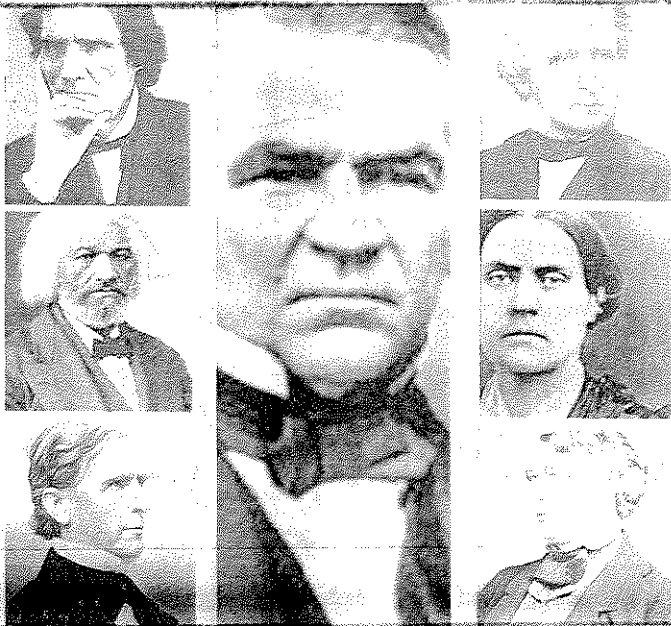


GREEN
MAY 1993

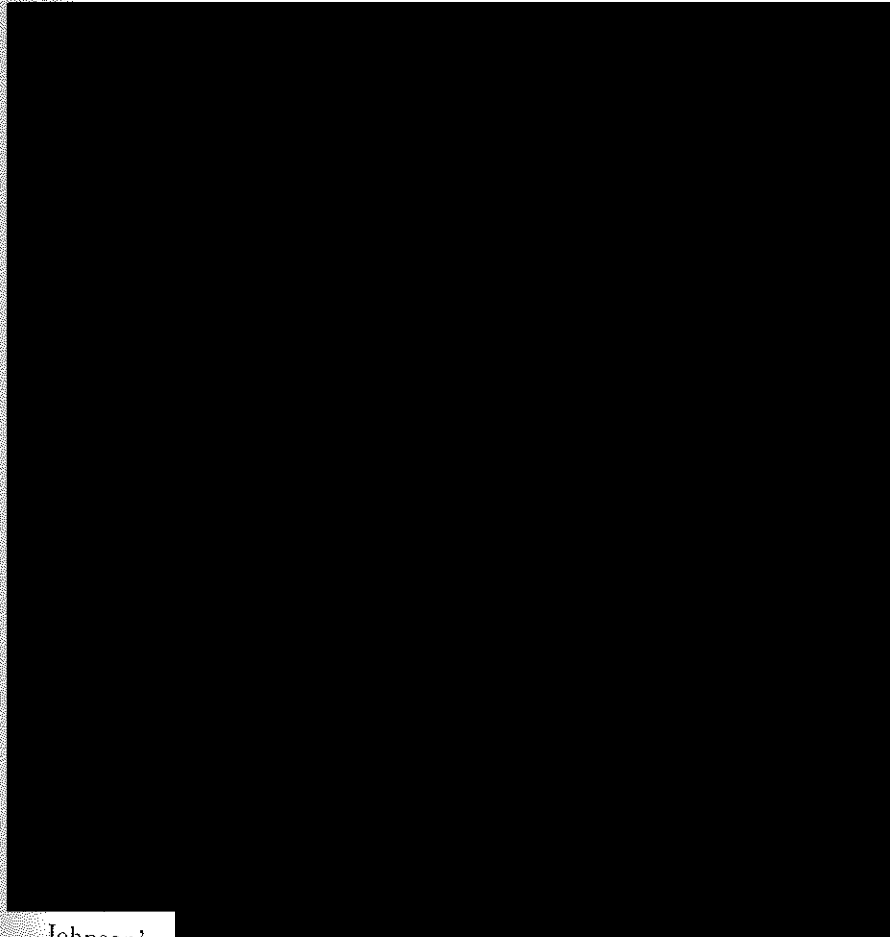
"ENGAGING . . . WITH A NOVELIST'S EYE FOR
BIOGRAPHICAL DETAIL, EPPS HAS
WRITTEN AN . . . ENTHRALLING BOOK."
—DAVID W. BLIGHT, *CHICAGO TRIBUNE*

DEMOCRACY REBORN

THE FOURTEENTH AMENDMENT
AND THE FIGHT FOR EQUAL RIGHTS IN
POST-CIVIL WAR AMERICA



G A R R E T T E P P S



Johnson's views were not unique; but they were extreme, and utterly inflexible. The key to this inflexibility may lie in his behavior at the moment that—had Lincoln not gone to Ford's Theater on Good Friday 1865—would have been the pinnacle of his career, a moment of triumph Johnson managed to convert into disgrace. On Inauguration Day 1865, Johnson went to the Capitol to meet with his outgoing predecessor, Hannibal Hamlin, before taking the vice-presidential oath before a crowd seated in the Senate Chamber. Johnson was unsteady on his feet; his health had been poor for a few weeks, and his condition had not been helped by a drinking bout the night before with his old friend John W. Forney, the secretary of the Senate. Just before Hamlin was to lead him into the Senate, Johnson impulsively asked

whether there was liquor at hand. Hamlin, from the teetotal state of Maine, had none, but a messenger brought a bottle of brandy from the Senate restaurant. Johnson gulped two-thirds of a tumbler, then had a refill. As the two men were walking out the door, Johnson, seemingly in a panic, returned for yet another glass.

By the time he rose to give his inaugural address, the new vice president was drunk. He rambled through an account of his glorious career, and reminded the Cabinet members that they, like him, owed their eminence to the people. "I will say to you, Mr. Secretary Seward, and to you, Mr. Secretary Stanton, and to you, Mr. Secretary"—here he paused and in an audible whisper asked Forney, "Who is the Secretary of the Navy?" "Mr. Welles," Forney whispered—"and to you, Mr. Secretary Welles, I would say, you all derive your power from the people."

Cabinet members closed their eyes or hid their faces in embarrassment. "I was never so mortified in my life," Zachariah Chandler wrote. "Had I been able to find a hole I would have dropped through it out of sight." Johnson stopped only when Hamlin firmly tugged him on the arm.

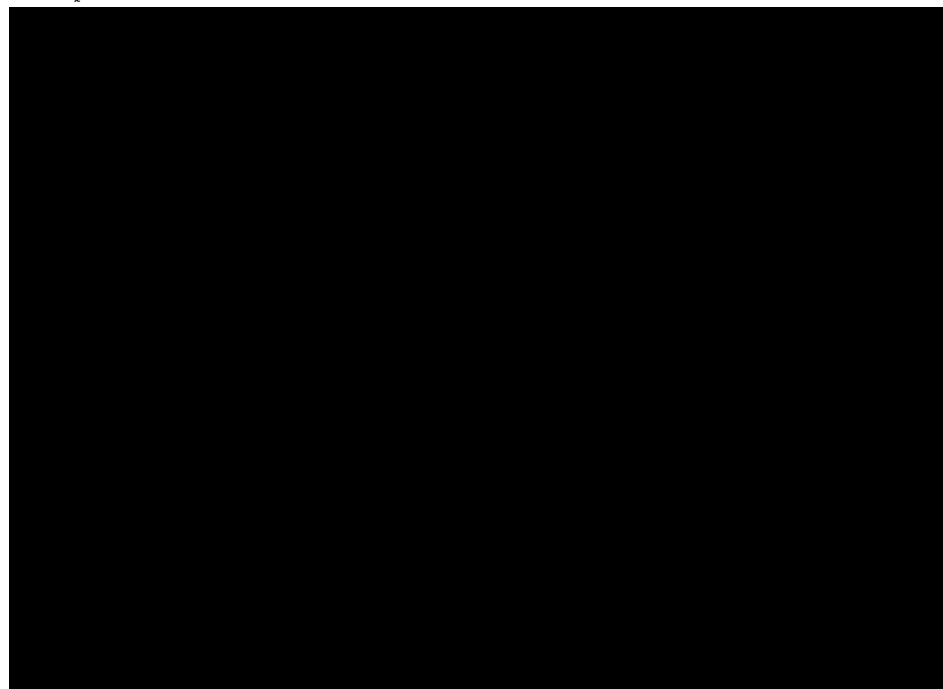
Johnson had a drinking problem, and indeed, by current standards, the record seems to suggest that he was a full-blown alcoholic. His most recent biographer, Hans Trefousse, acquits him of the charge; but he does so by saying that on *some* days Johnson did not drink his usual two to four glasses of whiskey, and that Johnson "was inebriated in public only once." That occasion, however, was what any reasonable man would have expected to be the most important day of his life. No one but a compulsive drinker would have let his need for liquor overcome his prudence and self-interest.

Much that is shadowy about Lincoln's successor becomes clearer when viewed as the conduct of a man who was either drinking or fighting an overpowering urge to drink. His inner rage and resentment, rigidity, impulsiveness, self-pity, vindictiveness, and rampant egotism—his penchant for angry, even homicidal rhetoric and his habit of making public commitments without a moment's pause to

consider where they would lead—suggest a man whose personality had been warped by alcohol.

Johnson's family life seemed, in contemporary terms, dysfunctional. That his son Robert was an open drunkard and a frequent patron of prostitutes, even when working in the White House, not even Johnson himself could deny. His wife, Eliza, was a recluse who lived in the smallest room of the White House's second floor and would never appear in public. Eliza suffered from consumption; but even so, there is something extreme in her withdrawal, suggesting the depressed and passive-aggressive behavior of an alcoholic's spouse.

It was a singular misfortune that this gravely flawed man had inherited the mantle of the modern presidency. Lincoln had forged the office by his prudence and his flexibility. He never spoke without thinking, he never committed himself before the right moment. He understood that the American earth was moving under his feet, and he let himself evolve to match. Johnson, by contrast, would never understand that history was not the lengthened shadow of his own experiences and beliefs.



The bureau bill had failed by 30 to 18. Again, the galleries exploded.

Johnson had won a significant victory. But there are certain personalities—men and women used to living on the edge—for whom danger lies not in adversity but in triumph. Johnson was exalted by the success of the veto, exalted almost to madness. On February 22, Washington's birthday, he made sure that everyone within earshot understood that for him this was not a difference of opinion with members of the party that had put him in office, but a life-and-death struggle against traitors and would-be assassins.

The occasion was a "serenade," a now-lost nineteenth-century political custom whereby crowds of supporters would march to the home of their leaders and call them to the window for an impromptu address. February 22 had been "a day of soft air, and a clear sky, and a warm sun." The march came from a midday meeting in Grover's Theater, now the National Theater, at Thirteenth and E Streets NW, only a few blocks from the White House. A boisterous crowd had assembled, with boys darting around hawking peanuts and apples. It seems likely that those attending the "Endorsing the President" meeting refreshed themselves alcoholically as well during a long afternoon of florid oratory about the greatness of Johnson and the perfidy of his congressional critics. One antislavery newspaper, the *Boston Daily Advertiser*, had a correspondent in the crowd. He noted the presence of many prominent "peace Democrats," including Andrew Rogers of New Jersey, James Brooks of New York, and Senator Willard Saulsbury of Delaware. These were men who had only barely disguised their hope for Southern victory during the war. Now they joined hands with administration figures like Frank and Montgomery Blair and Judge David Patterson, Johnson's son-in-law. "If there were few heretofore known as promoters of the cause of the Union, there were many known of all men as promoters, a year and a half ago, of peace at any price," the *Advertiser's* man reported. "If there was a

noticeable absence of men who have worn the army blue, there was also a noticeable presence of men who wore rebel gray." On the other hand, as one attendee assured the correspondent, "There wasn't a nigger present."

As darkness fell on the capital, the crowd, inspired by the speeches and liquor, descended on the White House, carrying torches and shouting for Johnson as the man of the hour. Like the parade that brought forth the "Moses" speech, the scene was one Andrew Johnson relished: flaring torches, an adoring crowd, himself high above them in a position of power. And once again, as he gazed from the portico of the White House, some demon seemed to seize his tongue. In the days to come, many of his enemies, and even a few of his friends, wondered aloud, in fact, whether it had not been demon rum. Count Adam Gurowski, a Polish exile who had the sharpest tongue in town, spread the word that Johnson had drunk too much bad whiskey to make a good speech. But the president's manner apparently betrayed none of the confusion and hesitancy that had disfigured his vice-presidential speech. Instead, what he told the crowd seems more like the words of what alcoholism counselors call a "dry drunk"—a man who has neither conquered his inner demons nor temporarily stilled them with alcohol.

It was a vintage Johnson speech. As Eric McKittrick notes, in a speech of six thousand words, he referred to himself no fewer than 210 times. He linked himself and his policies with George Washington, Andrew Jackson, and "the Founder of our holy religion." "Who has suffered more than I have?" he asked plaintively. "I shall not recount the wrongs and the sufferings inflicted on me." But like Jesus himself, Johnson was now for "clemency and kindness, and a trust and a confidence" in all the people of the South except for the Confederate leaders.

But his Christlike policy was opposed by a set of traitors, as disloyal as Jefferson Davis, who were using the joint committee to "bring about a consolidation of the Republic" and destroy constitutional government. Just as he opposed Davis and the other traitors, he would oppose those in Washington who were "still opposed to the Union."

From somewhere in the audience, a voice called for Johnson to name the villains. A prudent politician would have held his tongue—but then, a prudent politician would have hesitated to compare himself with Jesus. “Suppose I should name to you those whom I look upon as being opposed to the fundamental principles of the Government, and as now laboring to destroy them. I say Thaddeus Stevens, of Pennsylvania; I say Charles Sumner, of Massachusetts; I say Wendell Phillips, of Massachusetts.”

Later Welles wrote, “I was sorry he had permitted himself to be drawn into answering impertinent questions.” Indeed, a president seeking secure legislative victories usually should avoid calling members of Congress traitors; it gives his enemies a stick to beat him with, and embarrasses his congressional allies, who are often friends with the “traitors” and even if not must work with them day after day.

But Johnson was not content with declaring war on Stevens and Sumner. There was something so delicious in that comparison between himself and Jesus that he could not resist spinning it off for almost an hour longer. The object of his enemies was not only to depose him but to seek his life. “Are those who want to destroy our institutions and change the character of the Government not satisfied with the blood that has been shed? Are they not satisfied with one martyr?”

If need be, then, he, Andrew Johnson, would wear the martyr’s crown: “[I]f my blood is to be shed because I vindicate the Union and the preservation of this Government in its original purity and character, let it be so; but when it is done, let an altar of the Union be erected, and then, if necessary, lay me upon it, and the blood that now warms and animates my frame shall be poured out in a last libation as a tribute to the Union; and let the opponents of this Government remember that when it is poured out the blood of the martyr will be the seed of the church.”

All in all, the speech was a revealing glimpse into the mind of Andrew Johnson, and Count Gurowski was not the only observer who, over the next morning’s papers, suggested that the speaker must have once again been drunk. A few days later, however, Thaddeus Stevens rose gleefully to the president’s “defense.” The reports of the speech

were a slander by the newspapers. Johnson, whom Stevens professed to admire, would never have made such a speech. It had been invented out of whole cloth. Why? Well, Stevens said, the president’s enemies were like lawyers seeking to hale Johnson before a court on the common-law writ *de lunatico inquirendo*—a charge that the named person had lost his mind. A lawyer in such a case “would cautiously lead the alleged lunatic to speak upon the subject of the hallucination, and if he could be induced to gabble nonsense, the intrinsic evidence of the case would make out the allegation of insanity. So, Mr. Speaker, if these slanderers can make the people believe that the President ever uttered that speech, then they have made out their case.”

As so often when Thad Stevens grabbed hold of an enemy, he reduced his listeners to laughter. But there was little real mirth in it for either side. Johnson was now on record asserting that his own party was honeycombed with traitors; prominent members of his party were freely suggesting that he was out of his mind. Meanwhile, the great question of the postwar political order was unsettled, and more was still to come.