campaign platform in 1832.<sup>39</sup> To be sure, Jackson's reliance on state authority in preference to centralized control, as well as his desire to protect the "real" Indians from what he considered to be exploitation by a specially privileged Indian elite and their self-interested and politically motivated white allies, link Indian removal with other presidential concerns. But it is questionable whether Jackson ever accorded Indian affairs the centrality that he gave his monetary and banking policies.<sup>40</sup>

As stated earlier, the issue of internal improvements was intimately related to Indian removal, and shortly after arriving in Washington Jackson explicitly announced to Kendall his opposition to federal internal improvements expenditures that encroached on the rights of the states. His concern derived from a number of considerations constitutional, philosophical, and practical, and though he acknowledged that the nation would benefit from improved navigation and overland transportation, he thought that past practice had raised serious objections and had been undertaken "at the expense of harmony in the legislative councils."<sup>41</sup>