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Document-Based Activities on the Jackson Era

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The Spoils System Teacher Page

Overview:

In 1829, Jackson announced a policy he called “rotation in office,” but which later came to be known as the “spoils system.” In this lesson, students will read an excerpt from Jackson’s first annual message in which he introduced rotation in office, then will contrast it with a letter written to Jackson by a woman whose husband lost his job because of the spoils system. Students will have to consider whether rotation in office and the spoils system are consistent with America’s democratic values.

Objectives:

Students will:

- understand the theories of the “spoils system” and “rotation in office”
- contrast Jackson’s public portrayal of the spoils system with the ways in which he actually used it
- assess whether the spoils system conforms to or undermines American values

Web Sites Used in this Lesson:

Jackson Announces His Policy of Rotation in Office, 1829

http://www.wadsworth.com/history_d/special_features/ext/ap/chapter10/10.2.rotation.html

“Letter from Mrs. Barney to Gen. Jackson. Baltimore. June 13th, 1829”, located on the Library of Congress site at

[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/rbpe:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(rbpe15300700\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/rbpe:@field(DOCID+@lit(rbpe15300700)))

Strategies:

Begin by reminding the class that when a new president is elected, he is allowed to choose a new Cabinet. Have the class briefly debate whether a new president should be allowed to replace any or all other positions in the federal government as well. Is this a reasonable thing to do, or should there be some continuity from administration to administration?

Have students complete the worksheet. Most answers should be 2–3 sentences; answers for questions 5, 11, and 12 can range from 1–3 paragraphs, depending how much time you want to allot to this activity and how much depth you want student responses to have.

Wrap-Up:

After students have completed the worksheet, have an in-depth discussion or debate about their answers to questions 5 and 12. Focus on these basic issues: Is the spoils system essentially undemocratic? Is it always likely to induce corruption and/or favoritism, or can it be used fairly?

Extension Activity:

Have students investigate arguments being used today for and against term limits, then write position papers taking a side on the issue.

The Spoils System Student Worksheet

“They see nothing wrong in the rule that to the victors belong the spoils of the enemy.”
William L. Marcy (1786–1857): *Speech in the United States Senate, January, 1832.*

Introduction:

In 1829, Jackson announced a policy he called “rotation in office,” but which later came to be known as the “spoils system.” On the surface, the idea of rotation in office is somewhat similar to “term limits” laws we have today: periodically, new people should assume government offices so that government as a whole doesn’t become isolated from the “will of the people.” Proponents of such systems defend them as a way of infusing “new blood” and enthusiasm into government and making sure that officials keep in touch with the needs and wants of the electorate. Opponents used the term “spoils” to compare Jackson’s rotation in office policy to a conquering army looting those whom they had defeated (“spoils” is a term referring to property of the enemy taken in battle). Many felt that Jackson would use rotation in office as an excuse to fire all those who opposed him and replace them with his own loyal supporters.

All Web links for this lesson can be found at: <http://www.socialstudies.com/uslinks.html>

Directions:

Jackson Announces His Policy of Rotation in Office, 1829

http://www.wadsworth.com/history_d/special_features/ext/ap/chapter10/10.2.rotation.html

Read the entire document, and then answer the following questions:

1. Why does Jackson claim that holding “office and power” for a “great length of time” ultimately makes a person less fit to “serv[e] the people”?

2. What does Jackson say the problem is with considering office as a “species of property”?

7. Go to the third paragraph, which begins “Your Official Organ...” Mrs. Barney says that Jackson led the public to believe that rotation in office would be based on “the Jeffersonian rule of honesty and capacity [fitness for office].” How does she claim that Jackson had unfairly used this “rule” to justify removing from office those who opposed him?

8. In the first sentence of the first paragraph, Mrs. Barney makes reference to an earlier letter from Jackson in which he claimed that “rules” which he had felt “bound to adopt” had led him to fire her husband from his position. In the third paragraph, why does she claim that Jackson’s “rule” is not the noble “Jeffersonian rule of honesty and capacity”? What does she say Jackson’s “secret rule” really is?

9. Go to the paragraph that begins “But I boldly declare...” Why does she claim that Jackson’s “rule” is “altogether unworthy of the Presidential office of a magnanimous nation”?

10. Go to the paragraph that begins “My husband, sir, never was your *enemy*.” According to Mrs. Barney, what was the “offence” for which her husband lost his job? Why does she go on to claim that this “offence” was “one of the best acts of his life”? Do you think her husband deserved to lose his job?

