

Before the Storm: America from 1815-1850 Mick Chantler, Instructor

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America experienced more changes in these thirty years than earlier societies did in two or three centuries. Great cities sprung up in the east, vast new farmlands in the west were opened to provide opportunities for millions of enterprising pioneers, and common, ordinary folk came to see “the good life” as theirs for the taking. All this came at a price: Native Americans were pushed out of their traditional hunting lands, the forests east of the Mississippi were largely destroyed, and a brutal slave empire grew up in the Southern states. It was an exciting—and tragic—era. In this lecture course, we will trace the impact of several key players in this dizzying drama: Andrew Jackson, Henry Clay, John C. Calhoun, Daniel Webster, John Q. Adams, and slave-rebels Nat Turner and Cinque.

Week One: Culture and Politics in Tocqueville’s America

In every sense imaginable, our young nation underwent a profound transformation during the years between the War of 1812 and the end of the Mexican War. During what might be called America’s national adolescence, our country stretched its domains all the way to the Pacific. Doubling their numbers every twenty years, the American people dreamed of a new spiritual and material order. Anything—and everything—seemed possible. Their economy, fueled by revolutionary technologies like the railroad and telegraph, grew at a startling rate. The Churches were rocked by raucous evangelical fervor, and a radically new democratic ethos transformed the old politics of the Founding Era. In our opening talk, we will discuss how the “torch was passed” from the Revolutionary generation to a new breed of restless, ambitious, and often ruthless men.

Week Two: Andrew Jackson—Man of the People or Genocidal Savage?

At Andrew Jackson’s first inauguration, hundreds of bearded, buckskin-clad frontiersmen trashed the White House while celebrating the election of one of their own to the Presidency. The 1828 election was portrayed by Jackson’s

followers as evidence of the common people's right to choose a President. No longer were Virginia aristocrats and northern bankers dominating national politics. Old class hierarchies were breaking down. Property requirements for voting were gradually eliminated. Newer, younger, and less affluent voters fervently supported General Jackson. In this lecture, we will delve into the colorful and sometimes horrifying career of America's first populist chief executive.

Week Three: "Star of the West"-- Henry Clay and the Rise of American Nationalism

Historians consider Henry Clay—Abraham Lincoln's 'beau ideal' of a statesman—to be one of the four or five most influential Americans of the nineteenth century. A spirited "war-hawk" in 1812, Clay devoted the last years of his life to keeping America at peace. He vigorously opposed President Polk's Mexican War as an immoral land grab by America's "slavocracy," and in his last act of statesmanship he helped to craft the Compromise of 1850, which bought the country a temporary hiatus during its march toward civil war. He was an advocate of robust government involvement in the economy through high tariffs, a national bank, and government sponsored "internal improvements." In this talk, we will examine the political career of a man who worked tirelessly to hold the fledgling nation together during an extremely stressful period of fragmentation.

Week Four: "Young Hercules"—John C. Calhoun and the Evolution of Southern Identity

Today John C. Calhoun of South Carolina is chiefly remembered for his vigorous defense of slavery and for developing the concept of minority rights in politics, which he did in the context of protecting the interests of the white South in its confrontation with a rapidly expanding Northern populace. In the early days of his long political career he was seen as a nationalist, modernizer, and proponent of a strong federal government. But in the late 1820s, his views underwent a marked transformation, and he became the leading proponent of states' rights, limited

government, nullification, and opposition to high tariffs. Calhoun demanded that Northern politicians accept these pro-Southern policies as a condition of his state remaining in the Union. His beliefs and warnings exercised profound influence on Southern political thought during the drift toward secession in the 1850s. This week we will analyze the political philosophy of what some historians consider to be the last major constitutional theorist in American history.

Week Five: “Yankee Demosthenes”—Daniel Webster’s Quest for Union

Webster, the third member of “The Great Triumvirate” of antebellum Senators, is best known for his spell binding oratory. His speeches served as models for students of rhetoric for nearly a hundred years. It was believed that he could hold his own in debate with the devil himself, according to the classic short story by Stephen Vincent Benet. An ardent nationalist, Webster embodied the direct antithesis of the Southern separatist position. Yet he was also the consummate “waffler,” often willing to abandon previous commitments to accommodate new and painful realities. In this session, we will attempt to determine whether he deserves John F. Kennedy’s praise for Webster in *Profiles in Courage*, or the scorn heaped upon him by biographers who consider him a trimmer, unwilling to hew consistently to any clear vision.

Week Six: James K. Polk and the Conquest of Mexico

Dark Horse candidate James Polk rode Manifest Destiny all the way to the White House. A Tennessee Democrat and a slaveholder, Polk effectively harnessed the American people’s insatiable land hunger with a jingoistic outpouring of pugnacious nationalism to win for himself the highest political prize. In this class we will examine how Polk cleverly (if utterly unjustifiably) maneuvered the nation into a very avoidable war with Mexico. In so doing, Polk nearly doubled the size of our adolescent nation, and most importantly seized the greatest prize of all, the Golden State of California.

Week Seven: Storm Clouds Gathering: Religion and Reform in the Age of Jackson

While the prevailing national outlook during our period was generally optimistic, perceptive observers saw much to concern them. The Vesey and Nat Turner slave rebellions terrified Southerners, and pricked the consciences of Americans who advocated greater social justice for all. A powerful abolitionist movement developed on both sides of the Mason-Dixon, prompting a fierce backlash from defenders of “the peculiar institution.” Many grew mistrustful of the brawling, lusty free-for-all they saw unfolding before them, and turned to radical reform movements to restore order and harmony to what appeared to be a threateningly chaotic, almost anarchic society. Temperance, bloomers, new religions like Mormonism sprang up and millennialist cults flourished. In this concluding lecture, we will delve into the fears and fantasies of America’s ante-bellum era.

Week Eight: Rebels With a Cause—Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson

Of the many Americans who turned away in disgust at the developments in politics and society during this era, none did so more elegantly than Henry David Thoreau and his mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Scientists, nature lovers, philosophers, and writers, these two men laid out an appealing alternative to the path that most of their countrymen embraced with such gusto. In their essays and lectures, the two men attacked traditional Protestant theology, consumer materialism, slavery, and politics in erudite terms that still resonate today. In this final lecture, we will trace the careers of these two maverick thinkers.