Notes on the JACKSONIAN ERA, 1828-1840:

1. Andrew Jackson’s election to the presidency may not have signaled the rise of the common man in American politics, but it did launch the modern Democratic Party. Once Jackson’s opponents coalesced into the Whig Party, the second party system quickly established itself. A self-proclaimed follower of Jeffersonian ideas, Jackson did much to undo the powers of the central government. The Bank War is a crucial case in point, as is his refusal to enforce the Supreme Court decision in Cherokee Nation v. Georgia. On the other hand, Jackson’s handling of the Nullification crisis strengthened the central government. His Whig opponents were similarly consistent in their party platforms and inconsistent in their actions.

2. Jackson’s election did not result from a great outpouring of new voters. That came in 1840 when another military hero, the Whig candidate William Henry Harrison, won a great popular victory. However, the 1828 election was the first to bring the triumph of a man with little experience in government and few ideas about policy. Jackson can be described as the first modern politician. His expertise in organizing a political party and running a campaign were matched by his amateurism in governing. His predecessors had all been men of vast experience in national affairs. Each had been clearly identified in the public mind as advocates of particular policies. But Jackson owed his prominence to a few spectacular military exploits. Aside from a few years in the Senate, he had had no contact with the practical problems of running a government. And while running for office he avoided taking stands on controversial issues. For the first time in American history, the people elected a man whose ideas they had never heard.

3. If Jackson’s presidency represented the symbol rather than the substance of democratic rule, the symbol was nonetheless important. Highly successful politicians are usually highly uncommon people. Jackson himself was a member of the slaveholding aristocracy. Yet he presented himself as the embodiment of the common folk. And his successors have felt the necessity to do the same. When Jimmy Carter after his inauguration in 1977 walked up Pennsylvania Avenue instead of riding in the presidential limousine, he was a 20th Century Jackson. And Jackson, for his part had been consciously seeking to revive Jefferson’s simplicity of manner. It is ironic that the chief exemplars of the American preference for the common touch should have been aristocrats like Jefferson and Jackson.

4. It is no small irony also that the Whigs who organized themselves in opposition to Jackson did so in Jacksonian terms. They attacked his personal fitness for office, but even more they attacked his style of leadership, calling him King Andrew. Jackson was a very strong president; and he left the office far stronger than it had been when he first assumed it. But Jackson’s political style rested on denunciations of power. Thus, he left himself open to similar denunciations. Jackson was the heir of the Jeffersonian distrust of organized power. Power was, for them, antithetical to liberty. Thus Jackson’s attack on the Bank. But it was not how the Bank used its power that he disliked, it was the simple fact that the Bank had
the power to act decisively. Any bank worthy of the name of course had to have such power. That was the whole reason for having a central bank. But, again ironically, Jackson’s veto was itself an exercise of power. The heart of the matter is that Jackson could not conceive of legitimate power even though he recognized that no government could exist without it.

5. **The Second Party System:** Jackson’s political success stimulated the development of the Democratic Party and the broad opposition to Jackson stimulated the development of a new opposition party, the Whigs.

*Jacksonian Democrats* broadly included farmers, mechanics and laborers---the common man. But it especially attracted people who resented the privileges of established bankers and tariff-protected businessmen and had been hurt in some way by the “internal improvements” of the 1820s and 30s. Many Southern planters looked to Democrats to protect slavery and “states rights.” The party encouraged the aspirations of immigrants, particularly Irish Catholics. The party attracted free-thinkers and intellectuals and opponents of the righteous moralizing and crusading evangelism of the period.

*Whigs* came together in the early 1830s built on the foundations of a wide variety of opponents of *King Andrew*. Included were leaders of the powerful religious and democratic reform movements, Southerners reacting to Jackson’s anti-nullification position, conservatives who feared Jackson’s attack on the National Bank and supporters of economic nationalism. Whigs took the position that one of the chief functions of government was to promote the national economy and that congress should lead in developing a partnership between capital and government. Many Whigs hoped “to Christianize America through politics” and criticized Jackson’s pro-slavery positions and his Indian policy. But, they feared the political power of immigrants and Catholics. The Whigs attracted Northern merchants, bankers and industrialists; Southern planters; farmers hungry for internal improvements; workingmen in industries hurt by foreign imports and fearful of immigrant competition for jobs.