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Nicole Perkins
University of Dayton

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Writing Process

This historiography began with an abundance of research done on the topic of Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction, annotating each source, noticing trends in interpretation, and organizing my thoughts. Through this historiography, the reader will be able to clearly see the drastically different interpretations of Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction during different time periods of American history.

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Andrew Johnson: The Uniting or Dividing Factor of Reconstruction

In a divided country faced with the devastation of an assassinated president, Andrew Johnson took office during one of the most trying times in American history. His efforts to unify the country during the post-civil war era have been widely analyzed and criticized as early as 1930 and are dissected even today. As citizens of a country where racial issues still exist, it is imperative to acknowledge how far we have come as a country since Reconstruction and how far we still have to go. Despite the various interpretations of Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction, it is undisputed that the way in which Johnson facilitated Reconstruction completely shaped how the United States integrated black people into society. The contingency of history means that the way in which Johnson handled Reconstruction directly affected other racial controversies, such as the Civil Rights movement and even the Black Lives Matter movement today. This is why it is the duty of Americans to study Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction as to better understand why integration was so difficult.

In order to understand these effects of Johnson's Reconstruction, it is important to address how the interpretation of Andrew Johnson has changed over time. Basically, there are two arguments for Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction. With varying degrees of enthusiasm, historians throughout time either agree that Johnson was good for Reconstruction and provided a platform for rebuilding the nation, or historians despise him and intensely criticize Johnson's

strategies for unifying the country. Typically, sources that spoke highly of Johnson are the same outdated sources that believe that black people did not deserve the right to vote or have the same rights as a white man. In contrast, the sources that recognized Johnson as a terrible president also recognized his failure to integrate black people successfully into the community. After analyzing each source on the topic of Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction and grouping them into two categories, the sources pointing toward Johnson as an ineffective president during Reconstruction provide the more compelling argument.

The first category of interpretation developed in the 1930s when historians began reflecting on Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction. The common denominator within this category of sources is that each of these historians genuinely believed that Andrew Johnson helped speed up the unification of America after the Civil War in an efficient way. The first source that is reflective of this time period is Howard K. Beale's *The Critical Year: A Study of Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction*. Beale's argument defends Andrew Johnson and his Reconstruction policies, specifically applauding Johnson's amnesty policies for ex-Confederates after the Civil War. By describing Johnson's strengths and weaknesses as the successor of Abraham Lincoln, Beale bases Johnson's credibility on Lincoln's own policies. His strengths, according to Beale, included Johnson's ability to rebuild the Union by displaying kindness and forgiveness toward the South while believing that Southerners were essentially good people. Beale's view of Johnson's weaknesses, however, are even more indicative of the attitude toward Johnson during the 1930s. Beale states that Johnson was so bold in nature that it was almost a fault.¹

The second source that describes Johnson in a positive light is also a source from 1930. George Milton's *The Age of Hate: Andrew Johnson and the Radicals* provides a sympathetic

argument defending Johnson because he rose to the presidency at a time where the North wanted him to remain true to Lincoln's vision of Reconstruction, but Southerners had certain expectations of Johnson because he himself was a Southerner. Milton supports this argument by providing specific examples of how Johnson led America in one of the most difficult and controversial times in history. However, Milton says that Johnson had "zeal for the Union, and his anxiety was for the restoration of peace and friendship after the seceded States had been restored."² He also gives explicit examples of how devoted Johnson was toward Reconstruction policy during his first three months of presidency, including the simple fact that Johnson took no recreation at all during this time. This book is an excellent source for this category of interpretation of Johnson because it defends his decisions and policies during Reconstruction, but it also acknowledges that Johnson's choice to provide amnesty for Southerners was a long, deeply pondered decision.³ Beale and Milton are quite similar in their claims, probably due to the fact that their books were published in the same year and because both authors were in favor of Johnson's policies. However, these sources differ in that Milton's argument is more sympathetic toward Johnson and gives him more credit than he generally receives for his advancements in unifying the States. Beale, on the other hand, does not even acknowledge that there was a population of Americans, specifically black Americans, that despised Johnson. He sees no wrong in Johnson at all.

The next source within this category jumps to the year 1960 and is a major outlier. Chronologically, the sources in between 1930 and 1960 tend toward recognizing the erroneous ways in which Johnson handled Reconstruction. Cutting against this trend, in 1960 Eric McKittrick reverted back to the original claims of Johnson being a respectable and earnest president. This source takes the position that Johnson initially indicated that his attitude toward

the South would be harsh, but the generosity inherent in his amnesties ensured that the South would rapidly be reincorporated into the Union. McKittrick supports this argument by saying that the anger toward Johnson was discredited by 20th century historians, and Johnson's diligence and dedication to policy-making during Reconstruction should actually be seen as heroic. He says that Johnson's "devotion and care... have produced a setting in which we may now see the unfortunate man in the light of reason and justice."⁴ McKittrick also supports this argument with the observation that amnesties for Southerners were much more difficult to obtain than other historians have portrayed. However, McKittrick did not acknowledge Johnson's racist tendencies that other sources during this time described.⁵ This source excellently exemplifies how difficult it was even in the 1960s to reach a consensus about the interpretation of Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction.

These three sources share a common theme of a warm and fuzzy feeling toward Andrew Johnson and his attempts at unification, but also contain some distinct differences. Most notably, McKittrick, more than Beale and Milton, criticizes the work of revisionists that came before him. These are the historians that began to notice the flaws in Johnson's judgment, and his inability to completely and wholly unify the nation due to his utter racism. This retroactive view on Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction exemplifies the revival of racist feelings during the Civil Rights movements in the 1960s. Yet, McKittrick's writings in his book are even more ignorant than the writings of Beale and Milton. Despite full access to the facts of Johnson's discriminatory tendencies during his presidency, McKittrick still defended Johnson. There are people that to this day have a McKittrick-esque interpretation of Andrew Johnson.

A similarity between these three historians is that they are all echoes of white nationalists who did not want former slaves or black people to have any rights at all. It is not until the mid

1940s that writings of black writers and historians such as W. E. Burghardt Du Bois were acknowledged as legitimate accounts of racism during Johnson's Reconstruction. This is important to the historiography of Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction because during the 1930s and prior, the American people did not even have written accounts of the negative aspects of Andrew Johnson's Reconstruction. McKittrick, however, certainly had access to the works of accomplished black historians but did not acknowledge them as valid sources in his book.

The next category of interpretations portrays Andrew Johnson as an ineffective president and a person who was detrimental to the progress of integration and unification of America. The first of these sources is an article written by Harry Williams called "An Analysis of Some Reconstruction Attitudes" written in 1946. This source's argument is that the past interpretations of Reconstruction and Andrew Johnson were too simplistic and naïve. Williams supports this argument by outlining the ways in which he wishes to dispel the old interpretation that Reconstruction was a time period where good white Southerners were faced with opposition from the deceptive Republicans. He does this by referring to ignored writings of the time that truly describe what was occurring under Johnson. He speaks heavily about Du Bois, Stevens, and other credible black writers, and how their writings are proof that racism and segregation in fact hindered unity among America. He says that negating the legitimacy of these writings is frankly foolish because "the existence of such a body of opinion cannot be disputed."⁶ This journal article is very important to the evolution of the interpretation of Andrew Johnson because it is one of the first sources that validated the writings of black writers and politicians.

The next source within this category is another journal article entitled "Andrew Johnson Loses His Battle" by Gregg Phifer in 1952. This source's argument is that Andrew Johnson was a failure of a president because he took office during the trying time of Reconstruction and

succeeded someone as admired today as Abraham Lincoln. Phifer argues that Johnson would not have been a terrible leader if he did not have to lead Reconstruction, but he agrees with most historians of his time that Andrew Johnson was a failure at reuniting the nation. Phifer supports this argument by saying that only a political genius could have successfully united America in this decrepit period of history, and Johnson fell short. Phifer then gives explicit reasons as to why Johnson was an unfit president, saying that “he blundered by relying on speech-making rather than party organization, and by fighting the issue of Reconstruction on arguments chosen by his bitterest enemies.”⁷ Phifer essentially is saying that Johnson was too pre-occupied with his own re-election that he devoted neither the time nor the effort necessary to make real progress toward a unified nation. In claiming this, Phifer does not take away from Johnson’s leadership ability, but focuses on his inadequacy of his results during Reconstruction.⁸ This is an excellent source because it gives specific examples as to why Johnson misled Reconstruction, but also acknowledges that his political experience did make him qualified to be president. Phifer differs from Williams in this way, because Williams did not have any complimentary words toward Johnson nor did he recognize Johnson’s leadership abilities.

The next source is by Albert Castel entitled *The Presidency of Andrew Johnson* and was published in 1979. This piece offers another perspective within this category of Johnson interpretation: that Andrew Johnson was not a bad person fundamentally as many historians of the time had eluded to in previous writings. But rather, Johnson did not use his presidential authority as effectively as he could have because he “lacked the finesse and flexibility” a president during Reconstruction would have to have.⁹ Castel supports this argument by giving the example of the Black Codes and how they were the perfect example of how Johnson’s leniency with the Southerners backfired. In fact, as a result of Johnson’s awful leadership during

Reconstruction, many southern states attempted at reviving a neo-slavery paradigm through harsh segregation. Castel also makes the argument that Johnson's utilization of his presidential power was ineffective and confusing, because Johnson had described Southerners as traitors at the beginning of his presidency but then proceeded to distribute mass amounts of pardons.¹⁰ This book provides explicit examples of Andrew Johnson's weaknesses and indecisiveness about how to handle Reconstruction and concludes that Johnson was bound to be ultimately remembered as a failure.

Another source that recognized Andrew Johnson as a failed leader during Reconstruction is Hans Trefousse's *Andrew Johnson: A Biography* published in 1989. This source's argument is that Andrew Johnson was a bad president during Reconstruction because he was in denial that the southern states even tried to secede in the first place. Moreover, at a personal level, he did not do a very good job at masking his belief concerning the inferiority of black people. Trefousse supports this argument by giving examples of when Johnson tried convincing critics he was Unionist by making half-hearted attempts to appear inclusive of blacks. For example, Johnson allowed an interview with a regiment of black soldiers who paid their respects to the White House. Trefousse describes these attempts as fake. He takes the position that these superficialities were a last-ditch effort to protect his reputation. Johnson's theories read that Johnson wanted a speedy normalization and to return to pre-war conditions as efficiently as possible, but his actions seemed "unsympathetic for the blacks, and he had anxiety to restore many of the features of the old order which led him [Johnson] to sanction the return of property to its former owners even if it had already been given to the freedmen."¹¹ This source brings new evidence to the table by providing specific examples of when Johnson merely put a Band-Aid on

the issues of segregation and unification, without attempting to fix the root of the problem of racism due to the backlash he would receive from the newly-pardoned southerners.

The last source that fits in with the negative interpretation of Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction is Ryan Swanson's journal article entitled "Andrew Johnson and His Governors: An Examination of Failed Reconstruction Leadership." As the title suggests, Swanson is adamantly opposed to the methods by which Johnson attempted unification. This journal article, written in 2012, is an example of the most recent interpretation of Johnson and the most widely accepted one. This source's argument is that Andrew Johnson was a complete failure as a president and his lack of effort during Reconstruction is completely responsible for the longevity of racist attitudes in America. Swanson supports this argument by calling attention to his attempt at quickly unifying the divided nation by appointing seemingly unionist leaders for many Southern states. This headstrong push toward unification would have been a leap in the right direction toward regaining a wholesome nation, but Swanson argues that Johnson's lack of guidance to the appointees stunted Reconstruction and provided breeding grounds for racism and segregation of black Americans.¹²

Although this category of disapproval toward Andrew Johnson and his Reconstruction methods consists of various sources from various years, there are a couple main themes. Most sources address that Andrew Johnson's rapid amnesty for Southerners was detrimental to Reconstruction, that Johnson did not provide the unionist southern governors with the proper guidance to lead a battered state, and Johnson's racism conflicted greatly with his ability to effectively unify the country. Historians who fall into this category all agree that Andrew Johnson turned a blind eye toward segregation and focused on unifying white male Americans rather than all Americans, which ultimately did not lead to unification at all. In fact, it led to a

widened social gap between blacks and whites and materialized into harsh restrictions for blacks such as the Black Codes.

Although there is a plethora of similarities within this category, there are also many differences. Some historians, such as Phifer, believe that Johnson was qualified to be president but just did not handle Reconstruction very well. Other historians, like Swanson, take the position that Johnson was an unfit leader and was a complete failure. These types of drastic differences shape this category into a unique blend of sources that all unite behind the interpretation of Andrew Johnson as an unfit president for Reconstruction.

Out of the two categories, the one that depicts Andrew Johnson in a negative light is the best interpretation of what truly happened during Reconstruction. This category is superior because it includes the writings of black historians who gave first-hand accounts of the segregation that black Americans endured during Johnson's Reconstruction. This category takes into account Johnson's inability to unite the nation and does not excuse his failures like the early accounts of Johnson do. This category is more ethical, also, because it recognizes the rights that were withheld from blacks, and talks about the segregation of blacks in a shameful manner. The early historians such as Beale and Williams sided with Johnson because the southern attitudes were racist and genuinely did not believe blacks deserved the same rights as whites. McKittrick is representative of the many ignorant Americans that still exist today. He represents the population of people that still believe in white supremacy and choose to ignore the history of white barbaric behavior toward black people throughout American history.

As important as it is to think about the past, it is equally important to consider the future. I think future interpretations of Johnson will remain unfavorable toward him because the progression toward racial equality has been consistently stressed in American society since the

Civil Rights movement. With even more study on Johnson, and with the mindset that blacks deserve to be treated equally as whites, future historians will agree with historians like Swanson that reveal that Johnson was completely incompetent and crushed the vision Lincoln had for Reconstruction.

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- ¹ Howard K. Beale, *The Critical Year: A Study of Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction* (New York: Brace and Company, 1930).
- ² George Fort Milton, *The Age of Hate: Andrew Johnson and the Radicals* (Hamden: Coward-McCann, 1930), 346.
- ³ George Fort Milton, *The Age of Hate: Andrew Johnson and the Radicals* (Hamden: Coward-McCann, 1930).
- ⁴ Eric L. McKittrick, *Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), 3.
- ⁵ Eric L. McKittrick, *Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), 3.
- ⁶ Harry T. Williams, "An Analysis of Some Reconstruction Attitudes," *The Journal of Southern History* 12, no. 4 (1946): 471, JSTOR.
- ⁷ Gregg Phifer, "Andrew Johnson Loses His Battle," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 11, no. 4 (1952): 320, JSTOR.
- ⁸ Gregg Phifer, "Andrew Johnson Loses His Battle," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 11, no. 4 (1952): JSTOR.
- ⁹ Albert Castel, *The Presidency of Andrew Johnson* (Lawrence, Kansas: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1979), 72.
- ¹⁰ Albert Castel, *The Presidency of Andrew Johnson* (Lawrence, Kansas: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1979).
- ¹¹ Hans L. Trefousse, *Andrew Johnson: A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989), 226.
- ¹² Ryan A. Swanson, "Andrew Johnson and His Governors: An Examination of Failed Reconstruction Leadership," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (2007): JSTOR.

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