Andrew Johnson, born 1808
Parker
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Christopher Parker

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For the first time in American history, a President was indicted by the House of Representatives to answer accusations of “high crimes and misdemeanors.” Never before under the Constitution had such allegations been levied against the nation’s top executive. Never before had the United States Senate sat in trial over the man holding such a high office. Now in 1868, however, an unelected President was brought before a body of men hostile to his policies to defend his case.

This attempt to remove Andrew Johnson from office did not succeed, but because of the high tensions and thick biases raised by this event, it is extremely difficult to come up with a truly unprejudiced, historical analysis of the actual events that took place surrounding the Johnson impeachment. However, this is the objective of the book *The Impeachment and Trial of Andrew Johnson* by Michael Les Benedict, at the time of writing a professor of history at Ohio State University specializing in the Reconstruction Era (1865-1877). Benedict proposes that the majority of historians have unfairly judged the radical Republicans who instigated the impeachment, portraying their motives as purely political. Calling this conception “naïve in the extreme,” Benedict attempts to use the writings of the time period, as well as the private and public musings and the voting records of the members of Congress during the time in question, to establish that political
motivation did not significantly impact the outcome. Rather, he claims, the entire situation resulted from a disagreement between factions on the Constitutional legitimacy and legal reaches of the laws Johnson was charged with breaking.

Benedict writes that the seven Republican Senators who bolted the party and saved Johnson’s administration have been overly revered in the century since, almost as sacrificial martyrs. However, Benedict points out that despite their support of Johnson, none of their political careers suffered noticeably as a result. Rather, they became or remained quite successful in the party. Also, Johnson himself was not destroyed by the attempts on his career, despite his one-vote acquittal. Although he was not nominated for a full term as President, he did manage to return to the Senate before he died.

In addition to citing sources contemporary to his own time, Benedict uses the writings of men of the time period in question to defend his thesis, although seemingly avoiding a more exhaustive use of Johnson’s own writings. He uses these sources to establish his argument against the misconceptions believed and propagated by most historians, and to describe the mental transformations of the historical figures in question, mainly Johnson and the various members of Congress. Telling the events in the impeachment and trial process as a documentary narrative, he remains mostly impartial on issues not contingent to his thesis, doing well in his attempt to tell all sides of the story. Benedict discusses the less-than-enthusiastic support for previous efforts to impeach Johnson for obviously political motives as compared to the final event. He builds up the conflict between Congress and Johnson that ripened the appetites on Capitol Hill for Johnson’s head. Furthermore, he points out that if the Republican opposition to the President was politically motivated, then so too was his Democratic support.
Benedict also corrects the misconception that the Tenure of Office Act, the one leading to impeachment, was put in place to trap Johnson into firing a cabinet member. Rather, it was intended to protect lower-level officers, such as postmasters, that the President was firing routinely at that time. The belief that the act applied to members of the Cabinet was inconclusive at the trial, and this lack of certainty was, in Benedict’s opinion, what led to his acquittal. The acquittal was also due to Johnson’s successful assertion that the act was unconstitutional in the first place. As time went on, several members of Congress who had voted for impeachment either expressed their regret over or publicly repudiated their votes. The Tenure of Office Act was repealed by Congress on constitutional grounds, and the Supreme Court later concurred with the necessity of repeal.

Benedict approaches his subject fluently and knowledgeably, backing up his arguments with hard evidence as shown in the Congressional Record as well as the journals and letters of the members of Congress at that time. He also uses several charts in order to spell out visually the divisions among members of Congress with regard to the impeachment and trial, as well as other referenda on Johnson’s policies. Benedict’s thesis is consistent with the evidence as well as the conclusions he draws.

However, he misses the opportunity to point out the obvious conflicts of interest of some of the men involved with regard to the would-be succession to the Presidency. If Johnson had been impeached, he would have been succeeded by Senate President Pro Tempore Benjamin Wade, who voted for impeachment. Wade was also one of three frontrunners for the Republican presidential nomination, for which the vote was taken four days after Johnson’s acquittal. Another frontrunner for the Republican nomination
was Chief Justice Samuel Chase, who presided over the trial per the Constitution and whose son-in-law served in the Senate and voted for impeachment. Benedict mentions the Republican frontrunners nonchalantly, but he fails to explore these implications.

Overall, Benedict lays out relevant facts and available points of view before the reader and helps the reader to understand where every side came from and why they did what they did. This book is a wonderful, concise, and tasteful account of one of the most divisive trials America has ever witnessed. It is written at a level suitable for high school and up, but has enough research to intellectually stimulate any level of higher education. It is published by a general distributor, but in this case does not detract from its potential value to a scholar who is not entirely familiar with Johnson’s impeachment and trial.