

Choice of Johnson was not
a good one because you cannot
summarize his vast official
life in only 8-10 pages.
His influence is largely
confined to the Reconstruction
period and you have very little
on that making your choice
all the more problematical.

The Life of Andrew Johnson

review by

Mark Lewis



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During the night of April 15, 1865, Andrew Johnson was awakened from his sleep to receive the news that President Lincoln had been shot; he was about to become the seventeenth President of the United States. No man before or since has risen from lower depths to reach that office than did Andrew Johnson. He was a self-made man who hated Southern aristocrats and who identified himself with the "plebeians". He was elected at every level of public office during his political career - from city government to the Presidency. We will look at how he rose from humble beginnings to the highest office in the land.

Andrew Johnson was born on December 29, 1808, in Raleigh, North Carolina. His parents were Jacob and Mary, both of whom were illiterate tavern servants. Jacob Johnson died in 1812. Mary supported Andrew and his older brother William by taking in washing and sewing until she remarried in 1814. In 1822, at the age of fourteen, Andrew and his brother became apprentices to James Selby a Raleigh tailor. In 1824, he fled to South Carolina to avoid being arrested for throwing stones at an old woman's home. He supported himself there by tailoring. Selby posted a ten dollar reward for his return. In 1825, Andrew returned to Raleigh and offered to finish the remaining five years of his apprenticeship. Shelby refused to take him back or to release him from his services, therefore Andrew went to Tennessee and worked as a tailor in Columbia. In March 1827, he opened his own shop in the mountain village of Greenville. Two months later he married 17 year old Eliza McCardle a daughter of a shoemaker. She had an elementary education and used it to teach Andrew how

to write and cipher. Andrew always tried to better himself. While he worked, he had people read to him. In his spare time he practiced reading and writing. He joined a debating society which met every Friday night. From the debating society and less formal discussions with friends in his tailor shop, it was an easy step into politics.

In 1829, his political career began by being elected to become an alderman for Greenville. Two years later he was elected as the city mayor. In 1835, Johnson became a member of the State legislature. It was during this time he made his first major blunder. He opposed a bond issue for the construction of roads. The Greenville region badly needed better roads and did not approve of his opposition of the bill, so they voted him out of office in the next election. However, he was re-elected in 1839, and in 1840, he proclaimed himself a member of the Democratic Party. He was now ready and prepared to move on the national political scene.

Johnson became a member of the United States House of Representatives in 1842. He still owned his tailor shop, but he no longer worked there. He was now a professional politician. He served five consecutive terms in the House. The Whig party gained control of the House in 1852, and promptly gerrymandered Johnson out of his congressional seat. This only temporary set him back. He became Governor of Tennessee, and pushed through a law establishing Tennessee's first public school system. He successfully sponsored a number of other constructive measures. In 1857, when the state legislature again became democratic, it

sent him to the United States Senate.

In getting to the top of Tennessee politics, Johnson had to overcome men of superior learning, intellect, and status. No one could match him in appealing to the "plebeians". One of the reasons he was so successful was because he was a good stump speaker. The most important reason for Johnson's rise was his desire for power. The forces behind Johnson's drive for power were bitterness over the hardships of his boyhood and resentment of the rich, well born, and highly educated who, he felt, in adulthood, looked down on self-made men like himself. Power for Johnson meant vengeance and vindication. "Someday," he vowed, after being snubbed socially in Greenville, "I will show the stuck-up aristocrats who is running the country."

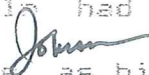
As senator he began seeking the presidency. During the Democratic Convention of 1860, he sent his two oldest sons with Sam Milligan, his chief henchman, to Charleston, South Carolina to represent his interest. The convention was split between Northerners and Southerners. He knew a split in the democratic party insured a Republican victory.

Lincoln's election in November precipitated the secession of the lower South. Johnson took a prominent role in attempting to arrange a new sectional compromise, at the same time he staunchly opposed secession which he branded as treason. Johnson argued that slavery could be best protected inside rather than outside the union, and preservation of the Union must come before all else. The people of Tennessee backed him at first. They rejected by a large majority pro secessionist Governor Isham B.

Harris' proposal for a convention to take the state out of the Union. However, public opinion changed after Fort Sumter. Johnson went home to campaign for the Union cause. He toured eastern Tennessee with some of his long standing political foes to promote the anti-secessionist crusade. On June 8, the predominantly whig and non-slave-owning mountaineers voted 33,000 to 14,000 against secession. However, the middle and western regions of Tennessee voted 67,000 to 14,000 in favor of secession.

Johnson's valiant struggle against secession won him acclaim in the North. He was called "the greatest man of his age" by the New York Times. Moreover, he was the only Senator from a rebel state to remain in Congress. He became the symbol and spokesman of Southern Unionism. Johnson eventually supported emancipation, not out of sympathy for the slaves, but strictly as a means of winning the war and breaking the power of the Southern aristocrats.

Early in 1862, Ulysses S. Grant drove the confederates out of the middle and Western part of Tennessee. At Lincoln's request Johnson went to Nashville as the military governor. During the next three years he was virtually the dictator of Tennessee - or at least the portion controlled by the federal army. Throughout his term as military governor Johnson struggled to establish a pro-Union government in Tennessee. In 1865, he succeeded with the inauguration of "Parson" Brownlow as governor.

President Lincoln had the Republican party, now called the Union party, nominate  as his running mate Andrew Johnson, whose

conduct of affairs in Tennessee had impressed the President. So, in late February 1865, Johnson headed to Washington to be inaugurated as Vice-President. Johnson was not feeling well; suffering from a severe bout of typhoid fever. He attended an inauguration party in his honor at which he drank a good deal of wine. The next morning March 4, 1865, he woke up with a hangover. When he reached the Capitol where he was to take the oath, he felt faint. He asked out-going Vice-President Hannibal Hamlin for some good whiskey. The result was a drunken man delivering his inaugural address. Johnson aware that he had disgraced himself, did not preside over the Senate during the short time Congress remained in session following the inauguration. Instead he spent the next two weeks recuperating physically and emotionally at the Silver Spring, Maryland mansion of Francis Preston Blair Sr., who had offered him sanctuary. He was planning on going back to Greenville, Tennessee, to rejoin his family; however, Grant's capture of Richmond, heralding the end of the war, caused Johnson to postpone his trip home. On Friday April 14, he conferred with Lincoln at the White House. This was his first meeting with the President since the inauguration. As Vice-President, Johnson had little part or influence in the affairs of the government. Politically, he had hit a dead end.

On April 15, 1865, some twelve hours after being awakened from sleep, Andrew Johnson took the oath of office to become the seventeenth President of the United States. His problems soon began when he tried to implement his reconstruction policies.

President Johnson became the only President ever to be

impeached. The vote was 126 to 47. All those voting in the affirmative were Republicans, while all those voting in the negative were Democrats. There were eleven charges against Johnson that claimed he committed "high crimes and misdemeanors". However, Johnson was not convicted and so remained in the White House. Johnson believed that he deserved the Democratic nomination for President. Furthermore, he believed that if nominated he would beat General Grant, the Republican candidate. Johnson received a great disappointment when on the twenty-first ballot the Democratic convention nominated Horatio Seymour as their presidential candidate. On March 4, 1869, Ulysses S. Grant was sworn in as the eighteenth President of the United States. Johnson's political life was reborn when he was elected to the United States Senate in 1875. On March 5, he took his seat in the Senate. Did Johnson have his eyes on the Presidency in 1876? We will never know, because on July 31, 1875, Andrew Johnson died.

He was a fighter who never gave up. He rose from unbelievable odds to reach the Presidency. But, perhaps his greatest victory was winning the Senatorial seat of Tennessee in 1875. Few people, if any, could have come back from the defeat and disappointment of a Presidency such as his. Lincoln's death propelled this "plebeian" into a situation and position he was unable to handle, although, I am not sure many men would have been successful in that situation. America had just come through its most devastating war and was facing the difficult period of reconstruction. It became Andrew Johnson's challenge and downfall.

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