

The Family Heritage Series

A weekly discussion of Americanist truths and traditions for those "heirs of all the ages" who will have to preserve that most important inheritance of all — freedom. Produced by the Movement To Restore Decency.



Volume II

Lesson Sixty-Nine

The Impeachment of Andrew Johnson

LESSON IDEA

To review the issues and events that led to the impeachment of Andrew Johnson, and to demonstrate that he was pilloried not for his wrongdoings but for trying to be just and fair.

PREPARATION

Review the previous lessons on the War Between the States, the Emancipation Proclamation, and Lincoln's assassination to better understand the political intrigues which prompted President Johnson's impeachment.

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WHEN ANDREW JOHNSON took the oath of office as President of the United States, following the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, two prominent Republican leaders — Thaddeus Stevens, a representative from Pennsylvania, and Edwin Stanton, Secretary of War — breathed a sigh of relief. There would be no more Presidential interference with their plans for a military dictatorship in the defeated South. Lincoln, their antagonist, was dead. Johnson, they were sure, would favor them. "Treason is a crime," the new President had said, "and crime must be punished. Treason must be made infamous; and traitors must be impoverished."

This vindictive attitude seemed to fit perfectly with the proposal Stanton had made — the very day of Lincoln's assassination — to divide the South into military districts, each to be run by a military commander accountable only to Stanton. And Stanton's military dictatorship was supported nicely by Stevens' dogma that the seceded states were no longer in the Union — that they were now "conquered territories" to be policed by Congress.

"I would lay a tax whenever I can, upon the conquered provinces," said Stevens, "just as all nations levy them upon provinces and nations they conquer." The United States "must treat those states outside of the Union as conquered provinces, and settle them with new men, and drive the present rebels as exiles from this country." If the Southern "territories" wanted to rejoin the Union, they would have to revise their state constitutions according to Congressional dictates, outlaw slavery, and give the Negroes the right to vote.

This line of reasoning had some strange twists, which Lincoln had been quick to see. As historian Lloyd Paul Stryker pointed out: "The Southern states were either in the Union or they were out. If they were in the Union, Congress had no power to provide what constitutions or laws they should adopt; if they were out of the Union, then they had succeeded in their war and Congress had no greater right to interfere with them than with Canada or Mexico. But the difference between Lincoln and his Congress lay far deeper than a mere dispute as to their constitutional prerogatives. Lincoln divined the inner purpose of the Radicals and he had set his will to thwart their hidden schemes to spoliage and trample down the South when her armies were defeated. If Congress could abolish slavery, it could disfranchise Southern white men and give the vote to the illiterate ex-slaves. Lincoln determined to prevent these things."

But Lincoln was dead, and Andrew Johnson was more likely to support than thwart the radical juggernaut. Or so Stanton and Stevens believed on the day he became President. In less than a

month, Johnson had proved them wrong.

The reconstruction plan which Lincoln had formed, and which Johnson put into effect immediately, was to have each Southern state elect delegates to a state convention. This convention would repeal the secession ordinance, abolish slavery, repudiate the State's war debt, and order elections for the state legislature and national and other state officers. To make doubly sure slavery would not be reestablished, the state legislatures would be required to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment, which outlawed slavery in all states of the Union. Why was it necessary to have a Thirteenth Amendment? [*Remind family members that the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 only freed the slaves in the seceded states; slavery still existed in some of the northern and border states.*]

UNDER THE PRESIDENT'S PLAN, the voting in each Southern state was to be done by citizens who had reaffirmed their loyalty to the Constitution and the United States, but not by any of the political or military leaders of the rebellion. The question of voter qualifications — whether literacy, owning property, paying a poll tax, or whatever — would have to be decided by each individual state, Johnson believed. The Constitution was clear that it was not the business of the federal government to impose its will on the states in such matters.

Nothing could have ignited the radicals' fury more. While the Southern states reconstructed their governments according to Johnson's proclamation, Thaddeus Stevens impatiently waited for the December session of Congress to convene. The moment the House of Representatives was ready for business, Stevens presented a resolution for the appointment of a joint committee of the two Houses to inquire into the condition of the late Southern states and report by bill whether any of them were entitled to representation in either Congress. Until that report was made, the newly elected Southern representatives who had arrived in Washington to take their seats would have to cool their heels. Congress, under Stevens' leadership, was declaring war on Johnson's reconstruction procedures.

In January, Stevens and his allies began their legislative attack. The Freedman's Bureau, which had been operating for about ten months as a

humanitarian center providing food, clothing, jobs, hospital care, and protection for recently freed slaves, was to be transformed into a military organization with absolute power over domestic Southern affairs. The South was to be divided into five districts, each containing one or more states. These districts were to be controlled by commissioners appointed by Washington, and answerable only to the President, not to the people.

The bill was rushed through Congress and sent to the President for his signature. Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, Johnson's ally, was the first to read it and grasp its implications. In his diary he wrote: "Have examined the bill for the Freedman's Bureau, which is a terrific engine and reads more like a decree emanating from despotic power than a legislative enactment by Republican representatives. I do not see how the President can sign it . . . Certainly I shall not advise it . . . I am apprehensive that the efforts of our Northern philanthropists to govern the Southern states will be productive of evil, that they will generate hatred rather than love between the races. The Freedman's Bureau scheme is a governmental enormity. There is a despotic tendency in the legislation of the Congress."

JOHNSON DID VETO the harsh measure. Stevens, lacking enough support in Congress to pass it over a Presidential veto, waited until July. Then the bill was reintroduced, amended, approved by Congress, vetoed by the President, and repassed by Congress with a two-thirds vote.

In the meantime, the radicals readied a new political missile that was sure to destroy the mending process that Johnson's reconstruction plan had started. This was the infamous Fourteenth Amendment. By its provisions, the federal government would step directly into the affairs of the

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

Gideon Welles' diary provides an interesting insight into the back-room maneuverings which resulted in President Johnson's impeachment. The three-volume *Diary Of Gideon Welles — Secretary Of The Navy Under Lincoln And Johnson* should be available at your local library. If it is not, or if time prohibits such an extensive study, we recommend Lloyd Paul Stryker's biography, *Andrew Johnson*, which includes many excerpts from the Welles diary.

