

The Washington Post

# PRESIDENTIAL

## Andrew Jackson

The violence, the fight

### EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

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LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Violence and death welcomed baby Andrew Jackson into the world. More precisely, into America. Into the remote back country between North and South Carolina.

He's born on the Ides of March, just a few weeks after his father died in an accident. Then, when he's just a young boy, British soldiers in the Revolutionary War capture Jackson and his brother and take them as prisoners. They're basically starved and abused. At one point, Jackson refuses to shine one of the British officers boots who's keeping them. That officer takes out a saber and slashes Jackson, who's only 13 -- slashes him across the face and leaves a scar that he'll have for the rest of his life.

Eventually, his mother orchestrates a prisoner exchange, and she rescues her two sons. But Jackson's brother dies just a few days later from the mistreatment and the smallpox they caught while they were there.

Jackson has a second brother, who also dies during the war. And while Jackson is still recovering, his mother goes to Charleston to help care for other prisoners, and she gets cholera and dies.

So, by 14 years old, Andrew Jackson is an orphan. War and death have taken every single person in his family, and for the rest of his life, he fights back.

BARBARA BAIR: I think that taught him the whole world is rough, the whole world is violent. Everybody suffers at the hands of someone else.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: That was Barbara Bair with the Library of Congress. And I'm Lillian Cunningham with The Washington Post. This is the seventh episode of Presidential.

PRESIDENTIAL THEME MUSIC

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: This episode is about violence. It's about the violence and sadness of Andrew Jackson's personal life. It's about the violence of his military campaigns and his policies as president against Native Americans. And it's about the metaphorical violence and conflict that

make up a dynamic democracy.

Let's not start at the beginning, though. We'll start about 200 years later. Right now, in this current moment, Andrew Jackson's name is all over the American South today -- Jackson, Mississippi; Jackson, Alabama; Jacksonville, Florida. His face is controversially on the \$20 bill. There are two main associations that tend to come up with him today. One is the Indian removal and the Trail of Tears. Jackson was largely responsible for clearing Native Americans off their lands in the deep south so that that land could go to white men.

The other association with Jackson today is with the rise of the modern presidency and the idea of majority-rules democracy. His election came about when more people were gaining the right to vote -- more white men were gaining the right to vote -- and Jackson was seen in many ways as the first self-made, common American to be elected by the power of the people.

So, to work our way back in time now and begin to understand the role that Jackson played in shaping the America we have today, I spoke with Steve Inskeep. He's the co-host of NPR's Morning Edition and the author of "Jacksonland."

STEVE INSKEEP: Jackson comes to us with a number of different images -- as this gigantic American hero, from the past generations; in more recent generations, he's seen as this awful, awful racist human being. And neither of those images is entirely wrong.

But I also learned that this was a guy who seemed to think several steps ahead in ways that the people around him didn't realize. And, in fact, some historians have written of Jackson as a rather narrow-minded guy, which in some ways he was -- hot-tempered, always ready for a fight, ready for a duel, willing to kill someone, actually did kill a person in a duel (let's not overlook that) -- but he was a guy who seemed to use his temper in certain ways. He'd use it to manipulate people, to push people in the direction he wanted them to go. And he would also restrain himself when that seemed wise. This is a guy who thought several steps ahead, thought for the long term -- even if we wish, in many instances, he'd been going for a different goal.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Andrew Jackson used anger and confrontation as tools throughout his life, starting at an early age. He would regularly challenge people to fights -- some estimates even say he was in close to 100 duels -- and he would use these partly to move up and cement his place in the social structure.

As Steve alluded to, in one of these duels, he killed lawyer Charles Dickinson. But not before Dickinson puts a bullet into Jackson so close to his heart that Jackson can never have it removed.

So, he has a scar from a British soldier's sword across his forehead. He has a bullet lodged near his heart. Maybe this is too poetic, but do you think that some of these physical scars really did shape him? And really made certain moments in his life sort of stick with him in a visceral way?

STEVE INSKEEP: Oh, I think absolutely so. He wrote about the scar on his head very late in life. It wasn't like he forgot about it, though it happened when he was a teenager. And he had other kinds of scars. He bore every other kind of insult as a wound as severe as that bullet in his chest that he carried around -- and another in his shoulder, by the way.

But he was that way even before he had the bullet in the chest. He was a combative guy all his life,

as far as we know. Something drove this young man. And we can try to psychoanalyze him at a great distance and say maybe it was the loss of his father. I don't know. Maybe it was the loss of his mother. Maybe it was the loss of his siblings. Maybe it was the culture in which he was raised.

He was on some version of the frontier all his life, even though he started in the Carolinas. It wasn't very far west, but it was a frontier nation, in effect, in the 1700s. And he was accustomed to fight. He believed that when he started fighting, he always had to win. And he very nearly always did; and when he couldn't, he was smart enough to avoid just that exact fight.

There was something that -- there was something pushing him forward that I am reluctant to set down to a single cause. Maybe all the circumstances of his life could have been different, and he would have still been that same driving, determined personality. I don't know where that comes from.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Here's the condensed version of his life after he's orphaned.

A couple of years after the death of his family, Jackson decides to study law; and by the time he is about 21, he moves to Nashville to practice it. He eventually serves in a series of political positions. He is a state representative. He's a judge. But the way he really makes his name is as a fighter when he becomes the major general of Tennessee's state militia.

Most notably, he wins a series of battles against the Creeks, a Native American people in the South. He also wins the Battle of New Orleans against the British. That makes him a national hero because it's this huge, decisive, underdog victory for America. It shocks everyone and it essentially ends the War of 1812, securing the United States full independence from the British. (We heard about that in the Madison episode, if you listened to that one.)

In the meantime, Jackson has fallen in love with a woman named Rachel in Nashville. This brings a little bit of levity to Jackson's life and to this portion of the episode.

Say I don't know Andrew Jackson at all, and I'm set up on a blind date with him. How would you describe what I'm about to encounter?

STEVE INSKEEP: Well, I think that if Andrew Jackson likes you and is interested in you, you'll have a great time. He would be gentlemanly and courtly and look after you and look after your honor and everything else, because he was that kind of guy to his friends and to those that he admired.

There is actually a great romantic story involving Andrew Jackson. He met this young woman Rachel and eventually came to marry her, even though she had not completed her divorce from an abusive husband. And you can look at that lots of different ways. He was criticized and mocked at the time for making her bigamist or whatever. You can certainly see Jackson's not that interested in following the rules exactly.

But also, he fell in love with this woman and was willing to put up with decades and decades of crap to have her and he didn't care. Or he did care -- he got violently angry -- but he wasn't going to turn against her. And so if it was a blind date, you'd be just fine.

Now, if he was thinking that you were in some way in his way, it might be real trouble. You might die, or you might be threatened sternly -- basically threatened with death. And be aware that you

were facing someone who would be willing to go to that extreme, because he had before.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Jon Meacham is the author of “American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House.” It won the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for biography. I asked him to describe Jackson for me and to tell me a bit about the characterizations we have today that seem accurate and inaccurate about Jackson.

JON MEACHAM: He was about 6'2 and weighed about 140 pounds. He was very thin. He had a great head of hair and was highly and self-consciously courtly. He would have been very attentive to you. Part of that was his attempt to be polished, though he came from a fairly rough-hewn background. He would always have been conscious of being watched and observed and judged. Part of that was the social insecurity that came from being a self-made man -- someone who had come from the bottom rungs of white society and rose to the pinnacle.

I think the idea that Jackson was simply a wild man -- was entirely a creature of populism and of passion -- is wrong. I think there was far more calculation and subtlety to him than the popular impression goes. And sometimes he wanted to play the wild man for his own purposes. But I think the greatest mischaracterization of Jackson is that he was this bloody-minded, un-nuanced figure. I think that's inaccurate.

Jackson was the product of a violent upbringing and a disturbing one; but he, at critical moments, knew how to constrain his own passion to at least achieve whatever end he was trying to achieve at the time -- at the moment.

His temper was like a summer storm -- it could be ferocious for a moment, and then pass. And he had a weakness for grand statements and would, you know, announce that he would do things like, ‘I will kill the bank of the United States.’ He had a weakness for hyperbole.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: What was the thing that really drew you to him -- to studying him and writing about him?

JON MEACHAM: The vividness of his character -- and his capacity to be subtle and strong while projecting an image of hawkishness, and the journey he made from obscurity to being the president of the United States. The first six presidents were either Virginia planters or Adamses from Massachusetts. Jackson is the seventh president. He was the first self-made man to reach the pinnacle and that was intrinsically dramatic.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: I asked Barbara Bair at the Library of Congress what it is that's driving Andrew Jackson this whole time, even from a young age, toward fighting, toward fame -- thrusting him toward leadership and, ultimately, the presidency. Is it a desire for power? Is it a desire to feel part of the social fabric?

BARBARA BAIR: I think all of those things, but most importantly, he wants honor. And, of course, another name for duels were Affairs of Honor. I think that, in some ways, is a paradigm for his whole presidency. He becomes what many people feel to be an overly strong president, abusing executive power. But what Jackson felt he was doing was representing the will of the people and standing up for the people and standing up for his own honor.

So, when he said, “I don't want a protective tariff,” and if Congress produced something else, he

vetoed it. And this was very much like calling Congress out as if he was in a duel with Congress. He also developed a kind of scrappiness. You know, he's later known as 'Old Hickory' because the hickory stick is very tough, and also because he was a tough commander and you can wield a stick against your own soldiers at times. So, that's the other side of his toughness. But he had that kind of ramrod toughness even as a kid. Laws weren't necessarily made for Andrew Jackson. But he was extremely charismatic and able to network, and that was also a very important thing later in his presidency.

Also, his idea of womanhood -- and protection of womanhood -- comes in a way from his love for his mother, who was a very pious woman but also very prejudiced against Indians. And he replicates that, in a way, when he meets Rachel Jackson in Nashville. He lives in the boarding house that is run by her mom, and he falls in love with her. And she was described as a very sprightly, witty, wonderful horsewoman. She also had many characteristics in common with his mother, including her piety and also a propensity for slaveholding. She was from a slaveholding family. And Andrew Jackson himself, very early when he began to make money, he almost immediately began acquiring slaves.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Barbara walked me through some of the love letters between Rachel and Andrew Jackson. Many of them are this arresting mix of Jackson's dispatches from the field about how many people he's killed and then loving romantic words to her. Here's one letter from Rachel to him, which gives a sense of their care for each other.

BARBARA BAIR: You know, she is often described as illiterate. She wasn't illiterate. She didn't spell as well as everyone might, but she was very articulate. And this is a letter from her heart.

The salutations of her letters to Andrew are often, 'My dearest life,' or 'My dear husband.'

Andrew Jackson's letters to Rachel usually started, 'My love,' 'My dearest heart,' 'My dear wife.' There's no question they had a passionate and loving marriage. So, she's writing to him from the hermitage. She's at home while he's at war.

February 10 1814:

'My Dearest Life,

I received your letter by express. Never shall I forget it. I have not slept one night since'

-- and I'm going to be skipping through the shards of the letter --

'My dear, pray. Let me conjure you by every tie of love of friendship -- to let me see you before you go again. I have borne it until now. It has thrown me into fevers. I am very unwell. My thoughts is never diverted from that dreadful scene. Oh, how dreadful to me. The mercy and goodness of heaven to me you are spared perils and dangers, so many troubles.

My prayers is unceasing. How long, Oh Lord, will I remain so unhappy. No rest, no ease. I cannot sleep. All can come home, but you. I never wanted to see you so much in my life. Let me know and I will fly on wings of the purest affection. My prayers, my tears is for your safety, day and night. Our dear little son is well. He says many things to sweet papa.'

And then she signs off: 'From your dearest friend and faithful wife until death, Rachel Jackson.'

So, it's a moving letter about the separation and, you know, her anxiety for him. And little does she know that this is just the beginning of his long life of public service.

And this is a theme for many wives of presidents – they don't necessarily want their husbands to be as ambitious as they are. But Jackson did have political ambition. And he would serve in Congress and he would run for president. And Rachel just did her best to go along with that.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: So how exactly does Jackson get to the presidency? If you listened to last week's John Quincy Adams episode, you'll remember that Jackson got the most votes in the election in 1824. But since he didn't quite have enough for a majority, the decision went to the House of Representatives, and they chose John Quincy Adams instead.

So Jackson comes back fighting four years later, and one of his rallying cries is that the government is controlled by special privilege, by a small handful of elites, and that it's time for true majority rule. His campaign in 1828, in many ways, transforms American politics to this day.

BARBARA BAIR: You were asking what fueled Jackson: Anger was one of the things. That and vengeance were common themes. And he was, of course, enraged, as were his supporters, that even though he had done better than Adams, he was not the president. And this is really when he started to organize very strongly a grassroots campaign for the next presidential election, in which he was successful and he won in a landslide.

During that 1828 campaign, it was especially a very dirty campaign. We sometimes think now that this is all new, you know -- the name-calling, the kind of cruel things that candidates say about one another. But it goes way back.

In 1828, John Quincy Adams was attacked by the Jacksonians as being elitist and educated and effete and a Washington insider. And Andrew Jackson was the hero of New Orleans, who had liberated the United States firmly and forever from the British -- kind of a follow-up to George Washington.

I think that, in terms of presidential leadership, we can compare Jackson and Washington. And, in fact, his own followers did that. They're both physically imposing, tall, handsome, charismatic men, who filled the rooms that they were in. They could be very elegant when they needed to be. And also, they were war heroes. So, George Washington gave us independence through the Revolutionary War. And Andrew Jackson gave us independence again through the War of 1812 and his victory at New Orleans. So that was one way that he was figured in the campaign.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Here's Steve Inskeep again.

STEVE INSKEEP: It wasn't just that he was a war hero. It was that Jackson had a story. Jackson had a narrative about himself, which fit his politics really well. And I'm not sure that that was true of some of the earlier presidents, necessarily. They are great in retrospect, but they were elected by a relatively small group of people. A few insiders chose who would be the nominees and a relatively small electorate would vote for them.

But Jackson had this narrative -- this story -- that could appeal to people in a much broader way.

Being a war hero was a huge part of it. It made him the most famous American of his time. But it was really only part of it, because the rest of it was that he was born in the Carolinas to a very modest family. He was orphaned in youth. He started life with nothing and he had risen to these great heights -- and that was something that completely played into his political philosophy, such as it was, and the political philosophy of the Democratic Party as it evolved.

He had a story to tell, and that's something that every politician since has realized that they need to have. You need to have a political narrative. Who are you? Where are you from? What do you really stand for? And why? Why should I relate to you?

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: To what extent did he make a point of using that as his way of gaining popularity? Versus that it just so happened that he really did have a pretty incredible life story?

STEVE INSKEEP: He was using that life story. Although, we should be careful: He wasn't out on a debate stage telling his story, because presidential candidates did not campaign in that time. In fact, Jackson went farther than presidential candidates before him simply because, as an incumbent when seeking re-election, he went out and gave some speeches and so forth. They weren't officially campaign events, but he happened to be out on the road in swing states.

After the War of 1812, one of his military aides began -- and another finished -- a biography of Andrew Jackson, which dealt with his early life and dealt frankly with his military story and dealt even with the occasions in which Jackson was brutal -- having his own soldiers executed, for example, for disobedience.

People retrospectively have called it the first campaign biography. (Every candidate does one of these [nowadays].) I don't know that that's exactly right, but I'm sure that on some level he knew what he was doing. And it became something that served his ambition later on.

And Jackson, even though he wasn't giving campaign speeches, was deeply engaged in messaging. He was a huge newspaper reader. He subscribed to as many as 17 newspapers at one time. And, in fact, when he got into office -- you've heard the phrase, 'kitchen cabinet.' Everybody in school learns a few things about Andrew Jackson, and one is that he had a kitchen cabinet of informal advisers. The informal advisers -- several of them were newspaper men. And he would bring them in and get them a government job so that they would have a salary and they would be helping to craft messages. He was thinking a lot about narrative.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: As had happened so many times before in his life, Jackson had started a fight. This time, for the presidency. And he knew how to win it.

But it also forced his opponents to fight back. That narrative of him as a tough war commander was turned right back on him. It was used in much the same way that we see candidates today try to use each other's stories against them.

BARBARA BAIR: This is one of the things that would come back to haunt Jackson when he ran for president. His critics were saying, 'Wait a minute. He's a killer.'

Not only the Indian wars, but the people that he executed. And one of the things that was used against him in his campaigns was what was called the Coffin Handbill, which was a broadside that was produced that had six black coffins on it representing six members of his own troops who he

had executed for insubordination or for deserting.

And this was one of the charges made against him -- this tendency to execute when, perhaps, it was not necessary. And, of course, we can play on the metaphor of executing/executive and his executive authority.

This is an example that he wasn't afraid to wield executive authority, even overcoming lesser sentences that had been recommended in court martials. And he did the same thing as president when he used the veto power.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: As Steve Inskeep said to me, 'The heart of Jackson is the fight.' And the fact that if he didn't have one, he would go find one.

That, in many ways, Steve says is democracy.

People are allowed to be, and supposed to be, fighting with each other. Jackson's opponents thought he wanted to be Caesar, but Steve says what he wanted was the ability to fight and win in the democratic system. Voter turnout more than doubled between that first time Jackson lost the presidency and the next election when he overwhelmingly wins.

STEVE INSKEEP: In some ways, the country might have been better if everything Jackson did hadn't been done just that way. But, in some ways, it might have been worse. He made it a more open and boisterous and energetic democracy.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Fights, even for the victors, though, are not without bloodshed. And if that duel years ago leaves a bullet lodged near his heart, this battle for the Oval Office hits directly in the center of it.

His wife Rachel dies. She ends up attacked throughout the campaign for not having fully divorced her first abusive husband before marrying Jackson years ago. Shortly before Jackson's inauguration, she dies of a heart attack. Jackson is absolutely devastated; and he is sure, for the rest of his life, that the cause of her death is the venom and the vitriol of the election.

He buries her on Christmas Eve in the garden of their home in Tennessee. When the Earth is shoveled over her, she is in the white dress that she picked out to wear for his inauguration.

BARBARA BAIR: I don't want to be overly Freudian about it, but I think, in some ways, again, he was orphaned. You know, it was like his mother dying all over again. Now his wife who was, in some way, so much like his mother, has died and his real partner in life. And of course, he was in deep mourning.

So when he goes through his inauguration, he is a very recent widower, and he is wearing black and he's wearing a top hat that has a black mourning band on it. He gives a very short inaugural address and it's greatly in contrast to all the mob excitement over his election. And it really was unprecedented -- the number of people who traveled to Washington to celebrate somebody that represented them, just common people, not highly educated people, not people that had a lot of privilege or opportunity, but everyday people. They came in droves here to Washington. There was a big parade, and they mobbed the White House.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: They basically have a huge party. The White House ends up full of people drinking, dragging barrels of alcohol out onto the lawn. There's rumor that a grand piano is thrown out a second-story window of the White House.

BARBARA BAIR: You know, basically for a short while, the people took over at the White House. It was symbolic, and it was a real party. But he, of course, was removed from all this because of the sorrow that he was experiencing.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Yet, in the two terms he serves as president, he's still just as much of a fighter. He's guided, perhaps, by the same formula that made him refuse to shine that British officer's boots as a boy; that made him challenge people to duels; that made him execute insubordinates within his own militia; that made him obliterate opponents in battle. It's a formula that says: The only hope for stopping chaos and unending tragedy is not through seeking peace, and it's not through compromise, and it's not through acquiescence – it's through a strategic and definitive show of force.

This type of strong executive style was new for the Oval Office. But, though firm, his presidential orders and objectives were also, at times, contradictory. He was for limited government and state's rights. But when South Carolina did not want to comply with a federal law, and said it should have the right not to, Jackson fiercely defended the Union and was ready to send troops to South Carolina to enforce their compliance.

He said he wanted common-man presidents, not monarchs. And yet, he vetoed more legislation and wielded more executive power than any of his predecessors.

STEVE INSKEEP: All the contradictory things you've just said are all simultaneously true. One of the other biographers of Jackson has a very simple phrase to describe Jackson's political philosophy: 'He did what he liked.' He was a guy who passionately believed in limited government. We've had this whole debate throughout the history of the United States over the size and scale and power of the federal government. He was a limited-government guy. He was a Jeffersonian-limited-government guy. But, within that, he wanted to do what he wanted to do.

He wanted to balance the federal government and cut government spending, but he wanted money to be spent where he wanted it to be spent. He believed in good and efficient government, but was perfectly happy to fire a lot of established civil servants and bring in new people. He would say that was on behalf of the common people -- everybody should have a turn at a government job -- but of course, in reality, that became the patronage system. They happened to be political supporters of Andrew Jackson who got these jobs.

He was deeply skeptical of federal road-building programs. But, if the road was being built in an area that was run by his political supporters, he would be more sympathetic to the road. He was, I guess you'd say, flexible...is the kindest thing you can say about that. He didn't worry terribly about consistency.

What he did worry about was his own authority. That was really important to him. He did not want his authority to be challenged. He didn't want anyone to get away with challenging his authority. And he would stop at nothing. He got in a battle over the Bank of the United States -- the central bank of his time -- and it became more and more intense, this fight. It became dangerous to the economy. Plenty of people were harmed, and he did not back down. And finally, a moment came

when he decided he was going to withdraw the United States' own deposits from the United States' own bank and put them somewhere else. And his treasury secretary wouldn't do this because it wasn't legal and resigned, and Jackson did it anyway.

So, he wasn't really worried about the law that much. What was important to him was that his authority be sustained. And sometimes that was a great trait. Sometimes it was an appalling trait. People would say, 'You are destroying thousands of lives by pushing Native Americans off of their lands in the eastern United States and you are also, by the way, violating the law and the the findings of the Supreme Court.'

And he would ignore that and push ahead. It could be an awful, awful trait, but I think it is something, ultimately, that is essential in a leader, and especially a Democratic leader. Because you can't give one Fiat -- give one order -- and make everything go your way. You have to push ahead over time to get in the direction that you want to go, and that was something that he had an ability to do.

He believed that what he wanted was what the people wanted. So, if you'd asked him, he would say that he was fighting on behalf of the people. And his definition of the people's desires was: whatever Andrew Jackson wanted. I think that's how he managed that contradiction.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: But there's another question here too, which is: Who does he think all these people he represents are?

BARBARA BAIR: We often think of Andrew Jackson as the man of the people, and of course that's what the Jacksonian Era is ushering in -- a new political climate, which was really class-based, which was really about expanding the white-male voter population to include the popular vote, include working men, include people in trades and artisans and especially white wage workers and people who wanted to settle on farms. So, really he's the champion of the white working class. While at the same time, he is the representative of the Southern plantation slave-owning gentry. So, there's a lot of contradiction there, even on the matter of class.

But he wasn't representing enslaved people. He was actually killing and removing Native Americans. He certainly didn't represent the rights of women. So, it's a question of: When we think of this popular vote and this popular following, what people is he talking about?

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: A large way that Jackson fights for the common southern white man is by securing much of the land that we now think of as the deep south: Georgia, Alabama, Florida, Mississippi.

We already talked about how, before his presidency, Jackson led many military campaigns against Native Americans. Well, as president, he becomes responsible for the Indian Removal Act, which is essentially large-scale relocation and segregation of Native Americans. The government basically forces Native Americans to leave their homes and their homeland in these southern areas and to march to present-day Oklahoma to relocate. In Jackson's view, this is a decisive way to stop ongoing fighting over those lands and to secure them for the white working class.

This means the real estate can be opened up for use by white farmers, which is to say that much of that land turns into more slave plantations. So, in fighting to help the common white southerner, this land policy ultimately further deepens two huge national tragedies. It expands the

footprint of slavery throughout the South, and these marches, most of which are actually carried out under the next president, end up leaving more than 10,000 Native Americans dead. This comes to be called the Trail of Tears.

Here's Jon Meacham.

JON MEACHAM: His legacy has shifted through time. He was seen as a great populist democrat -- lowercase D and uppercase D -- for a long time. As our awareness of the plight of Native Americans and the experience of enslaved people grew, Jackson's historical stock fell.

My view of Jackson is that, while his views on those matters were on the extreme edge of the mainstream of his time, they were still within the mainstream; and his sins were the nation's sins. And so, to condemn him without condemning the nation itself is sort of a cop out. We can't simply blame Andrew Jackson for Native American removal and the endurance of slavery. The nation was complicit in those tragedies as well.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: The legacy and controversy of Andrew Jackson is still very raw today two centuries later. I asked Steve Inskeep about the reactions he gets when people learned he wrote a book about Jackson. You must hear people who say, 'Oh, I love Jackson or I hate Jackson.'

STEVE INSKEEP: Oh yeah.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: What's your reaction to those sort of responses? I think even today we can get people with such very different reads on him.

STEVE INSKEEP: I discovered that all the way through writing the book. [There were people] I mentioned this project to who would say, 'Oh, my aunt was Cherokee,' or, 'My son is named Andrew Jackson so-and-so.' I mean, I've run into that -- the entire gamut.

And some people have been quite upset, like, 'Why are you beating up on that poor Andrew Jackson?' And some people have been a little upset the other way: 'How can you even mention Andrew Jackson?'

The strength of opinion, I think, says something about this particular story. It is a great tragedy in American history that was not resolved -- that was not ended or atoned for in any way. Slavery is the other great original sin, it is said, of early America. But whatever else America has done wrong, America faced that problem and hundreds of thousands of people were killed to end that problem. And even if it was later converted into other forms of the same problem -- racism -- you had a reckoning.

There wasn't really a reckoning for this. The Indians -- Native Americans -- were pushed aside and deprived of their land often by fraudulent or appalling or violent means, and that was the end of it. And so, it's still alive. And it's still something to debate and it's still something you feel really passionately.

I remember in elementary school learning just a fragment about this. I don't know if you learned anything in elementary school about this. People do or don't -- or maybe it's junior high school, actually -- but there's, like, one page in a history book, like one of those little sidebars.

And yet I remember little details from that. There was a description of Indians who had become like white people, living in white people's houses, and soldiers showed up at their door and made them leave. And as a little kid, you remember that because it seems so very, very wrong.

I think this is a story that we still feel and that we still ought to feel, because it wasn't fixed then. And probably there's no way to fix it now, but we ought to remember it and know it and know that it's part of our legacy.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: What do you think is one of either the biggest lessons or biggest questions that a study of Jackson begs us to ask?

STEVE INSKEEP: What I realized in looking at Jackson's era was that America then was facing one of the same huge questions that it faces now. We are increasingly conscious that we're in a very diverse country that's becoming more diverse all the time. And it's a development that underlies a lot of the news of our era -- and certainly most of the politics of our era. It's in the background there somewhere on issue after issue after issue.

When you study Jackson's time of almost a couple centuries ago, you realize that the United States was very diverse then and that there were many different kinds of people then. And so that question isn't new. They also came up with a terrible, terrible answer to that question. Jackson's own Democratic Party essentially answered the question by saying that Americans are white people. That was the platform unspoken -- and eventually quite loudly spoken -- of the Democratic Party of Jackson's day. A terrible answer. But they were wrestling with that question. And there were people at the time who had better answers to the question. And because it's a democracy, which became more democratic in Jackson's era, we've continued to argue and argue that question and come up with better answers over time.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: I asked Jon Meacham, too, what we stand to learn from the study of Jackson today.

JON MEACHAM: His life was intrinsically dramatic, intrinsically fascinating. And I think we see in him many of the contradictions, sins and shortcomings and possibilities of the country itself.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: If you're wondering what violent tragedy ultimately kills Andrew Jackson, the answer is that he dies in a way that, in all the death he saw, he had hardly ever witnessed.

He dies quite softly of old age, old injuries, old illnesses. He dies at home in his bed in Tennessee, and he is buried in the garden beside Rachel.