By Jon Meacham

He was a brawler and a courtier, a duelist and a conciliator, a warrior and a lover, a hothead and a cool calculator. Five summers ago, when I started reading deeply in the life of Andrew Jackson, I was struck by a seeming contradiction: he was at once the most remote of heroes and the most modern of men. He was the first truly self-made man to rise to the White House, the architect of the presidency as we know it and champion of democracy in an age of elites. Scarred and bloodied, wounded physically and emotionally, he carried two (that's right, two) bullets in his body for much of his life; wracked by pain, he nevertheless persevered, enduring much in order to make America work for the good of the many. He was a candidate of change, and his White House—riven by passion, sexual scandal, political intrigue and fears of secession—was the first we would recognize as a presidency in action. But I should not have thought Jackson's complexities surprising: America is complex, too, and he was the consummate American. Not to be too grand about it, but if you want to understand America, you have to understand Andrew Jackson.

A curious figure, Jackson is at once ubiquitous and overlooked. Long in the telling of American history, Andrew Jackson has slipped into the shadows, too far out of mind to be instructive or inspiring. In death as in life, he has proven intensely controversial and divisive (he was the object of the first assassination attempt in presidential history, and the second; in both instances he tried to assault his assailant). Now known largely as the scourge of the Indians or as a populist whose admirers trashed the White House on his Inauguration Day, Jackson is a caricature in the popular

imagination, not a character, and that, in part, was what I set out to correct in telling the sage of his life and his White House years.

I did so because I believe that Jackson is in many ways the first modern president, and the early president who most resembles us, for good and for ill. I began work on what became "American Lion" in the summer of 2003, when David McCullough, Walter Isaacson and others had created a wonderful Founders' vogue. I had just finished a book on Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt, and, looking back even farther into our history, it occurred to me (after being prompted by my then-editor, Jonathan Karp), that Jackson, with all his flaws, was the most human of presidents—and that his vices and virtues were the nation's. Jackson could be cruel, but so can we; he could be brutal, but so we are, all too often. He represents the best in us and the worst in us, and his complexities make him a far more compelling, and interesting, figure than many of the men who built America. If you want a simple tale of heroes and villains, you are out of luck; life is hard and messy, as was Andrew Jackson.

His story could be a soap opera, except it really happened. He never knew his father, who died before he was born, and lost his mother and brothers in the Revolutionary War. Orphaned at fourteen, alone in the world, he had hurled himself into the cause of the young republic. Reeling from those losses at such a young age—unimaginably difficult losses—Jackson began to see his life and the life of the country as one. His story is the story of the making of the America we know even now, in the first years of the 21st century. His mastery of politics, the press, and the presidency helped transformed the nation's public life and still shapes the way we live. His hunger for control knew no limits, no boundaries; he was a tireless and sophisticated politician, so

much so that his opponents routinely misread him and were perennially surprised when Jackson got his way.

Jackson's life and work—and the nation he protected and preserved—was shaped by the struggle in his own head and heart between light and dark, grace and rage, generosity and violence, kindness and coldness. Andrew Jackson's America is not unfamiliar to us: a country which cherishes democracy but is willing to live with inequality; which aims for social justice but is prone to racism and unspeakable intolerance; which believes itself one nation but is narrowly divided, fights close elections, and falls into regional wars over culture and power; and which occasionally acts arrogantly toward other countries while craving respect from them at the same time. And in Jackson himself there is a resonant presidential type: the underestimated, hawish populist who understands the people and the press—and knows how to get what he wants.

Shrewd and usually far-seeing, intuitive yet not especially articulate, bad-tempered and smooth-mannered, Jackson was a walking embodiment of the drama of a nation's birth and youth. To his last day, Jackson bore the scar from a brush with a British soldier during the Revolutionary War. Jackson came from nothing, yet had married into, and helped define, frontier aristocracy. He had little formal education, read few books, and liked nothing so much as threatening to kill his enemies—by noose, pistol, or blade. A haphazard speller, he was fiercely intelligent and able in debate. He could seem savage, yet moved in sophisticated circles with skill and grace. In miserable health much of his adult life, Jackson frequently spit up blood when he coughed—he carried a bullet near his lungs—and regularly predicted his own death.

He was fond of well-cut clothes, racehorses, the psalms, dueling, newspapers, gambling, whiskey, coffee, a pipe, pretty women, children, and company; one of his secretaries once observed that "there was more of the woman in his nature than in that of any man I ever knew—more of a woman's tenderness toward children, and sympathy with them." Depending on the moment, he could succumb to the impulses of a war-like temperament or draw on his deep reserves of unaffected human warmth. He spoke with the accent of a provincial in the capital—yet was discriminating in his choice of wines and favored Greek Revival architecture. He may have been a rube in the eyes of some Easterners, but he was a rube who gave lavish dinner parties and finished the East Room and the exterior of the White House.

"American Lion" is also the story of those closest to Jackson—his late wife's niece and nephew and his aides and advisers (a group known as his "Kitchen Cabinet.") Taken all in all, it was an eclectic circle, ever-shifting, linked by bonds of affection and complicated by jealousies and rivalries both large and small. It was, in other words, like most families—only this one lived in the White House and shaped the private world of the president of the United States.

Washington society in the Age of Jackson was glittery, gossipy, and important, for the pleasures of the drawing-room frequently overlapped with the business of the Congress and the White House. The best furniture came from Philadelphia, the best clothes from Paris and New York, the best wine from France. From the brilliant entertaining on Lafayette Square to dinners at the White House and at different embassies, the capital's players glided through a world that was at once charming and treacherous, a milieu of bright faces and dark political intrigues. Jackson's Washington

was a Washington of secrets—of scheming vice presidents and ambitious lawmakers, of wily editors and ferocious hostesses.

Many great, transformative leaders inspire nearly equal parts love and enmity, especially those who find themselves in the crucible at times when the nation is confronting fundamental questions about who we are and how we should live. Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson, Nixon, and Reagan were such presidents, men who held office in eras when the nature of the country, the scope of our engagement with the world, and the scale of our opposition to our enemies were live, open, and explosive issues. Andrew Jackson was also such a leader. His is a story, then, worth the telling, for it is at heart about what all great stories are about: love and honor and pride and passion—and power, always power.