

Mary Chase Barney to Andrew Jackson (1829)

Jackson's removals from office sparked bitter criticism. In April 1829 Jackson removed William Bedford Barney (1781–1838) as naval officer (a customs post) for the port of Baltimore, replacing him with Dabney S. Carr. Barney had been appointed in 1818, succeeding his father, Joshua Barney, a naval hero of the Revolution and War of 1812. Mary Chase Barney (1785–1872) was William Barney's wife and the daughter of Samuel Chase, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and later Supreme Court justice. Her letter below, written from Baltimore on June 13, 1829, circulated widely and was published in 1830. Barney continued her criticism of Jackson in The National Magazine; or Lady's Emporium, which she published in 1830–31.¹

Sir,

Your note of the 22 April last addressed to me through your private Secretary accompanying the return of my papers, which expresses your “*sincere regret that the rules which you had felt bound to adopt for the government of such cases, did not permit the gratification of my wishes,*” affords no palliation of the injury which you have inflicted on a meritorious officer and his helpless family—It is dark & ambiguous.¹ Knowing that the possession was not alone sufficient justification for the exercise of power; unwilling that your character for firmness should suffer by the imputation of caprice, or that your reputation for humanity should be tarnished by an act of wanton cruelty, you *insinuate* a cause; you hint at a *binding rule*, and *lament* that my husband is within its operation. If it were not unworthy the character of *Genl. Jackson*, I ask you, was it not beneath the dignity of the *President* of these United States to *insinuate*, if bold assertion had been in his power. When you had adopted for your government this inexorable rule was it not cruel in you to conceal it from those on whom it was to operate the most terrible calamities? Why should the President of a free country be governed by secret rules? Why should he wrap himself up in the black robes of mystery, and like a volcano, be seen and felt in his effects, while the secret causes which work the ruin that surrounds are hid within his bosom? Is this rule of which you speak a law of the land; is it a construction drawn from any articles of the constitution, or is it a section of the articles of War? Is it a rule of practice, which having been acted upon by any of your illustrious predecessors, comes down with the force of authority upon you? Did it govern the conduct of that great Man in whose mould (according to your flattere[r]s) *you* were formed? If so, why should you conceal it?...

¹ Daniel Feller et al., eds., *The Papers of Andrew Jackson 7, 1829* (University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 281-286.

The Office Harpies who haunted your public walks and your retired moments, from the very dawn of your administration, and whose avidity for office and power made them utterly reckless of the honorable feelings and just rights of others, cried aloud for *Rotation* in Office. Is that magical phrase, so familiar to the Demagogues of all nations, and of all times, your great and much vaunted Principle of *Reform*? If it be, by what kind of rotary motion is it, that men who have been but a few years, or a few months in office, are swept from the boards, while others (your friends) remain, who date their official Calends, perhaps from the time of Washington? What sort of adaptation of skill to machinery is that which brushes away those only who were opposed to your election, and leaves your friends in full possession?

Your official ~~confident~~ Organ would impose upon the public the belief that you had adopted the Jeffersonian rule of honesty, and capacity, and that incumbents, as well as applicants were tested by that infallible touchstone. The alleged delinquencies of one or two public officers have for this been made a colour; and the dye of their avowed iniquity has been spread with industrious cunning over the skirts of every innocent victim. Even of those few who have been thus charged, their misconduct (reported) was unsuspected, until the prying eyes of their *successors* came to inspect the official records of their proceedings, when *their delegated ingenuity* as in duty bound, could do no less, than find them guilty, and therefore could not have been the *cause* of their dismissal. Your's therefore is not the Jeffersonian Rule—You ask respecting incumbents and applicants other questions, than, “is he *honest*, is he *capable*?” and the answer to your questions decides the applicability of your Rule. By thus ascertaining what your secret rule is not, we may easily come to the discovery of what it is. Supposing you serious when you say you are *controuled by a rule*, and that you do not move blindly like other storms, but that you have eyes which see, and ears which hear, and hence that I have not yet described your rule; there remains however but one motive which could possibly have governed you, “*punishment of your political opponents and rewards for your friends.*”² This is your *rule* and however you may wish to disguise it, or to deceive the world into the belief that your secret principle, is something of a nobler sort, the true one is visible to every eye, and like a red meteor beams through your midnight administration, portending and working mischief and ruin—It was prescribed to you before you had the power to pursue it, by one to whom you are allied by a happy congeniality; whom you have neither the ability nor the wish to disobey, before whose omnipotent breath your presidential strength lies nerveless as infancy; who, while he suffers your

heart to pursue its wonted palpitations, seems to have locked up the closet which confines your *intellect*.....

But I boldly declare that such a rule is altogether unworthy the Presidential office of a magnanimous nation! What! wield the public vengeance for your private wrongs? Hurl from the armory of the nation the bolt of destruction on your private foes? Was the power, dignity, and wealth of the Union centered in your person to be so misused? Had a foreign Prince or Minister committed a like offence, with the same propriety might you have made it a cause of public quarrel, and sent from the ocean and the land hecatombs of appeasing ghosts.

The whole circumference of your *rule* at length expanded itself full to the public view; the reign of terror was unfolded, and a principle unprecedented even in the annals of tyranny, like a destroying angel, ranged through the land blowing the breath of pestilence and famine into the habitations of your enemies. Your *enemies* Sir, No. Your political opponents? You called them *enemies*, but were they so? Can there be no difference of opinion without enmity? Do you believe that *every man* who voted for Mr. Adams and who had not receiv'd from you some personal injury preferred him because he hated you? Think you, Sir, that there is no medium between idolatry and hate? It is not because you think there is no such medium, but because your elevated ambition will allow of none. This makes you look upon all those who voted against you, as your bitter foes. I most firmly believe that, saving those whom you had personally made your enemies, every honest man in giving his suffrage to Mr. Adams, obeyed the dictates of his judgement, and that many did so in violence to their warmer feelings towards you.

My husband, Sir, never was your *enemy*—In the over owing patriotism of his heart, he gave you the full measure of his love for your *military* services. He preferred Mr. Adams for the Presidency, because he thought him qualified, and you unqualified for the station. He would have been a traitor to his country, he would have had even my scorn, and have deserved yours, had he supported you under such circumstances. He used no means to oppose you—He did a patriots duty in a patriots way—For this he is proscribed—*punished*, Oh how punished! My heart bleeds as I write. Cruel, Sir! Did he commit any offence worthy of punishment against God, or against his country or even against you? Blush while you read this question; speak not, but let the crimson negative mantle on your cheek!...³ Careless as you are about the effects of your conduct, it would be idle to inform you of the depth and quality of that misery which you have worked in the bosom of my family. Else would I tell a tale that would provoke sympathy in any thing that

had a heart, or gentle drops of pity from every eye not accustomed to look upon scenes of human cruelty “with composure.” Besides you were apprised of our poverty, you knew the dependence of eight little children for food and raiment upon my husbands salary. You knew that advanced in years as he was, without the means to prosecute any regular business, and without friends able to assist him, the world would be to him a barren heath, an inhospitable wild—You were able therefore to anticipate the heart rending scene which you may now realize as the sole work of your hand—The sickness and debility of my husband *now call upon me to vindicate* his and his childrens wrongs—The natural timidity of my sex vanishes before the necessity of my situation, and a spirit, Sir, as proud as yours, although in a female bosom—demands justice—At your hands I ask it—return to him what you have rudely torn from his possession, give back to his children their former means of securing their food and raiment, shew that you can relent, and that your rule has had at least one exception. The severity practised by you in this instance is heightened, because accompanied by a *breach of your faith solemnly pledged to my husband...*

But this was not all—The wife whom you have thus agonized, drew her being from the illustrious Chase whose voice of thunder early broke the spell of British Allegiance, when in the American senate, he swore by Heaven, that he owned no allegiance to the British Crown; one too, whose signature was broadly before your eyes affixed to the Charter of our Independence—The husband and the father whom you have thus wronged, was the first born Son of a hero, whose naval and military renown brightens the page of your Country’s history from seventy six to 1815, with whose achievements posterity will not condescend to compare your’s; for he fought amidst greater dangers, and he fought for Independence.

By the side of that Father in the second British War fought the Son, and the glorious 12th. of September bears testimony to his unshaken intrepidity⁴—A wife, a husband thus derived; a family of Children drawing their existence from this double revolutionary fountain—You have recklessly, causelessly, perfidiously, and therefore inhumanly, cast helpless and destitute upon the icy bosom of the world, and the children and grand children of Judge Chase & Commore Barney are poverty stricken upon the soil which owes its freedom and fertility in part to their heroic patriotism.

Sir, I would be unworthy the title of an American Matron, or an American wife, if I did not vindicate his, and my children’s wrongs. In this happy land the panoply of liberty protects all without distinction of age or of sex. In the severity practised towards my husband (confessedly

without cause) you have injured me and my children—You have grievously injured them, without achieving any correspondent good to individuals, to your country or yourself—Silence therefore would be criminal even in me, and when the honest and regular feelings of the people of this country (who cannot be long deluded) shall have been restored, and when Party Frenzy, that poison to our national happiness, liberties and honour, shall have subsided, I have no doubt that the exterminating system of “Reform” will be regarded as the greatest of tyranny, though now masked under specious names, and executed with some of the formalities of Patriotism and of liberty. It is possible this communication from an unhappy Mother, and from a female, who until now had many reasons to love her country, will be regarded by you as unworthy of notice; if otherwise, and your inclination corresponds with your power, you have still the means of repairing the injury you have done—I am Sir Yr. Obt Sevnt.

Mary Barney

¹ AJ Donelson had used this language in an April 22 note returning to Mrs. Barney letters she had submitted urging her husband’s retention (Washington National Journal, May 13, 1830).

² Duff Green had declared in a *United States Telegraph* article published on November 3, 1828 that “We know not what line of policy Gen. Jackson will adopt. We take it for granted however, that he will reward his friends, and punish his enemies.”

³ Barney served as a Maryland militia major in the War of 1812.

⁴ At North Point near Baltimore on September 12, 1814, Maryland militia engaged a British force, inflicting heavy casualties and stalling its advance.