

Andrew Johnson: A Man of Unimpeachable Character

Much of the recent discussion of the Watergate affair has centered around the issue of impeachment of the President. In this respect, Andrew Johnson's impeachment has been referred to, but seldom has any analyst described the character of Johnson. For example, it is well known that the specific issues that brought about Johnson's impeachment were his violation of the Tenure of Office Act (nine counts), his failure to reinforce the Reconstruction acts (one count) and his disrespect for Congress, as illustrated by his inflammatory rhetoric (one count).

The validity of each one of these 11 charges was indeed debatable, and the Senate in 1868 and the courts in the 20th century exonerated Johnson, the latter by declaring the Tenure of Office Act unconstitutional. There was little question, however, regarding Johnson's character. He had the courage to run for the Senate after his term in the White House had expired and was the first and only ex-President to be elected to the upper house. Even after the Senate failed to convict him, he showed what one senator called "nobility of soul." In the words of Senator Morton of Indiana: "After I had voted for his impeachment, and met him accidentally, he wore the same kindly smile as in times before, and offered me his hand . . . There were

not many men who could have done that."

Six months after Johnson died, many senators and representatives paid tribute to their colleague. A common theme running through each of their speeches was the firm and unimpeachable character of Johnson. Representative Waddell of North Carolina expressed this theme best when he said:

"Mr. Johnson was an honest man, a truthful man, and incorruptible. He obstinately adhered to the opinion which ought to be, but is not, universally accepted and acted upon, that personal integrity and political dishonesty are absolutely irreconcilable in the same person. In all the bitter contests through which he passed, (and his career in this respect is almost without a parallel), his worst enemy, so far as I know, never attempted to prove, if he ever charged, that Andrew Johnson was a corrupt man . . .

"If his almost fanatical love of the Union caused him at times to assent to the use of arbitrary power, he still always proclaimed the supremacy of the Constitution. If corruption in administration occurred during his presidency, no one ever accused him of being even remotely connected with it. He at least understood the principles and sympathized with the spirit of republican institutions. He did not think that per-

sonal comfort and pecuniary benefit were the chief ends to be aimed at in seeking public offices. He did not accept them at the hands of his countrymen as a debt due to him, and did not administer them, as small men always do, in accordance with his personal feelings and interests. He considered himself the servant of the people, bound by his oath to be careful and diligent in looking out, not for his own, but for their interests. He never was one of those who were called, and aptly called in the civil-service-commission-report, 'the banditti of politics and the pawnbrokers of patronage' . . .

"I do not hold up Mr. Johnson as an exemplar either in morals or in politics. Very few are the men to whom I could pay that tribute. But, sir, the qualities which I have ascribed to him, and which he possessed, may well be emulated by some of his contemporaries upon whom fortune or an inscrutable Providence has devolved the duties and responsibilities of public office. Upon many of them have more brilliant gifts been bestowed. They have been more learned, more eloquent, more popular than he. But not of every one of them can it be said, as of him, he was honest, he was truthful, he was incorruptable . . ."

THOMAS V. DiBACCO,
Associate Professor of History,
American University.

Washington.