

Essay on andrew johnson

[Experience](#), [Belief](#)



Andrew Johnson is a man who, to this day, remains one of the most controversial American political figures to have ever lived. He is often presented as being a man who fought for the rights of his people but in such a way that indicates that he did not fully understand what it was they wanted. For example, he fought for free public education but did not attend school himself (Schroeder-Lein & Zuczek, 2001, p xv). Andrew Johnson is a historical figure with a number of varying portraits which depend, largely, on the historian's opinion of him. In his various renditions of Johnson's character, James McPherson presents Johnson in an extremely favourable light - often as a brave, bold man who fought for his beliefs. However, the history books do not always agree and as such, Johnson is sometimes viewed as being one of the worst presidents in American history. A large amount of Johnson's reputation rests on both his good and bad involvements with the Reconstruction movement following the American Civil War and former President Abraham Lincoln's attempts to rebuild relations between the north and the south. Johnson originally had taken quite a hard stance against southern rebels but upon finding himself in office, that softened and he was much more lenient in practice. As a result, Johnson is a man whose character is often discussed in a variety of overtones and remains hotly debated, to this day. The purpose of this essay is to explore the character of Andrew Johnson as represented in the history books; with particular attention given to James McPherson's representation of Johnson in comparison to other historians'.

First, it seems prudent to give a brief outline of why Andrew Johnson is in the history books at all - the biographical details are as told in Johnson's section

of the Latin Library website. As a child, Johnson grew up in poverty as his father died when he was three years old and when he and his brother were old enough; they became apprentices to a local tailor. After several years, the brothers ran away and continued to evade capture despite having a reward on both of their heads. Following a couple of years' time, Johnson and his brother returned home to move west to Tennessee with their mother and step-father, where Johnson began work as a tailor, in his own right. It was only when Johnson married his wife, Eliza that he began to master the basics of English grammar, reading or Mathematics as she taught him; up until then, Johnson had received no formal education. However, despite this, by 1834, Johnson had already served a number of terms as Mayor of his town, Greenville, and had found that his 'every man' approach to politics struck a happy chord with the working tradesmen of the town. Following his popularity, Johnson successfully carried out a number of political positions including ten years as a Democrat in the U. S. House of Representatives, and then as the Governor of Tennessee for a number of years. With the advent of the Civil War, Johnson was in heavy support of Abraham Lincoln and was labelled as a traitor in the south, where his family were driven out, and hailed as a hero in the north, where Lincoln eventually made him military governor of Tennessee and he ruled strictly which resulted in the restoration of civil governance in the state. During the election campaign of 1864, Lincoln appointed Johnson as his running mate and future Vice President in a clever attempt to unify the north and south again. In 1868, having been sworn in as Vice President six weeks previously, Abraham Lincoln was assassinated and Johnson became President of the United States of America

(LatinLibrary. com). He is largely remembered for his impeachment following his actions to remove Edwin Stanton from office.

Today, Johnson's rise to power would be praised but routinely, historians paint a picture of a man who, at times, seemed unable to make a strong decision and who often contradicted himself as a result. McPherson et al, discuss Johnson in their book *Liberty, Equality, Power: A History of the American People* as having "clawed his way up in the rough-and-tumble politics of east Tennessee" (Gerstle et al. 2007, p 628). This image presents Johnson as being a political fighter who fought his way to the top of the scrapheap. However, in a 2006 article for *The Washington Post*, Eric Foner proclaimed Johnson to be "the worst president in U. S. history." (Foner, 2006). It is interesting how one man can be perceived in two such radically different ways and surely, these opinions must come down to the political standing of the author. However, for many, it seems that Johnson's regularity in contradicting himself is the root cause of such differing opinions. A prime example of this is Johnson's approach to civil rights: following the end of the Civil War, Johnson continued Lincoln's work to 'reconstruct' the country and went about implementing a number of actions which would re-unify the north and the south. However, Johnson only attempted to do so under his own terms. McPherson et al. state that "He would exclude both blacks and upper-class whites from the Reconstruction process" with the intention of ensuring that the south would be made up of white tradesmen, like him, who "has remained steadfastly loyal to the union" (Gerstle et al. 2007, p 629). His actions here demonstrate him as being a man who publically stood for

re-unifying the country but in practice, he carried this out under his own definition of who he wanted to include.

Conversely, it is often Johnson's involvement with the civil rights movement that causes his name to be met with a variety of greetings. Whilst Johnson is presented as actively seeking to delay black rights by McPherson et al. he, equally, is often presented by black historians as being almost fascist in his anti-black standing. Whilst it is important to remember that black historians come with their own agendas, much like a feminist author or a gay historian would, it is also crucial to remember that a white historian may be less savage in their recounting of Johnson's reign. McPherson, for example, presents Johnson as being anti-black rights and demonstrates this through Johnson's lacklustre attempt at Reconstruction: " President Johnson did everything he could to block Reconstruction" (Gerstle et al, 2007, p 589). The suggestion here being that Johnson was afraid of the black vote since he had made it clear that he was anti-black rights through his delaying of Reconstruction and that, knowing full well that he was running for President again in the near future, he was hopeful that this would limit the number of black votes: " He encourages southern whites to obstruct the registration of voters and the election of convention delegates." (Gerstle et al, 2007, p 589). However, John Egbeazien Oshodi, a black historian, discusses Johnson's action at this time to a finer degree: " President Johnson fought relentlessly against the Fourteenth Amendment which provided citizenship for Blacks and entitled them to equal protection under the law as well as the right to life, liberty, or property." (Oshodi, 2009, p 38). Oshodi's description shows Johnson in a far harsher light when compared to McPherson who, although in

agreement with Oshodi, presents Johnson as more of a bungling, inept white man as opposed to the inherent racist that Oshodi suggests. Whilst one thing is clear - Johnson was opposed to black rights - it is unclear as to whether he holds that view as a personal vendetta or as a man who was afraid of the power that the black vote may hold over his future election prospects. In his scathing newspaper article, Eric Foner also labels him as a " fervent white supremacist" who " opposed efforts to extend basic rights to former slaves." (Foner, 2006). It would seem that history has painted Johnson as a racist and a bigot, but to varying degrees and dependant on the author's own agenda too.

Johnson is also renowned for his impeachment and this is usually one of the main points that is raised in the argument for Johnson's title as the worst American president in history. His impeachment came about as a result of his actions to remove Edwin Stanton from office which seemed to contravene the Tenure of Office Act and required the passing of Congress to carry out such an action. McPherson et al. discuss Johnson's impeachment in terms of the given reason and the actual reason for it: " The official reason for impeachment was that he violated the Tenure of Office Act, but the real reason was Johnson's stubborn defiance of Congress on Reconstruction." (Gerstle et al, 2008, p 450) Their need to differentiate between the two is a subtle, yet significant, hint towards their opinion of Johnson as being a difficult man whose love of power had grown too great for him to manage sensibly. In this instance, McPherson et al. seem keen to present Johnson in a less than favourable light. Equally so, in McPherson's own work, *The Political History of the United States of America During the Period of Reconstruction*.

In which, McPherson lists all of the original statements of fact concerning Johnson's impeachment which states the following as a conclusion: "Resolved. That Andrew Johnson, President of the United States, be impeached for high crimes and misdemeanours." (McPherson, 2009, p 264). McPherson presents the facts as presented in the record books from the time and so, it is less based on opinion than it is fact. However, by stark contrast, Chester G. Hearn presents Johnson's impeachment from an entirely different viewpoint: as a sympathiser. In a chapter entitled The Puzzling Issue of Impeachment, Hearn discusses how Stanton was actually a spy who was totally untrustworthy: "Andrew Johnson no longer knew whom to trust outside of his cabinet, the exception being Stanton, who no longer shielded his sub rosa persona as a spy for the Radicals." (Hearn, 2007, p 132). Hearn depicts Johnson as a man who had exhausted every other option to remove Stanton from a position of power as a matter of security and having been warned of his cabinet's concerns with regard to the Tenure of Office Act, Johnson is said to have proclaimed, "If they would impeach me for ordering away an officer who I believe is doing wrong – afflicting and oppressing people instead of protecting and sustaining them – if I am to be impeached for this, then I am prepared." (Hearn, 2007, p 132). And so, in this light, Johnson is portrayed as being a martyr for his cause as opposed to McPherson's presentation of him as a man with too much power and too little control.

It goes without saying that the recounting of events will invariably differ slightly from account to account, depending on the author and his political view. History is no exception to this and in particular, as discussed here, the

account of Andrew Johnson and his presidency are proof of this. Johnson is presented as being both a man of the people as well as an oppressor of the people who do not fit into his plan; a defender of people's rights as well as the cause of the limited rights for black people; a martyr for his country's protection as well as a man who actively sought to manipulate the fourteenth amendment to his own ends. His impeachment and his awkward handling of the Reconstruction movement suggest that he will forever be remembered as one of the worst American presidents in history, but the opinions will forever differ depending on who it is you're asking.

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