**Andrew Jackson vs. Charles Dickinson**

Charles Dickinson is remembered, if at all, as “That guy Andrew Jackson killed in a duel.” The proper way to word that phrase is:

“He’s *one* of the guys Andrew Jackson killed in a duel.”

They used to say when he walked, he rattled like a jar of marbles due to the fact that he was so full of bullets from his many duels, which have been numbered at 13 (the “official count”) to well into the hundreds. Despite a life saturated with savage violence and heartbreak, Andrew Jackson is frequently placed in “top ten” lists of best U.S. Presidents of all time.

Jackson was adoringly and reverently referred to as “Old Hickory.” He wasn’t feared as a particularly unscrupulous politician, but feared more as a lunatic who would knock on your door at two in the morning and kill you. While this was only partially true, his reputation as a man best left alone amidst personal confrontation was cemented after many repeated attempts on his life were averted, both in and out of office.

Jackson was the first sitting President whose life was put in danger. A seaman named Robert B. Randolph was discharged from the Navy by Andrew Jackson for embezzlement. On May 6th, 1833, in Alexandria, Virginia, Randolph threw a punch at the President and ran like a coward, and a mob which included author Washington Irving chased him down. Jackson brushed his shoulder off and declined pressing charges. No big deal. He’d seen much, much worse.

He fought in the Revolutionary War at age 13, for instance, and was taken prisoner by the British along with his brother, Robert. After refusing to polish a British officer’s boots, young Andrew was beaten and slashed with a sword, leaving permanent scars on his head, hands, and body. While his father died three months before he was born, every other member of his immediate family (including his mother) died as direct result of the Revolutionary War. Andrew Jackson developed an intense hatred for the British because of this, and blamed them for causing him to be an orphan at the brittle age of 14.

On January 30th, 1835, a mentally ill house painter from England named Robert Lawrence, who claimed to be King Richard III and was owed money by Andrew Jackson appeared from behind a column at the U.S. Capitol as the President and his entourage left a funeral. Lawrence produced a pistol and fired. He then drew a second pistol and fired again, a mere three paces away from Jackson. Neither weapon discharged. Without hesitation, the President of the United States beat Lawrence half to death with his cane in front of a large audience. Instead of protecting Jackson, his friends, such as Davy Crockett, jumped in to protect the would-be assassin.

So when the house painter’s pistols failed, Lawrence found himself dangerousy within range of a formidable opponent. Years earlier Jackson had advised a young man on how to wield a cane in combat. He warned that a cane swung at head level was easy to deflect; rather one should “take the stick so [held like a spear] and punch him in the stomach.” He described having once fought a man that way in Tennessee: “Sir, it doubled him up. He fell at my feet, and I stamped on him.” Richard Lawrence later told investigators that he only felt genuine fear when he saw the 67-year-old President charge.

Many claimed that the pistols’ misfiring was the work of divine intervention. *American Heritage*:

While Washington’s finest doctors listened to Lawrence claim to be the king of England, the police were testing his majesty’s misfired pistols. They worked perfectly. After watching them drive bullets through an inch-thick wood plank at 30 feet, many shuddered to think what they could have done to Old Hickory. Sen. Thomas Hart Benton, who had also once shot at Jackson, reflected that “two pistols—so well loaded, so coolly handled, and which afterward fired with such readiness, force, and precision—missing fire, each in its turn, when leveled eight feet at the President’s heart . . . made a deep impression upon the public feeling, and irresistibly carried many minds to the belief in a superintending Providence.” To his friends, Jackson’s survival could be nothing but the work of a higher power.

In 1806, well before he would be elected President, Andrew Jackson had a disagreement with a rival lawyer, horse breeder, and plantation owner named Charles Dickinson. Dickinson’s father-in-law, Captain Joseph Ervin, mishandled a horse racing bet with Jackson and this caused a friend of Jackson’s to protest. Dickinson came to the Captain’s rescue, verbally attacking Jackson’s friend. Jackson intervened, which enraged Dickinson. In the newspaper *Nashville Review*, Dickinson, known as the top duelist in the south at the time, referred to Jackson as a “worthless scoundrel... a poltroon and a coward.” He also publicly called Jackson’s wife, Rachel, a bigamist since her divorce was not final before she married Hickory.

Jackson, knowing Dickinson’s reputation as a top gunfighter, bravely challenged the man to a duel to protect his and Rachel’s honor. Since dueling was illegal in Tennessee, they agreed to meet in Kentucky at the Red River on May 30th, 1806, 305 years ago at the time of this writing.

So bold was Andrew Jackson that he gave Charles Dickinson the first shot. Jackson took a bullet two inches from the heart, breaking ribs. He held his wound, and fighting the urge to slump, aimed his weapon but misfired. He fired a second time and dropped Dickinson to the ground, who died of his injuries later that evening. Jackson carried the bullet in his chest until he died at the age of 78.