

*The Impeachers: The Trial of Andrew Johnson and the Dream of a Just Nation*, by Brenda Wineapple

## The failed removal of Andrew Johnson and the emergence of the American working class

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26 June 2019

Two years after the fateful month of April 1865, when the Confederacy surrendered, ending the Civil War, and John Wilkes Booth shot Abraham Lincoln in Washington DC, America's 17th president, Democrat Andrew Johnson, was openly conspiring with the former slave owners to restore the Confederate states and the rebel leaders to the Union without conditions.

While slavery as a mode of production had ceased to exist, the Ku Klux Klan, founded in Johnson's home state of Tennessee in 1866, was carrying out pogroms against freed blacks. Johnson vetoed every bill that came to his desk from the Republican-dominated Congress aimed at reorganizing the rebel states to protect the former slaves.

Brenda Wineapple's *The Impeachers: The Trial of Andrew Johnson and the Dream of a Just Nation* is a factual and easy-to-read account of one of the most overlooked and poorly understood turning points in American history.

Wineapple relies heavily on the interplay of the personalities engaged in the impeachment. This limitation results in her book reading more like a well written story than a detailed political analysis. The strength of her book, however, is that she approaches impeachment objectively and makes clear it was politically and legally justified.

The historical narrative of the impeachment of Andrew Johnson has long been dominated by apologists for the slaveocracy who claim that the trial was led by vindictive radicals to punish Johnson for seeking "compromise" with the former rebels. This narrative was championed by future president John F. Kennedy, whose 1955 book *Profiles in Courage* praised as a model of moderate civility Kansas Republican Edmund G. Ross, who cast the deciding vote against conviction in the Senate and Johnson's removal from office.

Wineapple takes aim at the notion that the impeachment of Johnson was merely an example of "hyper-partisanship." She has written a book that cuts through the lies of the Lost Cause and Dunning School of historians.

The charges of "high crimes and misdemeanors" against Johnson technically stemmed from the president's decision to repudiate the Tenure in Office Act by firing Republican Secretary of War Edwin Stanton when Congress was out of session. The Republican Congress had passed the Tenure in Office Act in March 1867 over Johnson's veto in order to protect Stanton, who was enforcing the reconstruction acts passed by Congress to protect blacks and keep leaders of the former Confederacy out of politics.

Johnson suspended Stanton from his position on August 5, 1867 and attempted to replace him with Ulysses S. Grant as interim secretary of war. In December, the Senate passed a resolution of non-concurrence with the decision to remove Stanton.

In January 1868, the Senate voted to reinstate Stanton, at which point Grant resigned in anger over Johnson's efforts to use the commanding general of the Grand Army of the Republic as a pawn to rehabilitate the very rebels he had fought. A central thrust of Stanton's tenure was his insistence that the military oversee reconstruction and carry out the democratic mandate of the Civil War by protecting freedmen and implementing social reforms.

On February 21, 1868, Johnson appointed General Lorenzo Thomas to physically remove Stanton from his office. Stanton refused and offered Thomas, who was cursed by history to be suffering a bad hangover that day, a glass of liquor. When Thomas, his palette whetted, politely left, Stanton barricaded himself in the office and asked his wife to bring him meals and clean clothes. Johnson, a political bruiser and vicious racist of plebian origins, was livid when he learned that Thomas had left without a fight.

Stanton remained holed up in his office for the duration of the impeachment proceedings. Three days later, on February 24, 1868, the House of Representatives voted 126 to 47 to impeach Johnson on 11 counts. The Senate proceedings began on March 30, with former Lincoln treasury secretary and then-chief justice of the Supreme Court and perennial presidential hopeful Salmon P. Chase presiding and Massachusetts Radical Republican Benjamin Butler serving as chief prosecutor. Johnson's defense team was riddled with reactionaries, including Henry Stanbery, who, as Wineapple notes, would later serve as an attorney for the Ku Klux Klan.

Nearly eight weeks later, Johnson was acquitted by a vote of 35-19—one short of the two-thirds majority required for conviction. Seven Republicans voted "no," guaranteeing the acquittal.

While the impeachment was ultimately a fight over reconstruction policy, the legality of the process remains in controversy today. Johnson's argument that he was only "testing" the validity of the Tenure of Office Act when he violated it does not pass constitutional muster. Only in a dictatorship can the president violate the law and later claim he was merely testing the legality of the act in question. The Constitution's separation of powers provisions bar the president from deciding which laws to enforce.

There is an important historical lesson for the working class in the defeat of the impeachment effort to remove Andrew Johnson from office.

Beneath the surface of the Civil War, profound changes were taking place both in class relations and the development of the means of production. In *The Republic For Which It Stands*, Richard White explains that the Civil War saw the replacement of the small "shop" by the "factory" as the central workplace. "Factories did differ from shops,"

White writes. “They were not just larger, but they also imposed a distance between the owner, who no longer worked alongside his men and who often did not know them by name.”

White notes that by the early 1870s, “the number of factories in the United States, most of them in the North East, New England, and parts of the Midwest, had nearly doubled in the ten years since 1860. These factories vastly increased the number of workers involved in manufacturing. New York City alone had 130,000 manufacturing workers by 1873... Industry was becoming more capital-intensive, and the trend was accelerating in the 1870s as manufacturers switched to coal and steam, added machines, and built larger factories.”

As a result of this growth, “Between 1863 and 1867 nineteen new unions arose” in the city of Chicago, for example. “These unions were multiethnic, and their members considered themselves part of a permanent working class. They no longer anticipated, as Lincoln had, that wage labor formed a transitory stage in their lives.”

In 1866, two years before the House impeachment vote and Senate trial of Johnson, the National Labor Union of the United States was founded in Baltimore for the purpose of establishing an eight-hour day. A number of other trade union federations—including those comprised of black workers—were established, and strikes became more commonplace.

A leading labor publication, the *Boston Daily Evening Voice*, expressed the feeling of many workingmen at the end of the Civil War: “All this talk about Republican equality and the rights of man is as water spilled upon sand, if the right of the laboring man to govern those affairs which pertain to his political, social and moral standing in society be denied him.”

As Wineapple explains, the seven Senate Republicans voted against impeachment not because they sympathized with Johnson, but because they feared the implications of Ohio Senator Ben Wade ascending to the presidency. Since Johnson had been Lincoln’s vice president and had no vice president of his own, Wade, as Senate president pro-tem, was next in line.

Wineapple describes the Ohio senator and congressional leader of the Radical Republicans:

“Born in the Connecticut valley, Wade and his family had moved to Ohio, where in his youth he’d worked as a farmhand, a teacher, and a laborer with spade and wheelbarrow on the Erie Canal before studying law with a local attorney and entering briefly in to a partnership with the evangelical abolitionist Joshua Giddings.”

Wade favored expropriating the land of the slave owners and distributing it to freedmen. Wineapple notes that Karl Marx “admirably quoted from Wade’s public statement that ‘after the abolition of slavery, a radical change of relations of capital and of property in land is next upon the order of the day.’”

Wade’s program marked an important step in the development of post-bellum American populism, a blend of soft money policies aimed at providing relief for debtors, especially small farmers, legal recognition of trade unions, and federal regulations covering workers’ safety, wages and hours. It was an attempt, led by a group of Radical Republicans like Thaddeus Stevens and Wendell Phillips, to bring the egalitarianism of abolitionism into the post-war framework. Such policies, which smacked of “socialism,” made Wade unacceptable to the Republican bourgeoisie that emerged out of the Civil War with full control over the productive forces North, South, East and West.

Even more concerning to the ruling class was the possibility that Wade’s program and rhetoric would trigger a movement of the working class. The emerging working class might have taken too seriously Lincoln’s statement in his First Inaugural that “labor is prior to, and independent of, capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital, and serves much the higher consideration.”

The historian Eric Foner wrote in his *A Short History of Reconstruction*,

“‘All the great Northern capitalists,’ a Radical editor observed, feared impeachment would shatter public confidence in the government and its securities.”

The failure to convict Johnson was greeted with a sigh of relief by Wall Street. A network of major industrialists held a public dinner in Boston to celebrate the seven Republicans who voted “not guilty.”

“The defeat of impeachment ensured the restoration of a laissez-faire government guided by the invisible hand,” Wineapple writes. A government that can regulate the former slave states could also regulate child labor, wages, hours and safety regulations. To the emerging financiers and leading Republicans, no principle surpassed the drive for profit.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were carefully following political and economic developments in the United States, conscious that a new powerhouse was emerging out of the war as a dynamic economic and political force and giving birth to a powerful working class.

In a May 1869 letter adopted by the General Council of the First International, Marx opposed the threat by Republicans, including abolitionist Charles Sumner, to launch a war with England to recoup the debt accrued during the Civil war. Marx summarized the tasks of the American working class emerging from the Civil War as follows:

The immediate tangible result of the Civil War was of course a deterioration of the condition of the American workingmen. Both in the United States and in Europe the colossal burden of a public debt was shifted from hand to hand in order to settle it upon the shoulders of the working class. The prices of necessities, remarks one of your statesmen, have risen 78 per cent since 1860, while the wages of simple manual labor have risen 50 and those of skilled labor 60 per cent. “Pauperism,” he complains, “is increasing in America more rapidly than population.” Moreover the sufferings of the working class are in glaring contrast to the newfangled luxury of financial aristocrats, shoddy aristocrats, and other vermin bred by war. Still the Civil War offered a compensation in the liberation of the slaves and the impulse which it thereby gave to your own class movement. Another war, not sanctified by a sublime aim or a social necessity but like the wars of the Old World, would forge chains for the free workingmen instead of sundering those of the slave. The accumulated misery which it would leave in its wake would furnish your capitalists at once with the motive and the means of separating the working class from their courageous and just aspirations by the soulless sword of a standing army. Yours, then, is the glorious task of seeing to it that at last the working class shall enter upon the scene of history, no longer as a servile following, but as an independent power, as a power imbued with a sense of its responsibility and capable of commanding peace where their would-be masters cry war.

The period from the impeachment of Andrew Johnson through the Grant presidency was the last, dying breath of an American bourgeoisie that had spent its progressive role. In 1868, General Grant won the election, and, to the surprise of his big business supporters, who expected him to be conciliatory to the South, waged a merciless campaign to suppress the KKK and aggressively expanded reconstruction. However, he increasingly found himself isolated and abandoned by formerly radical Republicans who were shifting rapidly to the right.

In less than a decade, the Republicans reached a cynical deal with the

Democrats after the contested 1876 election to gain the White House in exchange for ending reconstruction and pulling federal troops out of the South.

Underlying the deal was the common terror of both the Democratic and Republican Parties before the prospect of an American version of the French Commune of 1871. Decades of massacres, lynchings and Jim Crow segregation ensued. The same soldiers who in February 1877 were guarding blacks against the KKK were firing on striking railroad workers in the North by July during the great railroad rebellion.

Grant's own fate embodied the corruption and ruthlessness of emerging American capitalism. In the years after he left office, his closest advisors speculated on his wealth and betrayed his trust. Grant lost everything. The ruling class left him penniless, rewarding him for his service in achieving abolition by forcing the aging general to walk to the doctor's office when his health failed because he could not afford a carriage.

As the abortive impeachment and the 1876 deal showed, when the Republican Party was confronted with the choice between defending the democratic rights of the freed slaves and suppressing the emerging working class, it necessarily selected the latter and betrayed the former, developing into an out-and-out party of finance capital and political reaction. The Democrats, for their part, carried over their pre-bellum position to post-bellum conditions, building a national coalition of southern racist reactionaries with Northern city Tammany bosses, sealed with populist appeals.

With the war concluded and the liberation of the slaves achieved, the chief task of the working class shifted from supporting the war for abolition to fighting for the abolition of the capitalist system.

As the working class emerged after the war as the leading revolutionary social force, populism (both in the specific form of the People's Party and also in relation to other strands of utopianism and radical politics) became a chief mechanism through which the ruling class sought to forestall the development of an independent political party of the working class.

From the end of the war to the present day, populists who assert that workers' rights can be secured through appeals to the ruling class or "pressure" campaigns on the Democratic or Republican parties serve as a brake on the development of socialist consciousness in the working class. The ruling class's decision to keep Johnson as president to block Wade shows that such a program was futile from the start.

Writing to Friedrich Sorge in September of 1886, three years after Marx's death and in the midst of an upsurge of militant strike action across the US, Engels explained:

In a country as untouched as America, which has developed in a purely bourgeois fashion without any feudal past, but has unwittingly taken over from England a whole store of ideology from feudal times, such as the English common law, religion, and sectarianism, and where the exigencies of practical labor and the concentrating of capital have produced a contempt for all theory, which is only now disappearing in the educated circles of scholars—in such a country the people must become conscious of their own social interests by making blunder after blunder. Nor will that be spared the workers; the confusion of the trade unions, socialists, Knights of Labor, etc., will persist for some time to come, and they will learn only by their own mistakes. But the main thing is that they have started moving, that things are going ahead generally, that the spell is broken; and they will go fast, too, faster than anywhere else, even though on a singular road, which seems, from the theoretical standpoint, to be an almost insane road...

overlooked historical events. Workers can gain nothing by appealing to one or another faction of the American ruling class. Instead, the working class must take up Marx and Engels' challenge and build a mass, independent movement for socialist revolution.



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