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Donald Trump, Andrew Jackson, and the Civil War: A CWI Fellow's Response

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Abstract

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Keywords

Andrew Jackson, Causes of War, Donald Trump, Ryan Bilger

Disciplines

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Comments

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Donald Trump, Andrew Jackson, and the Civil War: A CWI Fellow's Response

By [Ryan Bilger '19](#)

In an interview for Sirius XM Radio released this Monday, May 1, President Donald Trump made some intriguing comments regarding the reasons why the American Civil War took place. He started by describing his beliefs on how 7th President Andrew Jackson would have influenced the events leading up to the Civil War:

I mean, had Andrew Jackson been a little bit later, you wouldn't have had the Civil War. He was a very tough person, but he had a big heart. And he was really angry that he saw what was happening, with regard to the Civil War. He said, there's no reason for this.



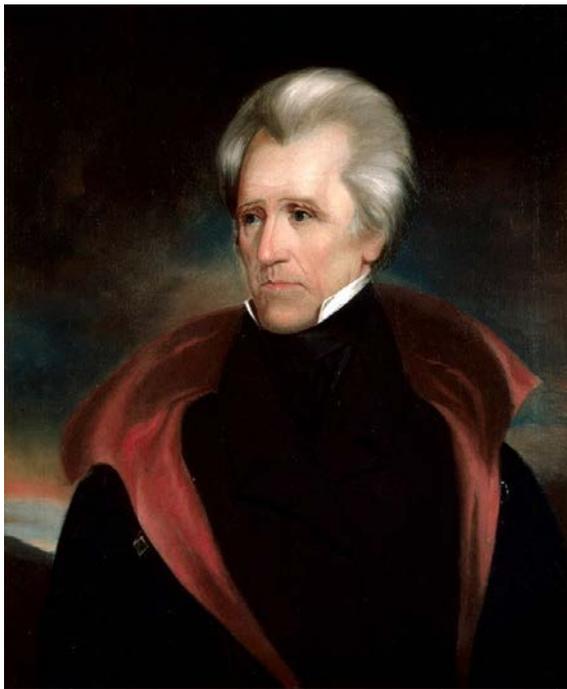
President Donald Trump. Via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Trump has made no secret of his admiration for “Old Hickory,” comparing his election victory to Jackson’s and stating in March that he was reading a book on Jackson in preparation for a trip to visit Jackson’s home, the Hermitage, in Tennessee. It is easy to see why Trump likes this comparison; both men cast themselves as populists, who

would fight for the people against Washington, D.C. corruption and excess, and both achieved victory by doing so.

However, Andrew Jackson was also a plantation owner who held 150 men, women, and children in bondage at the time of his death in 1845. The website for the Hermitage states that “[I]n all reality, slavery was the source of Andrew Jackson’s wealth.” Jackson died sixteen years before the start of the Civil War and it is impossible to know for sure how he would have reacted. But, if we examine the conduct and reactions of his peers, it appears unlikely that he would have been promoting reconciliation as Trump claims. The major Georgia slave owner Howell Cobb, for example, immediately resigned as James Buchanan’s Secretary of the Treasury upon Abraham Lincoln’s election and advocated heavily for Georgia to secede. A man who owned as many slaves as Andrew Jackson did would probably not have taken kindly to the election of the anti-slavery Lincoln, despite Trump’s statements to the contrary.

Trump asked about the Civil War “Why could that one not have been worked out?” The issue of slavery was exactly the reason why the Civil War could not have been worked out. Those passionate about the Civil War will certainly have familiarity with the series of compromises and deals that attempted to stave off the conflict. Yet they ultimately failed in their mission because slavery was such an abhorrent evil that it could not be allowed to continue any longer in the United States. The time for “working it out” with deals came to an end in 1860-61 when the Confederate States of America decided that Lincoln’s election threatened their slaveholding economy too greatly, and the Civil War ensued.



President Andrew Jackson. Via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Trump also stated in the interview “People don’t realize, the Civil War — you think about it, why? People don’t ask that question. But why was there a Civil War?” As a History major and Civil War Era Studies minor whose work involves constantly investigating why the Civil War took place, I can safely say to President Trump that people most certainly do ask that question. We as Gettysburg College students engage with this question quite often, and here on this very blog, we have several posts that address that issue.

In these times that are so rife with accusations of “fake news” and “alternative facts,” it is more important than ever to maintain as clear a view of history as possible. Statements like these from a man with the power and influence conferred by the office of President of the United States cannot stand unchallenged, lest they distort our understanding of our nation’s history. Continue studying the past, because it continues to be relevant for understanding the present and the future.

Sources:

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