



## PROFILES IN COURAGE

Teacher's Guide

# ANDREW JOHNSON

### CREDITS:

Starring Walter Matthau, Alfred Ryder, Paul Fix, Conlan Carter, John Abbott, and Linden Chiles. Written by Philip S. Goodman. Directed by Alexander Singer. Produced by Gordon Oliver and Robert Saudek Associates. Inspired by John F. Kennedy's Pulitzer Prize-winning book. **50 minutes.** Guide prepared for Social Studies School Service by Robert D. Barnes, 1983.

### OBJECTIVES:

- To examine the conflicts that faced the people of Tennessee in choosing between the Union and secession.
- To discover why Johnson, a slaveholder and opponent of abolition, would fight to preserve the Union.
- To understand the meaning of moral courage.

### BACKGROUND:

In 1860, out of a white population of more than 8 million, America had fewer than 400,000 slaveholding families. But strong abolition talk in the North and angry cries for secession in the South had polarized opinion on the slavery issue to the point where conflict appeared inevitable.

Within Tennessee, there was also strong division of opinion. In the middle and western parts of the state were large plantations and many slaves, but in East Tennessee the terrain forbade any great development of the plantation system. It was here that Andrew Johnson was raised. Apprenticed to a tailor at 12, he never spent a day of his life in school. Married at 18, his wife taught him to read and write. A former congressman and two-term Tennessee governor, he was in 1860 a member of the U.S. Senate. Determined that Tennessee remain in the Union, he spoke for tens of thousands of Southern men ready to fight for the Union. Said Johnson, "Secession is hell born and hell bound. For God's sake, let South Carolina nullify, 'revolute,' 'secede,' and be damned!"

### SYNOPSIS:

When Southern senators caucus on the issue of secession, Johnson refuses to even attend the session. But his relationship with fellow Tennessee Union supporters is hardly better. Divided by party, issues, and personal bitterness, they nonetheless form "working" coalitions determined for the Union "to make a fight."

In South Carolina the Governor calls for a convention to determine the issue of secession, and asks that 10,000 men be recruited for a militia. In the North, Lincoln has been elected but will not take office until March.

President Buchanan (in Johnson's view "a quivering jellyfish") "boldly" announces that South Carolina has no right to secede, but concludes that the United States has no right to stop her. Johnson's longtime friend and colleague, Tennessee Senator Nicholson, holds the same "do nothing" view.

Outraged, Johnson speaks before the Senate: "I am 'posed' to secession. No State has the right to secede. If that right exists, then this Government is at an end... It is no stronger than a rope of sand."

He denounces secession as "treason," but concludes in a clear, reasoned tone: "Let us stand by this Constitution, and in preserving it, we shall save the Union; and in saving the Union, we save this the greatest Government on earth."

Johnson receives thousands of letters of support from the North, but in the South he is denounced, and hanged and burned in effigy.

Johnson stumps eastern Tennessee with success, but the Governor has already placed the state with the Confederacy. His friends convince him that it is no longer safe to remain in the South.

Returning to Washington, Andrew Johnson resumes his place in the Senate. The only remaining senator from a seceded state (21 men have left), he will continue to support the Union.

### VOCABULARY:

The following words and phrases appear in the program. Teachers may wish to check for student understanding:

immortalized	coerce
caucus	impotent
Homestead Act of 1862	cotton is king
jollification	edifice
secession	sovereign
degeneracy	irony
veneer	referendum
fledgling	in effigy
Whig	mule skinnners
militia	momentum
give the Devil his due	tyranny
instigated	bourgeois
in toto	

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Johnson, in a conversation with his self-effacing tailor, urges: "...be a good one. Cut on the mark...and hold your head up. Carpenters, bricklayers, farmers, tailors, they're the backbone of the country, the pride of history."  
  
What does this statement tell us about Johnson's philosophy. Does he support himself with any examples? What was he attempting in his mention of Adam?
2. Johnson calls the Homestead Act provision giving free men the right to 160 acres of land, "the best guarantee of Democracy any nation ever had or ever will have," How does Buchanan regard the bill? What do you imagine most Southerners thought of the Homestead Act? Why?
3. "If someone is cheating me at cards, I stay in the game and fight for my rights. I don't go off and sulk like a mule." What point is Johnson making here? Using the card game analogy, what rebuttal could you present Johnson?
4. Johnson and his eastern Tennessee colleagues agree on one issue: "preservation of the Union," What are the issues that divide them?

5. "I'd like to chain South Carolina and Massachusetts to a raft and shove them out in the Artic Ocean" fumes Johnson, Why does he "link" these two States, Can you give specific reasons?
6. Tennessee senators Johnson and Nicholson both oppose secession, yet these friends will become bitter enemies. Why? Can Nicholson's position be defended? Johnson's? Explain.

### ACTIVITY:

Ask each member of the class to consider the process of decision making in their own family. On a sheet of paper, divided into three columns, each student should list:

1. Areas where family decisions are reached through discussion, consensus, or compromise.
2. Areas where decisions are usually made by parents.
3. Areas where students are encouraged to make their own decisions.

A class discussion focused on areas (1) & (2) might consider the problems involved in reaching a compromise, the frustration of having to "go along" with an unpopular decision, and the often unsatisfactory outcome of forced "unilateral" decisions.

### FOR RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION:

1. Do a research project on the life of Andrew Johnson. Consider his boyhood, his "education," his married life, his political life, his job of tailor, etc. Report your findings to your classmates.
2. Study the record of the impeachment proceedings against Andrew Johnson, the only American President ever to face this ordeal. What were the charges? What had Johnson done? What "crimes" constitute an impeachable offense? How did Johnson escape removal from office? (See also the Edmund Ross episode of *Profiles in Courage*.)

Some may wish to find out about President Richard M. Nixon who avoided almost-certain impeachment by resigning his office. What were his "crimes"? His justification?

