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## **Impeachable Character: Lessons from Andrew Johnson's impeachment**

Hannah Belayachi: Welcome to A Smarter U, a University of Lynchburg podcast where ideas come together in new ways. I'm your host, Hannah Belayachi, and today we will be discussing the 17th president of the United States, Andrew Johnson, who also happens to be the first president to face impeachment. To tell us all about that, we have Dr. Adam Dean, the John M. Turner distinguished chair in the humanities here at the University. And joining me today to co-host is director of communications, Bryan Gentry.

So your talk given today on October 24th is titled, "A Rank Demagogue and a Damned Scoundrel," and it talks about Andrew Johnson and the Reconstruction period. Why exactly did you decide to use that quote for the title of your talk?

Adam Dean: Perhaps the most eminently quotable person in 19th century American politics is Thaddeus Stevens, and Thaddeus Stevens was deeply skeptical of Johnson in the 1864 Republican convention and led the effort to keep him from being on the vice presidential ticket. Those were the words he used at the convention. And then later, Stevens was one of the leaders in impeaching Andrew Johnson.

Hannah Belayachi: Why don't you tell us a little bit more about Andrew Johnson and how he got into politics in the first place?

Adam Dean: He's a truly fascinating character. He was born in Raleigh, North Carolina, to a very poor family, which became poorer when his father died and his mother could not care for him. So she sent him to work as an apprentice for a local tailor. Andrew Johnson hated his apprenticeship, left Raleigh, and moved to Greenville, Tennessee. In Greenville, he joins a debating society. He also married Eliza McArdle, who would later take his last name Johnson. She taught him how to read and write. He got involved in politics, won his seat as an alderman. From there, he ascended pretty relentlessly in the world of Southern politics, becoming a Senator for the state of Tennessee and like many Southern elites, excuse me, like many white Southern people, once he joined the ranks of the political elite, he became a slaveholder. Now what catapulted him to even greater heights from being a Senator is he was the only Senator from a state that seceded to stay loyal to the United States.

Hannah Belayachi: And why exactly did he take that position to essentially stay with the Union?

Adam Dean: I think there were three reasons. One, his constituency was in East Tennessee. East Tennessee did not comparatively have as many slaves as the rest of the state, and was very much opposed to secession. I think the second reason is that he was simply loyal to the United States. That had been a big part of his political background. And then third, he took the Republican party at its word that it wouldn't interfere with slavery in the South.

Bryan Gentry: So he was still pretty invested in the continuing of slavery even though he supported the Union during the war.

Adam Dean: Yes. And he was well aware of the role of slavery in bringing on secession. He just thought slavery was safer in the Union. And again, he took the Republican party at its word that it only wanted to prevent slavery from moving West, not abolish slavery in the South.

Bryan Gentry: So he may have stayed loyal to the Union, but not necessarily for reasons that we should admire today.

Adam Dean: Well, if there's one thing that can be admired about Andrew Johnson, it was his kind of stubborn loyalty to the United States that came at great personal risk. In April of 1861, he was traveling through Lynchburg, Virginia, after Virginia had seceded, and that put him in a very awkward position.

Adam Dean: Tennessee hadn't seceded yet, but it was moving that way. So he's this lone holdout on secession going through Lynchburg. An angry mob boards the train in Lynchburg, threatens to pull his nose and do worse. (That's a big 19th Century insult, to pull someone's nose.) And he has to be restrained from firing his gun in response. And luckily the train conductor and his cousin, the train conductor's cousin, are supporters of the Union and they get him out of town into Tennessee.

Bryan Gentry: Wow, that's quite a moment. Never heard of that before. Right here in Lynchburg.

Adam Dean: Right here in Lynchburg! So I have to admit that the more — I spent a really long time reading Andrew Johnson's personal letters, speeches, and I increasingly came to not like him, but if there is one aspect of Johnson that is likable, it was his devotion to the United States at great personal risk.

Bryan Gentry: Okay. So you mentioned that you liked him less and less the more you read of his, of his writings and everything and that there's not much to be admired about him. I grew up in North Carolina where he is from. And I remember in third or fourth grade as we were studying state history, we were taught that something to be proud of was the fact that some presidents had been from North Carolina, including Andrew Johnson. They didn't tell us a whole lot about him, but they certainly did not tell us that he was a "rank demagogue and a damned scoundrel," as Thaddeus Stevens said. So on one hand his story kind of

sounds like an American dream type story, of someone who was born in poverty and eventually became president. You know, that's kind of this dream of anyone can do this. I guess an example of that as well. I'm sure he was grateful his wife taught him to read and write! But along the way, what was it that caused him to earn that reputation from Thaddeus Stevens?

Adam Dean: I think the people who knew Johnson the best, and that was not just Thaddeus Stevens, but Parson Brownlow, who was actually a close Johnson ally during the war, but came to despise him post-war. They both realize that he had almost limitless and uncontrollable personal ambition. And that explains a lot of the political decisions he makes. So Johnson, despite being a poorer white southerner who didn't own slaves, once he rose in politics, he became a big defender of slavery. And that was almost by necessity to succeed in Southern politics. He went so far as to support a bill in Tennessee that would force free black people to either leave the state or be re-enslaved.

Bryan Gentry: And so you talk about the unrestrained personal ambition. So was he just kind of in politics for himself? Was that the perception that people had or —

Adam Dean: I think the two things that explain Andrew Johnson's political career are first a thirst for power and personal ambition, and then, second, a commitment to white supremacy. It's interesting though because people debated that exact question at the time. Two political allies, Horace Greeley, of the New York Tribune and Parson Brownlow of Tennessee, Greeley said Johnson's just about white supremacy and Brownlow said, no, he's just really about personal advancement. Brownlow said if Johnson could gain by appointing an African American to his cabinet, he would. And I think the truth actually lies somewhere in the middle. That he was committed both to white supremacy and to personal advancement.

Hannah Belayachi: That's a really interesting fact that you bring up, because I feel like with his political journey and everything, it seems as though he was very dedicated to having, like if the South were to secede, like he would be fine with that. And just sort of like if the Confederate States were they exist today because of that point, like Johnson would've been behind them. So then how did his political career take a turn and how did he end up being vice president for Abraham Lincoln?

Adam Dean: So to answer the first part of your question, I do think Johnson was committed to the United States and that combined with his constituency in East Tennessee made him take this decision to stay loyal to the union, which did kind of conflict with his personal ambition, like you said. So why did he actually get on Abraham Lincoln's ticket in 1864? First, he was a hero in the North regardless of his racial views and past political career, many Northern abolitionists praised him as this hero who had stood up to secession and he started to switch his political views and make it seem like he was more opposed to slavery than he actually was, I think he gave his first public speech opposing slavery after he had already decided that slavery was disintegrating in Tennessee, even though the

Emancipation Proclamation didn't apply to the state. And then at the 1864 political convention, some of his allies saw an opportunity for him to become vice president and he wanted them to assure people like Thaddeus Stevens that Johnson was opposed to slavery. And how he actually got on is kind of a quintessential shady backroom deal. So in the 19th century, presidents didn't often pick vice presidents. It's not like today. And Lincoln actually sent a letter to the Republican convention saying, 'Don't look to me to pick someone. You know, it's up to the convention, whoever you want I'll have', and this is going to be complicated, so stay with me. Existing vice president, Hannibal Hamlin didn't really like being vice president. He thought it was an unimportant position. He wants to be Senator in Maine, so he's open to stepping down someone else coming in.

Adam Dean: There's some opponents of a guy named William Henry Seward in the cabinet. They want to nominate a New Yorker to be vice president. Having two New Yorkers in the cabinet wouldn't have been good for Lincoln. So Lincoln might've fired Seward then. It's actually Seward's defenders that start pushing Johnson's candidacy as a way to kinda get rid of that political movement. So it's this complicated shady smoke-filled room political scheme that actually got him on the ticket in 1864.

Hannah Belayachi: So you mentioned earlier about how he started changing his views, which was essentially a stepping stone to getting him on the ticket even though there were some shady moves going on, and you mentioned, if he could appoint an African Americans to his cabinet, he would.

Adam Dean: That's what some critics of his ambition said.

Bryan Gentry: Yeah. If it would have gotten him ahead.

Hannah Belayachi: Yeah. So was this change of heart and his change of opinion, was that something that he organically went through or was it just sort of like, okay, if I'm going to get ahead in politics, I need to just sort of like flip the switch and start saying different things?

Adam Dean: Yeah, I think he definitely flipped a switch. A great example is in October, 1864 after he has the vice presidential nomination and it's an election year, so that's when Lincoln and Johnson are running to be president. He gives a speech in Nashville where he declares himself to be the quote 'Moses of the colored people' end quote, that's his words, of the time, that he'll lead them to a future of equal rights and prosperity. And of course his course as president as the exact office it. But this speech attracted so much attention even from international newspapers that when he took over from Lincoln as president, the prevailing consensus was that he would be more radical than Lincoln.

Bryan Gentry: More radical in the sense of pushing reforms and positive changes.

Adam Dean: Yes. Now the exact opposite turned out to be true, but because of that speech and other speeches given in that election year, it did appear to a lot of observers that he had flipped a switch.

Bryan Gentry: We hear a phrase a lot in politics these days. Maybe not so much these days, but in the past 10 or 15 years, a lot of people have accused their opponents of being flip-flopers, changing their views when it's politically expedient. But Johnson actually convinced people when he did that.

Adam Dean: He did. And that wasn't a hard stretch because many northerners themselves had been radicalized by the war. That is driven to more strong anti-slavery views and even considering African-Americans to be citizens. For example, Abraham Lincoln went from explaining, 'I'm not an abolitionist, I'm in favor of a 13th amendment guaranteeing slavery in the South too.' By the spring of 1865, he's calling for black voting rights, a 13th amendment that abolished slavery and even land redistribution.

Bryan Gentry: So with all the massive change that was going on, a lot of people could see that their views had changed. So therefore they trusted that Johnson's views may have actually changed as well.

Adam Dean: Yes.

Hannah Belayachi: So with all this change that of the views of African-Americans gaining more rights and other minorities in the United States at the time, you mentioned that after Abraham Lincoln died, he became more radicalized in the sense of reform and everything and Andrew Johnson had this plan for Reconstruction. What exactly were some of the down points of that and where exactly did he go wrong?

Adam Dean: So John Wilkes Booth assassinated Lincoln and the trigger to that assassination was actually Lincoln coming out in favor of black voting rights. Now Johnson switched course entirely. So there was a lot of predictions and political horse trading on what would Johnson do. But when he came out, he said that to be readmitted to the Union as a defeated state in the Confederacy, you only have to do three things. You have to repeal secession, you have to observe emancipation, and you have to disown the Confederate debt. He doesn't say anything about black rights other than just vaguely, you have to agree to emancipation. So there's no black voting, no commitment to land redistribution. And so what ended up happening in the summer and fall of 1865 is, first there was a lot of violence directed against freed African Americans and those white southerners who had supported the Union; kind of reprisals and violent efforts to "keep people in their place," according to the white southerners in charge. And these governments also implemented what were called "Black Codes," which were pretty direct attempts at re-establishing slavery in all but name. And interestingly, what pissed off the Northern public the most was the election of former Confederate congressmen and senators and high ranking people to the US Congress. And so remember the North on its own lost over 300,000 people

in the American Civil War and they looked at Johnson and said, are you nuts? You are reversing the results of the war and the peace.

Bryan Gentry: So it didn't take long for this person who was claiming that he was a Moses to lead black Americans to a better future, to show what he was really like.

Adam Dean: Now political cartoons turned that phrase "Moses" into kind of a political sarcasm and mocking, and there was actually some political protest music of the time that denounced Johnson for his false promises.

Bryan Gentry: Would Reconstruction have gone better if Andrew Johnson had not been president?

Adam Dean: That's impossible to know. But I think the answer is yes, it would have had to have been better. He single handedly killed land redistribution, which had passed before Lincoln was assassinated. And the way he did that was by pardoning as many ex-Confederates as possible so that they could reclaim their land. And the failure of land redistribution played a big role in the failure of Reconstruction and continues to shape American life to this day.

Hannah Belayachi: So could you say that these actions that Johnson had taken, which essentially led America into having one foot in the grave, Reconstruction wise, could you say that these actions are essentially what led him to being impeached?

Adam Dean: Yes. And what's really interesting and new about my research is that I think he inspired violence on the ground. So I spent a lot of time looking at Klu Klux Klan depositions and accounts and numerous Klansmen supported Johnson and in the North Carolina clan they thought Johnson was the head of it. Now that's not actually true. He wasn't the head of the Klan, but what it shows is that his speeches and actions were encouraging violent resistance in the South and terrorism. Now that's actually one of the reasons he was impeached. Article 10 of impeachment accuses him of making violent and intemperate harangues that incite violence.

Adam Dean: Now what's particularly fascinating and relevant to today is that when Johnson's impeachment mood from the house to the Senate, the chief justice is the Supreme court Simon Peach Chase insisted that impeach main proceedings only focus on specific crimes. And there was no specific crime about giving a violent and intemperate harangue. . And so what impeachment focused on was Johnson's violation of the Tenure of Office Act.

Bryan Gentry: What was that act?

Adam Dean: The act itself is of dubious constitutionality, but it prevented the president from firing a cabinet member without congressional approval. What it was about was that Congress wanted to take control of Reconstruction policy. Johnson continued to frustrate that. So Congress wanted to protect someone in his

cabinet who was issuing orders to the army and thus enforcing Reconstruction. That person was the secretary of war, Edwin Stanton. And so when Johnson fired Stanton in violation of the Tenure of Office Act

Adam Dean: That was a specific violation that after Chase kind of announced that you could only focus on specific crimes. That's what the article that Congress chose to focus on and then was the point of the Senate trial.

Bryan Gentry: Okay. How did he escape conviction?

Adam Dean: Well, it was pretty dang close. It was one vote in the Senate and he escaped because, first there was discomfort about who would replace him. That was Benjamin Wade, president pro tem of the Senate. Why was there skepticism about Wade? He was considered too far left. Why? He gave a speech calling for women's suffrage, which at the time –

Hannah Belayachi: Very taboo.

Adam Dean: Very taboo.

Bryan Gentry: So about 50 years off.

Adam Dean: Yes. He also gave a number of speeches promoting labor unions and none other than Karl Marx, as in THE Karl Marx, in his preface to marks his famous book, "Das Kapital," said Ben Wade's a really good guy and pushing for the reform with workers.

Bryan Gentry: And so he was not convicted, but it wasn't necessarily because they did not think he had actually broken that law, but it was because they didn't want to kick him out because of who his replacement would be.

Adam Dean: It was who his replacement would be. And then another reason is I do think there was some discomfort with the convicting him on the basis of the Tenure of Office Act. I think if the chief justice had allowed some of the other articles to go through and be a subject of the trial, that would have had a greater chance of conviction. But he chose to almost force it to be, you know, did Johnson commit a criminal act? And then finally there was some chicanery that is Johnson bribed a Senator from Kansas named Edmund Ross with access to government positions and money to help them vote for acquittal. And then — I know I said three reasons but I think there is a fourth — that was an election year and the prevailing wisdom was that Johnson was so unpopular that he would not get the Democratic nomination and if he did, he would lose horribly. And so why impeach him in May of 1868 when he's going to be out in November anyway?

Hannah Belayachi: So you've talked a lot about the actions that Johnson had taken that made him so unpopular with the electorate and among his own cabinet members. Are

there any actions that are similar to other presidents that have gone through the impeachment process?

Adam Dean: Well, I think Nixon became very quickly unpopular as revelations of what happens at Water Gate and probably more important the cover up occurred. And that played a big role in the American distrust of government that I don't think they think is still in existence today. And in the contemporary world, it remains to be seen. You know how unpopular Trump's actions with Ukraine are.

Hannah Belayachi: So impeachment can occur according to the constitution, it says that it can occur when presidents commit high crimes or a misdemeanor. So what exactly does that, explain the scale as to the smallest thing that a president would need to be impeached.

Adam Dean: That questions almost impossible to answer. I'll quote Gerald Ford, that "What is a high crime? It's whatever Congress decides it is."

Bryan Gentry: And so there can be political motivations behind how people define what's a high crime or misdemeanor.

Adam Dean: Yeah. But what's interesting is that in both the Clinton and the Trump impeachment, and those were the two that happened in my lifetime, the defenders of each have just completely questioned the motives of the impeachers, saying that the motives are nothing but partisan and they're completely innocent of wrongdoing, and Johnson used that tract as well, but impeachment was, in Johnson's case, a reluctant decision driven by very real concerns over the effect he was having on the country. So let me be absolutely clear, it was not a partisan impeachment, meaning they didn't impeach him because he was a Democrat and they were Republicans. And so I would encourage modern day Americans to kind of ignore some of the hot air around that question and instead think what actually happened and does that rise to the level of a high crime or misdemeanor.

Bryan Gentry: You and I, we're about the same age. I was a teenager during the Clinton impeachment proceedings. And while preparing for this podcast, I was reading up about different presidential impeachment attempts and times impeachment had been discussed. I was surprised to find out how many presidents have not really faced impeachment proceedings at all, but people have talked about impeaching this president or that president over things such as starting a war. You know, there were people who talked about impeaching Barack Obama. And there was actually someone who filed a bill that would start an inquiry, but the bill didn't go anywhere. But I thought it was interesting that before the Clinton impeachment actually took place, there was an attempt previously to impeach him with something related to political fundraising allegations, that bill didn't go anywhere. And then the Monica Lewinsky scandal came to light and they impeached him for perjury. And so, in a way it seems like they had already decided to impeach him. They were just looking for the opportunity, in a way.



Do you think there's some of that that goes on in politics? Or does Congress take it a little more seriously than that?

Adam Dean: I'd certainly like to think that Congress takes it more seriously. And I honestly believe that they do. I think there's always the fringe of either political party that is views the president of an opposing party as so much an enemy that they want to impeach. But I think the vast majority of Congress only wants to impeach for legitimate reasons. And that was true in the Johnson era as well as early as 1866 the Chicago Tribune wanted to impeach Johnson for drunkenness. And he actually, that was true, he had a problem with alcohol, but it never gained steam until February of 1868 when enough of Congress had been convinced that there were some serious high crimes that he had committed.

Bryan Gentry: I thought it was interesting earlier this year Nancy Pelosi said that she would not pursue impeachment because, I think she said it would divide the country. And a lot of people say that we are very divided as a country. Political polarization has grown quite a bit. Some people even say that we might be heading towards civil war, but as a Civil War scholar looking back at that and looking at where we stand today how do we compare to that period that led up to the country literally dividing with secession and war?

Adam Dean: I think the biggest difference is there's nothing like slavery that divides Americans. So slavery turned the South into the fourth world's fourth largest economy at the time. Completely different social structure than in the North. And we don't have that kind of deep structural divide today. What is eerily similar and depressingly so is the media environment. So the media environment before, during, and after the Civil War was polarized. And if you read a pro-Johnson paper versus an anti-Johnson paper, it's two different worlds and two different realities. And I think unfortunately that's where we are today as a country.

Hannah Belayachi: So how do you suggest the electorate today sort of try and minimize polarization? Like you said, part of it does fall onto the media, but what can we as an electorate, when there are so many different options, do to sort of minimize it?

Adam Dean: I think that we need to be discerning consumers of the media. So we need to value real journalism and not dismiss news that challenges our biases as, quote "fake news." And respect news outlets that really try to have journalistic integrity and deliver facts. Not just, this is a blog post, or this is a meme someone sharing on Facebook, or this is an opinion piece that slams the other side. You know, really look at the facts. Use good judgment when evaluating media.

Hannah Belayachi: Okay, well that's all the time we have for today. Adam, Bryan, thank you so much for joining us.

