

Clash of the Historians: Paper on Andrew Jackson and Trump Causes Turmoil

A paper accusing scholars of “historical malpractice” upended an academic society and stirred arguments about racism, history and the limits of debate.



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Andrew Jackson has been no stranger to rough-and-tumble conflict. In his own time, he upended the established political order and helped spearhead the violent expansion of America’s borders. In ours, he has become a toxic figure for many, as even the Democratic Party he helped found has distanced itself from his legacy of slaveholding, Indian removal and populist demagoguery.

Last week, Jackson cut a posthumously destructive path through another institution once centered on his legacy, when the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic was thrown into turmoil after a contentious scholarly panel about the man.

The panel, which was held via Zoom on July 17, featured discussion of a paper by Daniel Feller, the editor of the Andrew Jackson Papers. Titled “Andrew Jackson in the Age of Trump,” it set off a firestorm that led, within 72 hours, to the ouster of the group’s president, as well as the publication of open letters denouncing the talk and counterletters protesting the ouster. It also caused debate over whether the distinguished academic society was experiencing an overdue reckoning with racism or abandoning its commitment to robust scholarly debate in the face of a Twitter mob.

With Jackson and Mr. Trump, Mr. Feller was taking on two characters with few admirers in the often left-leaning historical profession. He began by recalling the day in 2017 when Mr. Trump visited the Hermitage, Jackson’s home in Nashville, before picking apart what he called the president’s distorted and self-serving efforts to wrap himself in the former president’s mantle.

He also assailed journalists for what he said were misrepresentations of Jackson. But his most stinging words were reserved for his fellow historians, whom he accused of misreading the historical record, exaggerating his destructive policies toward Native Americans and generally painting a politically driven picture of Jackson as a “homicidal maniac” that was “untethered from reality.”

“Historical malpractice is indefensible, no matter how noble the cause it purportedly serves,” he declared.

Mr. Feller’s talk drew sharp challenges from some of the other panelists. But reaction exploded in the Zoom comments section and on social media, as viewers blasted his criticisms of female scholars (including one he suggested was “incompetent”), what some saw as corner-cutting in his reading of the historical record (including what some likened to genocide denial), and the all-white composition of the panel.

But things reached a boiling point in the last three minutes, when Mr. Feller, apparently repeating a misheard phrase uttered earlier by another panelist, referred to Jackson’s reputation for slaughter of “redcoats and redskins.” And tensions kept boiling as word of the talk spread.



In 2017, Mr. Trump visited the Hermitage, Jackson's home in Nashville. Stephen Crowley/The New York Times

Twenty-four hours later, the society's president, Douglas Egerton, issued a statement apologizing for the panel's lack of diversity and calling the use of racial slurs unacceptable. But he also wrote that he didn't want to "silence people he disagreed with."

But his statement itself, and that phrase in particular, drew strong condemnation from some members of the group, known as SHEAR. The next day, 13 members of the group's advisory council posted a letter calling for Mr. Egerton's resignation, which he offered. Three more public letters criticizing the talk or the society's leadership followed, along with privately circulated counterblasts (including one in the style of an anonymous 18th-century pamphlet) charging the advisory council of violating the group's constitution.

It was a tempest in a teapot, as multiple society members (few of whom were willing to say more than a few words on the record) put it in interviews. But it also echoed a broader upheaval happening at institutions across America in the wake of the protests inspired by the death of George Floyd.

To some historians, the fracas represented an embarrassing abandonment of scholarly prudence amid a social media stampede.

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"The SHEAR debacle has little to do with history and a whole lot to do about politics," John Fea, a historian at Messiah University and a former society member, wrote on his blog. "This is why many Americans," he added, "don't trust us and our scholarship."

But to others, it represented part of a long-overdue racial reckoning within the white-dominated historical profession, with broader implications for how history gets written, and by whom.

"What's happening at SHEAR is not an interpretive disagreement over Andrew Jackson's legacy," said Seth Rockman, a historian at Brown who recently co-wrote a diversity report for the group, "but a broader struggle within a tight-knit scholarly community over how to produce an inclusive American history capable of rising to the

challenges of 2020.”

The society, which has just over 600 members, was born of some of the tensions that have reshaped the historical profession, and the broader understanding of the American past, over the past few decades.

It was founded in 1977 to focus on the period between the American Revolution and the Civil War. Its founders were political historians who felt increasingly edged out of other associations by the rise of social history, with its emphasis on the experiences and perspectives of women, African-Americans and other groups marginalized from high politics.

It was a small, clubby group, whose early conferences, as one longtime member recalled, were “just 50 guys and a dog.” It was also a place where Jackson, and a sunny idea of the period as “the rise of American Democracy,” loomed large.

In recent years, both the field and the society have diversified, intellectually and demographically, as great men and high politics have become less central. There has been an explosion of work on Native Americans and enslaved people, who are seen as crucially important in shaping American democracy. The recent issue of the society’s journal focuses on connections between the early Republic and Africa.

Mr. Feller was described by friends and critics (as well as some who described themselves as both) as an old-guard political historian known for blunt, aggressive questioning at conferences and a view of himself as the guardian of the true Jackson.

During a recent scholarly panel, Daniel Feller, the editor of the Andrew Jackson Papers, criticized historians for promoting an exaggerated image “untethered from reality.” The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

In an interview, Mr. Feller, 69, a professor at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, said it wasn't the historian's job to defend or condemn. What he questioned, he said, was the insistence on seeing Jackson purely as someone "who just wanted to kill everybody," as well as what he sees as a politicized approach to writing history.

"The point in the paper is not that Andrew Jackson is a good guy or a bad guy," Mr. Feller, who called himself a lifelong Democrat, said. "But because both sides have identified him with Trump, for opposite reasons, we are now reading Jackson through the lens of Trump."

And he was unapologetic about the panel, which he noted had been approved by the society's programming committee and Mr. Egerton last fall, as one of 39 at a planned conference. (The others have been postponed until next summer.) The paper had been circulated weeks in advance, he said, adding that he had received no criticism before the panel.

As for his use of the phrase "redcoats and redskins," he said it was a reference to a common phrase in older scholarship, and had "implied quotation marks" around it. "I have never volitionally used the word 'redskin' in my life, period," he said.

But to some in the society, his arguments fell outside the bounds of acceptable scholarly discourse. In its letter, the advisory council — including the scholar who chaired the panel, Jessica Lepler — said the panel fell outside the society's "ethical norms, academic standards and established procedures."

Amy Greenberg, a historian at Penn State and the society's new president, seconded the notion. "I fully agree with that assessment," she said in a terse response to emailed questions, adding: "I'm grateful to the many scholars who took the time to rightly critique a paper that does not represent either SHEAR's values, or our standards of scholarship."

(Mr. Egerton, the outgoing president, declined to comment.)

Other historians inside and outside SHEAR said that Mr. Feller's dismissive attitude toward newer scholarship — and the fact that the scholars he attacked by name in his talk were all women — was deeply discouraging, and spoke to deeper problems at the society and in the field more broadly.

"I don't really care about Jackson," said Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor, a historian at Smith College and society member, who said she did not watch the panel but was quickly flooded with messages about it. "But I do care about being inclusive. I do care about Indigenous scholars being left out. It's just really offensive that happened."

Professor Pryor won an award from the group several years ago for a paper about how African-Americans in the early 19th century claimed an infamous racial slur as a way of asserting themselves politically. The whole idea of the society, and writing history, she said, "is to generate new scholarship, to understand what we study — and where we are as a country — better."

Mr. Feller's paper was lively, she said. "But it wasn't responsible and it wasn't generative. And now people are talking about the group and not the talk."