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The Repercussions of Presidential Perceptions: U.S. Reconstruction and President Andrew Johnson

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Writing Process

My writing process for this assignment was quite extensive as a Historiography is not a simple task. I started this assignment by gathering my sources. I looked for at least two books and articles from four different time periods: before 1950, between 1950-1970, between 1970-1990, and then 1990 to current day. After collecting my sources, I created a bibliography in Chicago style format which I submitted to my instructor for evaluation. After and having the final list compiled by my instructor, then came the tedious task of reading my sources. I read and evaluated each source as it pertained to my topic of Andrew Johnson. This part was particularly difficult because I was required to sort through sources in a new way. Instead of creating a summary of historical information, I was called to create a summary of the argument the authors were making through their summaries of the historical events. After completing that task, I compiled the authors' arguments into an annotated bibliography in which I placed the summaries under their corresponding bibliographic citation. This too, along with my paper's thesis, was submitted to my professor for approval. After all of that, it was finally time for me to begin my historiography. I transformed my annotated bibliography into a comprehensive essay in which I explained how history's perception of Andrew Johnson has changed over time, adding in footnotes according to the Chicago Manual Style. After finishing my source summaries, I added in an introduction in which I orientated my reader to the topic and the purpose of my essay. Once that was completed I added in my paragraph in which I evaluated the best and most accurate source which I determined through careful consideration. After that was complete, I wrote my conclusion in which I orientated the reader to the modern day significance to a seemingly dusty and aged topic.

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The Repercussions of Presidential Perceptions: U.S. Reconstruction and President Andrew Johnson

Claudia Dominique

After President Abraham Lincoln's assassination in 1865, his vice president, Andrew Johnson, ascended to presidency. The beloved president's death left many to wonder what would become of the America he was striving to create, and if the new President would stay true to Lincoln's Reconstruction policies that had been set to go into motion. Andrew Johnson was the first president of the Reconstruction and, therefore, set the precedent for the government's dealings with social state affairs. His actions, for better or for worse, were central to the shaping of Reconstruction policy. The Reconstruction was a tumultuous time full of chaos and change in which racial tensions and animosities grew in both the North and the South. If the social pressures of the era were not enough, the confusion and hostility of the Reconstruction were catalyzed by the opposition between Andrew Johnson and Congress. I evaluated Johnson's personal disposition, his political actions, and his relationship with Congress as historians have perceived them across history. In my analysis, I have discovered three chronological categories in which historians' perceptions of Andrew Johnson have shifted.

Historians' perceptions and opinions of Johnson as a presidential figure and his political actions have changed significantly. Over the course of history, historians have dealt heavily with the assessment of Johnson's effectiveness during his presidency, and the nature and intention behind his political actions. The evaluations of historians have changed in that they have gone from framing Johnson as a beacon of patriotic perfection, to a great president with a few notable faults, to a disgrace to American history. The earliest of works tended to be those

who glorified Johnson followed by works of scholars who simply supported him. The most recent works are those that detest Johnson and all of his actions. Historians like Howard Beale, William Dunning, Lawrence Gipson, and Robert Winston, whose works date between the years 1906-1930, idealized the actions of Andrew Johnson. They described him as the perfect patriotic model whose actions were untainted by a personal agenda. Other historians like Albert Castel and Walker Lewis, whose works were written between 1954-1980, still praised the character and disposition of Andrew Johnson but were a little more critical of the timeliness of his actions. The third group, which is the most modern group, whose works date from 1989-2007, includes historians like Michael Fitzgerald, William Hardy, Brooks Simpson, and Hans Trefousse who criticize the actions of Andrew Johnson. This group of historians conceptualize Andrew Johnson as a failed politician who halted any possible progress of the Reconstruction. In examining the three groups, I found that the third group that denounces Andrew Johnson to be the most accurate as it is the most transparent and void of biases.

The Glorifiers

Historians who support and idealize Andrew Johnson, like Beale, often focus on the political and personal actions of Johnson, his relationship with Congress, and the public's perception of him. The following sources paint Andrew Johnson as the perfect politician, discussing his political actions and relations throughout the Reconstruction. In his book, *The Critical Year: A Study of Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction*, Beale offers insight into the political and personal character of Andrew Johnson and how his disposition played into his political actions during the Reconstruction.¹ Beale describes how Johnson was not one of the most beloved political figures, but that injustice was due to the political perception that was fastened upon him by a small group of radicals. He claims that the infamous reputation of Johnson and his policies are not to blame for the chaos that defined the Reconstruction era. Beale notes that Johnson's image was distorted by radicals who were attempting to discredit him in order to gain the vote of the people and push their own Reconstruction policy. In reality, Johnson was a courageous and intelligent politician. Unfortunately, however, he was not very charming, which many radicals exploited. Beale mentions that while popular belief holds

¹ Howard K. Beale, *The Critical Year: A Study of Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction* (Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1930, 1958), 10.

otherwise, Johnson was actually an incredible public speaker.² However, Johnson's speeches got their power from his performance, as they were very emotionally charged. So, by looking at just the transcripts, radicals could easily portray him as scatter-brained and irrationally temperamental. In regard to Lincoln's inauguration, Beale addresses the rumor that Johnson had been drunk.³ Beale immediately shuts this down, proclaiming it all as slander. Beale conveys Johnson as organized, dedicated, and characterizes all of his political actions as a symbol of his unmatched and unwavering commitment to the American people, including his pardoning of Southern rebels.⁴ Overall, Beale portrays Johnson as an honorable leader. Even though he had a tendency to be indecisive, when he became certain of something, there was nothing that could shift his opinion. To Beale, Johnson was persistent and assertive in what he wholly believed in, and there was nothing Johnson was more certain of than his desire to preserve democratic ideals and his hope in the innate morality of Americans.

Like Beale, Dunning also focused on the public's perception of Andrew Johnson. In his article, "More Light on Andrew Johnson," Dunning attributes Johnson's negative reputation to radical slander as well. However, he also ascribes Johnson's notoriety to an unfortunate first political impression.⁵ The spectacle he made of himself at his inauguration as vice president left a bad taste in the public's mouth. However, Dunning holds that public opinion, although it was doubtful at times, generally saw Johnson's Reconstruction policy as effective and legitimate. Johnson was loved by the majority of both political parties, and it was only a small group of radicals from the Unionist Party who opposed him and tainted his otherwise pristine character. Despite the extreme political pressures being placed upon him, Johnson was able to maintain his clarity and composure. Dunning saw Johnson as a symbol of hope for democracy.⁶ Beginning as a humble tailor from Tennessee and making his way to President of the United States, Johnson was proof that America truly provides equal opportunity for all men. Dunning further builds upon the conception of Andrew Johnson as a dignified, strong, and intelligent leader who only ever tried to do what was best for the American people.

² Ibid., 19.

³ Ibid., 12.

⁴ Ibid., 20-21.

⁵ William A. Dunning, "More Light on Andrew Johnson," *The American Historical Review* 11, no. 3 (1906), 574-75. JSTOR.

⁶ Ibid., 576.

One of the reasons that Congress and Johnson did not get along is because they had completely polarized opinions on how Reconstruction should be executed. In his book, *Andrew Johnson: Plebeian and Patriot*, Winston provides insight into the ideology of Andrew Johnson and his position in opposition to Congress. Andrew Johnson, a man of loyalty and tradition, opposed any change in the Constitution, other than the liberation of African Americans, supported of the way of the old Union, and was adamant on adhering perfectly to Lincoln's Reconstruction goals and policies.⁷ While Johnson was insistent on staying true to the democratic ideals of the nation, Congress wanted to rush into radical reforms. Johnson supported the gradual enfranchisement of African Americans, was in opposition to the national government superseding the state government, and he viewed the rebel states as still part of the Union. Congress wanted the immediate and total enfranchisement of African Americans, they wanted the national government to supersede state government, they viewed the rebel states as conquered territories that they could just confiscate, and they believed that they should inflict harsh punishment onto the Southern rebels.⁸ Both Johnson and Congress held it true that they should be in charge of Reconstruction in the South. However, Johnson, according to Winston, due to his persistence and honor, refused to back down, even when Congress threatened him with impeachment. Winston contends that Johnson, in all his political actions, followed the will of the Constitution and of Lincoln. Johnson believed he was doing the best for his country by not allowing, what he perceived as, the rise of the African American governmental control in the South.⁹ Winston notes Johnson's actions were the only thing separating the country from the evil consequences that would have resulted from Congress' radical plans. Johnson's actions and policies were reflective of his opposition to the nationalization of his country as well as his attempts to diminish the power that Congress was abusing.

While Winston discusses the differences between the opinions of Congress and the opinions of Johnson, Gipson gives more insight on the political ideology of Johnson and the intentions behind it. In his article, "The Statesmanship of President Johnson: A Study of the Presidential Reconstruction Policy," Gipson claims that Johnson was a great statesman, was independent in his opinion, loyal

⁷ Robert W. Winston, *Andrew Johnson: Plebeian and Patriot* (H. Holt and Company, 1928), 325-328.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 328-330.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 386.

to a fault to the federal government, and, like Winston, believed Johnson delivered on his promise to uphold the intentions and policies of Lincoln.¹⁰ Johnson desperately wanted to achieve a compromise between the Southerners and the Republican radicals. However, the radicals refused to accept anything other than complete African American control in the South which, due to its undoubted result in anarchy, Johnson could not accept.¹¹ The article states that the ridiculous belief that Johnson's policy regarding Reconstruction in the South was motivated by his surreptitious opposition to African Americans is unfounded, as his policies reflect nothing but constitutionality and honor. Gipson contends that no man could have been better for the task of rebuilding the nation.¹² Andrew Johnson alone was able to both clearly evaluate the core of the nation's problems and subdue and the irrational exertions of Congress.

The Supporters

Other historians, such as Castel, regard the presidency of Andrew Johnson and his Reconstruction policy as mostly positive but with a few faults. In *The Presidency of Andrew Johnson*, Castel discusses the political actions of Andrew Johnson during the Reconstruction, focusing on the conflict that occurred between the Republicans, or, more specifically, Congress and Andrew Johnson.¹³ Just like the first group of interpretations, Castel notes the distinct differences in Reconstruction policy between Congress and Johnson. However, Castel emphasizes that the aggressions were not merely one-sided; Johnson also participated in aggressive political actions against Congress in order to further his Reconstruction plan and policies. The primary dynamic between Johnson and Congress was one was trying to assert power and dominance over the other in which they would use political actions and legislation as their medium to do so.¹⁴ According to Castel, Andrew Johnson was an upstanding politician who stood against white supremacy, valued states' rights, was persistent in the face of enemies, and possessed incredible political instincts. Castel points out that while some argue that Johnson's political actions were not always wise, and that he

¹⁰ Lawrence H. Gipson "The Statesmanship of President Johnson: A Study of the Presidential Reconstruction Policy," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 2, no. 3 (1915), 367-71. JSTOR.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 373.

¹² *Ibid.*, 383.

¹³ Albert Castel, *The Presidency of Andrew Johnson* (Regents Press of Kansas, 1980), 99.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 106-107.

definitely had his faults, it was the same passion that led him to make rash political decisions that made him a great man.

In Lewis' interpretation, he evaluates the character and political exertions of Andrew Johnson in a new way. In, "The Impeachment of Andrew Johnson: A Political Tragedy," Lewis gives insight into the proceedings that occurred during the impeachment and trial of Johnson. The battle between Congress and President Johnson was outspoken and obvious to anyone watching their political interactions. Johnson vetoed all of Congress' legislation, and Congress, in turn, attempted to pass laws to surpass the veto, which typically prevailed.¹⁵ Lewis, like Castel, characterized Johnson as autonomous, brave, and intelligent. However, Lewis notes that he lacked joviality and tact, which can be seen in how he handled his impeachment. Johnson did not even show up to a single trial and was impatient during the entire affair.¹⁶ Johnson's attitude and disposition during the trial had an effect on how the public and history decided to perceive the event and, consequentially, Andrew Johnson.

The Critics

Other historians, such as Fitzgerald, viewed Andrew Johnson as a disgrace to the presidency. In, *Splendid Failure: Postwar Reconstruction in the American South*, Fitzgerald talks about how Andrew Johnson's inflexible character was less than ideal for the fragile situation of the Reconstruction.¹⁷ His stubbornness and hostility created unnecessary tension over the issue of the ex-salves with ex-Confederates, who he encouraged to adopt a confrontational position against the Union. Fitzgerald paints Johnson as a duplicitous politician whose agenda was anything but transparent. For one, while Johnson claimed to be following Lincoln's Reconstruction policies, Johnson's policies completely deviated from the former president's intentions.¹⁸ He was just using the illusion of Lincoln's policies to rationalize his actions. Johnson's personal views, as claimed by Fitzgerald, revealed his true racist nature, and that nature played into a lot of his political decisions. Unlike the beliefs of former historians, Fitzgerald asserts that Johnson did not work with the South because he cared about them as citizens, but

¹⁵ Walker H. H. Lewis, "The Impeachment of Andrew Johnson: A Political Tragedy," *American Bar Association Journal* 40, no. 1 (1954), 15. JSTOR.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁷ Michel W. Fitzgerald, *Splendid Failure: Postwar Reconstruction in the American South* (Ivan R Dee, 2007), 22.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

out of necessity to further their own individual agendas.¹⁹ For example, in order to achieve his goal of bringing the South back into the Union, restoring the unity of the white man, he pardoned ex-Confederates so that they could take office in Southern state governments. While Johnson's actions as President were disgraceful, Fitzgerald argues that one good thing came out of his ignorant arrogance, which is that the federal government finally began regarding the civil rights movement as legitimate.

Another source that highlights the shortcomings of Andrew Johnson and his Reconstruction policies is Simpson's, *The Reconstruction Presidents*. In his book, Simpson discusses the administration of President Andrew Johnson and the policies, institutions, and societal structures that were imposed during his time in office. Simpson argues that Johnson was the single most influential person in shaping Reconstruction policy through his support of states' rights and his dedication to the restoration of the prewar country.²⁰ Sadly, however, the influence and agency that he was given turned out to be for the worst. At the beginning of his presidency, Johnson was receiving support from all sides because they all believed he would support their causes and policies.²¹ Consequentially, Johnson was always hesitant to develop an opinion because he did not want to lose his unanimous support, thereby ensuring stagnancy in the progression of the Reconstruction. Like Castel, Simpson notes that Johnson's main goal of the Reconstruction was to create peace between the North and the South and to bring the rebel states back into the Union.²² Johnson claimed that such actions were due to his belief in states' rights and that his Reconstruction plan was just looking out for the integrity of the nation, as he truly cared deeply about black suffrage. However, Simpson calls this an outright lie, declaring that Johnson's policies were motivated by his prejudices against African Americans.

In his interpretation, Hardy discusses how the racial and class prejudices of Andrew Johnson shaped his actions and policies throughout his presidency. An example of this is evident in, "Reconstructing Andrew Johnson: The Influence of Laissez-Faire Constitutionalism on President Johnson's Restoration Policy," in which Hardy discusses the true goal and motivations of Johnson's political actions. Johnson's vision for postwar America was for the North and the South to

¹⁹ Ibid., 37-39.

²⁰ Brooks D. Simpson, *The Reconstruction Presidents* (University Press of Kansas, 2009), 67.

²¹ Ibid., 71-73.

²² Ibid., 75-77.

come back together peacefully and quickly; the enfranchisement of African Americans was completely irrelevant to him.²³ Hardy contested that it was both Johnson's commitment to Jacksonian democracy, especially in regard to the power of the federal government in relation to the state government, and his innate racism that prohibited him from evolving and addressing the violence and injustice that was being committed against African Americans and Unionists. Deviating from the previous schools of thought, Hardy asserts that Johnson was offered two compromises by the Republicans in which he could have established peace between himself and Congress. However, Johnson refused due to his unwillingness to recognize the legitimacy of Congress' argument.²⁴ Hardy says that America suffered during the Reconstruction because the President that shaped policy and led them through it lacked the inspiration, the tact, and the effective leadership to carry out the reforms that were necessary to a socially, politically, and legally constructive Reconstruction.

Trefousse continues the discussion about the failures of Andrew Johnson by talking about his political shortcomings in policy and action. Trefousse describes Andrew Johnson's plan for Reconstruction and both the private and public actions that he took in attempt to impose his policies on the country. Johnson was an evasive politician who refrained from making any substantial decisions whenever possible.²⁵ According to Trefousse, Andrew Johnson and his hesitation can be blamed for the failures of the Reconstruction. Congress and Johnson's conception of how to go forward with Reconstruction differed drastically, so to avoid opposition, Johnson worked behind Congress' back while they were out of session.²⁶ Johnson was unable to conceptualize Congress' nationalized view of the states and, therefore, refused to compromise with the radicals. Trefousse denounces Johnson as a tactless politician, as any time he had the chance to make a smooth Reconstruction possible, he was indecisive in the moments of opportunity. In alignment with the other sources from this school of thought, Trefousse asserted that Johnson was more concerned with unifying the whites and creating a white government than he was with achieving black suffrage.²⁷ As a

²³ William E. Hardy, "Reconstructing Andrew Johnson: The Influence of Laissez-Faire Constitutionalism on President Johnson's Restoration Policy," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (2006), 75. JSTOR.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 78-79.

²⁵ Hans L. Trefousse, *Andrew Johnson: A Biography* (Norton, 1989), 214.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 216.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 226-227.

result, he thereby undermined any previous or intended efforts to integrate African Americans into society.

The group that I think provides the most accurate and unbiased interpretation is the third group. In reading sources from the first two groups, historians kept making excuses for Johnson's actions, as though they constantly felt as though they had to clear his name. The third group, however, did not need to rationalize their reasoning because it was all factual. The last group of historians, whose writings are from the late 1990s to the early 2000s, look at Johnson's political actions through the lens of race, factoring in the effect his policies had on African Americans. The other two groups focused more on how Johnson and his policies benefited Southern whites, which constructed their entire rationale for why he was a good president. I think the third group, comprised of historians who criticize Andrew Johnson, is honest in the sense that when it evaluated Johnson and his actions, it took into consideration more than whether or not they benefited the white man. The most recent group of interpretations factored in the experience of African Americans while the earlier groups of interpretation treated them like an afterthought or an obstacle to white unification.

The evaluation of President Johnson and the integrity of his political actions still has significance in our modern world today. In earlier years, historians praised Johnson for his valor and political skills, but now we see Johnson for what he truly was: a racist drunk who had no idea what he was doing. When you stop evaluating people for what you want to find, and you consider other people's experiences and opinions instead of disparaging them, you can discover a whole new truth that was under your nose the whole time. There is nothing simple about politics today; polarization has driven our country to be separated on almost every front, inciting each group to villainize the other. Sometimes we blindly trust politicians because they feed into our prejudices and because they promise they are looking out for our best interest. However, in reality, they have their own separate agenda. Discrimination and prejudice are still interwoven into our government, its policies, and its leaders. By looking at the progression of the perception of Andrew Johnson throughout history, we can see the dangers of turning a blind eye to governmental corruption. Johnson fed into his own prejudices as well as those of white Americans, resulting in a halt of essential progression during the Reconstruction and allowing for thousands of African Americans to continue to be oppressed and to suffer. We can better ourselves and our country by refusing to make the same mistakes as our Reconstruction

ancestors. We can reject discrimination and support equality in our political actions. As citizens of the United States, we have the responsibility not to let ourselves become blind to the illusion of progression and to see the reality of politics. As human beings, we have the responsibility to change the repetitive narrative of discrimination in our country and in our world.

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