**Buried by the People: The Fall of the Coffin Handbill and the Rise of Jacksonian Democracy**

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Interpretive Essay Submission

Featured Primary Sources: “Coffin Handbill” propaganda documents, 1828

In the heat of the 1828 presidential election, a sensational political poster flooded American towns and cities: rows of black coffins and imaginary tombstones accusing General Andrew Jackson of executing his own men. Known as the “Coffin Handbill,” this emotional attack ad tried to destroy Jackson’s reputation by portraying him as a bloodthirsty villain[[1]](#endnote-1). It became iconic, with its imagery meant to stir outrage and patriotic guilt—but it failed to stop Jackson’s surge to victory[[2]](#endnote-2). The handbill’s inefficacy proved that a more democratic and passionate group of voters had taken shape—voters no longer willing to accept fanciful narratives and instead drawn to emotional, outsider-driven politics that spoke to them directly. American politics was changing.

The 1828 election was one of the dirtiest in United States history[[3]](#endnote-3). Supporters of Adams and Jackson hurled wild accusations. Adams was accused of acting inappropriately as a minister to Russia and going as far as to spend public money for a new billiards table. Jackson was portrayed as a bigamist and even a cannibal, with a history of duels and cruelty[[4]](#endnote-4). Of the many attacks flying around[[5]](#endnote-5), one that Jackson’s team took seriously was the Coffin Handbill[[6]](#endnote-6). John Binns, an Irish-born activist and Philadelphia newspaper editor, distributed thousands of different versions of the handbills in his paper[[7]](#endnote-7). The ads accused Jackson of executing American soldiers. Some of the ads appeared as oversized posters or as pamphlets, but all used vivid imagery and emotion to sway voters.

At the heart of the Coffin Handbill was the charge that Jackson had wrongfully executed six militiamen after the Battle of New Orleans. One of the 27 known Coffin Handbills was called “Monumental Inscriptions” and featured six black coffins labeled with the soldiers’ names and emotional messages about their character and families. John Harris, for example, was described as a preacher with a wife and nine devastated children, turning a deserter into a symbol of loss. By humanizing the executed soldiers, the document tried to stir guilt and outrage. In addition, the tombstones were dated July 4, using the symbolism of Independence Day to cast Jackson’s actions as unpatriotic. One grave warned: “Let not the splendor of Military renown blot out from your indignant recollection this bloody deed DONE BY A HERO.” The goal was to turn Jackson’s heroic image into one of cruelty[[8]](#endnote-8).

The handbill’s creator tried to stir guilt and patriotism, but they failed, in part, because the electorate had changed. Between 1824 and 1828, many states expanded voting rights to include all white men, not just property owners. Jackson championed this shift and became the face of a more participatory democracy. Voter turnout in the 1828 election was 57 percent, eclipsing the 27 percent of 1824. Jackson’s support was strongest in rural areas, among people who felt left out of politics[[9]](#endnote-9). These new voters were people who did not mind the rumors of Jackson’s cruelty. They wanted someone who could represent them.

The Coffin Handbill represented a top-down approach to persuasion that was typical: elites had long shaped political discourse through pamphlets, newspapers, and formal speeches[[10]](#endnote-10). In at least one case, the Coffin Handbill was made into a pamphlet and distributed by pro-Adams congressmen using their franking privilege, a political perk that let congressmen mail materials for free[[11]](#endnote-11). However, by 1828, the American voter was no longer willing to be told what to think by high-ranking politicians. Jackson offered these voters a new role: instead of standing on the sidelines, they could see themselves reflected in their candidate. The failure of the Coffin Handbill marked the waning power of elite control over public discourse.

To Jackson’s supporters, no amount of criticism could change who he was: a war hero who had defended the country at the Battle of New Orleans. The Coffin Handbill tried to turn that legacy into something dark and shameful, but it backfired. Some of his allies even turned the insults into a badge of honor. Baltimore newspaper editor Dabney S. Carr created an ironic “coffin handbill” of his own featuring a coffin surrounded by dozens of smaller black coffins. His propaganda celebrated Jackson’s defeat of the British with mock mourning for enemy soldiers “cruelly shot to death by Andrew Jackson[[12]](#endnote-12).” Jackson’s popularity was less about policies and more about identity. He was seen as tough, loyal, and proudly not part of the political elite. Even valid arguments about his temper or rash decisions did not seem to change his supporters’ view of him[[13]](#endnote-13). Jackson gave ordinary voters someone who looked and sounded like them—and that personal connection made him almost untouchable.

Jackson was hailed as a hero of democracy—the president who gave ordinary people a louder voice in government. His campaign energized new voters and helped lay the foundation for the Democratic Party[[14]](#endnote-14). Looking back nearly 200 years later, the irony is hard to miss. Jackson, the so-called common man, was a wealthy slaveholder who enforced policies like the Indian Removal Act. His opponent, John Quincy Adams, openly opposed slavery and lived modestly. Yet voters rejected the messaging the elites put out in the Coffin Handbill and embraced Jackson, even if it meant overlooking contradictions in his life.

Adams’ biographer Jon Meacham warns against calling the Age of Jackson a mirror of today, but the similarities are impossible to ignore[[15]](#endnote-15). The failure of the Coffin Handbill showed something bigger was happening in American politics. By 1828, many voters no longer wanted to be told what to think by political elites. They wanted leaders who made them feel seen and powerful. Jackson gave them that. His rise marked the start of a more emotional, identity-driven democracy—where how a candidate made you feel mattered as much as what they stood for. That shift from reason to passion still echoes today. The Coffin Handbill tried to tell a story that fueled moral outrage—but Jackson’s story of strength and belonging proved far more powerful.

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ENDNOTES

1. Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, “Monumental Inscriptions,” GLC01825, https://www.gilderlehrman.org/collection/glc01825. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, The Rise of Andrew Jackson: Myth, Manipulation, and the Making of Modern American Politics (New York: Random House, 2011), 351. The authors write, “Binns produced the Coffin Handbill that became an iconic campaign document that ever afterward served as the gold standard for negative politics.” They continued, “His Coffin Handbill was a delicious mixture of blunt imagery and direct language that was copied and reproduced by numerous printers for a half year before the election. Binns published it as a broadside, that day’s version of a campaign poster.” They state that later versions of the handbill, which number more than two dozen in all, increased the body count that Jackson was accused of killing and were translated into different languages for immigrants. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Lynn Hudson Parsons. The Birth of Modern Politics: Andrew Jackson, John Quincy Adams, and the Election of 1828. Oxford University Press. New York, New York. 2009, x. Parsons shows that “Many features of modern presidential campaigns first appeared in 1828: large organized rallies, coordinated media efforts, fund raising, opposition research, negative advertisements, opinion polling, slogans and buttons and other campaign paraphernalia, and the creation of a cult of personality to promote Jackson’s presdiency.” …The election of 1828… marked the death of the elitist political culture of the early republic and the birth of true democracy.” [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Lynn Hudson Parsons. The Birth of Modern Politics: Andrew Jackson, John Quincy Adams, and the Election of 1828. Oxford University Press. New York, New York. 2009, x. Parsons says, “Many features of modern presidential campaigns first appeared in 1828: large organized rallies, coordinated media efforts, fund raising, opposition research, negative advertisements, opinion polling, slogans and buttons and other campaign paraphernalia, and the creation of a cult of personality to promote Jackson’s presdiency.” …The election of 1828 … marked the death of the elitist political culture of the early republic and the birth of true democracy.” [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Nancy Isenberg and Andrew Burstein, The Problem of Democracy: The Presidents Adams Confront the Cult of Personality (New York: Viking, 2019), 380–81. Isenberg and Burstein say, “An explosion in partisan journalism overspread the states in election year 1828. Press organs competed with one another in creative mudslinging. In sheer numbers, and in terms of circulation, the partisan press undeniably worked in favor of the Jackson campaign. …A so-called democratic style of electioneering had emerged. Adams and Jackson were born in the same year, but it is hard to imagine two more dissimilar candidates for the presidency.” [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, The Rise of Andrew Jackson: Myth, Manipulation, and the Making of Modern American Politics (New York: Random House, 2011), 349. The historians detail the many attack ads against Andrews and conclude that “of all the new attacks about old events, four set off alarms in the Jackson camp. One was the ‘Coffin Handbill’ that denounced the execution of the six militiamen at the end of the War of 1812. It was the most striking image of the entire campaign.” [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, The Rise of Andrew Jackson: Myth, Manipulation, and the Making of Modern American Politics (New York: Random House, 2011), 351. “His Coffin Handbill was a delicious mixture of blunt imagery and direct language that was copied and reproduced by numerous printers for a half year before the election. Binns published it as a broadside, that day’s version of a campaign poster.” Later versions increased the body count. As they took hold, Binns came up with different versions, increasing the body count or translating into different languages for immigrants. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, “Monumental Inscriptions,” GLC01825, https://www.gilderlehrman.org/collection/glc01825. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Lynn Hudson Parsons, The Birth of Modern Politics: Andrew Jackson, John Quincy Adams, and the Election of 1828 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 184. Voter turnout increased, Parsons said, in every state but one, Adams’s Massachusetts. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Jon Meacham, American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House (New York: Viking, 2019), x. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, “Monumental Inscriptions, 1828,” GLC08460, https://www.gilderlehrman.org/collection/glc08460. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, A Sarcastic Rejoinder to the Broadside “An Account of the Bloody Deeds of Gen. Jackson,” GLC06797, https://www.gilderlehrman.org/collection/glc06797. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, The Rise of Andrew Jackson: Myth, Manipulation, and the Making of Modern American Politics (New York: Random House, 2011), 362. The authors assert that “valid charges about Jackson’s misconduct and legitimate concerns about his temperament did little to injure him.” [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. David S. Brown, The First Populist: The Defiant Life of Andrew Jackson (New York: Scribner, 2022), 197–198.“In 1828 American politics became, for the first time in the country’s history, a popular pastime. Jackson…proved an ideal candidate for the new campaigning culture. …The Battle of New Orleans continued to resonate among a large share of voters, many of whom regarded Jackson as the greatest American since Washington.” [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Jon Meacham, American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House (New York: Viking, 2019), xxi. “It would be both glib and wrong to say that the Age of Jackson is a mirror of our own time. The cultural, political, moral, and intellectual universe Jackson inhabited has to be viewed on its own terms. Still, there is much about him and about his America that readers in the early twenty-first century may recognize. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)