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Notes and Documents

Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction: A British View

Edited by ERIC FONER

LIKE ALMOST EVERY OTHER PHASE OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY American history, Reconstruction fascinated contemporary observers overseas. It is well known that foreign journalists, of whom Georges Clemenceau was the most conspicuous, produced insightful commentaries on Reconstruction politics. But the equally interesting comments on internal American affairs contained in the dispatches of foreign diplomats based in Washington have generally been neglected by historians of the period.¹ The two documents reprinted below, letters from the British minister Sir Frederick William Adolphus Bruce to George William Frederick Villiers, fourth Earl of Clarendon and his government's foreign secretary, contain some noteworthy and controversial observations on the policies of President Andrew Johnson during the "critical year" of 1866.

Bruce, a career diplomat who had served in such far-flung posts as China, Egypt, and Bolivia, was appointed minister to the United States in March 1865.² Among other assignments he was instructed to seek an improvement in Anglo-American relations, which were at low ebb because of Britain's pro-Confederate leanings during the

¹ A recently published exception is Thomas Schoonover, "The Mexican Minister Describes Andrew Johnson's 'Swing Around the Circle,'" *Civil War History*, XIX (June 1973), 149-61.

² *The Dictionary of National Biography . . . from the Earliest Times to 1900* (21 vols., London, 1949-1950), III, 97.

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Civil War and the depredations of the English-built southern ship *Alabama*. The activities of the Fenian Brotherhood, the Irish-American nationalist organization which was openly recruiting for an "invasion" of Canada, further strained relations. The British understandably objected to Fenian activities, while the Johnson administration, anxious not to alienate Irish-American voters, particularly at a time when it needed all the support it could muster for its Reconstruction policies, refused to take any decisive action against the group.³

Despite these obstacles, Bruce did establish a friendly personal relationship with Secretary of State William Henry Seward⁴ and with the conservative Republican senator from Connecticut, James Dixon. Dixon, one of the few Republican senators who wholeheartedly supported Johnson's policies in early 1866, was a man who "exerted next to no influence"⁵ in Republican circles, but he did serve as a liaison between Bruce and the President. On February 9, 1866, three days after Congress approved the Freedmen's Bureau bill and ten days before Johnson's veto, which marked the first open break between the President and congressional Republicans, Dixon arranged for Bruce an interview with President Johnson.

Bruce's report of this interview is an interesting indication of Johnson's outlook during this period of political flux and tension. Johnson's comments on Irish-American politics, the Fenians, Mexican affairs, and his view of the Radical Republicans, all stated with his characteristic candor, conform to what is known from other sources. Johnson's opposition to Negro suffrage is also well known, but what are truly astonishing are the President's belief "that the right of voting in this country requires to be raised not lowered" and his suggestion that "moral," "educational," and property qualifications be instituted for white voters. For if there is one thing upon which Johnson's admirers and his critics have agreed, it is his sincere commitment to political democracy (for whites). Johnson's comments on the virtues of rural voters and his distrust of "town voters of the poorer classes" support Kenneth M. Stampp's analysis

³ The most recent study is Brian Jenkins, *Fenians and Anglo-American Relations During Reconstruction* (Ithaca and London, 1969), especially 23-25, 34-38, 47, 128-29.

⁴ Glyndon G. Van Deusen, *William Henry Seward* (New York, 1967), 497. Van Deusen made use of a number of Bruce-Clarendon letters in Chapters 30 and 31 on Seward's role in Reconstruction and also in his chapters on foreign relations.

⁵ Eric L. McKittrick, *Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction* (Chicago, 1960), 283.

of his social outlook: he "still romanticized the self-sufficient yeoman farmer, still regarded cities as centers of moral decay." But in view of Johnson's belief that the franchise should be restricted, one wonders if the President can still be regarded as, in Stamp's phrase, "The Last Jacksonian."⁶ Or perhaps Johnson's view is simply another example of the distressing tendency in American history for men to alter their democratic belief in equality for whites when forced to confront the implications of extending that principle to blacks.

Two months after this interview the foreign secretary requested Bruce to furnish him with a more detailed analysis of Reconstruction politics, particularly with regard to the rights of the freedmen. "People here are watching American affairs with intense interest," Clarendon wrote, "and the feeling, as far as I can judge of it, is all for the President because he is thought to be politically wise and personally plucky." Yet "some of our philanthropists" were dissenting from this general feeling, arguing that if the South were quickly restored to the Union, "the condition of the Negro would be as bad as ever and that he would have no security for social rights of any kind." "I wish you would let me know," the foreign secretary concluded, "whether these opinions are justified as I have a great respect for some of the persons who hold them."⁷ The "philanthropists" mentioned in Clarendon's letter were the leaders of the freedmen's assistance movement, a continuation of the British antislavery tradition, which attracted support from "the more religiously minded of the upper middle class." These benevolent reformers, as Clarendon noted and Christine Bolt's recent study has confirmed, were increasingly anxious over the status of the freedmen under Johnson's policies.⁸

Bruce's letter of May 6, 1866, the second document printed below, is an extended summary and analysis of the motivations and rationale of Johnson's policies. Less than a month earlier, on April 9, Congress had overridden Johnson's veto of the Civil Rights Act, which established the national citizenship of the freedman and offered federal protection for black civil rights, short of suffrage.

⁶ Stamp, *The Era of Reconstruction, 1865-1877* (New York, 1965), 50-82, especially 54.

⁷ Clarendon to Bruce, April 21, 1866, Clarendon Deposit, c. 142 (Bodleian Library, Oxford University, Oxford, England).

⁸ Bolt, *The Anti-Slavery Movement and Reconstruction: A Study in Anglo-American Cooperation, 1833-77* (London, New York, and Toronto, 1969), 63-70, 74-78; quotation on page 63

Johnson's veto had isolated him from the great majority of Republican congressmen, and Bruce's letter, probably based on continuing contacts with Seward and Dixon and via them with the President, is a fair summary of Johnson's perception of the Reconstruction issue at this crucial point. Bruce was not, it should be noted, a completely disinterested observer. For a variety of reasons, including his belief that the South, if quickly readmitted to the Union, would be unlikely to sympathize with Fenian activities or with an active prosecution of the *Alabama* claims, Bruce personally sided with Johnson against his Radical critics.⁹ In addition, he may well have shared the color prejudice which Christine Bolt has shown was increasing in Great Britain in the 1860s.¹⁰ On the other hand, Bruce, as a British aristocrat, seems in the letter to look with disdain on the racial prejudice of Johnson and his class of "mean Whites."

Among the more interesting of Bruce's comments is his observation that Johnson had "entirely . . . abandoned the agrarian ideas, which he apparently entertained at first." "Agrarian," of course, in this mid-nineteenth-century context, referred to proposals for social leveling, especially the redistribution of property. Why Johnson decided to move away from his intention of May and June 1865 to drive the planter class from power in the South has always been something of a mystery. Various historians have suggested that Johnson decided that northern capitalists were more of a danger to the southern yeoman than the planter aristocracy, that he needed the planters' support in a projected national conservative party, and that what he really desired was the personal satisfaction of the aristocrats supplicating for individual pardons during the summer of 1865.¹¹ Bruce's letter suggests another consideration—that Johnson believed that only the plantation aristocracy possessed the moral authority to control the labor and "civilize" the behavior of the freedmen. He therefore could not accept the idea of "turning the Negroes into small proprietors."

Clarendon apparently found his minister's lengthy analysis con-

⁹ Jenkins, *Fenians*, 60–61, 130.

¹⁰ Bolt, *Anti-Slavery Movement*, 141–70.

¹¹ Stamp, *Era of Reconstruction*, 65–71; McKittrick, *Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction*, 139, 144–49. A recent study suggests that Johnson's policy always aimed at resuming southern political life under the aegis of the South's traditional leadership. Michael Perman, *Reunion Without Compromise: The South and Reconstruction: 1865–1868* (Cambridge, England, 1973), 66–69.

vincing, for a few weeks later he wrote to Bruce, thanking him for his "very clear and interesting letter respecting the irrepressible Negro. It has made me understand the President's policy much more clearly than I have yet done." Clarendon now believed that Johnson's policy was "founded on justice and common sense as well as knowledge of black and white natures, the objects of parties and the ultimate welfare of the country."¹²

FREDERICK W. A. BRUCE TO EARL OF CLARENDON¹³

February 9, 1866

MY DEAR LORD,

In conformity with my understanding with Mr. Dixon, we called on the ladies at the Whitehouse last evening, and after a short time the President joined us

He made me sit down beside him, and expressed his satisfaction at having an opportunity of talking with me in a frank and informal manner. He alluded in a very friendly spirit to my conduct in the Osbourne flotilla affair, and said that my position as a friend to this country was thoroughly understood and appreciated, that he himself was anxious to see friendly relations existing with England, and did not wish to rely exclusively on reports of what passed between me and the Secretary of State.

After some general remarks, I alluded to the proceedings of the Fenians in this country, and to the preparations, as if for a state of War, that they obliged us to keep up on the frontier of the Provinces. He said with some emphasis, that this movement met with no sympathy on the part of the Govt., which on the contrary was anxious to discourage it, that he was much dissatisfied with the imperium in imperio, the Irish wished to create in this country, that the attempt to combine particular nationalities on this continent, was contrary to American interests, and inconsistent with their duties as American citizens, that he did not think the Fenian affair so formidable as was supposed, and that it would die out for want of fuel. He dwelt on the inconsistency of the Irish, who, while invoking aid on their own behalf as an oppressed race, were themselves the most bitter opponents of all attempts to improve and elevate the condition of the Negro in the United States. As my object was simply to discuss the question in its general bearings, and to draw the attention of the President to its importance, I thought it better not to suggest specific measures of repression, as such a course might excite the susceptibilities of Mr. Seward.

¹² Clarendon to Bruce, May 26, 1866, Clarendon Deposit, c. 142.

¹³ Bruce to Clarendon, February 9, 1866, *ibid.*, c. 90.

In alluding to the Emperor's speech, he said he was not so satisfied, as others seemed to be with his declarations about Mexico. (This was meant at Seward, who professes to consider the question as satisfactorily arranged.) That he did not consider that the position was materially altered by it, and that its terms were ambiguous.

I told him that it must be recollected, that the Emperor had to consult the susceptibilities of the French nation, that I felt sure the expedition was undertaken in the belief (instilled into him by refugees) that elements existed in Mexico of order and good government which would come to the surface, if temporarily assisted, but with no intention to take permanent footing on this continent. That when the task proved more difficult than had been anticipated the idea of the Latin race was put forward to reconcile the French to the sacrifices it imposed. That the great characteristic of the Emperor, was his ability in getting out of difficulties, and that he would find means of withdrawing from this enterprise. The President fully admitted his ability, and said that the collapse of the rebellion would no doubt materially change his views. But I can see he is not fully re-assured as to the course he may eventually take.

On the internal policy of the country, the President appears to be quite settled in his views, and confident that they will be ultimately successful. He said there are a few extreme Radicals who are bent on pushing theories to extremes, and that the way to deal with them is to allow them to lay their plans fully before the people, who will decide against them.

He remarked on the inconsistency of those who, while advocating in the Freedmen's Bureau bill provisions for the maintenance & tutelage of the Negro, which could only be justified on the ground of his helplessness and inability to take care of himself, wished at the same time to confer on him the right by means of suffrage of taking part in the Govt. of the country. He gave it as his opinion that the right of voting in this country requires to be raised not lowered. He said that in the towns it had become a source of corruption and that voters were publickly bought and sold without any regard to the publick interests. The only remedy he saw was to provide that after a certain time a qualification should be required, perhaps a moral & educational qualification for the electors of the lower Houses, and a small freehold qualification for the electors of Senators &c. He said, you can depend on the morality of the rural voters, but not on that of the town voters of the poorer classes. That the rural voter, however poor, felt that he had an interest in the country, and identified himself with it, but not so the poor class of townfolk. Such a change would be beneficial to us, for you may recollect that in a letter I enclosed from a Mr. Perrie [?] in the West, he mentioned that the country-Irish took little part in the Fenian movement, and that it was chiefly confined to the town-Irish, and was taken up by politicians in order to gain their votes.

Every reflecting person I have talked to concurs in thinking that the suc-

cessful working of this Govt. depends on the preponderance of the land being maintained in the electoral body.

Our conversation lasted about half an hour, during the latter part of it Mr. Stanton came in, and I thought it better to turn it upon general topics.

On leaving the President he expressed himself as much pleased with the interview, and added, that though all business must go through the Department of State, he should be glad to see me at any time, and hear any suggestions which I might wish to offer. I shall be very cautious in availing myself of this permission, as Mr. Seward's jealousy might be easily aroused. I told him I had seen the President, and had had a pleasant conversation with him, and he appeared pleased at my appreciation of him.

There is a singular charm in the President's manner. He is evidently a man of strong convictions and much thought, combined with tenderness of heart. He expresses himself with much clearness, and with an absence of anything like Americanism in his language and accent.

I shall learn through Mr. Dixon the impression my visit produced upon him.

I remain with the highest respect

Your Lordship's faithful Servt.

FREDERICK W. A. BRUCE

FREDERICK W. A. BRUCE TO EARL OF CLARENDON¹⁴

BRITISH LEGATION,
WASHINGTON
May 6, 1866

Private

MY DEAR LORD,

The question put in your last letter, as to the position of the Negro in the Southern States, supposing the President's policy of re-establishing State-rights to be carried out, is one of great interest & of great difficulty. I cannot speak on the subject with confidence, amid the conflicting reports I hear of Southern sentiment.

It does not however admit of doubt, that the freedom of the Negro is accepted in the South. The State Legislatures have sought to give it effect, and have generally recognized his civil rights in all cases where he is concerned. In some instances they refuse to admit his evidence where white men only are concerned.

¹⁴ Bruce to Clarendon, May 6, 1866, *ibid.*

But the question between the President & the majority in Congress is not fairly stated, if it is represented as being solely a question of the more or less protection to be afforded to the Negro. There is a much wider issue involved. "How is a minority, consisting of an ignorant & despised race, to exist & be protected in the midst of a dominant and haughty Race who yesterday knew them only as Slaves & Chattels?"

The President, a Southern man, knowing the state of opinion in the Southern States, and the condition of the Negro, says in substance; that the existence and safety of the Negro Race depends on their position being harmonious with, and not antagonistic to, the Whites. He maintains, that they will be the victims of the hatred & suspicion engendered by any attempt to support them by unconstitutional Legislation and by Northern influence, against the opinion of the South. He asserts, that there is no feeling of hatred or revenge in the South against them; that their well-being is essential to the interests of Southern cultivators; that these interests are safer guides in dealing practically with the question, than the theories of ignorant Northern sentimentalists; that if left alone, (under the menace of interference, if acting unjustly), the Southern States will establish relations beneficial to both races, and that at all events the experiment ought to be tried before tampering with the Constitution of the country. Finally he does not hesitate to say that the sympathy professed by the Radical majority in Congress for the Negro, is insincere, & that their real object is to use him as a means to prolong their tenure of power.

Moreover he objects to the Radical plan of action, that it is impracticable. He denies the possibility of extending over the vast country known as the Slave States, any effectual protection based on the assumption that the resident Whites are hostile to the Negro. He is in favour of accepting the Constitution as it is, and of legislating, if necessary, for *proved*, not for *presumed* evils. He is as anxious that the Negro should become a useful member of society, as that he should be secured in the enjoyment of the rights of Man; and if he is unequal to the exigencies of his position in an industrious community, he is indifferent to his fate. In this view of the case he represents, I believe truly, American sentiments in its cooler moments, though the hostility to the South produced by the War, shows itself at present in an artificial sympathy for the Negro. The Negro is not an ideal being, except perhaps in New England, where he is as little known as he was in Old England at the period of emancipation. In the other Free States he is looked upon, as Punch describes, not as a Brother, but as a Bother, and there is no disposition to make sacrifices to save him from destruction, if he is too idle and improvident to take care of himself. The Irish particularly hate him, as a probable competitor in the lowest description of labour, which has hitherto been exclusively their field.

You will never get out of the heads of men, like Johnson, (himself

originally a mean White) the idea, that the Negro is an inferior Being, totally inapt for the higher developments of civilization. The objections entertained by his class to Slavery, were political, and proceeded largely from the feeling of envy to the rich proprietors which republican institutions tend to produce. This class were the severest task-masters in the South, and they are now the negro's worst enemies. The badge of Slavery was the only distinction between them and the Black man, and their pride of Race is severely mortified, now that it is done away.

It is remarkable how entirely the President has abandoned the agrarian ideas, which he apparently entertained at first. I think he now perceives that, if his policy of re-construction is to be carried through, and the Southern States are to be restored to their autonomy, the interests and safety of the Negro will be best protected by the large proprietors. He has no faith in the plan of turning the Negroes into small proprietors, and thus depriving them of the care and civilizing influence of dependence on the White Man. He believes, that if they become squatters they will become idle, thievish, and dissipated. They will be exposed to the hostility of the Whites, and through bad usage and improvidence will soon disappear altogether. He wishes them to become a necessary link in the chain of Southern industry, and that can be only effected by a combination between their labour, and the capital and intelligence of the Whites. It is only in this way that the Negro can hope to escape the fate that has overtaken the Red Indian. Indeed if, as many suppose, White labour can be substituted for Black, in the raising of cotton, he will soon be driven for subsistence to the rice-swamps of South Carolina, and the sugar-plantations of Louisiana.

If therefore I am right in this statement of the views of the President and his adherents, it is evident that he looks upon the fate of the Negro, as dependent on *economical laws* not on *direct legislation*. He will therefore oppose to the utmost all revolutionary changes in the Constitution of the U. States, not only because of his reverence for it, but because he does not think the object of the philanthropists will be thereby attained. He will not refuse to consider any specific measure intended to meet a specific necessity, once that necessity is proved to exist. But he will resist all *a priori* legislation, which is based on the idea that the Negro must be put under the tutelle of the Federal Govt., as unconstitutional, and as prejudicial to the interests of the Negro himself. The question between him and the Radicals, is not one of humanity, but of sagacity, in dealing with this most difficult problem, and I think, though I speak with diffidence, that the President's plan will work more favourably for the Slave than any scheme which his opponents have hitherto been able to elaborate. I do not enter upon the political objectives & schemes which will render necessary a quasi-military occupation of the South, and which will give to the South

the support on Constitutional grounds of a large party in the North itself. But it is impossible to consider that question fairly without taking into account the constitution of this Govt., which is not a Republick one & indivisible, but is an agglomeration of separate Republicks under a Federal Head, the powers of which are jealously specified and circumscribed.

I remain with the highest respect

Your faithful Servt.

FREDERICK W. A. BRUCE