

- Anthony Comegna: [00:19](#) Here we are back for another week of Ideas in Progress from IHS. I'm your host Anthony Comegna and Professor Brad Birzer joins us once again. Last week we talked federalists and anti-federalists, but this week we'll take that story forward a generation or two. We're wrestling with Old Hickory, tackling Birzers recent book *In Defense of Andrew Jackson*.
- Anthony Comegna: [00:43](#) All right, so Brad, I'd like to pick up right where we left off last week and you were talking about historian Bruce Frohnen in his argument that the founders or the framers, I should say. The framers' generation was really the last one where a non-ideological politics marked American life. And that after that it's this knockdown, drag out fight to tar your enemies as the people who are destroying the republic and betraying everything the revolutionaries fought for.
- Anthony Comegna: [01:16](#) And it's just this nasty, knockdown, drag out fight all the time that maybe gets worse and worse every four years. But nonetheless, the way you were describing the situation of politicians being able to have their day of arguing ideas in the convention hall in Philadelphia, and then they go and they share bottle of Madeira at night and chit chat and hang out.
- Anthony Comegna: [01:43](#) As a cultural historian of Jacksonian America, you'll appreciate maybe how much that sounds familiar to a short story by Herman Melville, *The Paradise of Bachelors and Tartarus of Maids*, where all these English lawyers enjoy these tremendously lavish, expensive, luxurious meals. While of course the working classes toil along in endless drudgery wasting themselves away. And things work out very well for the gentleman, but not so well for everybody else.
- Anthony Comegna: [02:16](#) And it seems to me that there still was this somewhat pleasant gentleman's agreement type atmosphere leading up into the Jacksonian period. And I'm wondering, how different really were the political situations under, say, Andrew Jackson compared to say George Washington?
- Brad Birzer: [02:42](#) Yeah, that's well put Anthony and I'm not, I wouldn't disagree with you or the intent of the question. One of the most interesting things and I think one of the fatal aspects of the constitution is that even though when the constitution was created, in general there was a limitation on the sphere of politics, the constitution in many ways disrupts that limitation in that sphere.

- Brad Birzer: [03:07](#) And by proclaiming that through this balance of powers will keep things limited, I think the founders royally messed up and what we find of course throughout the entire Jacksonian period is that politics becomes something that becomes so widespread that you also then spread what politics can intrude into as well. I mean, this is one of the greatest dangers I think of democracy.
- Brad Birzer: [03:32](#) In some sense when you do have these elites and not necessarily Melville's portrayal of them, but when you do have elites who can just keep each other busy and occupied, but they're not allowed to interfere with the lives of the ordinary people, that's not a bad situation. It strikes me as one familiar or at least similar to the things that St. Augustine would argue.
- Brad Birzer: [03:55](#) You're always going to have evil in the world. You want to keep that evil as limited as possible and in its own sphere and not allow it to spread into the sphere of other things. And I wonder if there's a same argument that can be made that the constitution broke down in America over time, that separation of politics and everything else and allowed all to become political.
- Brad Birzer: [04:17](#) I certainly, as much as I... As many things as there are in the constitution I like, I think there are great dangers in it as well because it does allow for that politicization of society.
- Anthony Comegna: [04:30](#) Your comment there makes me think of yet another reason why I tend to treat Martin Van Buren as one of the shadow villains of this period. Much as a lot of classical liberals tend to like him. I think he's just such a pernicious influence behind the scenes. When he's in the New York legislature in the early 1820s, he's specifically arguing to all of his lieutenants in state politics.
- Anthony Comegna: [04:58](#) Okay, we need to pivot away from opposition to universal male suffrage and start courting that vote because it's going to happen one way or the other. And it's just a matter of which political faction gets ahead of it and gets to capitalize on those new votes the most. And so he does this 180 degree pivot towards supporting universal male suffrage in New York. And it's just totally this cynical move to gain votes. And it seems like that is really what characterizes these new politics.
- Brad Birzer: [05:33](#) Yeah, that reminds me Anthony, I can't remember the exact words that he used, but Andrew Jackson had a pet name and it wasn't little magician. He had a pet name, like little Machiavelli or something like that for Van Buren.

- Brad Birzer: [05:49](#) I'll have to look that up because now I remember just laughing so hard when I read it for the first time. But it was something to the effect of, Martin Van Buren has his purposes, but you would never want to ask him on anything dealing with virtue, something to that effect.
- Anthony Comegna: [06:06](#) Now you of course have a recent book out or fairly recent still about Andrew Jackson. And one thing I want to know about Jackson is, was he a federalist or to what degree, to what extent? In his context, what does that word even mean anymore?
- Brad Birzer: [06:24](#) When he was a younger man, he always identified with the old republicans, with people like John Randolph of Roanoke and John Taylor of Caroline and Mason. These were the people that he really identified with. And one of the greatest conflicts of conscience that he ever had in his life was when he went against nullification in South Carolina and really could not decide if he had been correct or not about that really did have a struggle.
- Brad Birzer: [06:55](#) And I think ultimately though, what we see with someone like Andrew Jackson, he's not a federalist but he is at some level of unionist and I think that's related to the federalists, but I don't think it's quite the same thing. I think partly this was an evolving thing for him, but I also think there was a lot of ego involved, especially when he was president at that time and he had such a personal hatred for John C. Calhoun that I think a lot of it had to do with that personal conflict as much as it did have to do with ideals.
- Anthony Comegna: [07:26](#) Is it fair to say that Jackson was a nationalist?
- Brad Birzer: [07:31](#) I don't think he was. I really do think the best description for him is a unionist. I think there are on certain issues he believes very strongly in national authority, but on others not at all. It seems pretty clear to me that with economics he believed very strongly in localism and States rights and free enterprise, a mixture of all three.
- Brad Birzer: [07:51](#) But when it did come to things like nullification, he was definitely a nationalist. But it's also worth remembering he never ever, even when he was in it, he never respected the standing army. Throughout his whole life he was leery of a standing army and always saw that as a great threat to the possibility of union. And he thought it would lead to disunion because of the concentration of power within the military.

- Brad Birzer: [08:15](#) So in that sense he doesn't sound at all like either the federalists or say our modern day neo-cons. I think he really is something that doesn't quite exist anymore.
- Anthony Comegna: [08:25](#) Why do you think Jackson was so, I don't know if I want to use the word afraid for anything related to Jackson, but why do you think he was so worried about the possibility of disunion?
- Brad Birzer: [08:42](#) Well, that's a good question. And on some things he didn't mind. I think he thought a little disunion was healthy from time to time, but on other issues, especially when it came to national authority in the constitution, he was pretty particular, especially when he was president. Again, I think there is a lot of ego involved and I think there's a lot of personality.
- Brad Birzer: [09:02](#) Jackson was not one for subtlety at all. And especially when it came to relations with him, you were either totally with him or totally against him. Calhoun, he had thought he was totally with him and then realized, came to realize slowly and then very suddenly that Calhoun had always been against him. And that was, it was one of those things that I don't think Jackson was able to get over at all.
- Brad Birzer: [09:27](#) And I'm not sure he was constitutionally, and I don't mean the U.S. constitution. I mean mentally, psychologically. I'm not sure he was capable of being able to forgive his enemies that was just not part of his makeup at all. But there's a strong interesting individualism in Jackson, not just in his policies but in who he was as a person. But there's also I think the danger of that individualism, there is an authoritarianism at least in personal relationships where he does expect you to conform to his wishes and believe what he believed.
- Anthony Comegna: [10:02](#) That point about Jackson perhaps being constitutionally incapable of forgiveness, which I love. It makes me wonder how real do you think, or how seriously should we take the rhetoric of the time surrounding the threat that Great Britain posed still to American independence. Or the threat of war with great Britain.
- Anthony Comegna: [10:26](#) Because Jackson famously said he didn't want to annex Texas because he didn't want a war with Mexico and people didn't want to antagonize Great Britain by sparking up conflicts over Canada or by taking any new territory. And I'm wondering though, is a lot of Jackson's support for the union, is it built out of a fear that we still need to protect ourselves from some foreign threat, especially the British Empire?

- Brad Birzer: [11:01](#) He absolutely hated the British Empire. That of course goes back to his childhood when he was 12 and 13 and fighting as a young boy in the American Revolution. And having that British officer basically ground his skull in when he was that young. And I'm sure Jackson was being obnoxious, but that doesn't mean he deserved that treatment of course. Jackson never ever forgave the British for that.
- Brad Birzer: [11:27](#) And of course, as we just talked about, he's not really capable of forgiveness overall. I think what's interesting to me and what I found in the book and my guess is you know this period better than I do Anthony on this issue especially. But when you look back at Jackson, part of his getting involved in the war of 1812 was his hatred of England. It was also his love of America.
- Brad Birzer: [11:50](#) But you see that the relations with the British during his presidency are really odd relations. He doesn't want to get involved with them, but that also means he doesn't want to get involved with them. He really doesn't pursue peace or war during his presidency with Britain and that's interesting to me.
- Brad Birzer: [12:10](#) And I also found, this isn't quite directly to the question you just asked, but I was also really surprised in my own research going through British papers, how much the British both feared and respected Jackson. And I think all of that comes out of what happened at The Battle of New Orleans.
- Anthony Comegna: [12:28](#) Go ahead. Tell us more.
- Brad Birzer: [12:31](#) So you've got this, the British of course had an overwhelming force. They have roughly 10,000 men and we have Jackson with only about 2,000. And of course Jackson was able to get in placements and build ditches and get everything, things that we would call modern trench warfare. He was able to get all that in place so that when the British finally did attack, even though they had just legions of soldiers who had all fought in the Napoleonic Wars and were battle-hardened.
- Brad Birzer: [13:00](#) The assault by Ned Pakenham on New Orleans was just such a disaster that Jackson was able to just mutilate that British army, including the commanders, the three leading officers to take them out so quickly, that it's very strange. And the British really did go from thinking of us as a third to fourth rate power ready to fall apart to being something to be respected.
- Brad Birzer: [13:26](#) I think that's one of the great 'miracles' of the battle of New Orleans and what it led to. It actually led to good relations with

the British, which is only in international relations could this happen, where your destruction of your enemy causes them to like you. But pretty amazing nonetheless.

Anthony Comegna: [13:45](#) Well, that's why I asked the question about how seriously we should take this threat from the British Empire that supposedly lingers after the war of 1812. Where you see politicians like Daniel Webster scrambling to make concessions on the one hand. And yet there's always also this just deep cultural hatred of everything British, that lingers in places like the frontier on and on and on.

Anthony Comegna: [14:13](#) And they just look at Queen Victoria as the worst person in the world. And maybe she was sitting atop the bones of countless Indians. But I find it extremely farfetched that the British posed any real threat to the United States anymore.

Brad Birzer: [14:32](#) Yeah, I think the only way they could have is if they had really gotten a foothold either into the Pacific Northwest, beyond just the Hudson Bay company or into Texas. And so, yeah, I would agree with you Anthony. I think and you can imagine, you have to think about this civil war. Whatever we think of the civil war itself.

Brad Birzer: [14:50](#) Imagine at the end of that war where Ulysses S. Grant has roughly 2 million men in arms in May of 1865. There's nobody in the world that could have challenged us at that point. Nobody even close. So yeah, I agree with you. Overall I think you're absolutely right.

Anthony Comegna: [15:11](#) Now your book of course, you bill it as a defense of Andrew Jackson. I'm wondering, can you go ahead and fill out, you've mentioned certainly some things that I think people might find admirable so far, his skill certainly and probably a lot of his idealism or his ideals. But go ahead and sketch out a bit more your particular defense for us?

Brad Birzer: [15:37](#) Yeah, thanks for asking. When I went into that book, that book I can honestly say was the result of just being asked by the publisher to write it. And it was a lot because of Trump's, I mean not a lot, probably 100% because of Trump's interest in Jackson at that point, and Regnery was looking from somebody to write that book.

Brad Birzer: [15:58](#) And I was contacted by my friend John Miller who's both at Hillsdale as well as National Review because he was good friends with the publisher and editor at Regnery at that point.

And I was pretty skeptical that I could write anything that was favorable. I've been teaching Jacksonian America as a distinct course at Hillsdale College for 20 years now. And for the vast majority of that time, really for about 17 to 18 years of that time, I always taught Jackson as the bad guy, as someone who distorted the constitution who put way too much power into the executive branch.

Brad Birzer: [16:35](#) I'm sure I have a number of students that probably are scratching their heads wondering what happened to Birzer, did he lose it because he's now defending Andrew Jackson. But what I came to find and I had made an agreement with Regnery that basically, as long as I present the case both good and bad for Jackson that the book will go forward. And I said, "I've just got to be critical about his Indian policy and so forth." And I still am.

Brad Birzer: [17:02](#) But I think there are things to put it into context and to understand that here's very little to defend it. Only to understand it, I think. But there are a lot of things I think Jackson did wrong, but what I've found and I did write that book really quickly. I think I had mentioned to you over dinner Anthony, that I had the contract signed on May 1st and I have the book finished August 4th.

Brad Birzer: [17:24](#) So this was all within that one single four month period I wrote that book. And I couldn't have done it without having taught Jacksonian America for so many years. But as I started the first thing I did, I ordered the 10 volumes of Andrew Jackson's Papers and I started reading and I'm a fast reader, and I started reading his letters and I just could not believe how honest he was.

Brad Birzer: [17:49](#) And I've had a chance to go through the Papers of James Buchanan, the president, not the economist the president. And you can just see immediately where the guy's lying. It's very clear where he's being duplicitous and he's nasty. And I thought, what a breath of fresh air that Jackson whether I agree with him or not, just says what he believes.

Brad Birzer: [18:11](#) And I know people criticize him for his duels, but I found that in every one of those duels, I don't agree with his code of honor, but there was always a code of honor. He was totally honest. Now he may blow you away after he's honest. But he was totally honest and whatever his faults, I still think honesty is a virtue and I was impressed by that. I felt that one of the great

things about Jackson was that anyone, myself or anyone else could come to know him and actually know him.

Brad Birzer: [18:45](#) Not as someone like Van Buren who you have to read between the lines and look at what's going on and see what he's doing that's duplicitous. But Jackson just tells you, if you're somebody he hates you know it. If you're someone who loves you know it. If he thinks you're right on most things but wrong on another thing he tells you. And he was actually quite honest about his own feelings as well. And I found that really refreshing.

Brad Birzer: [19:10](#) I'm a typical libertarian. I think automatically politician's scum and I expected that when I went in to him as well, especially because I disagree with so many of his policies. But when I started reading him, I found it very hard not to be attracted to him because of that honesty.

Anthony Comegna: [19:30](#) Now two other things I found really, really interesting about some of your choices in this biography. Historiographically I think it's important that you focus on Jackson as a westerner. Because so much of the literature on Jackson in the last couple of generations has been on Jackson, the southern planter. But as you point out, the fact of his growing up and operating so frequently on the frontier and in that culture is really, really important to shaping who he is.

Anthony Comegna: [20:04](#) And then the other thing that I find really compelling here is that you make a conscious choice to focus on what you call the man in full as opposed to the man in detail. And I'm wondering if you could tell us about that choice to write about the man in full and then about Jackson the westerner as opposed to Jackson the southerner?

Brad Birzer: [20:27](#) Great questions Anthony. Thank you. I'll start with that question about man in full. That of course comes from Tom Wolf and the idea of trying to look at a person as a complete person, not just taking the good or the bad but really in a very stoic fashion understanding within justice. So past, present, future, up, down, transcendent, what might be mundane. Trying to figure out, there's probably a Catholic element in there as well.

Brad Birzer: [20:56](#) But trying to figure out where the human person fits in. And in that sense I was very taken with Jackson's mother who was such an influence on him and his wife too. One of the things I think we often forget is that Jackson's wife though politically not able to vote and not able to carry the same weight because she was a woman was really his partner in everything.

- Brad Birzer: [21:20](#) And once she was gone, he was diminished. And of course that means his whole presidency. I don't think he is actually a man in full after she passes away. This is how close they were, how much she revered him. Almost to an unnatural degree. And I don't mean that in the sense there was perversion, not that. But his love of his mother and his wife were so intense that it seems almost supernatural rather than natural.
- Brad Birzer: [21:47](#) And in fact, the only way and again I bring this up as a Catholic, but the only way I could make sense of his love of his mother and his wife beyond just what was normal was he really thinks of them I think in the way that a super devout Roman Catholic would think of the Virgin Mary. That kind of just awe or the way maybe King Arthur thought of the Lady of the Lake. Just that mythical awe that he had of women.
- Brad Birzer: [22:13](#) And it wasn't just White women. He also treated those slaves up and they're slaves. This is so wild. But he also treated the female slaves as far as we know, with intense respect. And even they have a story in there about how you treated prostitutes well and none of that's Southern, it's all very, very Western. So if that leads into the second part of your question Anthony.
- Brad Birzer: [22:41](#) The thing I've found over and over again, and part of my own training is in Western America and Western America during the American Revolution especially, but that frontier ethos was, and especially the scotch Irish frontier ethos just permeated Jackson and all of his language and all of his actions. He never thought of himself as a southerner. He always thought of himself as a frontiersman.
- Brad Birzer: [23:06](#) And there really is I think in American history, a Natty Bumppo, Daniel Boone figure later on in the 20th century. I think in terms of Hollywood, it would be people like John Wayne and then maybe to a more cynical degree, Clint Eastwood. But there's an element in that American type that I think we all recognize as this heroic individual who always has a dark side.
- Brad Birzer: [23:36](#) There's that violent, almost unremittingly violent side. But they try and overcome it through their nobility and especially in their chivalry. And I'm sure there are a lot of people who would say that what Jackson had and his relationship, especially towards his wife, was a form of sexism. I didn't see it that way. I thought it was really very medieval and Scotch-Irish but always rooted in the pristine notion of the frontier.
- Anthony Comegna: [24:05](#) Was Andrew Jackson a racist?

- Brad Birzer: [24:08](#) Well, yes and no. In the sense that he harmed people who were not White? Yes. And owning slaves? Yes. Looking at the way he actually talked about humans? Not really. He had an Indian son that he had adopted, which I suppose in a certain argument could be called racist as a kind of White superiority. But he didn't really treat his son that way from what I could read.
- Brad Birzer: [24:38](#) He left one of his black slaves a female in charge whenever he was gone. And after Rachel had died, his wife had died. And he had great respect and they at least seem to have had great respect for him. Evidence seems to indicate that his understanding of others was rooted totally in whether he liked them or not. And that seemed to have transcended both skin color as well as gender. It really was personal.
- Brad Birzer: [25:05](#) Are you with Jackson or are you against him? And if you're with him, it doesn't matter what you look like or what your sex organs are you're a part of this. And if you don't like him, then same thing as true. It doesn't matter what color you are or what your gender is, you're nothing. And that was my take on him. I'm sure skin color played a role, he's a man of the 19th century. But I didn't see it blatantly in the way that I've seen it in other figures of that day.
- Anthony Comegna: [25:31](#) Again, I think that's why this a westerner angle is so important here. That these are the things that distinguish say your western frontier paternalist from a deep south cotton belt racist.
- Brad Birzer: [25:48](#) Extremely well put. I think the frontier demanded. When you get out on the frontier, you can't be picky. If you need to fight, you give your wife the gun. If you've got a plough, you give your wife a plough. I think there's a reason that western states allowed the vote for women earlier than eastern states. It's just the frontier experience in many ways erases both race and gender. It has to or you're dead.
- Anthony Comegna: [26:16](#) Now you didn't get to spend much time on Jackson the president, of course that's part of your original decision to focus on the man in full rather than the man in detail. But if there was anything from his presidency that you could have spent a significant amount of time on, what would it have been?
- Brad Birzer: [26:33](#) Yeah Anthony, I haven't admitted this before, but a lot of that was simply because I ran out of time and I had to get my manuscript in. And I think if I had had more I probably would have dealt more with this presidency. As it turns out Regnery

still cut out about a third of the book. I had a lot more on the mythological aspect of Jackson that Regnery took out.

Brad Birzer: [26:53](#) And I would have liked to have spent more time on his presidency. I will say and this may be a little bit of self-justification, I did not find his presidency as interesting as this pre-presidential life and I think in large part is because he didn't have Rachel. And you start actually getting into soap opera drama in his relations with Van Buren and his relations with his cabinet members and in ways that I think his wife would have straightened him out on, if that makes sense.

Brad Birzer: [27:22](#) I think she would have made clear what certain relationships were. It's part of what he relied on her for. They truly were a team in that. But I think if I had dealt more with the presidency and maybe someday I'll come back to that because there's still a lot to do. But I think if I dealt more with the presidency, I would have dealt a lot more with his foreign policy. Because he's such a domestically oriented president, especially with the bank Wars and the Indian removal policy, all of that.

Brad Birzer: [27:55](#) But I think there are the questions you brought up earlier, what about his relations with Mexico? What about with Texas? What about with Britain? What about with France? Those are incredible questions that no scholarship has really tackled. And I think there's a lot to do there. And I think even though Jackson didn't put his emphasis on those things, that in and of itself makes an interesting story.

Brad Birzer: [28:19](#) Why didn't he? Why was he so secure on certain things but not others? And I'd love to see just going back and looking at maybe some of the papers from the secretary of war and the secretary of state, I'd like to see what he was thinking about The Monroe Doctrine. I think there were probably a lot of things that would be very interesting. And in a sense I apologize for not having done that. I think that probably is a flaw in the book, rather serious flaw frankly.

Anthony Comegna: [28:47](#) Do you think Jackson is out there somewhere looking admiringly on the current administration?

Brad Birzer: [28:56](#) No, not at all. And I say this, I don't want to get too moralistic here, but when it comes to Trump and his relations, Jackson is exactly the opposite. Jackson was killing people for saying derogatory things about his wife and his mother. And I don't see that in Trump. I think Trump makes jokes about it on

Entertainment Tonight. But forgive me for getting moralistic. No, I don't think they're like at all.

Anthony Comegna: [29:35](#)

Once again, our warmest thanks to Professor Birzer for joining us. I know I get a little heated about this stuff. Jacksonian America is my bread and butter after all, but Brad has that cool demeanor that's just perfect for a discussion leader.

Anthony Comegna: [29:47](#)

Next week we check in with a very different program. It's Grad School 101 here on *Ideas in Progress*.