

FLORIDA ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY

BOOK REVIEW

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DR. GANSON

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BY

DAVID GLAUBER

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Book Review

Benedict, Michael Les. *The Impeachment and Trial of Andrew Johnson*. New York:

W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1973.

When Andrew Johnson succeeded to the Presidency, he said, “there is nothing like starting out on principle. When you start out right you can hardly go astray.” When he made up his mind, it could not be changed, for better or for worse. These principles that Johnson stuck to caused him great agony with Congress in dealing with the Reconstruction of the South after the Civil War. Historian Howard Beale, writes that Johnson “could bear insult, personal danger, obloquy; but he could not yield his point.” He passed legislation while Congress was not in session to have the South rejoin the Union. However, Congress, once they convened, felt that his legislation was too lenient because Blacks were still not enjoying freedom and former Confederate leaders were getting back positions of power after Johnson pardoned them. In wake of the continued problems in the South, Congress wanted a more aggressive Reconstruction program that would bring harmony to the South, seemingly overnight. As a result, Congress passed many bills, most of which were vetoed by the President. Michael Les Benedict, in his book *The Impeachment and Trial of Andrew Johnson* believes that it was Johnson’s unwillingness to compromise which ultimately forced Republicans in Congress to justifiably seek his impeachment. Benedict writes a good history, with solid facts, but he fails to win his argument that Republicans were doing the right thing in seeking the impeachment of Johnson, when in fact the truth is that they just saw him as an obstacle to getting their wishes accomplished.

Michael Les Benedict concentrates this book on the discussions and frustrations that Republicans had in dealing with the Democratic President and how a majority of them initially resisted the idea of impeaching Johnson. Although, a case can be made that Congress was not above embarrassing the Chief Executive by overriding most of his vetoes. In this way, Congress conspired together to manipulate and seize power in the government. The author claims that many of the Conservative Republicans who did not initially want to go to the extreme of impeaching a President were forced to when they saw that Johnson's actions were not working and that for the security of the nation, they had to do something to keep the country together. What Benedict fails to realize is that Johnson was taking action that restored the Union, which was the main purpose for the Civil War. Republicans changed the purpose of the Civil War somewhere between the middle to the end of the war. The guidelines that Johnson set up to restore the country may not have been perfect, but they did the job. Congress just wanted to achieve more to help Blacks. While today, we can appreciate and enjoy the rewards from the actions that the Republicans made in overriding Johnson, we must still understand that they were not justified in having restarted Reconstruction in 1867 and trying to impeach the President in 1868. Congress was just showing frustration in that they did not have all the power to run the country, when they desired to have that power. Ultimately, their actions, with the exception of having pushed the fourteenth and fifteenth amendment to the Constitution through, proved futile. In 1877, even after Congressional Reconstruction, former Confederate leaders still returned to power in the South after the Compromise of 1877.

One fault of this book is that it gives very little detail about Johnson's rise to power and his struggle to overcome poverty. Although, based on the title *The*

Impeachment and Trial of Andrew Johnson, maybe this can be accepted. Andrew Johnson, the seventeenth President of the United States was a man that lived the American Dream. He overcame poverty and rose to the highest job in America, the Presidency. Johnson, since he was raised in poverty, always stood up for the common man, however, mainly the White common man. He did not feel that Blacks were equal to Whites because as a child, living in poverty, he did not want to be on the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. Unfortunately, this was a view he carried to the end, but it was not an uncommon view for people of his era to have.

The author, Benedict, for his study, makes good use of Congressional records, manuscripts, and Books that have been written on the subject of Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction. To his credit, as well, Benedict includes a short epilogue, discussing several key characters in the trial, including the seven Republican Senators that voted with Democrats to acquit Johnson and also what happened in Johnson's future after the Presidency. He also includes an appendix, which includes a copy of the Articles of Impeachment against Johnson and the Voting Records for the Senators involved in the trial. Benedict devotes the single longest chapter in his book to the actual trial itself, including discussions between the Senators, and talks about the man who would succeed Johnson. Luckily, in the end, enough Senators were able to realize that impeachment was not justified, even though Benedict would like to convince us otherwise.

From studying the life of Andrew Johnson we can learn that people should stand up for what they believe in and not be so afraid to damage their image by caving in to pressure. If people only do what others want them to do, then they are not leading their own lives. They are then having their lives written for them. Johnson used Jacksonian

principles in standing up for himself and being a leader and not a follower of Congress. These are principles that would not be evident in a President again, until 1901 when Theodore Roosevelt succeeded to the Presidency after the assassination of William McKinley. Johnson's idea to stick to his principles should be a model for more people to follow.