The Age of the Oaths: Loyalty Oaths and the Implications they had on Tennessee Affairs Under Military Governor Johnson

Kristin Merritt

Follow this and additional works at: https://knowledge.e.southern.edu/senior_research

Part of the History Commons

Recommended Citation
https://knowledge.e.southern.edu/senior_research/69

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Southern Scholars at KnowledgeExchange@Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Research Projects by an authorized administrator of KnowledgeExchange@Southern. For more information, please contact jspears@southern.edu.
The Age of the Oaths:
Loyalty Oaths and the Implications they had on
Tennessee Affairs Under Military Governor Johnson

Kristin Merritt
Southern Scholars Project
April 19, 2001
Supervised by Dr. McArthur
Of all the states that seceded during the Civil War, no state had a shorter period out of the Union than Tennessee. On June 8, 1861, Tennessee seceded from the Union, making it the last state to secede, and by March of 1862, the Confederate forces had been expelled from most of central and western Tennessee, making it the first state to fall to Union forces. While its time in rebellion was relatively short, the impact this rebellion had on the people was long lasting. Tennessee had become the battleground of America. On her devoted soil seven hundred engagements took place, of which one hundred can be designated as battles. This made Tennessee the scene of more Civil War battles than any other state, save one.

In early 1862 the Confederate forces were beginning to weaken and portions of the Confederacy were falling under Union control. This was evident in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Tennessee, where Lincoln made attempts to restore a loyal government right in the heart of the Confederacy. In order to do this, Lincoln appointed military governors in the re-conquered areas. His goal was to reconstruct the conquered districts and encourage loyalty in order for the state to be readmitted to the Union.

The tide began to turn against the Confederates in February 1862 with the fall of Forts Henry and Donelson. The loss of the forts spelled disaster for the Confederate forces in Middle Tennessee. For many, the defeat of the Confederacy seemed imminent. The southern troops were starving and exhausted, their spirits shattered. Even more devastating to the Southern morale than the fall of the forts was the fall of Nashville, the

---

first Confederate state capital to fall to the Yankees.\textsuperscript{3} The fall of Nashville shook the confidence of southerners throughout the Confederacy. Nashville was a major port city and supplier for the lower south. A confederate woman lamented, "The thought of Nashville, the heart of our country and I may say granary of our Confederacy, falling into the hands of those robbers and murderers casts a terrible gloom over us all. That point in their possession, it really appeared that they might touch every other in North Alabama and Georgia."\textsuperscript{4} A Confederate Army chaplain stated, in a letter to his hometown newspaper, "I have seen sorrow before, private and public calamity, but never have I witnessed such a scene as the evacuation of Nashville. God forbid that I must ever see it again in any other city."\textsuperscript{5}

With the fall of the forts and the evacuation of Nashville, Tennessee now lay firmly within Union lines. It was vitally important that Tennessee be reinstated as a loyal government. In July of 1862 Lincoln wrote Johnson, "If we could somehow get a vote of the people of Tennessee and have it result properly, it would be worth more to us than a battle gained."\textsuperscript{6} Tennessee, which lay in the very heart of the Confederacy, was of vast strategic importance. It was the gateway to Georgia, and from there to the other states of the Deep South. Along with military importance, Tennessee also held great political importance. Of all the portions of the south now under Union control, Tennessee held the most promise of being successfully restored to the Union. The strong number of

unconditional Unionists in East Tennessee and the early expulsion of Confederate forces made it ideal for reconstruction. As the last Confederates fled from middle Tennessee, the people waited apprehensively for the first appearance of their conquerors.

The very heart of the once great state had fallen and a native had returned to lead the people of Tennessee back to wholeness and unity. Andrew Johnson was sent to Tennessee as military governor, ostensibly to implement Lincoln’s plan of Reconstruction. However, Johnson felt it necessary to deviate from Lincoln’s plan, and to instate his own harsh and vindictive policy. Why did Johnson veer from Lincoln’s original plan? How did his use of the notorious oaths hinder the healing and restoration of Tennessee? And most importantly: If Lincoln’s original plan had been followed, would the road to restoration have been smoother, and the effects more long lasting?

**Andrew Johnson’s Road to Military Governor**

From his earliest days, Andrew Johnson had been an outsider hungry for acceptance. Born and raised in East Tennessee, he had grown up in abject poverty. Along with his already humble beginnings, the fact that Johnson was from East Tennessee carried a stigma of its own. The central and western portions of Tennessee were areas of vast plantations and slaveholding aristocrats. East Tennessee was considered a backwater of poor tenant farmers, in decided contrast with the wealthy interior of the state. Slavery took less of a hold in eastern Tennessee, effectively estranging the eastern portion from the rest of the state.

Johnson’s early history, more than anything else, shaped him into the man he would become. Johnson thought of nothing but escaping his humble beginnings. He determined early on that, for him, personal fulfillment would only come as the result of a
struggle—real, full-bodied and terrible—against forces specifically organized to thwart him. His battle to rise to power consumed and obsessed him. Nowhere was this bitter struggle more obvious than against the elite of his own state. His East Tennessee upbringing left him on the fringe of powerful society, as all the moneyed, slaveholding aristocracy of Tennessee resided in Central and Western Tennessee. With them resided the power of the state. Johnson resented that his own East Tennesseans, as well as himself, should be left without a voice in their own state. “Andy” Johnson bound himself to the plain people of Tennessee, for better or for worse. His fight was as much for them as for himself. Slowly, he began to rise to power, first as mayor of Greenville, then as a congressman, and eventually to the United States Senate. It was in this capacity that fate finally caught up with Johnson.

In the eyes of most Tennesseans, the election of 1860 was the beginning of the end for Johnson. A popular Senator and former governor of Tennessee, Johnson was a state hero. Yet the election of Lincoln had severed relations within the state. The people had split into rival factions, each proposing a solution to the question plaguing not only Tennessee, but all of the South: What about secession?

Three basic positions towards secession emerged. The first called for immediate secession from the Union. The second called for a waiting period to see what would be the outcome of Lincoln’s election. This group became known as Conditional Unionists, as they were willing to stay in the Union, on the condition that slavery not be attacked, and that the people would not be called upon to fight against their fellow southerners. Last were the Unconditional Unionists who trumpeted the slogan, “Union at all costs!”

---

Johnson fell into this latter group. “As for myself,” Johnson stated, “I shall stay inside the Union and there fight for Southern rights.” With the Fire-Eaters on the brink of secession and the majority of Tennesseans siding with the Conditional Unionists, this statement forever put Johnson out of the graces of a large number of Tennesseans.

Though eight other Southern states had previously seceded with the election of Lincoln, Tennessee had remained loyal to the Union. Then, on April 12, 1861, the Confederate states fired the first shot at Fort Sumter. Thus began the real fight to keep Tennessee in the Union while the surrounding states seceded. Tennessee was teetering on the brink of secession, and Johnson’s pro-union statements in Congress were the topic of general conversation. His life was constantly in danger, and if not for the warnings of his friends he would surely have met his end. He was forced to flee from his home and remain in Washington for his own safety.

Lincoln’s call for troops finally plunged Tennessee into the war. Tennessee seceded on June 8, 1861. The people had thrown their support not to Johnson and the Union, but to secession and the aristocracy of Tennessee. Johnson viewed it as the ultimate betrayal that his beloved Tennessee would align themselves with the interests of his bitterest foe, the wealthy aristocracy. Johnson felt that his fight for Tennessee was over, little dreaming that the real fight was only just beginning.

Johnson spent the winter of 1861 bombarding Washington with letters requesting aid in East Tennessee. He sat helplessly in Washington, while at home his neighbors, friends, and family were betrayed by unfulfilled Union promises. Johnson feared that if no help was forthcoming, the people of his beloved East Tennessee might lose hope and begin to despair. Young men from East Tennessee were being taken by the Confederate

---

8 Winston, Andrew Johnson, 147.
Army; now was the time to strike. Johnson took it upon himself to keep Washington abreast of the state of affairs in Tennessee. So adamant was he in bringing the plight of Tennessee to public view that military operations in Washington, so far as Tennessee was concerned, were turned over to Johnson. Johnson was Lincoln’s right hand man concerning policy in Tennessee, and so Johnson appealed directly to Lincoln for help. Lincoln himself supported the plan to rescue the Unionist stronghold in East Tennessee, and he intervened in an attempt to send troops to take Cumberland Gap. However, General Buell cancelled the invasion, fearing a Confederate advance into Kentucky, where the Union forces would be weakened by sending off men to East Tennessee. Part of Buell’s excuse was the rugged conditions in East Tennessee. The roads were terrible, the winters harsh, and the terrain imposing. Thus, the mission failed even before it could be fully realized. Had federal troops captured East Tennessee first, Reconstruction would undoubtedly have followed a different course. However, all was in vain. Months passed and then a year and no troops materialized to relieve East Tennessee. When the news of the fall of the forts and the evacuation of Nashville reached Washington, Johnson’s joy was bittersweet. While the central portions of Tennessee had fallen to the Union, East Tennessee was still deeply entrenched behind Confederate lines.

With central Tennessee now cleared of rebel forces, a strong leader was needed to restore a loyal government. Lincoln found such a leader in Andrew Johnson, the man with whom he had worked closely in regards to East Tennessee. Although Lincoln was wary of establishing military control over any conquered area, he felt Johnson was the

9 Winston, Andrew Johnson, 200-201.
man for the job. Lincoln gave Johnson extreme leeway as to the restoration of government. Johnson’s letter of appointment from Secretary of State Stanton was itself exceedingly vague.

You are hereby appointed Military Governor of the State of Tennessee, with authority to exercise and perform, within the limits of that state, all and singular, the powers, duties and functions pertaining to the office of Military Governor (including the power to establish all necessary offices and tribunals, and suspend the writ of Habeas Corpus) during the pleasure of the President, or until the loyal inhabitants of that state shall organize a civil government in conformity with the Constitution of the United States.

When Lincoln requested that Johnson return to Tennessee in the capacity of military governor, Johnson did not hesitate. He would return to his homeland to restore his fellow Tennesseans to their rightful place in the Union.

Almost immediately, people began to question Lincoln’s choice for military governor. Undoubtedly, Johnson was the most famous Southern loyalist in the country. However, many politicians felt that Johnson had left a wake of bitterness in his departure from Tennessee. When Tennessee decided to secede from the Union, it was against much protest from Andrew Johnson who remained in Congress, the only Senator from the Confederacy who refused to secede with his state. His unpopularity in Tennessee was quite pervasive. His violent opposition to slavery and secession had angered many Southern Democrats. Harper’s Weekly ran an article saying, “Of Andrew Johnson it is enough to say that there is no man in the country, unless it be Mr. Lincoln himself, whom the rebels more cordially hate. He fought them in the Senate when they counted upon his

---

aid, and he has fought them steadily ever since."\textsuperscript{15} He lost no time in denouncing confederate leaders and in promoting the confiscation of their lands and property. There was thus plenty of reason for the confederate fear that he would be a despotistic and tyrannical leader.\textsuperscript{16} A contemporary wrote to Salmon P. Chase saying, "Do not send Andy Johnson here in any official capacity ... He is too much embittered to entrust with a mission as delicate as the direction of a people under the present circumstances."\textsuperscript{17}

**Lincoln's Plan of Reconstruction**

The appointing of a military presence was unheard of in the United States. Never before in American history had military rule been imposed upon a state. The idea of putting a state under direct military governance was utterly foreign to Lincoln. Lincoln wanted to extend the hand of pardon and peace to the areas of the Confederacy that were beginning to fall into Union hands, yet he felt it was necessary to show some force in the re-conquered states. Lincoln felt the appointment of military governors was a necessary deviance from his basically conservative approach to reconstruction, which rested on the premise that the states of the Confederacy had never legally left the Union. Thus, as states, they were not to be punished for the actions of a disloyal faction of their citizenry. These states, under home rule, would be fully restored to the Union when they repealed their secession acts and abolished slavery.\textsuperscript{18} Lincoln’s plan of Reconstruction was one of extreme clemency. He wanted to restore Southerners to what he felt was their rightful place in the Union.


\textsuperscript{16} Hesseltine, *Lincoln's Plan,* 56.


\textsuperscript{18} Michael Davis. *The Image of Lincoln in the South.* (Knoxville, TN: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1971), 136.
Lincoln's initial attempt at reconstruction came in his 10 Percent Plan. This plan stated that once only 10 percent of the voters took an oath of allegiance, they could begin the process of restoring their own government by electing state and local officers. The question of who would be involved in the work of restoration was a major concern to both the president and Congress. Lincoln decided that the only politically viable course of action was to entrust Reconstruction to the same southern whites who had fought for the Confederacy, imposing minimal checks upon the new governments they established, and hoping, through generous treatment, to secure their future political support.\(^{19}\)

Lincoln strove to leave the actual work of reconstruction in the hands of the former rebels and the conquered peoples of the South. As one historian notes, "Lincoln felt that the people within the State alone had the right to initiate and carry into effect measures for the rehabilitation of the deranged governmental machinery."\(^{20}\) Yet he felt that with the war still raging, a strong leader must step up and bring the people back into the Union.

**Lincoln and Johnson’s Differing Views on Pardon and Amnesty**

Johnson arrived in Nashville in early March 1862. His mission was to impose loyalty on the very people who, less than a year before, had broken the bonds of union. In an ironic twist of fate, the area of Tennessee that first fell under Union control was the region where the secessionist sentiment was the strongest.\(^{1}\) Johnson plunged himself into the task of constructing a loyal government from the ruins left behind by the fleeing Confederates.


On the week of his arrival, he gave a speech in Nashville stating that he came, "With an olive branch in one hand and the Constitution in the other." To further assure the people, he issued a written proclamation saying, "Those who through the dark and weary night of the rebellion have maintained their allegiance to the Federal Government will be honored. The erring and misguided will be welcomed on their return." The Appeal was written in an attempt to ease the minds of the apprehensive people of Tennessee. However, as one historian states, "The Appeal, reportedly written before Johnson left Washington, reflects the conciliatory views of Lincoln, rather than the fire and brimstone pronouncements against rebels that characterized Johnson's other public statements." As he continued, Johnson hinted at what was yet to become the mainstay of his reconstruction program, "While it may become necessary, in vindicating the violated majesty of the law, and in re-asserting its imperial sway, to punish intelligent and conscious treason in high places, no merely retaliatory or vindictive policy will be adopted." Even amidst the reassurances there was still an intimation of the harsh policies Johnson would implement throughout Tennessee.

Johnson's first act as military governor was to enact an oath that ousted all secessionists from their state offices and filled their seats with loyal unionists. The oath stated,

I do solemnly swear that I will support, protect and defend the Constitution and Government of the United States, against all enemies, whether domestic or foreign, and that I will bear true faith, allegiance and loyalty to the same, any law, ordinance, resolution or conviction to the contrary notwithstanding; and further: that I do this with a full determination, pledge and purpose, without any mental

---

22 Appeal to the People of Tennessee, March 18, 1862. Graf, Johnson Papers, Vol 5., 211.
23 Harris, Charity, 43.
24 Appeal to the People of Tennessee, March 18, 1862. Graf, Johnson Papers Vol 5., 211.
reservation or evasion whatsoever; and further: that I will well and faithfully perform all the duties which may be required of me by law.25 Although stringent oaths were soon to become an integral part of Johnson's policy, his first oath was not intended to disenfranchise or exclude. The oath was administered solely to officials in the state government for the purpose of reinstating loyalty. Standard procedure in Tennessee had been for all government employees to swear an oath of loyalty to the Confederacy. Thus, Johnson issued an oath for the same officials to renounce their former Confederate allegiance by swearing an oath of loyalty to the Union. This oath was the same given to all employees who served in the Federal government. Johnson sent a notice to all public office holders informing them of the necessity of taking the oath. The majority of officials refused to take it. In response, Johnson carefully selected prominent rebels and members of the social and political elite, whom he felt constituted the "intelligent and conscious rebel leaders". Aware that these leading citizens posed a threat to the success of his provisional government in Nashville, Johnson ordered a series of highly publicized arrests, suppression of pro-Confederate newspapers and publishing houses, and the dismissal of Nashville city officials.26

This rapid consolidation of governing power ushered in a time known as the Nashville Terror in early April 1862. Johnson began arresting people in earnest shortly after the initial arrests. Squads of soldiers began appearing in the dark hours of the morning; they seized seven prominent Nashville citizens, as well as others. Throughout the state within the lines of the Union armies, the search for secessionist leaders continued.27 Within the first weeks of his arrival in Nashville, Johnson had decided that

25 Typical oath required to hold a federal office
26 Hardison, *Toils of War*, 83.
the conciliatory reconstruction program of Lincoln had no place in Tennessee. Thus in
his first deviation from Lincoln’s plan, he ultimately set the precedent for the methods
that would be implemented during the remainder of Reconstruction in Tennessee.

Although the measures implemented in those early weeks contradicted the plan
originally outlined by Lincoln, there was no communication between Lincoln and
Johnson that indicated that Lincoln was displeased with Johnson’s actions. Rather,
Lincoln allowed Johnson a great deal of leniency and freedom to carry out measures that
he felt were necessary to the restoration of civil government in Tennessee. Thus, from
the very start, Johnson’s plan began to diverge from Lincoln’s and in its place was
implemented a harsher treatment of the conquered southerners now under Johnson’s
jurisdiction. Johnson’s brash vindictiveness is seen in a letter to Lincoln in which he
proposes to, “Arrest seventy vile secessionists in this vicinity and offer them in exchange
for seventy East Tennesseans now lying in prison in Mobile . . . and if they refuse to
exchange I will at once send them South at their own expense . . . with the under
stand that if they come again within said lines, . . . they shall be treated as spies and with
death.” Although the idea was foreign to Lincoln’s original reconstruction stance, in
reply Lincoln conceded to Johnson’s wishes, stating only, “I certainly do not disapprove
the proposition.”

In decided contrast to Johnson, Lincoln’s Reconstruction plan was becoming
increasingly tolerant of rebels. In December of 1863, Lincoln issued his Proclamation on
Amnesty and Reconstruction. The proclamation stated that, “All persons who have . . .
participated in the existing rebellion . . . have a full pardon hereby granted to them, with

28 Telegram to Lincoln, May 9, 1862. Basler, Lincoln Papers, V, 265.
the restoration of all rights of property...upon the condition that every such person shall take and subscribe an oath." The oath stated:

I do solemnly swear, in the presence of Almighty God, that I will henceforth faithfully support, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States, and the union of the States thereunder; and that I will, in like manner, abide by and faithfully support all acts of Congress passed during the existing rebellion with reference to slaves, so long and so far as not repealed, modified or held void by Congress, or by decision of the Supreme Court; and that I will, in like manner, abide by and faithfully support all proclamations of the President made during the existing rebellion having reference to slaves, so long and so far as not modified or declared void by decision of the Supreme Court. So help me God.

That same day, in his annual address to Congress, Lincoln defended his use of the oath as a means of determining loyalty.

True the form of an oath is given, but no man is coerced to take it. The man is only promised a pardon in case he voluntarily takes the oath... An attempt to guaranty and protect a revived State government, constructed in whole, or in preponderating part, from the very element against whose hostility and violence it is to be protected, is simply absurd. There must be a test by which to separate the opposing elements, so as to build only from the sound; and that test is a sufficiently liberal one, which accepts as sound whoever will make a sworn recantation of his former unsoundness.

In his proclamation Lincoln fully outlined the course he intended to take regarding his treatment of former secessionists and rebels.

Lincoln had provided Southerners with a lenient test to renew their loyalty to the Union. In Tennessee, however, under the heavy hand of Andrew Johnson, quite another approach was being instated. "He that wants pardon," Johnson commanded, "must take the oath prescribed by the President of the United States;... I think the President has been exceedingly lenient in permitting them to do that." Neither Johnson nor the Unionists he was gradually beginning to rally were eager to extend amnesty to the

---

30 Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction, December 8, 1863.
31 ibid
confederates in Tennessee. Johnson stated, “I say that the traitor has ceased to be a citizen, and in joining the rebellion, has become a public enemy... My judgment is that he should be subjected to a severe ordeal before he is restored to citizenship... Treason must be made odious, and the traitors must be punished and impoverished”.34 Johnson was not alone in his feeling that “traitors” were being pardoned too easily. Maine’s W.P Fessenden stated, “Abraham’s proclamation, take it altogether, was a silly performance. Think of telling the rebels they may fight as long as they can, and take a pardon when they have had enough”.35 A staunchly Unionist paper in Nashville bemoaned, “Such a process is a cheap way for treason to avoid punishment... Why should loyal people needlessly place themselves in the power of men who so recently have been their deadly foes?”36 They felt that “Rebels have no right to demand citizenship as a recompense for oath-taking”.37 One of Johnson’s correspondents laments to him,

If rebels are suffered for nearly three years to do all they can to break down the Government, and then when they are conquered, come forward and take a hypocritical oath to save property, an awful doom awaits the loyal portion of the American people... For if loyal and disloyal alike are upon equality... then I can see no good that can result from the loss of so much blood and treasure, already shed and spent.38

The thought persisted in many minds that if no punishment was to be inflicted on the rebels, then the war had been fought for naught.

Initially Johnson attempted to adhere to Lincoln’s amnesty proclamation. However, he immediately ran into problems with the amnesty oath because it placed the ex-Confederate and the loyalist on equal footing. Many East Tennesseans who had

36 *Nashville Daily Times and True Union*, May 26, 1864
37 ibid
never left the Union or fought for the Confederacy were offended that Lincoln’s amnesty oath should make them swear the same allegiance as their rebel counterparts. General Nathaniel Banks wrote to Lincoln, “The only ground of hesitation is considering your oath required in your proclamation of December 8. Prominent Union men who have never sympathized with or aided the rebellion directly or indirectly... feel they ought not to be compelled to take an additional oath in order to vote at this election.”39 Lincoln replied, “You are at liberty to adopt any rule which shall admit to vote any unquestionably loyal free-state men and none others. And yet I do wish that they would all take the oath.”40 Lincoln told Johnson, “Loyal as well as disloyal should take the oath, because it does not hurt them, clears all question as to their right to vote, and swells the aggregate number who take it, which is an important object.”41 Johnson resented the amnesty oath, which was alienating the much-needed Unionists in Tennessee by allowing no distinction between loyal Unionists and former rebels, while at the same time promising easy pardon to former Confederates.

Johnson was further frustrated that some rebels would take the president’s oath solely to protect their property or to ensure a release from prison and then return to their posts in the Confederate army.42 In response to the Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction, Johnson wrote to Lincoln, “I am thoroughly satisfied that the Amnesty will be thoroughly detrimental in reorganizing the state government, and that Tennessee should be made an exemption... As it now operates its main tendency is to keep alive

---

38 From William A. Sorrells, June 23, 1864. Graf, _AJP_, Vol. 6, 753.
39 Notes, _Lincoln’s Papers_, VII, 162.
40 Letter to Nathaniel Banks, January 31, 1864. _Lincoln’s Papers_, VII, 162.
the rebel spirit in fact reconciling none. This is the opinion of every real Union man here.\footnote{43} Lincoln responded two days later, telling Johnson that he would write more on the subject within a few days, but no subsequent letter has ever been found.\footnote{44} Without a response from Lincoln, Johnson moved ahead on his own will.

**Era of the Oaths**

Even before his written request to have Tennessee thoroughly exempted from the Proclamation, Johnson had already taken great liberties by issuing his own oath to all ex-confederates who wished to vote in the upcoming county elections in March 1864. Thus, he ushered in the era of the oaths, one of the most confusing, and yet notorious chapters in his reign as military governor of Tennessee. Unlike his early oath of March 1862, these new oaths were hard, stringent, and unforgiving.

Johnson’s use of oaths is better understood in light of his view towards the people of Tennessee. He felt that the whole of secession had been a conspiracy of the elite, and that the people of Tennessee, “his people” had been unnaturally coerced into seceding. The very unnatural nature of the coercion justified his own use of force and counter coercion. The aristocracy, whom he saw as the rebel leaders, filled him with fury. He felt that if only they could be cowed, the true voice of the people would again be heard. How sweet would have been the words of contrition from the former rebels.\footnote{45} As one historian notes,

Words: it may be in just this sense that we are to understand Johnson’s intense preoccupation with oaths. It was as though there were something occult in them; conspiracies were somehow bound and unbound by oaths, as by charms and spells, if cunningly contrived. The “oath” theme that recurs throughout Johnson’s

---

\footnote{44} Reply and Notes, Graf, *Johnson Papers*, Vol. 6, 701.  
\footnote{45} McKitrick, *Andrew Johnson*, 137-141.
military governorship is quite striking, and Johnson's conjurations in this realm seem to have exceeded the normal.\textsuperscript{46}

This obsession with oaths was an evil omen for the former confederates, as Johnson would try anything to exclude the hated rebels from having a say in his loyal government.

Johnson made a distinction between Lincoln's amnesty oath and his own voting oath. "There is President Lincoln's altar if you want pardon or amnesty—if you want to escape the penalties you have incurred by violations of law and the constitution go over there and get your pardon... We want a hard oath, a tight oath, as a qualification for everybody who votes."\textsuperscript{47} Johnson's oath was much harsher than Lincoln's original amnesty oath. Lincoln's oath seemed to encourage swarms of former Confederates to take the amnesty oath simply to avoid punishment at the hands of the Union soldiers. As one historian states, "All during the war, the oath of loyalty was the key to freedom for millions of southern civilians within Union lines. To the southerner it meant food, mail and peace. It meant liberty and pardon for rebellion."\textsuperscript{48} Lincoln, unlike Johnson, was not concerned with the reasons the rebels took the oath, but that they took the oath at all. Lincoln felt that even if the rebel had taken advantage of the oath, it was a still a step, no matter how small, in the restoration of loyalty. Johnson and Lincoln viewed the confederates with different eyes. Lincoln viewed the rebellious states as erring brothers', while Johnson viewed them as enemies of the Union, deserving harsh treatment. Johnson was determined that these former rebels would not be allowed to vote or have any part in Tennessee affairs on the amnesty oath alone. If former Confederates wanted to vote they had to take an oath condemning all they had once stood for. Swearing the oath in word

\textsuperscript{46}Ibid, 140.
\textsuperscript{47}Speech on Restoration of State Government, January 21, 1864. Graf, Johnson Papers, Vol. 6, 578.
\textsuperscript{48}Hyman. \textit{Era of the Oath}, 41.
alone was not enough for Johnson; rebels must actively work against their former cause and former comrades. This alone would be sufficient proof of their loyalty. The oath stated:

I solemnly swear, that I will henceforth support the Constitution of the United States and defend it against the assaults of all its enemies; that I will hereafter be, and conduct myself as a true and faithful citizen of the United States, freely and voluntarily claiming to be subject to all the duties, and obligations, and entitled to all the rights and privileges of such citizenship; that I ardently desire the suppression of the present insurrection and rebellion against the Government of the United States, the success of its armies and the defeat of all those who oppose them, and that the Constitution of the United States, and all laws and proclamations, made in pursuance thereof, may be speedily and permanently established and enforced over all the people, States and Territories thereof; and further, that I will hereafter heartily aid and assist all loyal people in the accomplishments of these results. So help me God.49

Johnson’s oath, which everyone—Confederate sympathizers and loyal Unionists alike—held to, went far beyond Lincoln’s oath of amnesty. Prospective voters had to agree not only to support the Constitution, but also to “ardently desire the suppression of the present insurrection” as well as the extension to Tennessee of the Emancipation Proclamation.50 Many loyalists objected to the oath, which indirectly committed them to support all future proclamations against slavery.51

Johnson’s “Damnesty oath” was immediately met with dismay and outrage from the people of Tennessee.52 Many had already taken Lincoln’s oath of amnesty, yet found themselves unable to participate in Tennessee affairs unless they agreed to take Johnson’s oath. One particular objection many had against Johnson’s oath was that it required a declaration of their desires. One Tennessean complained, “I own it as an unheard of

51 Hesseltine. Lincoln’s Plan, 102.
52 Corlew, Tennessee, 323.
inquisition, contrary to the genius of our institutions, to swear one concerning his desires. It brings the citizen to a confessional—a sworn confessional."\textsuperscript{53} Another chief objection to the oath was that Johnson, as a provisional governor, had no right to institute an oath on the people, thus rendering the whole proceeding null and void.\textsuperscript{54} The \textit{Nashville Press} commented cynically,

If this course of reasoning should be generally adopted and acted out, we don’t see how the governor can manage to checkmate the move. He may construct a new or additional oath—he may even require folks to swear that they love him for his candor and humanity and disinterested patriotism, and ardently desire that he shall be perpetual dictator of Tennessee—they can still take it in the same sense they offer to the other—the sense of void nothingness.\textsuperscript{55}

Tennesseans waited anxiously to see how Lincoln would respond to Johnson’s usurpation of presidential power. Retribution against Johnson’s presumptuousness seemed imminent in Lincoln’s letter to Edwin Stanton regarding Johnson’s oath, “On principle I dislike an oath which requires a man to swear he \textit{has} not done wrong. It rejects the Christian principle of forgiveness on terms of repentance. I think it is enough if the man does no wrong \textit{hereafter}.”\textsuperscript{56} However, Tennessee’s Attorney General Horace Maynard wrote to Lincoln regarding Johnson’s new innovations,

I have heard two criticisms (about the proclamation). It’s excessive liberality to rebels, and it’s placing in the same category repentant rebels and men always loyal. The expressions of repugnance are too strong to be disregarded. Gov. Johnson has attempted, in solution of the difficulty, in a manner quite satisfactory to the Union men, but greatly to the disgust of secesh and semi-secesh. I will enclose a copy of his proclamation for the March election. In all probability you will be solicited to interfere. This I hope you \textit{will not do}.\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Nashville Dispatch}, February 5, 1864.
\textsuperscript{55} \textit{Nashville Press}, February 28, 1864.
\textsuperscript{57} Notes, Basler, \textit{Lincoln’s Papers}, VII, 184.
In Maynard’s remark, it is clear that “the Union men”, did not necessarily mean all unionist supporters, but only unconditional Unionists. In Johnson’s eyes, they alone were “true” Unionists, all others were viewed with suspicion and forced to prove their loyalty with an ironclad oath. Lincoln responded to the letter, “I do not apprehend that he will think it necessary to deviate from my views to any ruinous extent. On one hasty reading, I see no deviation in his programme which you send.”58 The final word on the matter came from Lincoln on February 27, 1864:

The oath prescribed in the proclamation of Governor Johnson ... is entirely satisfactory to me as a test of loyalty of all persons proposing ... to vote ... There is no conflict between the oath of amnesty in my proclamation ... and that prescribed by Governor Johnson ... No person who has taken the oath of amnesty ... should have any objection to taking that prescribed by Governor Johnson as a test of loyalty. I have seen and examined Governor Johnson’s proclamation and am entirely satisfied with his plan, which is to restore the State government and place it under the control of citizens truly loyal to the Government of the United States.59

Andrew Johnson’s position did not conform with Lincoln’s intentions when he issued his proclamation. The president intended for his amnesty oath to be a sufficient test for voting. Still he was willing to permit Unionists to determine voter requirements for their states. For this reason, Lincoln went along with Johnson’s stringent oath.60 Thus, by refusing to interfere, Lincoln unwittingly sealed the fate of the people of Tennessee. They were fated not to the restoration of Lincoln’s plan, but to the revenge of Johnson’s.

Johnson’s loyalty oath proved so sweeping that no honest confederate would agree to take it, because, as one historian stated, “The restored citizen must “ardently desire” and actually assist in the suppression of his former secessionist kinsmen and

---

60 Harris. Charity, 215.
friends and the reestablishment over them of the Constitution and laws they hated, against which they had taken arms, and for the overthrow of which they were still contending. 61

"I can tie my hands, my feet, or my tongue by the oath I have taken," one man whose sons were in Confederate service stated, "but I cannot prevent my heart from going out towards my boys." 62 Unionists, as well as former rebels, were disgusted with the oath. Unionists in East Tennessee were humiliated to have to take an oath at all, and many conservative Unionists, in disgust, refused. 63 It was estimated that, had the amnesty oath been the only test, the vote would have been nearly doubled. 64 It was a great blow to Johnson’s image when the March county elections were little more than a mockery, as most Tennesseans were barred from the polls by the oath. 65 Johnson had failed to learn the lesson of Lincoln’s amnesty oath. By implementing his oath, he had discounted the alienating effect on the Unionists, who should have been his supporters.

The oath would come back to haunt him in the 1864 vice-presidential campaign, as it was once again implemented. With the last of the Confederate troops finally cleared from Tennessee, Johnson felt that, at long last, a valid election could be held among the loyal members of Tennessee. A Constitutional Union Club was established in Nashville to elect the Democratic candidate, General McClellan, rather than the Republican Lincoln-Johnson ticket. There was real worry as to whether the Republican ticket would win in a free election. One Tennessee resident stated, "The men who own these slaves and ‘Conservative Union’ men and those who have taken the Amnesty Oath will vote

61 Hall, Andrew Johnson, 120.
63 Corlew, Tennessee, 322
64 Nashville Union, March 8, 1864.
65 McKitrick, Andrew Johnson, 127.
together and against the administration. The result of an election is today feared by the Union men of the State. 66 This new party was a direct result of Johnson’s first oath, which had caused a rift between unconditional Unionists and the conservative Unionists who refused to accept emancipation. 67 This split between the Tennessee Unionists came at a time when solidarity among the Unionists was of vast importance to reestablishing a loyal government and to obtain the needed number of loyal voters.

In September, Johnson set forth a new oath, which was even more stringent than the one implemented for the March election. The new oath disenfranchised ex-Confederates and many conservative Unionists, while allowing soldiers to go to the polls without taking the oath or registering, in order to swell the numbers and guarantee that the “right” side would win. 68 His new oath stated:

I solemnly swear that I will henceforth support the Constitution of the United States, and defend it against the assaults of all enemies; that I am now an active friend of the Government of the United States, and the enemy of the so-called Confederate States; that I ardently desire the suppression of the present rebellion against the United States; that I sincerely rejoice in the triumph of the armies and navies of the United States, and in the defeat and overthrow of the armies, navies, and of all armed combinations in the interest of the so-called Confederate States; that I will cordially oppose all armistices or negotiations for peace with rebels in arms, until the Constitution of the United States and all laws and proclamations made in pursuance thereof, shall be established over all the people of every State and Territory embraced within the National Union, and that I will heartily aid and assist the loyal people in whatever measures may be adopted for the attainment of these ends; and further, that I take this oath freely and voluntarily, and without mental reservation. So help me God. 69

Once again, Johnson clearly violated the spirit of Lincoln’s amnesty oath. The president intended that upon taking the amnesty oath, the individual would have all rights restored.

67 Tennessee had initially been exempted from the Emancipation Proclamation, however in September 1864 Johnson had declared that he was in favor of emancipating the slaves in Tennessee. Unionists were split over the matter of emancipation.
68 Maslowski, *Treason*, 90-93.
He assumed that people who subscribed to the oath would feel morally bound to support the Union and to insure only loyal candidates were sustained at the polls. Johnson had no such faith in the people of Tennessee.\textsuperscript{70} After the humiliating fiasco in the March election, Johnson's new oath effectively excluded all those who meant to support the growing body of southerners backing General McClellan.\textsuperscript{71} In issuing this new oath, he showed the flexibility of his constitutionalism, as his oath disqualified not only secessionist sympathizers, but also loyalists who intended to vote for George McClellan. When challenged, he retorted, "Suppose you do violate the law if by so doing you restore the law and the constitution, your conscience will approve your course, and the all the people will say, amen!"\textsuperscript{72} The people of Tennessee were furious at the blatant unconstitutionality of the new oath being administered. The people of Tennessee wrote a petition appealing in vain for Lincoln to intervene on their behalf. The \textit{Washington National Republican} ran an article stating,

\begin{quote}
It is the solemn voice of a once free and proud people, protesting against their own disenfranchisement by the agent of Abraham Lincoln. It is the voice of those loyal men in Tennessee who have borne the reproach of a people they still loved, supporting the President in all lawful efforts to preserve the Union. The reward of our loyalty is disenfranchisement. If you, the people of the Northern states, shall sustain this act of tyranny, your own time will soon come. If the President of the United States may 'manage his side of this contest' by setting aside the very letter of the Constitution, and altering the election laws of the state so as to disenfranchise his opponents, liberty is already dead.\textsuperscript{73}
\end{quote}

After condemning the unconstitutionality of the elections, the petitioners then focused all their animosity against the oath,

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{69} Copy of Johnson's Oath, Basler, \textit{Lincoln's Papers}, VIII, 66.
\textsuperscript{70} Harris. \textit{Charity}, 221.
\textsuperscript{71} McKirrick. \textit{Andrew Johnson}, 127.
\textsuperscript{72} David Donald. \textit{The Politics of Reconstruction}, 21.
\end{flushleft}
He (the citizen of Tennessee) is required to make an oath and subscribe to a mass of vain repetitions concerning his activity as a friend of the Union and an enemy of its enemies—concerning his desires his hopes and fears—and that he finds it in his heart to rejoice over the scenes of blood, and of wounds, of anguish and death, wherein his friends, his kindred, his loved ones are slain, or maimed, or made prisoners of war—whereby the land of his birth or adoption is made desolate, and lamentation and mourning are spread over the whole nation. While all the civilized world stands aghast in contemplation of the unequalled horrors of our tremendous strife, the citizen of Tennessee is called upon by her Military Governor, under your authority, to swear that in these things he finds occasion to rejoice!  

Another part of the oath which was vehemently protested by the people was the condition of “opposing all armistices or negotiations for peace with rebels in arms”. In response, the petition continues,

We earnestly desire the return of peace and goodwill to our now unhappy country . . . We would be traitors to our country, false to our oaths . . . to oppose such negotiations. We cannot consent to swear at the ballot box a war of extermination against our countrymen and kindred, or to prolong by our opposition, for a single day after it can be brought to an honorable and lawful conclusion, a contest the most sanguinary and ruinous that has scourged mankind.  

In response to these pleas offered up by Tennesseans, Lincoln replied, “Governor Johnson, like any other loyal citizen of Tennessee, has the right to favor any political plan he chooses.” Lincoln continued to give Johnson free reign in Tennessee, even though he might not always have approved of his measures.

In addition to disenfranchising by means of his new oath, Johnson also utilized terror tactics in order to further intimidate the people of Tennessee. After the failure to encourage loyalty by way of the oath, Johnson soon resorted to the use of arbitrary arrests and reprisals, and came to depend on the military to keep a sense of general order. The people of Tennessee wrote to Lincoln concerning Johnson’s use of violence, “Troops

75 Ibid
from our own and other states are used to overawe the people . . . We have now secret
leagues, and are liable at any time to arbitrary arrest, as well as to mob violence, which is
now used in our midst."  They related an instance of a pro-McClellan meeting being
broken up by a “large party of soldiers” who rushed in with guns and drawn pistols,
shouting, “Disperse, you damned rebels and traitors.” It was discovered the following
week that the raiders had been appointed and raised for that purpose by none other than
Governor Johnson.  Ironically, most of the people assembled were loyalists and
unconditional unionists who had never supported the rebellion. However, Johnson was
no longer repressing solely the secessionists, instead he was beginning to turn his
violence to include those of his own party who did not agree with him. One historian
states,

Thus by the fall of 1864, radicals were grim and serious in their efforts to keep
ex-Confederates and conservatives subservient. Only unconditional men were to profit
from the reestablishment of civil government. Taking an amnesty oath was not enough
because past action, not promises for the future, was the proof of loyalty. Erring citizens
no longer merited consideration; their property and political rights were no longer
guaranteed respect.  

In view of everything they had already suffered, the people of Tennessee were finally
forced to concede,

We will not advise our citizens to put in jeopardy their lives in going through the
farce you propose . . . In view of the fact that we have appealed in vain to the
President whose duty it is to ‘see that the laws be faithfully executed’ and that
those who act by his authority shall hold sacred the liberties of the people, in view
of these things we announce that the McClellan electoral ticket in Tennessee is
withdrawn.

77 McKitrick. Andrew Johnson, 127.
78 Letter to Lincoln, November 8, 1864. Basler, Lincoln Papers, VIII, 60.
79 ibid
80 Maslowski., Treason Must be Made Odious, 90.
81 ibid
The controversy swirling around the election of 1864 and Johnson's treatment of loyalists, as well as secessionists goes down as one of the most contentious eras in the Reconstruction process in Tennessee.

The Aftermath

The crisis encountered during the era of the oaths, as well as the widespread disenfranchisement of numbers of loyal citizens and former secessionists, was merely a precursor of an impending crisis. In the winter of 1864-1865 the hardest portion of the reconstruction process in Tennessee reached a climax. The ultimate question still remained: would Reconstruction be a success? Or was Tennessee doomed to more years of harsh rule, disenfranchisement, and warring factions? Would there be a renewing of the bonds of brotherhood in Tennessee? Would the Unionists be able to bridge the gap of hostility caused by the war to welcome back their erring secessionist neighbors?

Johnson had been elected as Vice-President of the United States, and was soon to return to Washington, determined that Tennessee would be returned to its rightful place in the Union before his departure. Despite Johnson's often-harsh deviations from Lincoln's original plan, Lincoln chose Johnson as his running mate. Several reasons led Lincoln to choose Johnson. A vice-presidential candidate from a seceding state would impress Europe that, while the South was split, the nation was on the road to healing. Johnson was a Democrat and an Unconditional Unionist from a border state, which diversified the ticket, making it a representative ticket of the people. Besides these political reasons, Lincoln had come to accept Johnson's judgment, if not always to agree with it. Thus, Johnson would be leaving reconstruction behind, and stepping into a new
role as vice-president. All that remained for him in Tennessee was to pick a successor to carry on his work.

In January 1865, a convention met to elect the new governor. Ironically the people chose William Brownlow, Johnson’s old nemesis from East Tennessee. Johnson and Brownlow’s mutual love for the Union had thrust them together during the war. However, they would soon resume their rivalry on a national stage during Reconstruction. With the decisions of the convention, Johnson was convinced that at long last, Tennessee was starting down the road to a peaceful and lasting restoration.

But the convention did not signal the end of problems for Tennessee. Nashville, the capital of the state, remained a disloyal city. The city ratified the antislavery amendment, but with a very small turnout: by a vote of 1,349 to 4. The Daily Times and True Union noted that it was shameful that a town of 25,000 permanent citizens gave so few votes to the cause of the Union and civil law. Tennessee now had a loyal state government, but it lacked a loyal populace. The majority of the people felt little love for Johnson or his policies. Thus, while the new government gave the illusion of loyalty, the reality was that true loyalty was no more widespread in March 1865 than it had been three years before.

When the Confederate armies finally surrendered, the people of Tennessee remained essentially unchanged. They felt no differently towards the Union and all that it represented than they had felt three years earlier when they had seceded from it. They renewed their allegiance to Washington because their cause had been defeated militarily, not because they had been convinced that their cause had been wrong in any way. Their

---

82 Maslowski, Treason, 93.
83 ibid
defeat left them with one lasting legacy, hatred, awful and implacable. “They’ve left me with one inestimable privilege,” an impoverished housekeeper said of the Yankees, “to hate ‘em. I git up at half-past four in the morning and sit up till twelve at night to hate ‘em.” In their hearts they still espoused the same ideals and remained unchanged.

Both Lincoln and Johnson started on the road to reconstruction with some basic misconceptions that hindered their progress in restoring the Union. They had misunderstood the fundamentals of Southern Unionism. Both assumed that the people in the rebelling states were basically loyal, and once safe under Union control, would quickly renew their allegiance as well as their state to the Union. Even with the leniency of Lincoln’s Amnesty Proclamation, many Confederates had refused to desert their cause, and the advent of Johnson’s harsh policies had only served to cement their convictions. Southerners were deeply committed to their cause, believing it to be completely justifiable. “A struggle dressed in the silks of truth, justice, and freedom,” historian Peter Maslowski states, “is not lightly abandoned.” Well into 1864 secessionists held out hope that the Confederate army might still come to deliver them from Union control. Not until the surrender of the Confederacy did confederates finally give up their hope and abandon their cause, though in actions only. Their hearts remained unchanged. Lincoln and Johnson did not sense how deeply Tennesseans loyalty to the southern Confederacy ran, nor that most would rather die defending it than to see it defeated. It was a mistake that only time would correct. In order to quench the rebel faction Johnson implemented harsh tactics. These policies gained few converts, while alienating many conservative

---

85 Maslowski, *Treason*, 147.
86 Ibid, 147.
Unionists as well as former rebels. As one historian points out, "the stage was now set for the conflict between ex-Confederates and conservative Unionists on one hand, and radical Unionists on the other—a conflict which dominated Tennessee’s postwar troubles."\(^87\) Johnson’s stringent policies towards unionists and confederates alike left a lasting legacy of distrust, alienation, and hostility that would plague Tennessee throughout the postwar period.

Of all the Southern states, Tennessee had been the likeliest to succeed in wartime reconstruction. A combination of a substantial Unionist element along with early Union occupation produced conditions that were about as promising for redemption as could be expected in a state which had seceded and joined the Confederacy. Even with these optimal conditions, however, a loyal nucleus of official authority, which could exercise any real influence, was never realized.\(^88\) This became painfully obvious after the conclusion of the war. The first postwar election in Nashville proved that Tennessee’s citizens had never considered the Johnson government anything more than a puppet government. The voters reelected only one of Johnson’s appointees, while former Confederates were elected in abundance to the highest positions in the Tennessee government.\(^89\) The state had been the subject of a governmental experiment, headed by one whose temperament was not suited to the task. In East Tennessee, four years of bitterness left old wounds that required many years to heal, and the end of the war did not spell the end of troubles. The people of Tennessee were destined to suffer through four years of reconstruction with their archenemy now in charge not only of their fate, but of the fate of the entire nation as well.

\(^87\) ibid.
\(^88\) McKitrick. *Andrew Johnson*, 126.
In his annual address to Congress on December 6, 1864, Lincoln had stated,

A year ago general pardon and amnesty, upon specified terms, were offered to all, except certain designated classes; and, it was, at the same time, made know that the excepted classes were still within contemplation of special clemency . . . Thus, practically, the door has been, for a full year, open to all, except such as were not in condition to make free choice—that is, such s were in custody or under constraint. It is still so open to all. But the time may come—probably will come—when public duty shall demand that it be closed; and that, in lieu, more rigorous measures than heretofore shall be adopted.90

Lincoln’s words are eerily prophetic. On that fateful day when John Wilkes Booth shot President Lincoln, the door of mercy slammed shut. The day of probation was over, and judgment had come for the Southern portion of the United States. When Johnson came to power many Northerners rejoiced for they felt assured that the rebels would now be made to feel the full consequences of their actions, and that punishment was imminent for all who had dared to leave the Union. On the morning of Lincoln’s death, Senator Benjamin F. Wade, clasped Johnson’s hand and exclaimed, “I thank God you are here. Mr. Lincoln had too much of human kindness in him to deal with these infamous traitors, and I am glad that it has fallen into your hands to deal out justice to them.”91 The Chicago Tribune predicted that while Lincoln “whipped them (rebels) gently with cords,” Johnson would “scourge them with a whip of scorpions.”92 A sense of foreboding must have gripped the people of Tennessee as they realized that the tyrant of Tennessee was now to be the President of the United States with the fate of restoration resting solely with him and a vengeful Northern people.

While many Northerners were jubilant that retribution was about to be visited on the South by the new President, Southerners were belatedly realizing that, rather than

---

90 Annual Address to Congress, December 6, 1864. Basler, Lincoln Papers, VIII, 152.
91 Harris. Charity for all, 266.
rejoicing, they should be mourning the lost of their greatest ally. Lincoln had given former Confederates no reason to fear. Lincoln’s legacy was one of reconciliation, beginning with his proclamation of amnesty and reconstruction, and confederates knew they had nothing to fear in the reconstruction of Lincoln. Ten years after the assassination of Lincoln the *Atlantic Monthly* ran a column about Lincoln’s plan of reconstruction, lamenting,

There were no humiliating terms of submission imposed on a brave people: no amnesty qualifications exacted; no banishment or confiscation laws; no test oaths, to incite to perjury or foster the resentments of war. On the contrary, relief and protection should be denied to none, while the common rights of fraternity and citizenship should be freely accorded to all. In propounding these conditions the president showed a just appreciation of the Southern people. Had the policy thus declared been carried out faithfully, what untold misery and sufferings would have been prevented?  

**Johnson’s Legacy**

The legacy of Johnson’s reconstruction does not begin in the White House, but rather begins amid the toils of war, deep in the heart of the Confederacy. There is manifested his plan of reconstruction. From the beginning, Johnson was a polarizing figure in Tennessee, opting to stay with the Union rather than follow the lead of his homeland of Tennessee. His unrepentant loyalty to the Union and hatred of secession only served to fan the flames of secessionist feeling and further alienate the very people he had come to restore. What loyalty remained was eroding at the prospect of Emancipation, and when Johnson ushered in the era of the oaths, he effectively lost the support of the majority of the people in Tennessee. His oaths, which presumably were intended to solidify Unionist sentiment and heal the war-torn state, only served to further
exacerbate already strained relations. His oaths excluded many unquestionably loyal people from participating in reconstruction, thus destroying their interest in the work and causing Johnson to lose their counsel, influence and support.\(^9\) It is hard to imagine that Johnson, himself a Southerner and a Tennessean, failed to realize the implications of his harsh methods and stringent oaths, especially among staunch Unionist supporters. Southern honor was a mainstay of the Southern culture, and to place those who had never left the Union on the same footing as their rebel neighbors was an insult not to be born. It was to defend their very identity as Southerners, as well as their pride, that Tennessee Unionists were compelled to refuse to take the oath of loyalty. By alienating many Unionists, as well as Confederates, Johnson insured that Tennessee would be plagued by problems for years to come. By adopting a vindictive and harsh policy towards the people of Tennessee, Johnson deviated essentially from Lincoln’s plan of charity, amnesty and pardon. In a sense, he did restore Tennessee, however imperfectly. A hostile citizenry had been cowed, but not defeated; the slaves had been emancipated, though not guaranteed equality; a loyal state government existed, encompassing a minority of the people. These imperfect solutions destined that Reconstruction would be the work of a lifetime, rather than the work of a moment, or even a few years.

Questions still remain. Why did Johnson feel it was his place to punish the people of Tennessee for seceding from the Union? Perhaps as he viewed his ravaged homeland he wanted its destroyers to feel the full weight of their rebellion, to put them face to face with a reality that was painful to them both, as if to say, “Look at what you have caused.” It is impossible to know exactly what reasons he had in deviating from the plan laid out for him. But history seems to indicate that, had Lincoln’s original plan been

\(^9\) Corlew, *Tennessee*, 323.
implemented, the people of Tennessee, as well as the United States as a whole, could have been saved a good deal of misery and hardship, and been restored sooner to the nation where, "the mystic chords of memory . . . will yet swell the chorus of Union."\textsuperscript{95}

History itself furnished Johnson with one final attempt to salvage his name from the failures encountered in Tennessee and to emerge a victorious and successful leader. This one last chance at redemption appeared when the duty of restoring the nation fell into his hands, after Lincoln's untimely death. Here was his opportunity to prove that his would be a legacy of pardon and charity, rather than harshness, misery and failure. However, the awful fate of the nation was proclaimed when Johnson stated, "You may look back to it (his past record) as evidence of what my course will be . . . Mine has been but one straightforward and unswerving course, and I see no reason why I should depart from it."\textsuperscript{96} The misery that might have been the fate of Tennessee alone, blends imperceptibly into the fate of the nation as a whole. Reconstruction was doomed to be a long, painful process that was to plague America for generations to come. The injurious ramifications of Reconstruction are evident even today in the troubled relations between North and South. Thus, the unfortunate legacy of Johnson continues on.

\textsuperscript{95} Harris. \textit{Charity}, 275.
\textsuperscript{96} Andrew Johnson quoted in Simpson, \textit{Reconstruction Presidents}, 69.
Works Cited


Hardison, Edward T. *In the Toils of War*. Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, 1983.


*Nashville Dispatch,* February 5, 1864.

*Nashville Daily Times and True Union,* May 26, 1864.

*Nashville Union,* March 8, 1864.

*Nashville Press,* February 28, 1864.


A significant scholarly project, involving research, writing, or special performance, appropriate to the major in question, is ordinarily completed the senior year. The project is expected to be of sufficiently high quality to warrant a grade of A and to justify public presentation.

Under the guidance of a faculty advisor, the Senior Project should be an original work, should use primary sources when applicable, should have a table of contents and works cited page, should give convincing evidence to support a strong thesis, and should use the methods and writing style appropriate to the discipline.

The completed project, to be turned in in duplicate, must be approved by the Honors Committee in consultation with the student's supervising professor three weeks prior to graduation. Please include the advisor's name on the title page. The 2-3 hours of credit for this project is done as directed study or in a research class.

Keeping in mind the above senior project description, please describe in as much detail as you can the project you will undertake. You may attach a separate sheet if you wish:

Lincoln's Plan of Reconstruction
(work under Dr. McArthur as directed study)

Signature of faculty advisor: ____________________________
Expected date of completion: __________________________

Approval to be signed by faculty advisor when completed:
This project has been completed as planned: ✔
This is an “A” project: ✔
This project is worth 2-3 hours of credit: ✔

Advisor's Final Signature: ____________________________
Chair, Honors Committee: ____________________________ Date Approved: ____________________________

Dear Advisor, please write your final evaluation on the project on the reverse side of this page. Comment on the characteristics that make this “A” quality work.
Kristin Merritt  
"The Age of Oaths"  
Senior Honors Project  
final evaluation  
Ben McArthur  

I believe Kristin's paper meets the criteria for an honors project. For three reasons. She puts forward a clear thesis and supports it with evidence. She builds her paper on a large number of primary sources (largely the papers of Lincoln and Johnson). And her prose has some vigor. In addition, she made a research trip to Nashville to utilize the Tennessee State Library. This shows some initiative on her part. This will be an "A" paper.

Ben McArthur, advisor