



# PORTRAIT OF AMERICA

FOURTH EDITION

VOLUME II

STEPHEN B. OATES

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VOLUME II  
*From Reconstruction  
to the Present*

STEPHEN B. OATES

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS, AMHERST

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## *Again, for Greg and Stephanie with my love*

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*Portrait of  
America*

## PREFACE TO THE FOURTH EDITION

Like its predecessors, the Fourth Edition of this anthology stresses the human side of history, focusing on the interaction of people and events to suggest how that interaction shaped the course of the American past. As I compiled selections for *Portrait of America*, my primary criterion was always that selections must be well written and suffused with human interest and insight. I chose biographical portraits, dramatic narratives, and artful essays — writings that humanize American history, portraying it as the story of real people who actually lived, who struggled, enjoyed triumphs, suffered failures and heartbreaks, just like people in our own time. I hope that the anthology is an example of humanistic history at its best, the kind that combines scrupulous and engaging scholarship with a compelling narrative style. My feeling is that, since college survey audiences are not professional ones, they might enjoy reading history if it presents the human past in exciting and readable form.

By popular demand, the Fourth Edition of Volume II retains the best writings of the previous editions. It also features fourteen new selections, some of which — Edward Robb Ellis's account of labor unrest in the thirties, Louis L. Snyder's telling of Pearl Harbor, Carl Degler's treatment of the Cold War, Walter Karp's story of Watergate, and Marilyn French's portrait of Betty Friedan — replace and improve upon earlier selections on similar subjects. Other new selections focus on topics not previously covered — the clash between robber barons and radicals, the struggle for women's suffrage, the evolution-creation controversy, Eisenhower's record as

president, Ronald Reagan and the resurgent right, and a coda on the national character called "What Is This American?" The Fourth Edition offers samplings of virtually every kind of history — men's and women's, black and white, social and cultural, political and military, urban and economic, national and local — so that students can appreciate the rich diversity of the American experience.

The anthology is intended for use largely in college survey courses. It could be utilized as a supplement to a textbook or to a list of paperback readings. Or it could serve as the basic text. For the Fourth Edition, the selections have been grouped in pairs or at most three for a period or a particular aspect of an era, so that readers can make comparisons and contrasts between different events or viewpoints. The introductions to the selections set them in proper context and tie them all together so they can be read more or less as connected episodes.

New to this edition are study questions that follow the selections. These are designed to help students make comparisons and contrasts between selections and to raise thought-provoking issues about the individual selections themselves. The questions also help students review the selections and suggest points for class discussion.

In putting together the Fourth Edition, I drew on the expertise of congenial and enthusiastic colleagues across the country. My thanks to Karen Smith, who made critical suggestions, photocopied materials, and performed a number of other indispensable tasks; to Professor Charles C. Alexander of Ohio University, whose advice

PREFACE TO THE FOURTH EDITION

and constructive criticism again proved invaluable; to Professor Gerald W. McFarland of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, who generously interrupted his own labors to evaluate my selections on the robber barons and John Peter Altgeld; and to

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S.B.O.

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I

To  
BIND THE  
NATION'S WOUNDS



# I

## *Why They Impeached Andrew Johnson*

DAVID DONALD

*Until the 1930s, most historical writers viewed Reconstruction as "a tragic era" when fanatical Radicals like Old Thad Stevens and Charles Sumner attempted to create a Congressional dictatorship in Washington, to "put the colored people on top" in the South, and to turn that maligned region over to hordes of beady-eyed carpetbaggers and roguish scalawags who "stole the South blind." According to this view, still popular among many Americans today, Reconstruction was a "blackout of honest government," a time when the "Southern people were literally put to the torch," a period so rife with "political rancor, and social violence and disorder," that nothing good came out of it. Possibly the only good that happened was the triumph of white supremacy, when Southern redeemers took their states away from "the niggers and carpetbaggers" and put an end to the corruption. From about 1900 to the 1930s, a whole procession of books appeared that advanced this view of Reconstruction, but it found its most popular expression in D. W. Griffith's epochal motion picture Birth of a Nation, a blatantly racist film that eulogized the Ku Klux Klan. Produced in 1915, Birth of a Nation played to millions of white Americans over the ensuing decades.*

*The underlying assumption of the old view of Reconstruction was that Negroes were inherently inferior — they were "lazy, dishonest, and extravagant" — so any attempt to grant them equal political rights with white people was misguided. But in the 1930s and 1940s some historical writers began to question the conventional wisdom about Reconstruction, including the anti-Negro prejudice that un-*

*derlay it. Once science and psychology had dispelled the myth that Negroes were inferior to whites, most historical writers abandoned the old interpretation with its racist underpinnings and tried to approach Reconstruction with more critical detachment and more insight into the complexities of that troubled period. Since then at least two parallel reinterpretations have been under way. One has sought to re-evaluate the role of Andrew Johnson in the rise of Congressional or "Radical" Reconstruction. Another has offered a more benign view of Radical Reconstruction itself, contending that it was neither harsh nor even very radical.*

*This essay by David Donald reflects the re-evaluation of Andrew Johnson in the Reconstruction story. Examining how Congressional Reconstruction emerged from the political struggles of 1865–1867, Donald concludes that Johnson invited much of that program — and the impeachment proceedings which followed — because of his own intransigence.*

RECONSTRUCTION AFTER THE CIVIL WAR posed some of the most discouraging problems ever faced by American statesmen. The South was prostrate. Its defeated armies straggled homeward through a countryside desolated by war. Southern soil was untilled and exhausted; southern factories and railroads were worn out. The four billion dollars of southern capital invested in Negro slaves was wiped out by advancing Union armies, "the most stupendous act of sequestration in the history of Anglo-American jurisprudence." The white inhabitants of eleven states had somehow to be reclaimed from rebellion and restored to a firm loyalty to the United States. Their four million former slaves had simultaneously to be guided into a proper use of their newfound freedom.

For the victorious Union government there

was no time for reflection. Immediate decisions had to be made. Thousands of destitute whites and Negroes had to be fed before long-range plans of rebuilding the southern economy could be drafted. Some kind of government had to be established in these former Confederate states, to preserve order and to direct the work of restoration.

A score of intricate questions must be answered: Should the defeated southerners be punished or pardoned? How should genuinely loyal southern Unionists be rewarded? What was to be the social, economic, and political status of the now free Negroes? What civil rights did they have? Ought they to have the ballot? Should they be given a freehold of property? Was Reconstruction to be controlled by the national government, or should the southern states work out their own salvation? If the federal government supervised the process, should the President or the Congress be in control?

Intricate as were the problems, in early April, 1865, they did not seem insuperable. President Abraham Lincoln was winning the peace as he

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From "Why They Impeached Andrew Johnson" by David Donald. © 1956 by American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc. Reprinted by permission from *American Heritage* (December 1956).

had already won the war. He was careful to keep every detail of Reconstruction in his own hands; unwilling to be committed to any "exclusive, and inflexible plan," he was working out a pragmatic program of restoration not, perhaps, entirely satisfactory to any group, but reasonably acceptable to all sections. . . .

The blighting of these auspicious beginnings is one of the saddest stories in American history. The reconciliation of the sections, which seemed so imminent in 1865, was delayed for more than ten years. Northern magnanimity toward a fallen foe curdled into bitter distrust. Southern whites rejected moderate leaders, and inveterate racists spoke for the new South. The Negro, after serving as a political pawn for a decade, was relegated to a second-class citizenship, from which he is yet struggling to emerge. Rarely has democratic government so completely failed as during the Reconstruction decade.

The responsibility for this collapse of American statesmanship is, of course, complex. History is not a tale of deep-dyed villains or pure-as-snow heroes. Part of the blame must fall upon ex-Confederates who refused to recognize that the war was over; part upon freedmen who confused liberty with license and the ballot box with the lunch pail; part upon northern antislavery extremists who identified patriotism with loyalty to the Republican party; part upon the land speculators, treasury grafters, and railroad promoters who were unwilling to have a genuine peace lest it end their looting of the public till.

Yet these divisive forces were not bound to triumph. Their success was due to the failure of constructive statesmanship that could channel the magnanimous feelings shared by most Americans into a positive program of reconstruction.

President Andrew Johnson was called upon for positive leadership, and he did not meet the challenge.

Andrew Johnson's greatest weakness was his insensitivity to public opinion. In contrast to Lincoln, who said, "Public opinion in this country is everything," Johnson made a career of battling the popular will. A poor white, a runaway tailor's apprentice, a self-educated Tennessee politician, Johnson was a living defiance to the dominant southern belief that leadership belonged to the plantation aristocracy.

As senator from Tennessee, he defied the sentiment of his section in 1861 and refused to join the secessionist movement. When Lincoln later appointed him military governor of occupied Tennessee, Johnson found Nashville "a furnace of treason," but he braved social ostracism and threats of assassination and discharged his duties with boldness and efficiency.

Such a man was temperamentally unable to understand the northern mood in 1865, much less to yield to it. For four years the northern people had been whipped into wartime frenzy by propaganda tales of Confederate atrocities. The assassination of Lincoln by a southern sympathizer confirmed their belief in southern brutality and heartlessness. Few northerners felt vindictive toward the South, but most felt that the rebellion they had crushed must never rise again. Johnson ignored this postwar psychosis gripping the North and plunged ahead with his program of rapidly restoring the southern states to the Union. In May, 1865, without any previous preparation of public opinion, he issued a proclamation of amnesty, granting forgiveness to nearly all the millions of former rebels and welcoming them back into peaceful fraternity. Some few Confederate leaders were excluded from his general amnesty, but even they could secure par-

don by special petition. For weeks the White House corridors were thronged with ex-Confederate statesmen and former southern generals who daily received presidential forgiveness.

Ignoring public opinion by pardoning the former Confederates, Johnson actually entrusted the formation of new governments in the South to them. The provisional governments established by the President proceeded, with a good deal of reluctance, to rescind their secession ordinances, to abolish slavery, and to repudiate the Confederate debt. Then, with far more enthusiasm, they turned to electing governors, representatives, and senators. By December, 1865, the southern states had their delegations in Washington waiting for admission by Congress. Alexander H. Stephens, once vice president of the Confederacy, was chosen senator from Georgia; not one of the North Carolina delegation could take a loyalty oath; and all of South Carolina's congressmen had "either held office under the Confederate States, or been in the army, or countenanced in some way the Rebellion."

Johnson himself was appalled. "There seems in many of the elections something like defiance, which is all out of place at this time," he protested. Yet on December 5 he strongly urged the Congress to seat these southern representatives and "thereby complete the work of reconstruction." But the southern states were omitted from the roll call.

Such open defiance of northern opinion was dangerous under the best of circumstances, but in Johnson's case it was little more than suicidal. The President seemed not to realize the weakness of his position. He was the representative of no major interest and had no genuine political following. He had been considered for the vice presidency in 1864 because, as a southerner and a former slaveholder, he could lend plausibility

to the Republican pretension that the old parties were dead and that Lincoln was the nominee of a new, nonsectional National Union party.

A political accident, the new Vice President did little to endear himself to his countrymen. At Lincoln's second inauguration Johnson appeared before the Senate in an obviously inebriated state and made a long, intemperate harangue about his plebeian origins and his hard-won success. President, Cabinet, and senators were humiliated by the shameful display and Charles Sumner felt that "the Senate should call upon him to resign." Historians now know that Andrew Johnson was not a heavy drinker. At the time of his inaugural display, he was just recovering from a severe attack of typhoid fever. Feeling ill just before he entered the Senate chamber, he asked for some liquor to steady his nerves, and either his weakened condition or abnormal sensitivity to alcohol betrayed him.

Lincoln reassured Republicans who were worried over the affair: "I have known Andy for many years; he made a bad slip the other day, but you need not be scared. Andy ain't a drunkard." Never again was Andrew Johnson seen under the influence of alcohol, but his reformation came too late. His performance on March 4, 1865, seriously undermined his political usefulness and permitted his opponents to discredit him as a pothouse politician. Johnson was catapulted into the presidency by John Wilkes Booth's bullet. From the outset his position was weak, but it was not necessarily untenable. The President's chronic lack of discretion made it so. Where common sense dictated that a chief executive in so disadvantageous a position should act with great caution, Johnson proceeded to imitate Old Hickory, Andrew Jackson, his political idol. If Congress crossed his will, he did not hesitate to defy it. Was he not "the Tribune of the People"?

Sure of his rectitude, Johnson was indifferent to prudence. He never learned that the President of the United States cannot afford to be a quarreler. Apprenticed in the rough-and-tumble politics of frontier Tennessee, where orators exchanged violent personalities, crude humor, and bitter denunciations, Johnson continued to make stump speeches from the White House. All too often he spoke extemporaneously, and he permitted hecklers in his audience to draw from him angry charges against his critics.

On Washington's birthday in 1866, against the advice of his more sober advisers, the President made an impromptu address to justify his Reconstruction policy. "I fought traitors and treason in the South," he told the crowd; "now when I turn around, and at the other end of the line find men — I care not by what name you call them — who will stand opposed to the restoration of the Union of these States, I am free to say to you that I am still in the field."

During the "great applause" which followed, a nameless voice shouted, "Give us the names at the other end. . . . Who are they?"

"You ask me who they are," Johnson retorted. "I say Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania is one; I say Mr. Sumner is another; and Wendell Phillips is another." Increasing applause urged him to continue. "Are those who want to destroy our institutions . . . not satisfied with the blood that has been shed? . . . Does not the blood of Lincoln appease the vengeance and wrath of the opponents of this government?"

The President's remarks were as untrue as they were impolitic. Not only was it manifestly false to assert that the leading Republican in the House and the most conspicuous Republican in the Senate were opposed to "the fundamental principles of this government" or that they had been responsible for Lincoln's assassination; it was incredible political folly to impute such actions

to men with whom the President had to work daily. But Andrew Johnson never learned that the President of the United States must function as a party leader.

There was a temperamental coldness about this plain-featured, grave man that kept him from easy, intimate relations with even his political supporters. His massive head, dark, luxuriant hair, deep-set and piercing eyes, and cleft square chin seemed to Charles Dickens to indicate "courage, watchfulness, and certainly strength of purpose," but his was a grim face, with "no genial sunlight in it." The coldness and reserve that marked Johnson's public associations doubtless stemmed from a deep-seated feeling of insecurity; this self-educated tailor whose wife had taught him how to write could never expose himself by letting down his guard and relaxing.

Johnson knew none of the arts of managing men, and he seemed unaware that face-saving is important for a politician. When he became President, Johnson was besieged by advisers of all political complexions. To each he listened gravely and non-committally, raising no questions and by his silence seeming to give consent. With Radical Senator Sumner, already intent upon giving the freedmen both homesteads and the ballot, he had repeated interviews during the first month of his presidency. "His manner has been excellent, & even sympathetic," Sumner reported triumphantly. With Chief Justice Salmon P. Chase, Sumner urged Johnson to support immediate Negro suffrage and found the President was "well-disposed, & sees the rights & necessities of the case." In the middle of May, 1865, Sumner reassured a Republican caucus that the President was a true Radical; he had listened repeatedly to the Senator and had told him "there is no difference between us." Before the end of the month the rug was pulled from under Sumner's feet. Johnson issued his proclamation for



the reconstruction of North Carolina, making no provisions for Negro suffrage. Sumner first learned about it through the newspapers.

While he was making up his mind, Johnson appeared silently receptive to all ideas; when he had made a decision, his mind was immovably closed, and he defended his course with all the obstinacy of a weak man. In December, alarmed by Johnson's Reconstruction proclamations, Sumner again sought an interview with the President. "No longer sympathetic, or even kindly," Sumner found, "he was harsh, petulant, and unreasonable." The Senator was depressed by Johnson's "prejudice, ignorance, and perversity" on the Negro suffrage issue. Far from listening amiably to Sumner's argument that the South was still torn by violence and not yet ready for readmission, Johnson attacked him with cheap analogies. "Are there no murders in Massachusetts?" the President asked.

"Unhappily yes," Sumner replied, "sometimes."

"Are there no assaults in Boston? Do not men there sometimes knock each other down, so that the police is obliged to interfere?"

"Unhappily yes."

"Would you consent that Massachusetts, on this account, should be excluded from Congress?" Johnson triumphantly queried. In the excitement of the argument, the President unconsciously used Sumner's hat, which the Senator had placed on the floor beside his chair, as a spittoon!

Had Johnson been as resolute in action as he was in argument, he might conceivably have carried much of his party with him on his Reconstruction program. Promptness, publicity, and persuasion could have created a presidential following. Instead Johnson boggled. Though he talked boastfully of "kicking out" officers who failed to support his plan, he was slow to act. His

own Cabinet, from the very beginning, contained members who disagreed with him, and his secretary of war, Edwin M. Stanton, was openly in league with the Republican elements most hostile to the President. For more than two years he impotently hoped that Stanton would resign; then in 1867, after Congress had passed the Tenure of Office Act, he tried to oust the Secretary. This belated firmness, against the letter of the law, led directly to Johnson's impeachment trial.

Instead of working with his party leaders and building up political support among Republicans, Johnson in 1866 undertook to organize his friends into a new party. In August a convention of white southerners, northern Democrats, moderate Republicans, and presidential appointees assembled in Philadelphia to endorse Johnson's policy. Union General Darius Couch of Massachusetts marched arm in arm down the convention aisle with Governor James L. Orr of South Carolina, to symbolize the states reunited under Johnson's rule. The convention produced fervid oratory, a dignified statement of principles — but not much else. Like most third-party reformist movements it lacked support and grass-roots organization.

Johnson himself was unable to breathe life into his stillborn third party. Deciding to take his case to the people, he accepted an invitation to speak at a great Chicago memorial honoring Stephen A. Douglas. When his special train left Washington on August 28 for a "swing around the circle," the President was accompanied by a few Cabinet members who shared his views and by the war heroes Grant and Farragut.

At first all went well. There were some calculated political snubs to the President, but he managed at Philadelphia, New York, and Albany to present his ideas soberly and cogently to