

Topic Page: [Johnson, Andrew \(1808 - 1875\)](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/johnson_andrew_1808_1875)

Summary Article: **Johnson, Andrew**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

1808–75, 17th President of the United States (1865–69), b. Raleigh, N.C.

Early Life

His father died when Johnson was 3, and at 14 he was apprenticed to a tailor. In 1826 the family moved to E Tennessee, and Andrew soon had his own tailor shop at Greeneville. A man of no formal schooling but of great perseverance and strength of character, he was greatly aided by his wife, Eliza McCardle, whom he married in 1827; she taught him to write and improved his reading and spelling. He prospered at his trade, and the tailor shop became the favored meeting place of other artisans, laborers, and small farmers interested in discussing public affairs. The best debater in the community, Johnson became the leader of his group in opposition to the slaveholding aristocracy.

Political Career

From 1830 onward Johnson was almost continuously in public office, being alderman (1828–30) and mayor (1830–33) of Greeneville, state representative (1835–37, 1839–41), state senator (1841–43), Congressman (1843–53), governor of Tennessee (1853–57), and U.S. Senator (1857–62). As U.S. Representative and Senator, Johnson was principally interested in securing legislation to make land in the West available to homesteaders. He voted with other Southern legislators on questions concerning slavery, but after Tennessee seceded (June 8, 1861), he remained in the Senate, the only Southerner there. He vigorously supported Abraham Lincoln's administration, and in Mar., 1862, the President appointed him military governor of Tennessee with the rank of brigadier general of volunteers. His ability in filling this difficult position and the fact that he was a Southerner and a war Democrat made him an ideal choice as running mate to Lincoln on the successful Union ticket in 1864.

Presidency

On Apr. 15, 1865, following Lincoln's assassination, Johnson took the oath of office as President. His Reconstruction program (and he insisted that Reconstruction was an executive, not a legislative, function) was based on the theory that the Southern states had never been out of the Union. He therefore restored civil government in the ex-Confederate states as soon as it was feasible. Because he was not prepared to grant equal civil rights to blacks and because he did not press for the wholesale disqualification for office of Confederate leaders, he was roundly denounced by the radical Republicans who, led by Thaddeus Stevens, set out to undo Johnson's work on the convening of the 39th Congress in Dec., 1865.

In Apr., 1866, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act over Johnson's veto, and his political power began to decline sharply. The remainder of his administration saw one humiliation after another. His "swing around the circle" in the congressional elections of 1866 was unsuccessful. Baited by mobs organized by the radicals and slandered by the press, he struck out at his enemies in such harsh terms that he did his own cause much harm. On Mar. 2, 1867, the radicals passed over his veto the First Reconstruction Act and the Tenure of Office Act.

When Johnson insisted upon his intention to force out of office his Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, whom he rightly suspected of conspiring with the congressional leaders, the radical

Republicans sought to remove the President. Their first attempt failed (Dec., 1867), but on Feb. 24, 1868, the House passed a resolution of impeachment against him even before it adopted (Mar. 2–3) 11 articles detailing the reasons for it. Most important of the charges, which were purely political, was that he had violated the Tenure of Office Act in the Stanton affair. On Mar. 5 the Senate, with Chief Justice Salmon P. Chase presiding, was organized as a court to hear the charges. The President himself did not appear. In spite of the terrific pressure brought to bear on several Senators, the court narrowly failed to convict; the vote, on the 11th article (May 16) and on the second and third articles (May 26), was 35 to 19, one short of the constitutional two thirds required for removal.

Although the problems of Reconstruction dominated Johnson's administration, there were important achievements in foreign relations, notably the purchase (1867) of Alaska, negotiated by Secretary of State William H. Seward. Johnson's name figured in the balloting at the Democratic convention of 1868, but he did not actively seek the nomination. In 1875, on his third attempt to resume public office, he was returned to the Senate from Tennessee, but died a few months after taking his seat.

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