AMERICAN CONSTITUTIONALISM

VOLUME I: STRUCTURES OF GOVERNMENT

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Supplementary Material

Chapter 5: The Jacksonian Era – Introduction

*The Democratic Review*, **“An Introductory Statement of the Democratic Principle”** (1837)[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Democratic Review was the ideological torch bearer for Jacksonian Democrats. Founder John L. O’Sullivan established that journal in 1837 to be a more radical alternative to the established and more conservative political journals that were critical of the Jacksonian movement. This “introductory statement” was published in the inaugural issue.

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We believe . . . in the principle of democratic republicanism, in its strongest and purest sense. We have an abiding confidence in the virtue, intelligence, and full capacity for self-government, of the great mass of our people, our industrious, honest, manly, intelligent millions of freemen. We are opposed to all self-styled “wholesome restraints” on the free action of the popular opinion and will, other than those which have for their sole object the prevention of precipitate legislation. This latter object is to be attained by the expedient of the division of power, and by causing all legislation to pass through the ordeal of successive forms; to be sifted through the discussions of coordinate legislative branches with mutual suspensive veto powers. . . . We cannot, therefore, look with an eye of favor on any such forms of representation as, by length of tenure of delegated power, tend to weaken that universal and unrelaxing responsibility to the vigilance of public opinion which is the true conservative principle of our institutions.

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. . . [T]he greatest number are more likely, at least, as a general rule, to understand and follow their own greatest good, than is the minority.

. . . [A] minority is much more likely to abuse power for the promotion of its own selfish interests, at the expense of the majority of numbers, the substantial and producing mass of the nation, than the latter is to oppress unjustly the former. . . .

. . .

It is under the word government that the subtle danger lurks. Understood as a central consolidated power, managing and directing the various general interests of the society, all government is evil, and the parent of evil. A strong and active democratic government, in the common sense of the term, is an evil, differing only in degree and mode of operation, and not in nature, from a strong despotism. . . .

The best government is that which governs least. No human depositories can, with safety, be trusted with the power of legislation upon the general interests of society so as to operate directly or indirectly on the industry and property of the community. Such power must be perpetually liable to the most pernicious abuse, from the natural imperfection, both in wisdom of judgment and purity of purpose, of all human legislation, exposed constantly to the pressure of partial interests. . . . Government should have as little as possible to do with the general business and interests of the people. . . . It will be impossible to confine it to the public interests of the commonwealth. It will be perpetually tampering with private interests, and sending forth seeds of corruption which will result in the demoralization of the society. Its domestic action should be confined to the administration of justice, for the protection of the natural equal rights of the citizen and the preservation of social order.

. . .

Such is, then, our democracy. It of course places us in the school of the strictest construction of the Constitution. . . . One necessary inference from the views expressed above is that we consider the preservation of the present ascendancy of the Democratic party as of great, if not vital, importance to the future destinies of this holy cause. . . .

1. Excerpt taken from The United States Magazine and Democratic Review (October 1837). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)