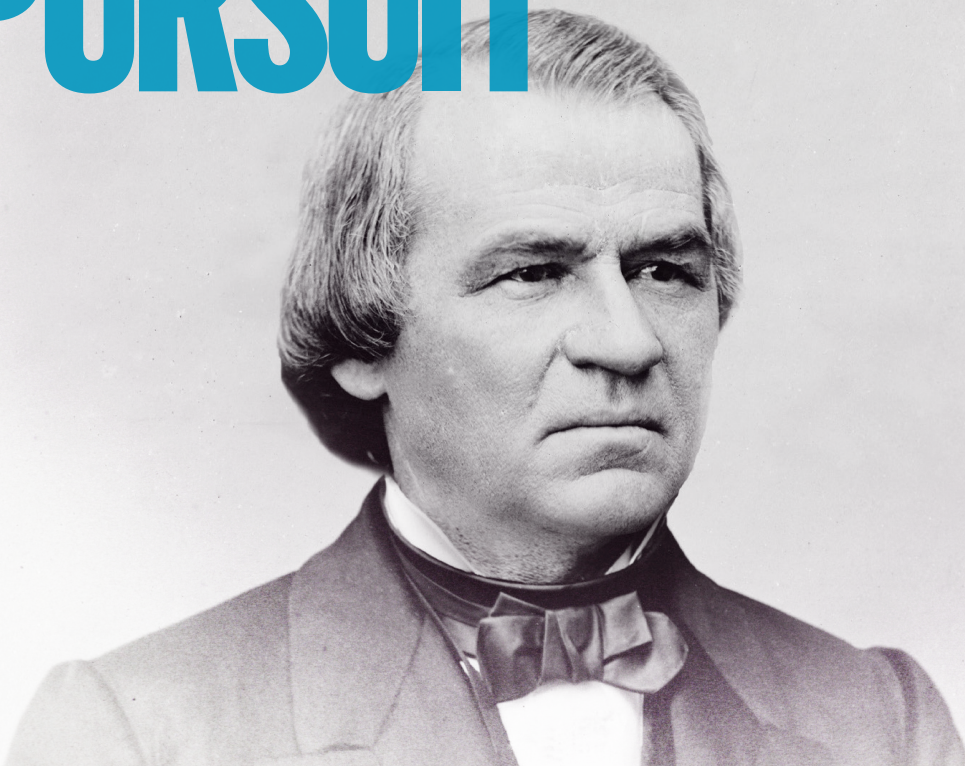


IN PURSUIT



LESSON #24 • FROM ANDREW JOHNSON

INSTITUTIONS ARE ONLY AS STRONG AS THEIR OCCUPANTS



by Annette Gordon-Reed

Every year a group of political scientists and historians is asked to rank American presidents from the best to the worst. Most years, Abraham Lincoln comes first as the greatest president, sometimes vying for the top spot with George Washington. There is similar movement at the bottom of the list. James Buchanan most often occupies the last position, with Warren Harding, Andrew Johnson, and, more recently, Donald Trump hovering around. In 2010, the year my short biography of Johnson appeared, he overtook Buchanan and was listed as the worst president. Since then, the ignominious jockeying for last place has continued.

It is likely no coincidence that two of the presidents listed as the worst preceded and succeeded Abraham Lincoln. What an act to come before and what an act to follow! Even if Buchanan and Johnson were not terrible presidents—though they were—they would have suffered in comparison to the martyred Lincoln, who led the nation through war and saved the Union. This is particularly so for Johnson, who was Lincoln’s vice president.

Lincoln had expressly picked Johnson to replace his first vice president, Hannibal Hamlin of Maine. As the only southern senator to remain loyal to the Union, Johnson seemed a good choice to broaden Lincoln’s electoral coalition. The Tennessee senator’s vehement criticism of the Confederates—“treason must be

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punished,” Johnson insisted—was, no doubt, influenced by his longstanding antipathy toward the planter class. Born poor in North Carolina, at one point running away from the tailor apprenticeship in which his mother had placed him, he blamed the grandee planters for the situation of poor Whites and for having led them into the war.



Portrait of Andrew Johnson | Alexander Gardner

The pairing between Lincoln and Johnson symbolized the possibility of North and South coming together again. It was not to be, in large measure due to Johnson’s myriad shortcomings. That Johnson can be ranked one of the worst presidents, however, does not make him unimportant. He was a pivotal figure who helped direct the course of American history during, perhaps, the most consequential period the country has faced. Johnson’s time as president shows that institutions are only so strong as the individuals who occupy them. Citizens can never assume that institutions themselves will prevent disastrous politics.

The American Civil War destroyed an institution that had been in place for nearly two centuries. Slavery had not only influenced the country’s economic system, it also shaped the country’s social life. American slavery helped cement a racial hierarchy that placed people of African descent at the very bottom of the scale. Even free Black people, no matter their talent or character,

were treated as second-class citizens. Or they were not citizens at all, as Chief Justice Roger Taney had proclaimed in the infamous Dred Scott case, now seen as one of the catalysts to the armed conflict between the North and South.

At war’s end, four million people who had been enslaved were now free and had to be incorporated into American society in a different role. How would this be accomplished? On what terms would this integration be carried out? What about the fate of White southerners, those who had enslaved people and others whose lives were indelibly influenced by the “peculiar institution” of slavery? Slavery had been a useful mechanism for holding White supremacy in place. With slavery gone, the majority society could choose to rewrite the story of race in the country and move forward, or it could attempt to reconstitute the old world, denying Black people full citizenship.

Some members of Congress, the so-called Radical Republicans and even the more moderate Republicans, understood that social life in the United States should be based upon the changes—and, one should say, the



Andrew Johnson's reconstruction and how it works | Thomas Nast

opportunities—wrought by war and the destruction of the slave system. The law would be the mechanism for the transformation, bringing Black people into full citizenship.

Yet as forceful as congressional leaders can be, only the president of the United States has the advantage of what Theodore Roosevelt called “the Bully Pulpit” of the office to help shape public opinion. The country needed a strong leader, a person able to see beyond the racial mores and the expectations that had been set in the pre-war years. History shows that having the right person in place at the right time matters greatly.

Johnson was the wrong person at a critical time. He had no interest in using his position to equalize citizenship in the United States. He was an inveterate racist who did not accept the idea that American society had to be restructured to accommodate African-Americans on an equal basis. Even in his own time, when racism was endemic, observers noted that Johnson had “an almost unconquerable prejudice against the African race.”

He had reluctantly agreed that slavery should end, but he thought emancipation should be the extent of the change in status for Black Americans. They would exist in society like landless peasants, dependent upon Whites for sustenance and subject to their whims and violence. Legalized slavery would be gone, but the ethos of White supremacy would remain almost as powerful as it was when Black people were designated as property.

Think of what it meant to have a man who despised Black people as the President during the era when the fate of Blacks in the United States after slavery was being decided. No sympathy or empathy. No human charity. Only implacable hostility.

When Johnson became president and realized that Republicans' plan for Reconstruction would have empowered Black people by taking away the inordinate power that Whites held over them, his antipathy toward the southern planter class instantly dissipated. He hated Southern planters, but he hated Black people more.

Johnson tried to block every effort designed to help the newly freed African-Americans. He was often unsuccessful, his bitter clashes with Congress culminating in Johnson becoming the first president impeached by the House of Representatives (though he would be acquitted in the Senate by a single vote). But Johnson's ferocious opposition to Reconstruction buoyed the defeated and dispirited South. Some White Southerners expressly credited Johnson with raising their hopes that the region's racial hierarchy could remain intact. One recalled that the South was in such dire straits after the war that they had been prepared to accept any retribution the North meted out, but Johnson "held up before us the hope of a white man's government." Johnson, in effect, told the South that were right to cling to the notion of White supremacy, and encouraged them to resist any racial progress.

Of course, Andrew Johnson was not the only President who believed in White supremacy. He was, until his time, the one who acted with the most determined energy to promote the idea, and his actions had particularly severe consequences because of the time in which they were taken.

We are still living with the consequences of Johnson's failures. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall once suggested that had the country made different choices after the end of slavery—committing itself to Black political equality, discontinuing racial violence, and allowing economic development—there would have been no need for remedies to deal with some of the racial problems America faced in the 20th century. Andrew Johnson was president at a time when a good president—and, it should be said, a good person—was needed in that office. It is an ongoing tragedy for the country that Johnson was neither.