

Andrew Johnson's Civil War and Reconstruction

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Review

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Bergeron, Paul H. *Andrew Johnson's Civil War and Reconstruction*. University of Tennessee Press, \$49.95 ISBN 978-1-57233-748-0

Examining Lincoln's Successor

In 1987, Paul Bergeron took over the editorship of the Papers of Andrew Johnson from his colleagues at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, LeRoy P. Graf and Ralph W. Haskins. Thirteen years later, in 2000, he brought the project to completion after publishing the last volumes, 8 through 16. Thus, every two years, a meticulously edited volume appeared, ensuring that this large and valuable undertaking did not falter or lapse, a remarkable achievement.

When I began my dissertation research in the summer of 1966, I spent months going through Johnson's papers in the Library of Congress' Manuscripts Division and I can testify that these presidential papers are an extraordinarily important resource, for Johnson seems to have kept everything that came into his office, and much of his incoming correspondence was very significant and revealing. Their availability now in book-form is a great boon to scholars of the period.

But Paul Bergeron had, it seems, one more Johnson project to complete, the book under review called *Andrew Johnson's Civil War and Reconstruction*. Arranged chronologically, this account covers his military governorship of Tennessee from 1862 to 1865 in the first two chapters, and then his presidency from 1865 to 1868 in the last four chapters, with one chapter assigned to each year. Drawing heavily on the Johnson Papers for the primary evidence on which his account is based, Bergeron provides a narrative of these tumultuous events as perceived and experienced by Johnson himself. Quite literally, this volume presents Andrew Johnson's Civil War and Reconstruction, and not anyone else's. So, it is Johnson's own story which Bergeron, the writer, tells on Johnson's behalf. Previously the editor of Johnson's papers, Bergeron has now

taken on the task of writing his story for him. Or more accurately, it is Johnson's side of the larger story of the Civil War and Reconstruction. So, this is not therefore the side of the story of this critical period in American history that Charles Sumner, the well-known radical Republican senator, would present, or the side of the story that Senator Lyman Trumbull, a moderate Republican from Illinois and a pre-war Democrat, would tell. Nor even is it the story that any other leading participant in this episode could recount. It is Johnson's alone.

Over the past fifty years or so, Revisionist historians of the Civil War era have subjected President Johnson's historical reputation to withering attack, beginning with Eric McKittrick's *Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction* (1960), LaWanda and John Cox's *Politics, Principle, and Prejudice, 1865-1866* (1963), and William R. Brock's *An American Crisis: Congress and Reconstruction* (1963). (It should be pointed out that the view these historians were revising was that of the Dunning school, which was sympathetic to the South and dominant in the first half of the twentieth century. In this interpretation of Reconstruction, Johnson was the hero who saved the nation from the "vindictive Radicals" in Congress by interpreting the Constitution narrowly and protecting the South from the radical Republicans' wild ideas that included punishing the former Confederates and providing legal protection for the freedom of the emancipated slaves. So, Johnson has already been admired and lavished with praise for a half-century). Within the next few decades, a number of studies appeared that criticized Johnson severely for his role as president during these pivotal postwar years, 1865-68, when a national policy toward the defeated South was being debated and developed, and eventually enacted, in the nation's capital. Now that these Revisionist historians have had their say, perhaps Paul Bergeron feels it is his task, even his obligation, to give Johnson his day in court, his chance to tell his side of the story, even though it had actually been heard and highly appreciated once before.

Although this proposition seems on its face to be fair, it is in fact not what historians are supposed to do. Because it is Johnson's world that is being presented in this book, the views of his opponents, for example, have to be excluded because they have a different take or perception and therefore a different narrative to relate. And similarly, the views of historians who are unable to see the world of Reconstruction through President Johnson's eyes alone cannot be taken into consideration, nor can the author engage with and argue with them. They are absent, with an occasional mention in passing but without specific names in the text, just cited in the notes. In essence, the author

does not assess or judge Johnson's performance; he simply reports it as Johnson himself saw and understood it. Whether the President's views were accurate or mistaken, his actions wise or foolish, does not matter. And neither, it seems, do the consequences and outcomes of what he set in motion.

Because this account of Johnson's Civil War and Reconstruction is in narrative form, it is difficult to summarize. But in the book's final paragraph, Bergeron imagines what attributes and achievements Johnson would have wanted on his tombstone. And the list consists of the following: "Heroic Southern Unionist. Champion of Emancipation. Lincoln's Lieutenant. Cautious Reconstruction Leader. Guardian of the Constitution. Valiant Defender of the Presidency. Survivor of Political Wars. Lasting Jacksonian" (224).

The first three items deal with Johnson's years as military governor, but these are not as controversial or as important as his presidential term. Historians today would certainly argue with Johnson over his understanding of his presidency as it is reported by Paul Bergeron. They would assert that Johnson did not understand how complicated and difficult the postwar reunification of the nation was, involving as it did three interconnected problems--reconciliation of wartime enemies, reorganization of southern state government, and determination of the status of the emancipated slaves. Indeed, reunification required a high degree of political subtlety and insight that Johnson simply did not possess. As evidence of this, the President turned reunification into a battle within the federal government after his own plan for southern readmission had failed in December 1865. For he proceeded to obstruct every set of terms that the Republican majority in Congress proposed by simply vetoing them one after the other.

The unproductive deadlock that his course generated made the contest between the President and Congress the focus of the nation's postwar politics, instead of the reunion of North and South which was the real issue. Johnson's obstructionist course therefore distorted the entire process of reunion and reconstruction. Furthermore, the President's fight with his party in Congress gave cover to the former Confederates and encouraged them in their resistance and recalcitrance. And predictably, Johnson lost his obstructionist battle with Congress and, as a result, the presidency was weakened, rather than protected, with Johnson's impeachment marking a low point in presidential authority and power. And failing to defeat Congress' proposals, all of which he denounced as unconstitutional, did not of course "guard" the Constitution as he understood it.

Of course, President Johnson himself saw all of this very differently, but then that was just his own view as one of the participants. Historians however are not participants in the events they study, so they must and should consider the episode, as far as they can, from all sides, as well as assess and evaluate it in its entirety. What one participant, Andrew Johnson, might have said about his thoughts and course of action could be taken into consideration, but it is not particularly authoritative or definitive. Moreover, presenting his view without context or assessment is more like advocacy than history. Perhaps at a future time, some historians may reexamine Johnson's view of the travails of Reconstruction during his presidency and might even approve of his exacerbating role in it. But it is unlikely to happen anytime soon, if at all.

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