

ANDREW JOHNSON  
THE MOST UNFORTUNATE PRESIDENT IN AMERICAN HISTORY

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by Jack Boxley

It was February 8, 1865, the sun of the Confederacy was sinking fast, though gloriously. Pressure by some of his top advisers persuaded President Jeff Davis to ask for a peace conference, in the hope of obtaining from Lincoln a statement of Union war aims to "fire the Southern heart." The statement came after a four-hour conference on board the steamer, River Queen in Hampton Roads, between President Lincoln and Vice President Stephens, who had been Lincoln's friend in Congress sixteen years earlier. Stephens had credentials to negotiate peace as the envoy for an independent republic. Lincoln patiently repeated his refusal to negotiate on that basis. Senator Hunter, who accompanied Stephens, alleged as precedent the negotiations during the English Civil War. Lincoln replied, "I do not profess to be posted in history on all such matters, I will turn you over to Seward. All I distinctly recollect about the case of Charles I is that he lost his head. This war will cease on the part of the Government, whenever it shall have ceased on the part of those who began it."

Sherman had made his devastating march from Atlanta to the sea and was marching north into the Carolinas. Joe Johnston fought his last battle at Bentonville, North Carolina on March 19. On April 3 Union forces entered Richmond. On April 9 Lee ordered a white flag to be carried through the lines to request an interview with General Grant.

The scene that followed, in the McLean house of the tiny village of Appomattox Court House, has become a part of American folklore: Lee, in a new full dress uniform with sash and jewell-studded sword, Grant in his usual unbuttoned private's blouse, "his feelings sad and depressed at the downfall of a foe who had fought so long and valiantly."

Grant wrote these terms of surrender in his own hand. "Officers and men paroled--arms and material surrendered--officers to keep their side arms, and let all the men who claim to own a horse or a mule take the animals home with them to work their little farms." "This will do much toward conciliating our people", said Lee and mounted Traveller and returned to his field headquarters. Grant said: "The war is over, the rebels are our countrymen again". "Over the carnage rose prophetic a voice," wrote Walt Whitman, catching the spirit of that great moment. "Affection shall solve the problems of freedom yet."

Could his prophecy have been fulfilled but for the insane assassination on April 14? It could have been had matters been left to the fighting officers and men.

Lee and Grant appointed commissioners to arrange practical details of the surrender and they had no difficulty reaching an agreement. Grant rushed rations to the half starved confederates and allowed them free transportation home on government ships and railways. As General Gordon, one of the commissioners said, "Courtesy and even deference was shown to the defeated officers, everyone looked forward to a "liberal, generous, magnanimous policy toward the south".

Senator Benjamin H. Hill, of Georgia, said in 1874 "all physical advantages are insufficient to account for our failure.

The truth is, we failed because too many of our people were not determined to win."

April 12, 1865 was the date of the formal laying down of arms.

President Davis slipped away from Richmond on April 2 ahead of Union troops--he did not feel he was retreating, just looking for a new capitol. News of Lee's surrender did not kill Davis's resolve to continue the fight--he was living in a purple dream and blind to the raw fact of utter and complete defeat. At Greensboro, North Carolina he called a confederate cabinet meeting which Generals Johnston and Beauregard attended along with secretaries Benjamin, Mallory, and Breckenridge. All tried to persuade Davis to throw in the sponge--he would not.

On April 26 Johnston surrendered his army to Sherman. On May 10 President Davis and his wife were captured near Irwinsville, Georgia and that was the end of the confederate government.

"With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan--to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations."

This closed the second inaugural address of President Lincoln. The struggle over reconstruction was already on, but when Congress next met in December, it might be confronted with the established fact of a restored nation, if the south were wise, and nothing happened to Lincoln.

Everywhere in Washington "the words peace, pardon, and clemency were heard." On April 11, the day after Lee's surrender was announced, Lincoln delivered his last public address from a window in the Whitehouse to a crowd on the lawn.



After a brief allusion to Appomattox and the hope of a speedy peace, he unfolded his reconstruction policy--the most magnanimous terms toward a helpless opponent ever offered by a victor--he did not consider himself a conqueror--he was and had been since 1861 the President of the United States. The rebellion must be forgotten and every southern state must be readmitted to full privileges in the Union as soon as ten percent of its citizens had taken the oath of allegiance and organized a state government.

On Good Friday, April 14, 1865, Lincoln, who loved the theater, took his wife and two friends to Ford's Theater to see Laura Keane in a play called "Our American Cousin."

About 10:13 p. m., a pistol shot rang out, the President slumped in his seat, Booth leaped from the box to the stage and escaped through the rear exit. The night before Lincoln dreamed that--"in a strange, indescribable ship he seemed to be moving with great rapidity toward a far, indefinite shore." And so he did travel to a far off shore. At 7:22 a. m. April 15 President Lincoln died.

Andrew Johnson of North Carolina and Tennessee was thrust into the Whitehouse by the assassination of Lincoln. He was the seventeenth President of the United States and the third Vice President to step into office because of the death of a President.

Johnson was an old-fashioned southern Jacksonian Democate of pronounced states' rights views. He was an "accidental president." He had to deal with some of the most difficult problems that have ever faced an American President.

J. Wilkes Booth not only killed a great and good President, he gave fresh life to the very forces of hate and vengeance which Lincoln himself was trying to kill.



Had Lincoln lived his magnanimous policy toward the south may have prevailed.

Even though the war between the states was over, the most difficult problem of bringing the southern states back into the Union remained.

Johnson tried to reconstruct the Federal Union by giving speedy control of southern states to those who would take the oath of allegiance.

Johnson was a Democrat, a southerner, and a slave owner. He had strong sympathy for the south although he had remained loyal to the Union when his state, Tennessee, seceded. He tried to carry through Lincoln's plan of treating the southern states kindly and generously. But Congress was dominated by the Republicans--they were determined to keep their party in control, to punish the south, to profit by the war--the leaders were brilliant and ruthless. Laws, harsh laws, were passed time and again over Johnson's veto. Johnson was no match for them--he did not have Lincoln's statecraft and astuteness of political maneuver. He was courageous and stubborn; he was indecisive, putting off action until it was too late.

Johnson's enemies in Congress tried to remove him from office by impeaching him. If they had succeeded, they might have changed the entire system of government in the United States--the President might have become a mere figurehead, with no real power. Witness today's President, who likewise was accidental, but who has tremendous power--his name is Johnson also.

Johnson was a typical, uneducated, hardworking man of the frontier. His beginnings were humble--he began as a tailor's apprentice and without any formal schooling--rose to Vice President through a career as State Representative, Governor, and United States Senator.

He was honest, brave, and very intelligent, but he had the touchy pride of a self-made man--being reserved and finding it hard to seek or accept advice.

He did not change his mind--he was tender hearted--but had neither tact nor sense of humor. He could not get men of opposing views to work together as Lincoln could. He was an unfortunate President. It was he who said, "God's best gift to man--a noble woman." At 19 he married Eliza McCordie, who taught him to read and write.

Johnson's fine traits were not appreciated until after his administration was over. But he lived to see the American people realize that he had been treated very unjustly. Abuses begun then were not corrected for years, and the financial interests of the north took control of the country.

Andrew Johnson was born at Raleigh, North Carolina on December 29, 1808. His father, Jacob Johnson, was a handy man in a tavern and his mother, Mary McDonough was a maid in the same tavern. Andrew was the younger of two sons and his father died when he was three years old. His mother did washing and sewing--they were very poor even though Mrs. Johnson married again. There was no way to send the children to school.

When he was fourteen years old he was apprenticed to a tailor for six years. After two years he ran away and started his own business in Laurens Court House, South Carolina in 1824. In 1825 he moved to East Tennessee. In 1826 his mother, stepfather, and older brother came to live with him in Greeneville, Tennessee.

Here he opened a tailor shop and was busy at his trade. In those days it was the custom to employ someone to read to the workmen as they sat cross-legged on their tables, stitching clothes.

This included the American constitution, the local paper with its lively discussion of political questions, and sometime a book on poetry or history.

He married Eliza McCardle, a beautiful and intelligent girl of Greeneville. She taught him to read and write and encouraged him to read and study. He walked four miles once a week to take part in debates held by students of two colleges in the neighborhood. His shop became the meeting place of the townspeople who wanted to discuss public affairs. He prospered, bought land, and became a slaveowner.

Johnson developed a powerful though crude oratorical style through participation in local debating. He entered politics and became an adept stump speaker, always championing the common man and attacking the plantation aristocracy.

In Johnson's time, Tennessee was ruled by a small group of great landowners and they controlled the local government in Greeneville although the eastern part of the state had been settled chiefly by small farmers.

In 1829 at 21 he entered politics and was elected alderman, then mayor, then advanced to the state legislature in 1835 and on to the U. S. House of Representatives in 1843 for ten years. He was a loyal Jacksonian Democrat.

He became more widely known in 1840 when he campaigned for Martin Van Buren as a Democratic elector-at-large. He learned to sway large crowds with his powerful voice and homely arguments. His appearance was striking- although of medium height, with powerful shoulders, stubby legs, and had a large head. His eyes were a brilliant black, his features were rugged and he had a mass of black hair.



He was elected to the State Senate in 1841. Here he became very unpopular with the large land holders by suggesting that only white people should be counted in determining the number of representatives a district could have--this would have given less power to the landowners who also owned many slaves and since five slaves were counted as three white men in determining representation.

By 1843 he was recognized as a political leader in Eastern Tennessee and was elected to the United States House of Representatives. He was conscious and proud of his humble origin. He kept to himself and avoided the aristocrats who represented the southern states at that time. The southern leaders considered him not "pure" on the slavery question.

Johnson was not consistent on slavery. In Congress he voted to admit Oregon and California as free states, but approved the entrance of Texas as a slave state. He supported the Lecompton constitution of the pro-slavery group in Kansas.

He believed that slavery had to be defended because the constitution sanctioned it. He owned eight slaves. He tirelessly advocated a homestead bill to provide free farms to the landless for twenty years and became enraged when President Buchanan, heeding planter protests, vetoed one such bill. His bill would have opened Federal lands to poor white settlers and would have destroyed slavery. Johnson opposed the political power of the great slaveowners, but he thought agitation against slavery was a threat to the safety of the Union.

He favored higher taxation of the rich and defended the rights of workmen and poor farmers--but he stood with the Democrats in fighting higher tariffs and internal improvements.

During the secession crisis, Johnson made a firm stand in defense of the Union and Constitution.

He remained in his seat in the Senate when Tennessee seceded--he became a hero in the north but a traitor in the eyes of most southerners.

In 1853 he became Governor of Tennessee. He favored laws to provide free public education and he fought the use of prison labor in competition with free white labor, but to no avail.

In 1855 he was reelected Governor even though he was opposed by the Whigs and the Know-Nothing Party, a secret political order hostile to foreigners, Catholics, and Masons. Johnson was a Mason and despised all kinds of religious persecution.

In 1857 he returned to Washington as U. S. Senator from Tennessee. His Homestead bill was finally passed in 1862 after the war between the states had begun and southern representatives had withdrawn.

As the slavery question became more critical, Johnson continued his middle of the road course. He stood for the Union and slavery. This suggested that he would be a good compromise candidate for President in 1860. Tennessee voted for him that year at the Democratic Convention, but he withdrew and gave his support to John C. Breckenridge.

Johnson did not believe that the south would secede until the last minute. On December 18, 1860 he made a powerful plea in the Senate for unity. He was the only southern member of Congress who refused to secede with his state.

On March 2, 1861 he denounced the secessionists before the Senate and threatened them with the death penalty for treason.

When he returned to Tennessee his train was besieged by mobs again and again. Eastern Tennessee always supported Johnson, but the state seceded in June 1861.

In 1862 President Lincoln sent Johnson to Tennessee as military Governor and with much difficulty made the state serve as a laboratory for Reconstruction.

He planned to win back the rebel sympathizers by a generous policy. Part of Tennessee had been freed by the Union armies, but Johnson had to wait for more Union victories. He wanted to allow free elections for voters in Tennessee who would take an oath against the rebellion and accept the Emancipation Proclamation provided those voters had not supported the confederacy. He had made so much progress by March 1864 that Tennessee prepared to send representatives to Congress.

Johnson's devotion to the Union and his record as a military governor made him a national figure. He was the most prominent of the War Democrats. The Republicans and War Democrats supported Lincoln for a second term and named Johnson as candidate for Vice President. The two parties combined under the banner of the National Union Party. Johnson was a southerner and a Democrat--thus their contention that their party was a coalition of all loyal men.

They were inaugurated March 4, 1865. Johnson had just recovered from an attack of Typhoid Fever, but Lincoln insisted that he take part in the ceremonies. For strength he took a drink or two and the alcohol made him tipsy--his speech was jumbled and his appearance disheveled. His enemies accused him of being a drunkard, but this was never proved.



Six weeks after the inauguration, on April 15, 1865 Lincoln was assassinated--Johnson became President just as the war between the states ended. This was the beginning of Reconstruction.

Johnson kept the same cabinet that Lincoln had appointed. It included William H. Seward as Secretary of State and Edwin M. Stanton as Secretary of War.

The long and difficult task of reconstruction put Johnson into conflict with Congress at the beginning. The Congressmen who opposed Johnson were on doubtful legal ground--they had fought a war to prove that no state could leave the Union, but when the war was won, they claimed that theseceding states were outside the Union and could come back only on terms dictated by Congress.

The real motives of Congressmen who fought Johnson were later made clear. They wanted to retain the power they had won as a political party and they wanted to give northern business interests a free hand. They had been blocked at every turn by southern politicians who represented agricultural interests. The Republicans in Congress were dominated by a group called Radicals--they feared that former southern leaders would return to Congress and outnumber them.

The Radicals wanted a protective tariff, a national banking system, the repayment of the war debt in gold, and government aid to transcontinental railroads. The foundation for these had been laid during the war years in Congress with a Republican majority. It was well known that Johnson was a states rights, southern Democrat who had always opposed large economic interests, even in the south--they knew that Johnson would block their plans for postwar industrial expansion.

After taking the oath of office, Johnson proceeded with reconstruction under his own authority, just as Lincoln had planned. On May 29, 1865, he issued a Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction which offered to restore the southern states to the union. This was while Congress was not in session.

Johnson pardoned all those who would take an oath of allegiance, except for former leaders of the confederacy and men of wealth whom he required to obtain special Presidential pardons--and he was generous in bestowing these.

By the time Congress met again in December 1865, most southern states were operating their governments and had ratified the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery. But Black Codes, state laws which tended to deprive freedmen of their rights, began to appear. Ex-Confederates were prominent in the legislatures and administrations of these states and several score former Confederate officers and officials, including the former Vice President of the Confederacy, had been elected to Congress.

Radical Republicans, led by Thaddeus Stevens and Charles Sumner moved to block the Johnson reconstruction program. A joint committee of fifteen from both houses was created to decide whether representatives from southern states could be admitted. They planned to punish all Confederate leaders, give the vote to the negroes, and place the south under military rule.

Johnson opposed this program and vetoed the bills as violation of states rights. Johnson thought that the individual states should decide the question of negro suffrage, as they did in the north, and he felt that military occupation would keep alive the hatreds of war. His veto of a bill to extend

the life of the Freedmen's Bureau, an agency providing relief to negroes, was sustained. Johnson charged that Radical Republican leaders were traitors on February 22, 1866.

This was the first open break between Johnson and Congress--he stated that their bills, which he regularly vetoed and which they consistently passed over his veto, were "legal monstrosities."

The Civil Rights Act of 1866, which established negroes as American citizens and forbade states to discriminate against them was passed. This was intended to nullify Black Code laws passed in the southern states which laws tended to make negroes slaves again. Johnson opposed this act because he felt it interfered with the rights of states.

In June 1866, Congress passed the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution. This amendment was designed to protect the civil rights of the negroes, to bar former rebels from holding office or voting until 1870, to restrict representation in Congress in accordance with the number of voters, and to declare the Confederate debt null and void. Johnson objected to the clause concerning former rebels holding office. He could not see how the south could find leaders to work out its problems if this source of leadership was cut off.

The Fourteenth Amendment specified that no state should "deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws. All former Confederate states except Tennessee refused to accept the amendment.

Slaves alone were not the only consideration in the Fourteenth Amendment, big business was included. It was called the "magna charta of accumulated wealth and capital."



Johnson opposed the amendment, but it was ratified by the necessary number of states and went into effect on July 28, 1868.

There were two bloody race riots in the south in 1866 and when Johnson toured the east and middle west, he faced hostile, heckling audiences; in Congressional elections that fall Radical Republicans won overwhelming victories.

In March 1867, the Radicals initiated their own plan of Reconstruction, placing southern states under military rule until they met certain requirements, including approval of the Fourteenth Amendment.

The Stevens Reconstruction Bill divided the south into five military districts and imposed strict army rule. The bill provided for the organization of state governments under Federal supervision; it also provided that the states could not send representatives to Congress until they approved the Fourteenth Amendment--the bill was passed over the President's veto. The initial military appointees were Generals Schofield, Thomas, Ord, Sickles and Sheridan. The last two (and Pope who relieved Thomas) were replaced by President Grant after they had made themselves obnoxious to the white population through arbitrary acts.

Next, the Radicals turned on President Johnson--pushing through the Tenure of Office Act (this was ruled unconstitutional in 1926 by the Supreme Court). This law forbade the Chief Executive to remove, without the Senate's approval, any official whose appointment had been confirmed by the Senate. On August 2, 1867, President Johnson dismissed Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, who was plotting with the Radicals and appointed General U. S. Grant in his place. In January 1868 Grant broke with the President and turned his office over to Stanton.

Stanton was removed again and General Lorenzo Thomas was appointed. Stanton locked himself in his office and would not yield to Thomas.

The Senate declared that Johnson had violated the Act by removing Stanton without its approval. On February 25, 1868, the House of Representatives passed a resolution impeaching the President. Thus Johnson became the first and only President to be impeached.

There were eleven articles of impeachment--the first charged that Johnson had broken the Tenure of Office Act when he fired Stanton and the eleventh, that Johnson had committed various offenses in his attacks on Congress.

On March 5, 1868, the Senate organized itself into a Court to hear the case. Johnson remained dignified and silent in the White House while his lawyers defended him.

Samuel Eliot Morison in The Oxford History of the American People said: "Although a monstrous charge preferred by George S. Boutwell, that Johnson was accessory to the murder of Lincoln, was not included, the impeachment of Johnson was one of the most disgraceful episodes in our history. Johnson was defended by able counsel including William Maxwell Evarts, leader of the American Bar and Benjamin R. Curtis, formerly a justice of the Supreme Court. They tore the prosecution's case to shreds. No valid grounds legal or otherwise, existed for impeachment. Yet the Radicals would have succeeded in their object but for Chief Justice Chase's insistence on legal procedure, and for sevendourageous Republican Senators who sacrificed their political future by voting for acquittal: Grimes of Iowa, Trumbull of Illinois, Ross of Kansas, Fessenden of Maine, Van Winkle of West Virginia, Fowler of Tennessee, and Henderson of Missouri. One more affirmative vote, and Ben Wade, president of the Senate, would have been installed in the White House.

Then, in all probability, the Supreme Court would have been battered into submission and the Radicals would have triumphed over the constitution as completely as over the south."

On May 16, 1868, thirty-five Senators voted to convict and nineteen to acquit--one vote short of two-thirds necessary for conviction.

President Kennedy told the story of Edmund G. Ross ("I looked down into my open grave") in his Profiles in Courage. All seven were denounced as Benedict Arnolds, Judas Iscarrots and all but Grimes and Fessenden, who died shortly, were defeated when they next came up for election.

At home Johnson had been able to accomplish nothing because of Reconstruction and his battles with Congress. However, Secretary of State Seward did accomplish two things --during the war between the states, Napoleon III sent an army to Mexico to overthrow the Mexican government--he placed Maximilian, of Austria, on the throne as Emperor of Mexico. This was a violation of the Monroe Doctrine. In 1865 Federal troops were sent to the Mexican border and Seward informed Napoleon's ambassador that the U. S. Army would drive the French out by force if necessary. Napoleon did not wish to become involved in a war with the United States. In 1867 he withdrew the last of his troops from Mexico, and Maximilian was left behind to face the firing squad.

The other important accomplishment in foreign relations was the purchase of Alaska from Russia in 1867. The United States purchased Alaska from Russia for \$7,200,000. Seward had no trouble getting approval of the Senate, but the House was not enthusiastic. For years this purchase was referred to as Seward's Folly.



How wrong this was--today Alaska is a very valuable state and that purchase was no folly, it was a bargain. Alaska has great undeveloped resources, even today.

Johnson's last months as President were uneventful. He hoped the Democratic Party would nominate him as their candidate for President in 1868--but they chose Horatio Seymour, a sound money man from New York, to run against Grant. Grant would have lost except for the negro vote in the south.

Johnson won more and more respect for the honorable way in which he faced Congress. His last important official act was the proclamation on Christmas Day, 1868, of complete pardon to all who had been connected with secession.

In 1875 Tennessee returned the "old commoner" to the Senate. In March 1875, he delivered a speech attacking Grant and defending the Constitution. He never quit defending the Constitution.

Johnson, the 17th president died, following a paralytic stroke at his daughter's plantation in Tennessee--he was buried at Greeneville, Tennessee--his old home. Great crowds came to pay their respects to the stubborn old fighter, the most unjustly attacked of all American Presidents.

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