

Old Hickory: Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [June 16, 2009](#) issue

What I knew about Andrew Jackson, the seventh president, was pretty much confined to the popular image of him: he was the hero of the battle of New Orleans and a “man of the people.” After reading Jon Meacham’s *American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House*, I have new appreciation for Jackson and a new understanding of how critical his presidency was. I also learned how his presidency was related to that of Abraham Lincoln. For example, it was Jackson who appointed Lincoln as postmaster for New Salem, Illinois, after Lincoln lost a race for the state legislature.

Though he was an unapologetic slaveholder, Jackson nevertheless managed to beat back southern states’ attempts to nullify federal law—attempts he correctly saw as the first step toward secession. Jackson believed that slavery would one day come to an end, but like Lincoln’s his overriding priority was preserving the Union.

Jackson was, Meacham says, “the most contradictory of men.” He was a fearless warrior and a tender-hearted lover of children; he was a man of the people and the president who ripped Native Americans from their ancient territories.

He was also a lifelong Presbyterian. As a youth he soaked in Presbyterian teachings, and he claimed to read three chapters of the Bible every day. Meacham attributes the question-and-answer style of Jackson’s personal correspondence to his familiarity with the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

Jackson left office after two terms in 1837 and died in 1845. Sixteen years later, when Lincoln was preparing his first inaugural address, it seemed that the Union would not survive. Lincoln asked his friend and adviser William Herndon for some suggestions about what to say. Herndon gave him a copy of Jackson’s proclamation to the people of South Carolina on the topic of the Union, delivered 28 years before. Secession had been discussed in Jackson’s time and ruled out. The president, Lincoln said, cannot entertain any proposition for dissolution. Lincoln agreed with Jackson

that “a majority held in restraint by constitutional checks and limitations . . . is the only true sovereign of a free people.” The president’s first duty, Jackson and Lincoln understood, was to preserve the Union. That task would prove incredibly costly. Lincoln did it—inspired in no small part by Andrew Jackson.