President Andrew Jackson

Meager beginnings led to courageous decisions from a self-made man

BY SUE DE PASQUALE

The American people had spoken, and Andrew Jackson had heard them, loud and clear.

Voted the seventh president of the United States in 1828 in a landslide victory over John Quincy Adams, the Tennessee senator who inspired the term "self-made man" opened wide the doors of the White House for the "people's inaugural." Thousands swarmed into the executive mansion. In the once-elegant East Room, where Jackson had wisely installed 20 spittoons, the crowd smashed china and crystal while scrambling for refreshments.

It was a fitting start for the founder of the Democratic Party. Jackson's guiding credo was: "The people are the sovereign power. The officers are their agents." During his two terms, the tall, skinny, white-haired former general charted a new course for the modern presidency, vastly expanding its scope. He exercised his veto power 12 times (more than all his predecessors combined) and helped invent the political convention as a method for nominating presidential candidates.

The first president born poor, Jackson grew up on the frontier at the border of North and South Carolina. His father died before Andrew was born. At 13, Andrew signed on as a mounted orderly in the Revolutionary War. His brother Hugh died in battle and Andrew and his brother Robert were taken prisoner. When at one point Andrew refused to clean the boots of a British officer, the man slashed him with a saber, cutting his arm to the bone and gashing his face—and Robert's, too. Both boys soon after contracted smallpox and Robert died. Elizabeth Jackson brought her only surviving son home, where he recovered. But within months she too died, of plague, while tending to sick relatives aboard a British prison ship. "I felt utterly alone," Andrew would later recall.

These early trials imbued in Andrew Jackson an abiding ambition and a lifelong toughness. (His nickname "Old Hickory" derived from those who described him in battle as "tough as hickory.") A "roaring, rollicking" young fellow, he headed to North Carolina to learn the law and eventually landed in Tennessee, where he rose to become a major general in the state militia, a Superior Court judge and the state's first U.S. congressman.

After a brief early stint in the War of 1812, Jackson directed a brutally successful campaign to exterminate the Creek Indians. When the war shifted south, he was tapped to lead the Americans against the British in the Battle of New Orleans. After the smoke cleared, the casualty tally was absurdly lopsided. Americans killed or injured: 71. British: 2,037. General Jackson emerged a national hero, his ascendancy to the presidency seemingly preordained.

Jackson lost an extremely close election to John Quincy Adams in 1824, but came back in 1828 to capture America's

highest office by a 4-1 popular margin. Sadly, his beloved wife, Rachel, died a few months before his inauguration.

One of Jackson's biggest challenges as president came to be known as the "nullification crisis." When Vice President John C. Calhoun proposed that his state of South Carolina annul the federal cotton tariff (and later advocated secession), Jackson's response was swift: He threatened to send in federal troops, with the proclamation: "Disunion by armed force is treason. Are you ready to incur its guilt?" The nullifiers backed down and a token compromise tariff was passed.

A second issue that engaged Jackson was his opposition to the increasingly corrupt Bank of the United States—what he disparaged as the "hydra-headed beast." He wanted to democratize the American economy, giving smaller banks a chance to take hold. But the federal bank remained deeply entrenched, largely by offering cheap loans to influence-wielding politicians. In a show of executive power, Jackson vetoed the bank's early recharter, a move that set a permanent new course for America's economy, according to some historians. With three years left in the bank's charter, he later ordered the withdrawal of all federal deposits. The action earned him a "resolution of censure" from the Senate—a step never taken before or since. The censure was later officially expunged.

After leaving office, Jackson returned home to his beloved plantation in Tennessee, "the Hermitage," in 1837, where he lived with his adopted son, Andrew Jackson Jr. (With no children of their own, he and Rachel had adopted their orphaned nephew as a child.)

The "people's president" died eight years later at age 78, leaving behind an executive branch that had been transformed by a man unwilling to bow to influence. "It is possible that friends are overawed by power," Jackson had once written. "It cannot overawe me."