

# Senate Censures President

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**March 28, 1834**

In 1833, the Senate clashed with President Andrew Jackson in a fight over the survival of the Bank of the United States. After months of debate and recriminations, in an unprecedented and never-repeated tactic, the Senate censured the president on March 28, 1834.

Two years earlier, President Andrew Jackson (pictured) had vetoed an act to re-charter the Bank of the United States. That veto became a major issue in his 1832 reelection campaign, in which he decisively defeated Senator Henry Clay.

After the election, Jackson moved to withdraw federal deposits from the bank and, in doing so, set off a political firestorm. The bank's charter gave the secretary of the treasury the power to move federal deposits out of the bank, but required him to report his reasons for such actions to Congress. Jackson instructed Treasury Secretary William J. Duane to remove the deposits but Duane refused. On September 23 Jackson dismissed Duane from his post and with a recess appointment named Attorney General Roger Taney as treasury secretary. Taney, who shared Jackson's stance on the bank, carried out the orders to move federal deposits to a number of state banks and submitted his reasons to Congress in December.

When the new Congress convened in December 1833, Clay's anti-administration coalition in the Senate held an eight-vote majority over Jackson's fellow Democrats. Clay was determined to challenge Jackson on the bank.

Jackson had read a message to his cabinet in September explaining his decision regarding the federal deposits and later had it published in the *Washington Globe*, the mouthpiece of his administration. Clay's first move was to introduce a resolution requesting a copy of that message, arguing that it ought to be submitted as an official document. When Jackson refused to provide it, Clay escalated the conflict.

On December 26, Clay introduced a two-part resolution. The first part stated that in firing Duane and installing Taney to remove the public deposits, Jackson had "assumed the exercise of a power over the Treasury of the United States not granted him by the

Constitution and laws.” The second part, asserting Congress’s role in overseeing the handling of the nation’s deposits, stated that Taney’s explanation for the move was “unsatisfactory and insufficient.”

After a 10-week debate, the Senate voted 26 to 20 to adopt a revised resolution, which stated that “the President, in the late executive proceeding in relation to the public revenue, has assumed upon himself authority and power not conferred by the Constitution and laws, but in derogation of both,” effectively censuring the president. Jackson responded with a lengthy protest denying the validity of the Senate's action. In another unprecedented move, the Senate responded by refusing to print the president's message in its *Journal*.

For nearly three years, Missouri Democrat Thomas Hart Benton campaigned to expunge the censure resolution from the *Senate Journal*. By January 1837, having regained the majority, Senate Democrats [voted to remove this stain](#) from the record of an old and sick president just weeks from his retirement. With boisterous ceremony, the handwritten 1834 *Journal* was borne into the mobbed chamber and placed on the secretary's table. The secretary took up his pen, drew black lines around the censure text, and wrote "Expunged by the order of the Senate." The chamber erupted in Democratic jubilation and a messenger was dispatched to deliver the expunging pen to Jackson. Dressed in the deep black of a mourner, Henry Clay lamented: "The Senate is no longer a place for any decent man."