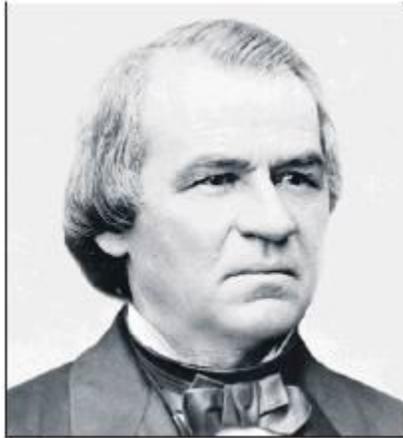


# JOHNSON FAILED IN WAKE OF CIVIL WAR - LINCOLN PAVED WAY FOR ONE OF THE NATION'S WORST PRESIDENCIES

BY RANDY KOCH



*Andrew Johnson*

The more things change, the more things stay the same. Only when Atlanta fell in September 1864 did President Abraham Lincoln begin to believe he could be reelected. While militarily he needed the Union army and navy to go on the offensive to defeat the Confederacy, he went on the defensive politically to retain the presidency.

In the last 50 years, we have questioned the qualifications of running mates presidential candidates have selected. Vice Presidents Lyndon Johnson, Gerald Ford, and George H. Bush each proved themselves capable of serving in the nation's highest office, although each reached the office in a different manner.

In 1864, Illinois Republican Abraham Lincoln selected Tennessee Democrat Andrew Johnson as a running mate for what the Republicans marketed as the Unionist Party. Johnson's primary attribute was his vehement opposition to secession at the beginning of the war and his continued support for the Union war effort since its beginning. Lincoln had never even met Johnson prior to the inauguration, selecting him solely on political motives.

One of our greatest presidents paved the way for arguably our worst president to attain the nation's highest office. Andrew Johnson's administration is judged primarily on reconstruction following the Civil War. One only needs to look at Mississippi today and recognize that it failed miserably.

Andrew Johnson was a self-made man from eastern Tennessee who at one time owned slaves and held little sympathy for the plight of African Americans. Due to his humble beginnings, he also harbored great disdain for the Southern aristocratic class. He prominently displayed those biases during his term as president.

Dr. Brooks D. Simpson, in his comprehensive book, "The Reconstruction Presidents," quotes Johnson in July 1865 as saying, "These states have not gone out of the Union, therefore Reconstruction is unnecessary" and he "desired to have the seceded States return back to their former position as soon as possible."

Initially, the Radical Republicans believed that Johnson aligned with their desire for black male suffrage and stringent guidelines for the return of functional southern state governments. Johnson moved away from those views not only because of his deep personal convictions but because the northern citizenry allowed it.

Newspaper reporter Whitelaw Reid noted, "southern whites stand ready to claim everything if permitted, and to accept anything, if required." A brief window of

opportunity existed following the Civil War for the North to lay the groundwork to rebuild the South economically and politically, much like the Allies did with Germany and Japan following World II. Instead, Civil War Reconstruction laid the foundation for unresolved issues for future generations, similar to those implemented at the close of World War I.

Early in the Johnson Administration, the 15th Amendment passed allowing male black suffrage. Not only in the South was this unpopular, but also in the North. In the fall of 1865, Connecticut, Wisconsin and Minnesota each failed to pass state legislation permitting black suffrage, which further enticed Johnson to reestablish a South that was not that different from antebellum days. Slavery was gone. Johnson envisioned the place for blacks as a class in southern society would remain the same.

Loosened restrictions allowing prominent former Confederates to receive pardons after taking the Oath of Allegiance essentially addressed the minor technicality blocking the path for many to return to political office. Johnson permitted returning states to develop their own militias to maintain order. Many of those state militias superficially carried out federal law with very loose interpretation while using their new power to keep former slaves in line as they saw fit. Johnson escaped impeachment by only one vote and left a politically splintered nation.

If Johnson would have been removed from office, Sen. Benjamin Wade of Ohio, as President pro tempore of the Senate, would have become president. The man who cast the deciding vote, which kept Johnson in office, was Sen. Edmund G. Ross of Kansas. Ross was born in Ashland, Ohio. He went to school and started a newspaper career in Sandusky before moving to Wisconsin and then Kansas.

In 1868 the nation elected its most popular man, Ulysses S. Grant. Whereas Johnson used the plight of southern blacks as pawns to build his power base, Grant strove to build a power base in order to protect them. As Grant entered the White House, he admitted, "To go into the presidency opens altogether a new field to me, in which there is to be new strife to which I am not trained."

During his term, Grant faced issues and events that would prohibit historians from judging his administration in a positive light. Scandal came to light at the beginning of his second term, though much of it had its seeds planted during the Johnson administration. He lacked cohesive party support, as the Radical Republicans, though weakened, continued promoting their own agenda and driving a wedge between the moderates, who seemed to better represent the northern populace. Add to that a severe economic crisis known as the Panic of 1873, due in large part to the "Railroad Bubble" bursting. Northern and Southern whites alike both complained of the tax burden required for the transition of taking former slaves to freedom. The challenges and coercion facing 4 million formerly enslaved people slipped far down the list of the average northern citizen's concerns.

Because each southern state presented different issues, Grant was often viewed as vacillating as he addressed each situation individually. He was not averse to utilizing federal troops to protect rights guaranteed by the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments. He also soon realized that Americans seemed leery of a despotic federal government displacing state government to enforce the law. One former antislavery politician even

went as far as to imply that if force was necessary to ensure freedom for 4 million people, then perhaps emancipation was wrong. Short of stationing vast numbers of federal troops throughout the South, Grant did what he could to maintain order in the South.

Despite the countless atrocities reported throughout the South, without the widespread support of Americans who were eager to put the war and its cause behind them, he could only accomplish so much. Grant did prove instrumental by influencing Rutherford B. Hayes' ascent to the presidency in a highly disputed election similar in controversy to that of George Bush and Al Gore in 2000. Although Hayes refused to deploy federal troops, his election did maintain a status quo rather than allow a strong reversal had the Democrats entered the White House.

Nineteenth century Americans for the most part accepted the termination of Reconstruction during the Hayes administration. It is for the historian of today to look back and determine when or if it ever truly ended.

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