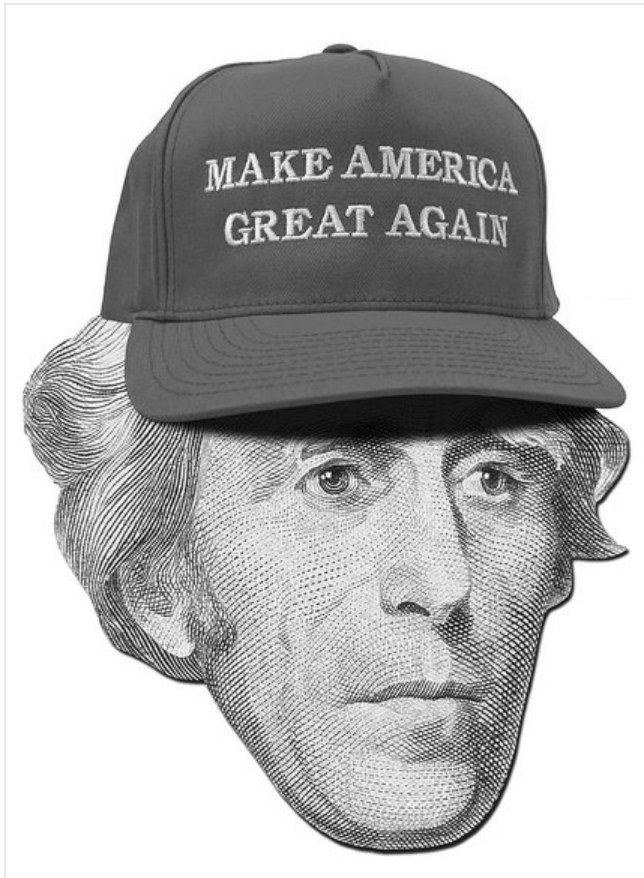


Donald Trump's Secret? Channeling Andrew Jackson

Photo



Credit Matt Chase

SINCE Donald J. Trump shot to the top of Republican polls last fall, pundits have tried to make sense of his popularity. He has been described as a modern-day product of reality-TV narcissism, or the second coming of European fascism. But as he cruises into the South Carolina primary after beating his rivals by double digits in New Hampshire, it's clear that neither idea quite explains his strength.

Mr. Trump's rhetoric resonates with a particular American political tradition. Voters may not know the details of that tradition, but they feel it viscerally when a politician taps into it. Mr. Trump has done just that by emulating a classic model of American democratic leadership.

A clue as to just which leadership model can be found on [a map](#). While Trump fans are spread across the country, they are heavily concentrated in and near the Appalachian states — from Mississippi and Alabama all the way to western Pennsylvania and New York. The northwest corner of South Carolina is one of the most pro-Trump parts of the country.

Greater Appalachia has remained culturally distinct for centuries. Migrants from the northern British Isles — Scots, Scots-Irish and others — pushed into these mountains in large numbers from the 1700s onward and did much to create the nation as we know it. Their descendants weathered generations of hardship and calamity: washed-out hillside farms, coal-mining disasters and extreme poverty.

Though today's Appalachia also features excellent roads, shining auto factories and fresh waves of migration, its electorate represents an older version of America, more rural, white and conservative than elsewhere. To live or work in Appalachia is to feel the tug of

its past.

What could the voters of such a region possibly see in a loud and self-interested New York real estate tycoon? In some respects, he is a type of leader Appalachia has seen before. Students of history will recognize that Mr. Trump is a Jackson man.

Consciously or not, Mr. Trump's campaign echoes the style of Andrew Jackson, and the states where Mr. Trump is strongest are the ones that most consistently favored Jackson during his three runs for the White House.

What Mr. Trump borrows from Jackson is not an issue, but a way of thinking about the world. Mr. Trump promises to fix his supporters' problems, no matter who else is hurt. He's a wealthy celebrity always ready for a fight, a superpatriot who says he will make America great again. He vows to attack government corruption and defend the common man. All this could be said of Jackson.

Born to Scots-Irish immigrants and then orphaned in his youth, Jackson made his name in Nashville, on what was then the frontier. As a general in the War of 1812, he won the Battle of New Orleans, which made him a national celebrity.

His military aides later told his story in a book, which is considered the first campaign biography. It unapologetically praised even his most brutal acts, such as putting his own soldiers to death for disobedience. Riding his fame to the White House, Jackson captured the imagination of ordinary citizens who'd never voted in such numbers before. He crushed rivals who considered him crude, barbaric and even a danger to the republic.

Jackson had a captivating style, and not just because of his wild hair. He did what he wanted, and demanded respect. In an 1806 duel, he shot and killed a man who had insulted him in a newspaper. Mr. Trump's Twitter broadsides at his critics are gentle by comparison.

Like Mr. Trump, Jackson made his fortune in real estate. He bought and sold vast tracts of Southern land in concert with wealthy friends. If desirable land was owned by Indians, Jackson bullied or bribed them into selling it cheap.

And again like Mr. Trump, a former Democrat and independent, Jackson did not worry about consistency. Having joined the nation's wealthy elite, he ran for president as an opponent of wealthy elites. He defended liberty while operating a personal empire of cotton plantations using hundreds of enslaved black laborers.

Needless to say, Jackson and his Democratic Party enforced a certain idea of America — an America for white people. Jackson was personally cordial to people of other races, but their rights did not concern him. When white Southerners grew tired of Indian nations in their midst, Jackson forced them into internal exile in the West. He could have defended this policy using a Trump phrase: “We either have a country or we don't.”

Mr. Trump's proposal for a “[total and complete shutdown](#)” of Muslims entering the United States until the government “can figure out what is going on” has a brutal simplicity that echoes Jackson. So does his promise to force Mexico to pay for a border wall. The people Mr. Trump favors are to be protected from all harm. Nobody else matters.

Mr. Trump cannot fully impersonate Jackson. Unlike Mr. Trump, the Tennessean rose from modest beginnings and risked his life in war; he also served for decades in government before running for president. But Mr. Trump captures Jackson's tone, and voters clearly respond.

Could Mr. Trump ride the Jackson vote to ultimate victory? Not unless he adds to it. Jackson's old coalition no longer dominates the electorate. Nonwhite voters are growing in numbers, and many white voters have told pollsters they would be embarrassed by Mr. Trump as president. Mr. Trump would have to reckon with one of Andrew Jackson's cherished principles: In America, the majority rules. Assembling a majority today is not the same as it used to be.

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