

This article is protected by copyright, East Tennessee Historical Society. It is available online for study, scholarship, and research use only.

Suggested Citation:

Haskins, Ralph W. "Andrew Johnson and the Preservation of the Union." *The East Tennessee Historical Society's Publications* 33 (1961): 43-60.

at Townsend. In
 consumed in con-
 he camps, while
 mber cut by the
 unknown quan-
 yielded as much
 pped altogether.
 mber, but hem-
 the timber cut,
 in lumber.²⁷

e River Lumber
 were based upon
 a was essentially
 antial assistance
 supplies and its
 measured.²⁸

r gorge into the
 ly unaware that
 the area. Little
 is a careful ob-
 the form of the
 which winds its
 d the residences
 within his vision
 eration has been
 here.

et, Value, and Net
 eration." *Ibid.*
 our years, viz; 1926,

ANDREW JOHNSON AND THE PRESERVATION OF THE UNION

By RALPH W. HASKINS

One hundred years ago, as the Union tottered on the brink of dis-
 solution and the great essay in democracy seemed doomed to failure,
 Sam Milligan of Greeneville wrote thoughtfully to his old friend
 Andrew Johnson: "Experiment and time alone can correct the errors
 of an infatuated people, who have grown rich and powerful under the
 very government which they now wish to tear down. They will, I fear,
 accomplish it, and with it their own destruction. But it is the part of
 wisdom, as well as the highest duty of patriotism," he added, "to save
 the Constitution, and the eternal principles of government. The madness
 that rules the hous[e] will pass away, and returning reason bring back
 the wanderers . . . again."¹ To a degree, Milligan's words had the ring
 of prophecy. For secession began a revolution by which the ruling clique
 of the Old South was destroyed, the nation reunited, and the Constitu-
 tion saved. Yet the means chosen to attain these ends was not peace, as
 the patriot Johnson counselled, but war. The wanderers were brought
 back not by reason but by force of arms.

The Civil War Centennial provides Americans with a chance for
 historical introspection. At its conclusion, they will know much more
 about the conflict itself—about the military phases, about the role of
 personalities, about the war behind the lines. More important, they will
 see it in enlarged perspective. That contemporaries resorted to war was
 a tragedy; that the nation was dissolved in the first place was scarcely
 less a tragedy and a damning indictment of the "Blundering Genera-
 tion." Out of the vast majority who believed in the perpetuity of the
 Union, it is ironic that only a few public men spoke out vigorously for
 its preservation by measures short of bloodshed. Outstanding among
 these, and indeed one of the few southerners, was Andrew Johnson,

¹ Sam Milligan to Andrew Johnson, December 13, 1860, Andrew Johnson Papers
 (Library of Congress). This and all letters subsequently cited are to be found as paper
 facsimiles in the files of the Andrew Johnson Project, University of Tennessee Library,
 Knoxville, Tennessee.

whose courageous stand during the "cold war" before Sumter made him a national figure.

A man's early life may be a kind of microcosm of his future; so it was with Johnson. In several ways his career is the epitome of the American dream. He ascended the ladder of success from the bottom rung. From humble beginnings in North Carolina, he became a successful tailor in Greeneville—so successful that an examination of the 1850 census returns, ordinarily a dull chore, becomes fascinating when it reveals a number of tailors in that community—a plethora of "men of the cloth" perhaps inspired by his example. In the course of time he invested in land and bonds and also made loans, generally small but occasionally sizable. The Andrew Johnson of 1860 was hardly poverty-stricken. He was equally successful in the political arena. A lifelong Democrat, he was successively alderman and mayor, state representative and senator, and eventually governor. He spent ten years in the national House of Representatives and in 1857 became United States senator.

Johnson's slow but steady progress reflected one of the great historical trends of the time: the rise of the common man. Sprung from the people, he stood for the people—the farmer, the workman, the mechanic. He gloried in the company of Adam, who was a tailor and sewed fig-leaves, of Socrates, who wielded chisel and mallet, and of Christ, who was the son of a carpenter.² The papers and deeds of the "plebeian," as he liked to style himself, are replete with testimonials of his faith in the masses. As governor, he labored for a public school system; as congressman and senator, he was a veritable watchdog of the treasury, and he crusaded so fervently in behalf of the Homestead Bill that he may be justly called its "father." He opposed vested interests, whether they were in the form of banks or of planters. Once, interpreting a speech of Jefferson Davis as invidious to tailors and workingmen, he reacted characteristically with remarks about "an illegitimate, swaggering, bastard, scrub aristocracy."³ A friend observed that if Johnson were a snake, he would lie in the grass and bite rich men's children.

It is a common fallacy to regard all men below the Mason and Dixon line as being of one mind. The Old South, like the New, sheltered a variety of viewpoints. As my colleague Dr. LeRoy P. Graf has

² Frank Moore, *Life of Andrew Johnson*, 68, quoted in Robert W. Winston, *Andrew Johnson, Plebeian and Patriot* (New York, 1928), 34.

³ *Ibid.*, 50.

Sumter made him
 of his future; so it
 epitome of the
 from the bottom
 became a success-
 ation of the 1850
 cinating when it
 hora of "men of
 ource of time he
 nderally small but
 s hardly poverty-
 rena. A lifelong
 ate representative
 rs in the national
 States senator.

of the great his-
 an. Sprung from
 e workman, the
 was a tailor and
 l mallet, and of
 nd deeds of the
 h testimonials of
 a public school
 watchdog of the
 Homestead Bill
 vested interests,
 Once, interpret-
 nd workingmen,
 egitimate, swag-
 that if Johnson
 en's children.

the Mason and
 e the New, shel-
 Roy P. Graf has

pointed out in a recent article,⁴ Johnson remained a loyal southern Democrat of the Jacksonian species; but he found himself out of step with the party, the more so since the southern wing dominated its councils after the election of 1844. In many respects Johnson did not share the views of the dominant planters. Granted that he himself was a slaveholder with the racial outlook of the southern white, he was not an ardent defender of the peculiar institution. He was an interloper—too much of a maverick and indeed too much of a leveller—for the southern aristocrats to stomach. The Homestead Bill was unacceptable to most southern Democrats. Many northern Democrats either did not know him or perhaps distrusted him. His record in the House of Representatives reveals him as a dissenter often petty in his dissent, a blunt man of principle to whom compromise was almost invariably the wrong solution, and a verbal bludgeonist who now and then showed a trace of the demagogue. Ambitious for the presidency, Johnson was not really a "party man" at the national level. He was neither a leader among the Democrats nor had he many friends within the party.

These formative years afford an insight into his concept of the nature of the Union. In his program of self-education the tailor-politician heard and read selections from Jefferson and other founding fathers, as well as from the Constitution itself. The deep impression thus made upon his mind was re-enforced by years of experience in politics. He believed in the principles of Thomas Jefferson as expounded by Andrew Jackson. He insisted upon a strict interpretation of the Constitution and maintained that the rights of the states should be protected against encroachment by the federal government. But he feared extremes: opposed to centralization, he was even more opposed to secession and its "hermaphrodite," nullification.⁵

Long before the *dénouement* came, the shadow of disunion hung over the land. By the 'forties and 'fifties southern sectionalism had become southern nationalism and a minority was planning secession. That the edifice was crumbling was shown by the split of major religious denominations, the revolution in political parties, the growing skepticism toward compromise, and the increasing resort to violence.

⁴ LeRoy P. Graf, "Andrew Johnson and the Coming of the War," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* (Nashville), XIX (September, 1960), 212-16.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 217-19. There is no evidence, however, that he took any definite stand during the nullification controversy of the 1830's.

One of the central themes of the time was the failure of the American process.

Southerners had threatened secession if a Black Republican should become President; and in the wake of Abraham Lincoln's election, northerners who had for years scoffed at such threats saw South Carolina, the citadel of state rights, leave the Union on December 20. She was to be followed shortly by other states of the deep South. The poverty of American leadership is nowhere more in evidence than in President James Buchanan's failure to cope with the deteriorating situation. He denied that a state had the right to secede; yet he denied that the federal government had the right to coerce a seceding state. The "old public functionary" offered a few compromise proposals designed to pour oil on the troubled waters. For the future, he would leave the issue to his Republican successor; for the time being, he left it to Congress.

The Thirty-Sixth Congress, thus charged with the responsibility of preserving the Union and of avoiding possible war, had the potentials of statesmanship. In the House were such men as Thaddeus Stevens, Justin S. Morrill, Charles Francis Adams, and Thomas Corwin. But Johnson's colleagues in the Senate shone brightly by comparison. The Vice-President was John C. Breckinridge, a Kentuckian of moderate views who had been supported for the presidency by the lower South. Jefferson Davis of Mississippi wore the mantle of the departed John C. Calhoun. No longer the fire-eater of 1850, he was nonetheless skeptical about the future of the Union. There was Robert Toombs of Georgia, a former Unionist now veering toward extremism, and his colleague the fire-eating Alfred Iverson, whom one writer, yielding to an irresistible impulse, called "Iverson the Terrible."⁶ From Louisiana came Judah P. Benjamin and John Slidell, the first a brilliant but casuistic lawyer who would enjoy a distinguished career in both the Confederacy and England, and the second a leading figure in the *Trent* Affair. There was Louis T. Wigfall, born in South Carolina but now gone to Texas, a fire-eater and master of invective and one of Johnson's chief gadflies in the months that followed. Finally, there was the elderly John J. Crittenden of Kentucky, a friend of the Union but only a faint echo of the great

⁶ Winston, *Andrew Johnson*, 159.

compromiser Henry Clay. The South Carolina senators were conspicuous by their absence.

On the other side were William H. Seward of New York, once damned as an abolitionist but now clearly a moderate who chose expediency as his method for preserving the Union. Intent upon the same objective was the storm-center of the Democratic party, the Little Giant, Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois. The North harbored zealots like Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, now returned from a long absence—necessitated, as he said, by recuperation from *l'affaire Brooks*; necessitated, as others said, by partisan politics and a martyr complex. Of like viewpoint were such westerners as Benjamin F. Wade of Ohio and Zachariah Chandler of Michigan: the one a profane abolitionist (if the noun and adjective be not incongruous) and the other an incendiary who declared that "without a little blood-letting, this Union will not . . . be worth a rush."⁷ Joseph Lane of Oregon occupied the most anomalous position of all—southern-born and an ardent defender of secession, he represented a new state beyond the possibility of seceding. And there were others, advocates of compromise but largely unsung in their own time and relatively unknown today—William Bigler of Pennsylvania, George E. Pugh of Ohio, and Lazarus Powell of Kentucky.

It would be impossible to say whether the legislators or their constituents were the more excited; at any rate, congressional deliberations were conducted in an atmosphere of high tension. The galleries were generally crowded and often "packed" with secessionists or Unionists, who punctuated the proceedings with cheers intermingled with hisses and the stamping of feet. "Order in the galleries" and "clear the galleries" were phrases often on the lips of presiding officers, who nevertheless gave deference to the ladies seated in a segregated section. That the senators now and then took liberties with history is obvious; that they often resorted to demagoguery is apparent; that they occasionally approached hysteria is possible. Speculation was rife: according to one rumor, Ben Wade had a shotgun in his desk; according to another sometime later, Johnson had "shot Jeff Davis."⁸ But the first was never proven, and the second, like the passing of Mark Twain, was undoubtedly exaggerated. Yet, compared with the disorderly House, whose mem-

⁷ Allan Nevins, *The Emergence of Lincoln*, 2 vols. (New York, 1950), II, 412.

⁸ Wm. M. Lowry to Johnson, December 29, 1860, Johnson Papers, L.C.

bers not only exchanged choice expletives but called each other out to reckonings with pistols and bowie knives, the upper chamber maintained something of its traditional air of sobriety. The senators restricted themselves to verbal salvos and adjectival brickbats.

Neither the radical Republicans nor the secessionists had anything resembling a majority. It is probable that most senators were inclined toward moderation, yet few of them spoke out boldly for the Union. Perhaps they lacked confidence or feared the criticism of the extremists; possibly they shared the cynicism, so typical of the day, toward reaching any kind of compromise. Regardless of viewpoint or section, it is well to remember that these men of 1860, unlike Jackson, Calhoun, Clay, Webster, and others nurtured in the older tradition of nationalism, were tutored in the school of sectionalism. Except for Johnson and a handful of others, genuine enthusiasm for the Union was lacking.

In general, representatives of the border slave states bore the brunt of the fight. Theirs was the dilemma of being caught between contending factions. Were they to be loyal to the old government or to adhere to the new? What of the future of slavery? Would they be subjected to the ravages of war? Though Andrew Johnson was not a member of the Committee of Thirteen appointed to deal with the secession crisis, border state men were well represented.

For some years prior to the election of 1860 Johnson seems to have discounted the menace of secession. Certainly he had long distrusted the theories of Calhoun and others, and as early as 1852, he expressed fears for the future; but his subsequent correspondence during that decade yields little on the subject. In January, 1859, he spoke of the propensity for "singing peans and hosannas for the Union . . . done so often that it has got to be entirely a business transaction."⁹ It is possible that Johnson had so often heard threats of disruption that he regarded them as mere buncombe and bombast. His illusions, if any, were soon dispelled. On the day before the election, he foresaw a Republican victory, added that he believed the South would use this as a pretext to secede, and predicted that the effort would fail. "When the crisis comes," said he, "I will be found standing by the Union."¹⁰

⁹ John Savage, *The Life and Public Services of Andrew Johnson . . . Including His State Papers, Speeches and Addresses* (New York, 1866), 145.

¹⁰ Winston, *Andrew Johnson*, 150.

How did Johnson plan to stand by the Union during the secession winter? He believed that the border states, acting as a unit, might hold the balance of power. Tennessee, in turn, would be a kind of fulcrum to hold together this middle area; so Tennessee must be kept in the Union at all costs. He did not believe that the state would secede, partly because of his own considerable influence there and partly because of optimistic reports from his correspondents. Johnson worked behind the scenes in behalf of a border state convention, and busied himself in other ways. He introduced amendments and resolutions, he supported the compromise proposals of others, and he delivered several ringing speeches in the Senate.

He was well aware of the value of propaganda in influencing public opinion. Even before the South Carolina secession convention met on December 17, he and others aided the director of the census in compiling a list of southern voters to whom census clerks addressed and dispatched Unionist speeches—just as he would later respond to the landslide of requests that followed his own addresses.¹¹

On December 13 he submitted a proposal for three constitutional amendments. The first would place the selection of the President and Vice-President in the hands of the people, voting by districts. These posts were to be alternated between North and South. A second amendment proposed that senators should also be elected by direct vote. Similarly, the Supreme Court was to be made more responsible to the popular will. The tenure of the justices was to be limited by dividing the court into three classes with staggered terms, and vacancies were to be filled one-half from the slave states and the remainder from the free states.¹²

None of these propositions was new. Johnson had long advocated direct election and he had offered the Supreme Court amendment in the House of Representatives. There was nothing superficial about them; on the contrary, they were revolutionary measures that would have produced a fundamental change in politics. Seen in another way, they were concerned with the protection of a minority from the tyranny of a majority. The idea of alternating between North and South is reminiscent of Calhoun's concurrent voice. In these amendments, which

¹¹ Roy Franklin Nichols, *The Disruption of American Democracy*, 404, cited in Graf, "Andrew Johnson and the Coming of the War," 219.

¹² *Cong. Globe*, 36 Cong., 2 Sess., 82-83.

made no headway in the Senate, we see both the tribune of the people and the southern Democrat.

From time to time he brought in resolutions. On the same day, he advocated the establishment of a new division between free and slave territory—a resurrection of the geographical principle in the Missouri Compromise. Other proposals gave further guarantees to slavery in the states.¹³ These suggestions anticipated by several days the more important Crittenden Compromise; yet they did not come to a vote and there is no evidence that they were seriously considered. By January he was skeptical of amendments, believing that they would benefit only the northern majority.¹⁴

Unsuccessful in his own proposals, Johnson endorsed those of others. Though he appears to have been rather lukewarm toward the Crittenden Compromise, he was anxious that it receive a fair hearing. In mid-January, as it came to a critical vote, he hastened to the side of the senator from Louisiana and whispered "Mr. Benjamin, vote! Let us save this proposition and see if we cannot bring the country to it. Vote, and show yourself an honest man."¹⁵ Mr. Benjamin was not interested.

Of far greater significance were Johnson's various speeches in behalf of the Union. The first, interrupted by other business and by the heckling of Wigfall and others, occupied several hours on December 18 and 19. It was timely, for the Senate was now considering the Crittenden amendments, the South Carolina secession convention was deliberating, and five days earlier, thirty southern legislators had signed an open address to their constituents, in which they declared that the only hope lay in a southern confederacy.

The speaker identified himself with southern interests but not with secession. He denied that Lincoln's election menaced the South and he invoked the idea of a safety valve: let us keep the North to quarrel with. Conceding that the South had just grievances, he called for joint action; but he insisted that the panacea for these ills lay inside the Union—that the war for southern rights should be waged "upon the battlements of the Constitution." He criticized northern states which had violated the

¹³ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁴ See draft of "Remarks," probably written in January, 1861, in Johnson Papers, L.C.

¹⁵ Winston, *Andrew Johnson*, 177. There is no reference to this incident in any of the Benjamin biographies.

Constitution by passing personal liberty laws and by refusing to execute the Fugitive Slave Act. But where was the logic in seceding and at the same time demanding that the North comply with the Constitution and the laws? Instead of mutual concessions, for "I am not a compromiser . . . in the usual acceptation" of the term, he preferred congressional legislation or constitutional amendments, "upon the principle that they are right and upon no other ground." He emphasized his opposition to a "big" government; yet he wanted a government strong enough to preserve itself. If the right of secession were conceded, the Union was no stronger than "a rope of sand." Citing the opinions of James Madison, Jefferson, John Marshall, and Jackson, he denied the right of secession and maintained that the compact was not temporary but perpetual, not voluntary but irrevocable. Though the federal government could not coerce a state, it could act upon the individuals within that state to enforce the law of the land.

The speech was fraught with grim forebodings. What would be the effects of secession? Assuredly the end of the Union would mean the end of slavery. And if South Carolina made an alliance with a foreign power, the United States would be justified in using strong measures. What about the free navigation of the Mississippi? What significance would secession hold for the border states? Moreover, if one state seceded, would not the nation ultimately be divided piecemeal

. . . into thirty-three petty Governments, with a little prince in one, a potentate in another, a little aristocracy in a third, a little democracy in a fourth, and a republic somewhere else; a citizen not . . . able to pass from one State to another without a passport or a commission . . . with quarreling and warring amongst the little petty powers.

There were ringing phrases. "It was good enough for Washington, for Adams, for Jefferson, and for Jackson. It is good enough for us. I intend to stand by it. . . . It is the last hope of human freedom." If we preserve the Constitution "we shall save the Union; and in saving the Union, we save this, the greatest Government on earth."¹⁶

The passage of a century provides historical hindsight and in theory, a degree of detachment. Any students of the period, editors or otherwise, who have struggled through Johnson's letters, his state papers, and his speeches, cannot fail to be impressed by his capacity for growth—by his increasing ability to cope with the vagaries of the

¹⁶ *Cong. Globe*, 36 Cong., 2 Sess., 117-20, 134-43.

English language, by the salutary influence of wider reading, and by his general maturity. The phraseology is of the times—now and then a long, grandiloquent sentence and an occasional allusion to the classics, but with little of the florid oratory of that day. Whether or not one accepts the hypothesis that Johnson was a scholar rather than a “doer,”¹⁷ the speech demonstrates more than a passing acquaintance with the American past and indeed shows some research into political and constitutional history. If the southern point of view is apparent, it is equally obvious that the speaker is a man who values the Union above all else. Even though he minced no words, this speech, unlike his later ones, was basically conciliatory. His denial that he was a compromiser was a mistake; unfortunately, many public men were saying the same thing. In his references to the future of slavery, the removal of a safety valve, and a consolidated government, there was what a biographer calls “prescience.”¹⁸ Many Unionist speeches were made in Congress, but Johnson, as a southern Unionist, stood virtually alone.

What did his contemporaries think—men immersed in the crucible and without the Olympian detachment of a hundred years hence? A modern biographer overstated the case when he wrote subsequently that “it was not the Senate alone, but the whole country that was listening—the South with execration and the North with tumultuous approval.”¹⁹ Irrespective of what might have been said in the cloak-rooms or corridors, in the boarding-houses or taverns, the microscopic print of the *Congressional Globe* does not convey accurately the enthusiastic reception given elsewhere. Only a few senators, and certainly none from the South, praised the speech or even alluded to it. Unquestionably northern men took a new interest in Johnson and some now discovered that he had enduring qualities once overlooked. He who had roundly criticized Seward and others after the John Brown episode was now Seward’s “noble friend,” and Simon Cameron spoke of “the lion-hearted Johnson.”²⁰ With southern extremists, it was another story. Johnson observed subsequently that “a bevy of conspirators” came from the other house, and he spoke bitterly of “the taunts, the jeers, the derisive remarks, and contemptuous expressions.”²¹ Lane denied the

¹⁷ Milton Lomask, *Andrew Johnson: President on Trial* (New York, 1960), 182-83.

¹⁸ Lloyd Paul Stryker, *Andrew Johnson, A Study in Courage* (New York, 1929), 60.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 71.

²⁰ Winston, *Andrew Johnson*, 168.

²¹ Stryker, *Andrew Johnson*, 62.

ading, and by his
now and then a
on to the classics,
ether or not one
r than a "doer,"¹⁷
intance with the
political and con-
erent, it is equally
on above all else.
is later ones, was
miser was a mis-
e same thing. In
safety valve, and
biographer calls
in Congress, but

ed in the crucible
years hence? A
ote subsequently
ntry that was lis-
with tumultuous
id in the cloak-
the microscopic
y accurately the
enators, and cer-
en alluded to it.
ohnson and some
rlooked. He who
n Brown episode
n spoke of "the
as another story.
tors" came from
s, the jeers, the
Lane denied the

(New York, 1960), 182-83.
(New York, 1929), 60.

power of coercion, denied that the compact was irrevocable, and blamed the Republicans for the dissolution of the country. Davis called Johnson "an ally" of Ben Wade, thus rendering a verdict of guilt by association.²² Wigfall's several speeches, for which he ransacked both ancient and modern history, were diatribes delivered in English, French, and Latin—masterpieces of sarcasm, innuendo, and outright villification. Johnson had lamented that Davis, the warrior, had now deserted the ramparts; Wigfall impugned Johnson's own patriotism, saying that he was "not upon the battle-fields of Mexico," but "electioneering . . . trying to get place and office." The Homestead Bill would have disrupted the Union. Johnson was a lukewarm supporter of his own ticket—a charge that was well-founded. Out of his arsenal of opprobrium Wigfall brought such phrases as "renegade southerner," "Help-erite," "Black Republican," "Red Republican," "*sans culotte* of the purest stamp" (scarcely a reference to Johnson's tailoring), "popinjay," and "jackal."²³

The Johnson Papers afford still another opportunity for appraisal. From December to April, his correspondence multiplied: he received hundreds of letters from all parts of the nation. With a few exceptions, these provide eloquent testimony of wide acclaim. His heart must have been gladdened and his courage reinforced—providing, of course, that he had time to read them and could decipher the bad penmanship. There were letters from the great and the small, the rich and the poor, the cultured and the illiterate. Letters came from prominent politicians and businessmen, from resident and transplanted Tennesseans, from old friends and utter strangers, from farmers and mechanics, from pacifists and laborites, from newspaper editors, and from members of all political parties. Undoubtedly they provided valuable information. Perhaps they gave Johnson a "public opinion bath," as Lincoln would have said.

Unfavorable reaction came chiefly from secessionists and their sympathizers. Though Tennessee was not to secede until June, the tide of disunion sentiment was running stronger in the middle and western parts of the state. A coolness had already developed between Johnson and Governor Isham G. Harris, a man of secessionist sympathies, and

²² *Cong. Globe*, 36 Cong., 2 Sess., 308.

²³ *Ibid.*, 780-88.

there were various unsuccessful moves in the state legislature to "instruct" its senator or even to recall him.²⁴ There is little question that Johnson lost many friends among the Democracy. One of his Knoxville correspondents wrote that he was being denounced by such men as General John Crozier Ramsey, C. W. Charlton (postmaster), Dr. J. G. M. Ramsey, "and a few low down loafers."²⁵ He was shot, stabbed, hung, burned, and fancied in effigy in Memphis, Nashville, and elsewhere. Still, his prestige in Tennessee was probably greater than ever.

There was an occasional hostile letter from the deep South. A citizen of Mobile remarked that "no man having a drop of southern blood in his veins would openly proclaim such doctrines," and one Mississippian threatened to humiliate an impudent mulatto slave by sending him to Washington armed with a cowhide to give Johnson some "*marks of his attention.*"²⁶ But the correspondence contains surprisingly few such fiery epistles. It may be that the secessionists simply ignored him; it is also possible that many letters were subsequently destroyed by accident or by design. A family may bask in the reflected glow of a famous ancestor; but that fame may be at times a burden and his papers may even become something of a liability. If the descendants have a keen eye to the opinions of posterity, they may prefer that posterity view their ancestor in the most favorable light. In a word, they may do their own editing.

Letters from the North generally endorsed his sentiments. One man criticised Johnson because he was not strong enough on the issue of coercion. To the same correspondent, evidently an ideological descendant of Alexander Hamilton, Johnson was "fostering the ground work of secession" by asserting that states were sovereign.²⁷ Several Republicans wrote at some length, picturing their party as one of moderation rather than radicalism; among these was a thirty-eight page discussion from a Pennsylvanian.²⁸

²⁴ W. R. Harley to Johnson, January 14, 1861; R. R. Butler to same, January 15, 1861; and R. Johnson to same, January 15, [1861], Johnson Papers, L.C.

²⁵ Jos. C. S. McDannel to Johnson, December 29, 1860, *ibid.*

²⁶ H. S. Smith to Johnson, December 26, 1860, and "Grand Junction" to same, February 3, 1861, *ibid.*

²⁷ Walter S. Waldie to Johnson, February 3, [1861], *ibid.*

²⁸ John Griffen to Johnson, January 7, 1861, and Joseph W. Stokes to same, January 16, 1861, *ibid.*

But the bulk of the letters from most areas eulogized him. Johnson's courage inspired many of his correspondents to rise to the superlative. One reads such phrases as "the man on the watch-tower," "second Andrew Jackson," and "the courage which dared to oppose the Catalines, Arnolds, and Burrs of 1861." Being martyred in effigy had its advantages, too, for a resident of Meigs County declared that "the blood of the saints is the seed of the church." Some of the letters were touching in their homely patriotism: "Yes Gov—we are with you . . . The mountain boys—The wood choppers The rail splitters—Infact the bone and sinew of the country back you."²⁹ If he lost many friends among the Democrats in Tennessee, he gained a host of new ones among former Whigs who had opposed him for years. That the age of miracles had not passed was evidenced by a letter from a Knoxville, who reported that Johnson's old enemy Parson Brownlow had told him "*Johnson is right . . . a true Jackson Democrat . . . and I will defend him to the last.*"³⁰ To be cast in the image of Jackson was a signal honor for one who had taken the Old Hero as his chief political mentor. And more than a few men saw him in the highest office of the land. "You are booked for the 'White House' and have a 'through ticket'," wrote one.³¹ A few offered their own suggestions for remedying the evils that beset the country. One man counselled peaceful division, another a national convention, and a third proposed the creation of "diplomatic districts," out of which the consuls would be elected by the people—a degree of democracy which must have given pause even to the plebeian.³²

Requests poured in for copies of his speech, as well as for other documents: "I love to Reade But am two poore to furnish myself thease Long winter Nights[.] it would do me and the old woman good to Read Enny thing that Andy Johnson Send us[.]"³³ The influence on public opinion of the speech must have been considerable. Allowing for the emotions of the moment and the wave of excitement which accompanied his words, Johnson had struck a responsive chord.

Yet such efforts did nothing to halt the inexorable march of events. South Carolina had already left the Union and in January other states

²⁹ W. Crutchfield to Johnson, January 14, 1861, *ibid.*

³⁰ Jos. C. S. McDannel to Johnson, December 29, 1860, *ibid.*

³¹ Richd K. Anderson to Johnson, December 27, 1860, *ibid.*

³² Columbus W. Ford to Johnson, December 19, 1860, *ibid.*

³³ H. W. Winfree to Johnson, January 18, 1861, *ibid.*

of the lower South followed. The same month saw the *Star of the West* repelled by the batteries in Charleston Harbor. The Crittenden Compromise failed by one vote in the Senate on March 2, and other congressional efforts were fruitless. Events in February and early March deepened the gloom. A provisional government for the Confederate States of America was organized. In public, Lincoln spoke seldom but firmly; in private, he counselled the Republicans to shun compromise. Greeley of the *New York Tribune* said over and over, "Let the erring sisters depart," but his editorials were so honeycombed with qualifications that they gave the lie to his fervent pleas for peace. A peace conference, presided over by the venerable John Tyler, assembled at Washington on February 4. No delegates from the deep South attended; the Republicans sent representatives, more to watch the proceedings than to aid in a settlement. Someone suggested that Martin Van Buren, John Tyler, Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce, and James Buchanan—more living former Presidents than at any other time in American history—issue a manifesto to the people. Nothing came of it.

It was in these circumstances that Johnson delivered a second major speech on February 5 and 6. It was some six weeks in preparation—six weeks to study and two days to disgorge, as Lane said derisively. Though he traversed much the same ground as before, this address was more militant and in some respects less logical. To his declaration that secession was a political heresy, Johnson added the charge of a long-standing conspiracy to break up the Union—a notion widely held at that time but since discredited. Centering his accusations on South Carolina, he examined the state's history as far back as the Revolution—a bit of research that does not stand up to the scrutiny of the historian. Once more he was at pains to denounce extremists in general, whether "run-mad Abolitionists" or red-hot disunionists. If the Palmetto State was the historic southern culprit, Massachusetts was its northern counterpart.³⁴

I have sometimes thought that it would be a comfort if Massachusetts and South Carolina could be chained together as the Siamese twins, separated from the continent, and taken out to some remote and secluded part of the ocean, and there fast anchored, to be washed by the waves, and to be cooled by the winds; and after they had been kept there a sufficient length of time, the people of the United States might entertain the proposition of taking them back.

³⁴ *Cong. Globe*, 36 Cong., 2 Sess., 748.

Rejoinders to his critics were mingled with sarcastic references to the farewell speeches of the departing senators: "sweet tones, euphonious utterances, mellifluous voices." Again he appealed to the people. And there was the inevitable peroration:³⁵

I have been told . . . that the Union is . . . dead, and merely lying in state waiting for the funeral obsequies to be performed. If this be so . . . and that flag, that glorious flag . . . shall be struck from the Capitol and trailed in the dust—when this Union is interred, I want no more honorable winding sheet than that brave old flag, and no more glorious grave than to be interred in the tomb of the Union.

Johnson's later outburst of March 2 was largely extemporaneous, prompted in part by Lane's strictures of the same day. It also mirrored the increasing passions of the time; secession was now an accomplished fact and war imminent. So it was natural that he concerned himself with the theme of crime and punishment. He defined treason according to the Constitution and he sounded the notes of a continuous cacaphony: "Treason must be punished. . . . Were I the President of the United States . . . I would have them [the traitors] arrested; and if convicted, . . . by the Eternal God I would execute them." He depicted the secessionists as tyrants who had deprived the common man of a voice in his own affairs—deprived him of "the elective franchise, that glorious lightning-rod that conducts the thunder of tyrants off the heads of the people." Once more he trumpeted for the Union, vowed that Tennessee would never desert it, and demanded security for the border states. The stumper who had once exorcised the demons of Federalism and Whiggery was at his best in denouncing Lane and other extremists. He intended, he said, to stick to the senator from Oregon "as tight as Jew David's Adhesive Plaster." He cited Dr. Samuel Johnson; he quoted Cardinal Wolsey and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.³⁶ Remarking that "these two eyes never looked upon any being in the shape of mortal man that this heart of mine feared," Johnson the actor "rose to full height, pointed with two right fingers at Lane, and smote his breast with a blow that reverberated through the Senate chamber."³⁷ The speech was interrupted by prolonged applause from the galleries, at this time occupied predominantly by Unionists. Small wonder that Thomas L. Clingman of North Carolina could say caustically, "this Senate has . . . been

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 772.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1350-51, 1354-56.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1350; Winston, *Andrew Johnson*, 180.

converted into a sort of theater for applause," and a spectator could write that nothing like it had ever been heard in the Senate.³⁸

Again there was a burst of enthusiasm from a multitude of correspondents. There were the same superlatives, the same comparisons with Jackson, and the same rosy visions of Johnson's elevation to the White House. "If I can be even a spoke in the wheel . . . I will at once take the stump and ask for the great cause of bringing about the time prophesied by Carlyle, when the Tailors shall become the hierarchs of the Earth. . . ."³⁹ And these letters reflect one of the most significant results of his Unionism: hundreds of job applicants, mainly from Tennessee but from the North as well, besought him to use his influence with the new administration. Johnson, the southern Democrat, was chosen over John Bell and other former Whigs as the chief patronage dispenser for Tennessee.⁴⁰

During the remaining weeks, he strove in vain for a border-state convention. The term over, he returned home and took the stump against the secessionists. But the firing on Ft. Sumter and Lincoln's call for volunteers wrote *finis* to his plans for saving the Union and the state. A wave of secessionism led Tennesseans to vote on June 8 for separation from the Union, but Johnson's efforts, combined with those of Brownlow and others, resulted in a Unionist vote in East Tennessee. Acclaimed by Unionists, anathema to secessionists, his life in jeopardy, Johnson left the state but kept his seat in the Senate. A new phase had begun—he was now an exile.

What can be said in retrospect? Most assessments of Johnson are based on his presidency rather than on his career as a whole, and run to extremes varying from a southerner's judgment that he was "a first-rate stump speaker, a second-rate statesman, and a third-rate politician" to Harry Truman's verdict that he was the most mistreated of Presidents, "slandered and vilified by the press and the biased historians."⁴¹

³⁸ *Cong. Globe*, 36 Cong., 2 Sess., 1351; Winston, *Andrew Johnson*, 185.

³⁹ Louis C. Scott to Johnson, March 9, 1861, Johnson Papers, L.C.

⁴⁰ J. Milton Henry, "The Revolution in Tennessee, February, 1861, to June, 1861," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, XVIII (June, 1959), 109-14.

⁴¹ Benjamin B. Kendrick, *The Journal of the Joint Committee of Fifteen on Reconstruction*, 253, quoted by Willard Hays, "Andrew Johnson's Reputation," *East Tennessee Historical Society's Publications* (Knoxville), No. 31 (1959), 24; Harry S. Truman, "The Most Mistreated of Presidents," *North Carolina Historical Review* (Raleigh), XXXVI (April, 1959), 204.

The Johnson of the cold war period rose for the first time to statesmanship. It took courage to beard the extremists. But courage was one of his sterling qualities—a characteristic of the lowly tailor who had defied the Greeneville aristocracy and of the President without a party who challenged the Radicals.

His constitutional nationalism was neither the organic Unionism of Francis Lieber nor the leviathanism of Hamilton; rather, it rested upon a balance between the central government and the states. His concept of the nature of the Union is still debatable in the abstract. Obviously, his amendments were too far ahead of their time and some are too radical for our day. In general, his analysis of American history was sound; however, an historian can cut his cloth to fit preconceived notions.

He was handicapped to some extent by temperament and viewpoint. Characteristically, he saw the problem in terms of moral rules and high principles. Clingman of North Carolina observed that his speeches steeled the North against concession—this is a moot question. But one may wonder about such inflexibility, for the art of compromise is one of the hallmarks of the American political genius. And his lack of standing in the Democratic party weighed heavily against him. Andrew Johnson would have understood the predicament of some twentieth century Americans: an outsider, a rugged individualist, and indeed a controversial figure, he was a non-conformist in a South that demanded conformity. Ironically, his loyalty to the Democracy may have contributed to Tennessee's secession. As patronage referee, he filled federal jobs with deserving Democrats rather than meritorious Whigs, thus weakening Unionist sentiment among this traditionally Unionist group.⁴² Still, a peaceful solution of the American crisis was beyond the control of any one man. At such a juncture Clio might well ponder the problem of historical inevitability.

To say that Johnson was politically ambitious does not detract from his statesmanship. He had been bitten by the presidential bug, and the burst of enthusiasm which followed his exertions must have given him high hopes of a mandate from the people. Certainly they would not soon forget his stand for the Union.

⁴² Henry, "The Revolution in Tennessee," 111-13.

Nor, for that matter, did an old North Carolinian of the present day, who suggested that the Civil War centennial might be commemorated by raising a statue on Roan Mountain to Andrew Johnson and the Union.⁴³ Fantastic as it may have sounded, the proposal was not altogether inapropos. If Johnson's efforts to save the Union failed, they were a milestone on his road to the presidency; and in the annals of American patriotism they were a *tour de force*.

⁴³ A statement by an unidentified participant in a Civil War Centennial meeting held at Chapel Hill, North Carolina, in February, 1959, attended by the author.