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White: The Jacksonians

M. Fred Mallender, II S.Ed.
University of Michigan Law School

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THE JACKSONIANS. By *Leonard D. White*. New York: Macmillan Co. Pp. xii, 593. \$8.

The Jacksonians is the concluding volume of Dr. White's trilogy, which traces the evolution of our system of government from 1789 to 1861. The period primarily dealt with is from 1829, the inauguration of Andrew Jackson, to 1861, the inauguration of Abraham Lincoln. It is not necessary to have read the previous two volumes dealing with the period 1789 to 1829 to understand and appreciate the book. The focal point of the study is the executive department, but necessarily Congress has to be considered. The Supreme Court is referred to only incidentally, and lawyers might prefer more detail of its relation to the administration of the period. However, the work should be of more than passing interest to the members of the legal profession.

To many people the period 1829-1861 is a vague period in American history, memorable for four things: the growing tension between the North and the South, the struggle between President Jackson and the advocates of the Second Bank of the United States, the Mexican War, and the spoils system. These incidents are treated in the book but not out of proportion to the rest of the material. In fact, one of the worthwhile things to be gathered from the book is Dr. White's successful attempt to place these events in historical context and to explain them. The two underlying theses of the book are the trends toward centralization and democratization of the executive department. In the main they are admirably developed. That the two trends were interdependent is very clear. The system of rotation in office which was the result of the theory that to the victor belonged the spoils fastened the eyes of the nation on Washington, D.C., and away from the various state capitals. Since the Executive was the immediate dispenser of most of the lucrative positions, it began to assume a position of importance formerly, and jealously, held by Congress. At every turn a parsimonious Congress tried to deter the realization by the executive department of its potential power. The success of the executive department in capitalizing on this power depended largely upon the character and capacity of the man in the White House. Dr. White develops the personality and ability of the various presidents, but to an unequal degree. Jackson and Polk are treated in detail, but Taylor, Buchanan and others seem to be glossed over. This may be because of lack of material, or the weakness of these presidents, but it tends to give a certain lopsidedness to the book.

When the various departments are under discussion, the book is at its best. Cabinet officers, military leaders, clerks and printers are discussed in great detail. Although rotation in office caused inept and dishonest individuals to receive public appointments for political reasons, the executive department functioned as well as the prevalent theories of administration and congressional interference would allow. As explained by Dr. White, the period appears neither as disorganized nor as corrupt as a casual study of its history would lead one to believe. The government was affected by the decline in business ethics and the doctrine of laissez faire, as was economic life, but as a whole was on a higher moral and ethical level than the commercial world. The period saw no great steps forward in theories of administration, except that the President came to be as much the representative of the people as Congress was, but Dr. White asserts that it left a heritage of democracy which later administrations would more fully develop.

Dr. White has succeeded in making "the dry bones of old records" come alive. The wealth of detail is not sheer makeweight but, in many cases, the particular fascination of the book. For a lawyer or anyone interested in the administrative development of the federal government, time spent with this history is well spent.

M. Fred Mallender, II, S.Ed.