

America's Jacksonian Turn



**GLOBAL
VIEW**
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Donald Trump was only glancingly wounded on Saturday, but the effects of the attack and of his courageous response will be profound. His chance of victory substantially increased, and the movement he represents will continue to be a powerful force in American policy regardless of November's result.

Mr. Trump is part of a strain of American politics that Andrew Jackson brought to power in 1828. In domestic politics, Jacksonians are skeptical of big business, hate the political and social establishment, and demand "common sense" solutions to complex problems. They support the military but not an officer class seen as distant from the values and folkways of the nation—West Point stuffed shirts in the 19th century, "woke generals" today. They assume the political class is deeply and irreformably corrupt.

In foreign policy Jacksonians feel no need to spread democracy around the world. Instinctively realist, they view the United Nations and international law that would bind the U.S. with fear and contempt. Absent serious threats against America, Jacksonians have little interest in foreign affairs. But when the U.S. is attacked, they believe every measure is justified in its defense. Jacksonians don't regret assaults on civilian targets during World War II, including Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Relentless warfare against terrorists is justified; most Jack-

sonians support Israel's war in Gaza and believe the U.S. should respond to terror with the same vigor.

Sept. 11 was one of the moments in history, like Pearl Harbor, or the British attacks on Lexington and Concord in 1775, that ignited a Jacksonian firestorm across the U.S. and mobilized previously isolationist and almost pacifist Americans for war. Other such moments are the publication of the 1917 Zimmermann Telegram (in which Imperial Germany offered to help Mexico regain the territories lost in the Mexican-American War if it joined Germany's side in World War I) and the destruction of the Maine in Havana (allegedly by Spain) in 1898.

What Jacksonians regard as the unsatisfactory outcomes of the "endless" wars in Iraq and Afghanistan led them to sour on the U.S. military presence in the Middle East. That didn't change their attitude toward international politics and the need for a strong defense. In recent years, China has replaced jihadist terror as the prime enemy, but new terror attacks in the U.S. could easily reignite the fires.

For most Democratic policymakers, the presence and power of Jacksonian America is a national liability and a political danger. At home, Jacksonian hatred of educated elites and contempt for their policy preferences is a potent source of opposition to Democratic cultural and social policies. Abroad, Jacksonians' skepticism about international organizations and law, their resistance to global climate policy, and their indifference to ideological crusades threatens essential elements of what most Democratic policymakers

believe are sensible policies required to save the world.

Jacksonian America likes strong leaders, even those like George Washington and the two Roosevelts who come from elite backgrounds and whose policy preferences don't always align perfectly with Jacksonian ideas. Jacksonians are deeply skeptical of most politicians; Jacksonian faith and loyalty, once given, can be enduring. This gives Jacksonian leaders flexibility on policies; the base will often follow where they lead.

The assassination attempt gives new power to an old political tendency.

Saturday's events made America more Jacksonian and gave Mr. Trump an unbreakable hold on Jacksonian America. On the one hand, the assassination attempt reinforced the sense that Jacksonian America is under siege. On the other, Mr. Trump's fist-waving defiance and determination quieted any doubt about his personal courage. Attacks on him from the political and journalistic establishments will only boost his standing with his followers and inflame Jacksonian hatred of elites.

The more Jacksonian America becomes, the harder it is for Democrats to win elections and to govern. Team Biden sought to tamp down the Jacksonian fires, but the most important fact about American politics in 2024, even before Saturday, was that these efforts have fallen short.

Democrats hoped that the

superior wisdom of elite-guided policies would generate results that would convince the peasants to lay down their pitchforks and torches. Bidenomics would make Americans feel more prosperous at home as an enlightened foreign policy—wise, focused on alliances—would make the world safe again. In that atmosphere, Team Biden hoped, Mr. Trump's rhetoric and promise of disruption would resonate with fewer voters and alarm more. The strategy was failing even before the debate. Bidenomics isn't having the desired effect. Inflation and the high interest rates required to suppress it have infuriated voters, as have the administration's controversial stands on immigration, gender, crime and climate change. The sense of growing international danger has made Mr. Trump's attacks on the administration weakness resonate with worried voters who don't see a world returning to stable normalcy.

The Butler, Pa., attack exposed another problem with the Biden strategy. Making Mr. Trump toxic has been the core theme of Democratic campaign rhetoric all year. Comparing him to Hitler and calling him a coward, a traitor and an existential threat to democracy have been Democratic talking points. This strategy boomeranged in spectacular fashion as, post-Butler, Democratic anti-Trump rhetoric looks like irresponsible demagoguery recklessly pushing the nation into crisis to serve President Biden's political ambition.

After Butler, America has suddenly become a more Jacksonian nation. The shadow of Old Hickory looms larger than ever, and Donald Trump stands taller as his undisputed heir.