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Counterfactuals in the White House: A Glimpse into Our Post-Truth Times

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May Day 2017 was filled with reporting and debating over a set of comments that US President Trump made while visiting Andrew Jackson's mansion, the 'Hermitage', now a tourist attraction in Nashville, Tennessee. Trump said that had Jackson been deployed, he could have averted the US Civil War. Since Jackson had died about fifteen years before the war started, Trump was clearly making a counterfactual claim. However, it is an interesting claim—not least for its responses, which were fast and furious. They speak to the nature of our times. Let me start with the academic response and then move to how I think about the matter. A helpful compendium of the responses is [here](#).

Jim Grossman of the American Historical Association spoke for all by claiming that Trump ['is starting from the wrong premise'](#). Presumably, Grossman means that the Civil War was inevitable because slavery is so bad that a war over it was inevitable. However well he meant this comment, it feeds into the anti-expert attitude of our post-truth era. Grossman seems to disallow Trump from imagining that preserving the American union was more important than the end of slavery—even though that was exactly how the issue was framed to most Americans 150 years ago. Scholarship is of course mainly about explaining why things happened the way they did. However, there is a temptation to conclude that it necessarily had to happen that way. Today's post-truth culture attempts to curb this tendency. In any case, once the counterfactual door is open to other possible futures, historical expertise becomes more contestable, perhaps even democratised. The result may be that even when non-experts reach the same conclusion as the experts, it may be for importantly different reasons.

Who was Andrew Jackson?

Andrew Jackson is normally regarded as one of the greatest US presidents, whose face is regularly seen on the twenty-dollar banknote. He was the seventh president and the first one who was truly 'self-made' in the sense that he was not well educated, let alone oriented towards Europe in his tastes, as had been his six predecessors. It would not be unfair to say that he was the first President who saw a clear difference between being American and being European. In this respect, his self-understanding was rather like that of the heroes of Latin American independence. He was also given to an impulsive manner of public speech, not so different from the current occupant of the Oval Office.

Jackson volunteered at age thirteen to fight in the War of Independence from Britain, which was the first of many times when he was ready to fight for his emerging nation. Over the past fifty years much attention has been paid to his decimation of native American populations at various points in his career, both military and presidential, as well as his support for slavery. (Howard Zinn was largely responsible, at least at a popular level, for this recent shift in focus.) To make a long and complicated story short, Jackson was rather consistent in acting in ways that served to consolidate American national identity, even if that meant sacrificing the interests of various groups at various times—groups that arguably never recovered from the losses inflicted on them.

Perhaps Jackson's most lasting positive legacy has been the current two-party—Democratic/Republican—political structure. Each party cuts across class lines and geographical regions. This achievement is now easy to underestimate—as the Democratic Party is now ruing. The US founding fathers were polarized about the direction that the fledgling nation should take, precisely along these divides. The struggles began in Washington's first administration between his treasury minister Alexander Hamilton and his foreign minister Thomas Jefferson—and they persisted. Both Hamilton and Jefferson oriented themselves to Europe, Hamilton more in terms of what to imitate and Jefferson in terms of what to avoid. Jackson effectively performed a Gestalt switch, in which Europe was no longer the frame of reference for defining American domestic and foreign policy.

Enter Trump

Now enter Donald Trump, who says Jackson could have averted the Civil War, which by all counts was one of the bloodiest in US history, with an estimated two million lives in total lost. Jackson was clearly a unionist but also clearly a slaveholder. So one imagines that Jackson would have preserved the union by allowing slaveholding, perhaps in terms of some version of the 'states rights' or 'popular sovereignty' doctrine, which gives states discretion over how they deal with economic matters. It's not unreasonable that Jackson could have pulled that off, especially because the economic arguments for allowing slavery were stronger back then than they are now normally remembered.

The Nobel Prize winning economic historian Robert Fogel explored this point quite thoroughly more than forty years ago in his controversial [*Time on the Cross*](#). It is not a perfect work, and its academic criticism is quite instructive about how one might improve exploring a counterfactual world in which slavery would have persisted in the US until it was no longer economically viable. Unfortunately, the politically sensitive nature of the book's content has discouraged any follow-up. When I first read Fogel, I concluded that over time the price of slaves would come to approximate that of free labour considered over a worker's lifetime. In other words, a slave economy would evolve into a capitalist economy without violence in the interim. Slaveholders would simply respond to changing market conditions. So, the moral question is whether it would have made sense to extend slavery over a few years before it would end up merging with what the capitalist world took to be an acceptable way of being, namely, wage labour. Fogel added ballast to his argument by observing that slaves tend to live longer and healthier lives than freed Blacks.

Moreover, Fogel's counterfactual was not fanciful. *Some* version of the states rights doctrine was the dominant sentiment in the US prior to the Civil War. However, there were many different versions of the doctrine which could not rally around a common spokesperson. This allowed the clear unitary voice for abolition emanating from the Christian dissenter community in the Northern states to exert enormous force, not least on the sympathetic and ambitious country lawyer, Abraham Lincoln, who became their somewhat unlikely champion. Thus, 1860 saw a Republican Party united around Lincoln fend off three Democrat opponents in the general election.

None of this is to deny that Lincoln was right in what he did. I would have acted similarly. Moreover, he probably did not anticipate just how bloody the Civil War would turn out to be—and the lasting scars it would leave on the American psyche. But the question on the table is not whether the Civil War was a fair price to pay to end slavery. Rather, the question is whether the Civil War could have been avoided—and, more to the point of Trump’s claim, whether Jackson would have been the man to do it. The answer is perhaps *yes*. The price would have been that slavery would have been extended for a certain period before it became economically unviable for the slaveholders.

It is worth observing that Fogel’s main target seemed to be Marxists who argued that slavery made no economic sense and that it persisted in the US only because of racist ideology. Fogel’s response was that slaveholders probably were racist, but such a de facto racist economic regime would not have persisted as long as it did, had both sides not benefitted from the arrangement. In other words, the success of the anti-slavery campaign was largely about the triumph of aspirational ideas over actual economic conditions. If anything, its success testifies to the level of risk that abolitionists were willing to assume on behalf of American society for the emancipation of slaves. Alexis de Tocqueville was only the most famous of foreign US commentators to notice this at the time. Abolitionists were the [proactionaries](#) of their day with regard to risk. And this is how we should honour them now.