



The Presidency of Andrew Johnson (American Presidency Series)

Albert Castel

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Andrew Johnson, who became president after the assassination of Lincoln, oversaw the most crucial and dramatic phase of Reconstruction. Historians have therefore tended to concentrate, to the exclusion of practically everything else, upon Johnson's key role in that titanic event. Although his volume focuses closely on Johnson's handling of Reconstruction, it also examines other important aspects of his administration, notably his foreign, economic, and Indian policies. As one of the few historians to do this, the author provides a broader and more balanced picture of Johnson's presidency than has been previously available.

Johnson has always been an enigma: much is known about what he did, little about why he did it. He wrote few letters, kept no diary, and rarely confided in anyone. Most historians either admire or despise him, depending on whether they consider his Reconstruction policies right or wrong. Castel achieves an objective reassessment of Johnson and his presidential actions by examining him primarily in terms of his effectiveness in using power and by not judging him as most other scholars have on moralistic or ideological grounds.

The book begins with an overview of America at the end of the Civil War and a description of Johnson's political career prior to 1865. Castel recounts the drama of Johnson's sudden inheritance of the presidency upon Lincoln's death and then examines how Johnson organized and operated his administration. Johnson's formulation of a Reconstruction policy for the defeated South comes under special scrutiny; Castel evaluates Johnson's motives for that policy, its implementation, and its reception in both North and South. He describes and analyzes Johnson's quarrel with the Republican-dominated Congress over Reconstruction, the triumph of the Republicans in the election of 1866, the president's frustrated attempt to remove Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton from office, his bitter dispute with General Ulysses S. Grant, and his impeachment by Congress. Johnson's impeachment trial is covered in detail; Castel explains how it was that Johnson escaped conviction and removal from office by the narrowest possible margin. The book concludes with a discussion of Johnson's place in history as judged by scholars during the past one hundred years.

This study sheds light on the nation's problems during the chaotic period between 1865 and 1869 and contributes a great deal to a much improved understanding of the seventeenth president.

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