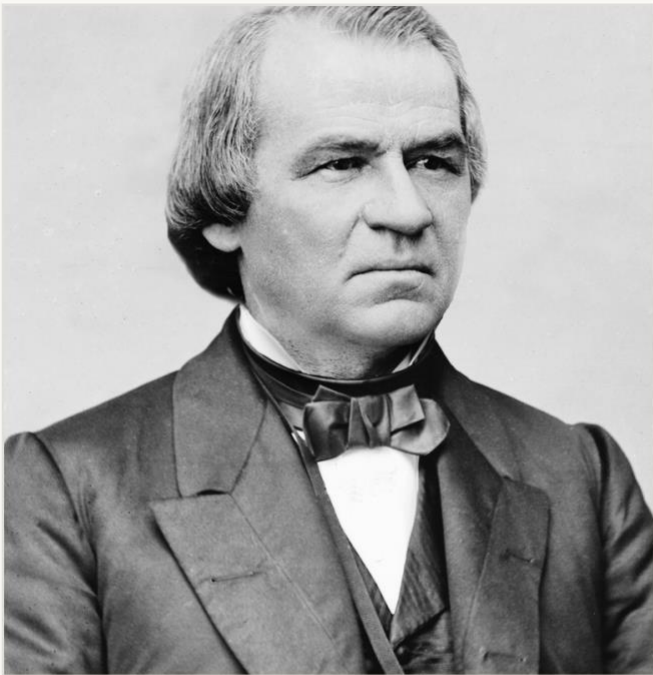




Andrew Johnson

Andrew Johnson, whose presidency was dominated by the struggle over Reconstruction.

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Andrew Johnson: The Wrong President for Reconstruction

President he succeeded: Abraham Lincoln

Term of office: April 15, 1865–March 4, 1869

Andrew Johnson became president only hours after Abraham Lincoln died from an assassin's bullet. The Civil War was ending, but the equally difficult work of rebuilding the Union had barely begun.

Johnson was a Southern Democrat from Tennessee who had remained loyal to the Union. Lincoln selected him as his 1864 running mate to symbolize national unity. After the assassination, that political calculation placed Johnson in charge of Reconstruction.

Johnson favored quickly restoring the former Confederate states. He offered pardons to many former Confederates and permitted Southern governments to reorganize with limited federal

interference. These governments soon enacted “Black Codes” restricting the freedom of formerly enslaved people.

Republicans in Congress believed Johnson’s policies allowed the old Southern leadership to regain power while offering insufficient protection to freedmen. Johnson vetoed civil-rights legislation and measures extending the Freedmen’s Bureau. Congress responded by overriding his vetoes more frequently than had occurred under any previous president.

The confrontation became intensely personal. Johnson denounced his opponents in angry public speeches, while Congress passed legislation limiting his authority. When he attempted to remove Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, the House impeached him for allegedly violating the Tenure of Office Act.

In 1868, the Senate fell one vote short of the two-thirds majority needed to remove him. Johnson remained in office, but his political influence was effectively destroyed. He did not receive his party’s nomination for another presidential term.

Johnson could claim an important territorial acquisition. His administration purchased Alaska from Russia for \$7.2 million in 1867. Critics mocked the purchase as “Seward’s Folly,” but Alaska eventually proved strategically important and rich in natural resources. Secretary of State William Seward also acquired American rights to Midway Atoll.

These achievements could not redeem Johnson’s Reconstruction record. His opposition to the Fourteenth Amendment, hostility toward congressional Reconstruction and indifference to racial violence left formerly enslaved Americans dangerously exposed.

Historians usually rank Johnson among the worst American presidents. His resistance to civil-rights protections and inability to cooperate with Congress worsened the nation’s already difficult transition from slavery to freedom.