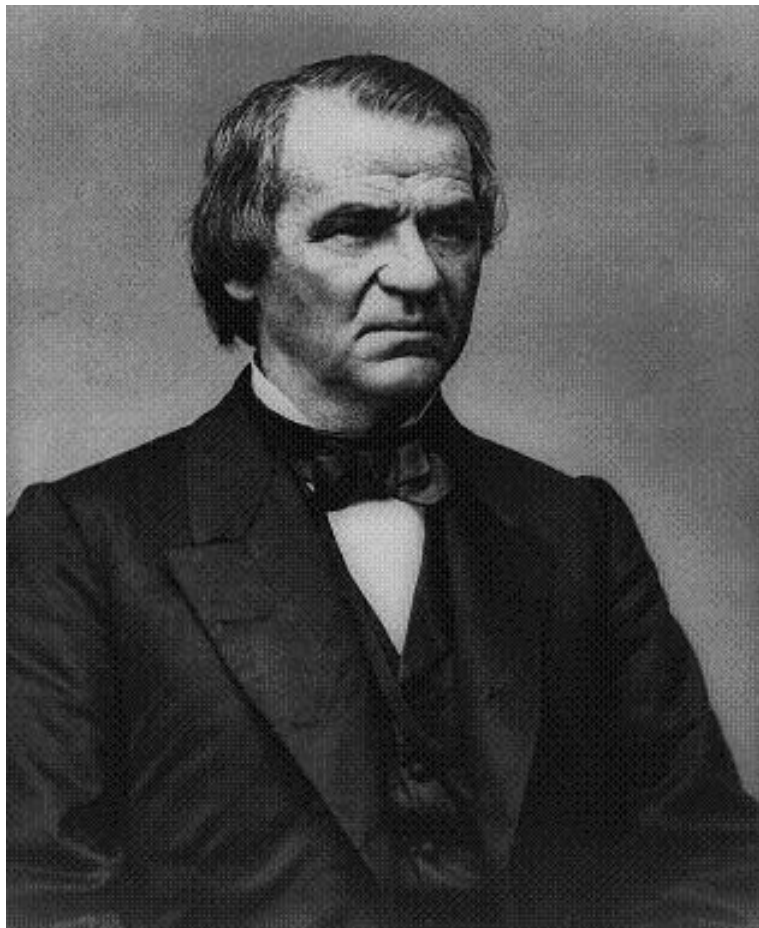


# Andrew Johnson

Nonconformist  
Seventeenth, 1865-1869



**Nicknames:** "The Grim Presence", "Andy the Sot", "Sir Veto", "The Tennessee Tailor"

**Birth:** December 29<sup>th</sup>, 1808, Raleigh, North Carolina

**Death:** July 31<sup>st</sup>, 1875, Carter Station, Tennessee

**Significant Events During Johnson's Term:** Canada Unites ... "Seward's Folly" (U.S. Purchases Alaska) ... Fourteenth Amendment Passes ... Johnson Impeached ... Nebraska (#37) becomes a State

**Quotes:** *"I have reached the summit of my ambition."*

-- Andrew Johnson, on being elected to the U.S. Senate in 1857

*"To think that one frail life stands between this insolent, clownish creature and the presidency! May God bless and spare Abraham Lincoln!"* -- New York World, 1865

*"No man has a right to judge Andrew Johnson in any respect who has not suffered as much and done as much as he for the Nation's sake."* -- Abraham Lincoln, 1864

*"One of the people by birth, he remained so by conviction, continually referring to his origin...He was indifferent to money and careless of praise or censure."* -- Jefferson Davis, 1865

**How his term ended:** Johnson was not renominated by his party in 1868. Instead, they chose Horatio Seymour, who lost to Ulysses S. Grant.

**Other Professions:** Tailor

**Worst Mistakes:** Johnson stole the liberty from all of those whom he enslaved.

While a Congressman, Johnson voted in favor of the gag rule preventing the consideration of antislavery petitions. Worse yet, he supported the unconscionable and indefensible Fugitive Slave Law.

**Saving Graces:** Although a defender of slavery (and a slaveholder himself), Johnson upheld the Union and opposed secession (being the only Southern Senator not to secede along with his State, Tennessee).

Johnson also showed great bravery in traveling into Tennessee during the Civil War and explaining his position (namely, placing national loyalty above sectional loyalty) to his enraged constituents.

**Notes:** Johnson's father Jacob, who had once worked for a cousin of James Polk (#11), died when Andrew was three as an indirect result of saving two men from drowning. The water in the mill pond from which the two men were saved was frigid, and thirty-four year old Jacob was exhausted after dragging the two men to shore. His health deteriorated so quickly and drastically that within a month he collapsed at work and died.

Johnson's mother was a seamstress and washerwoman.

Johnson was the last President to have been a slaveholder, as there was not another President from the South until Woodrow Wilson (#28), over forty years later. Of the nine Presidents between Johnson and Wilson, six were from Ohio (as well as one each from Vermont, New Jersey, and New York).

Johnson and his brother broke free/ran away from indentured servitude when they were

young men. Andrew was sixteen, and had been working for his master for two years. They, of all people, should have realized how vile a thing slavery was, having for a time tasted a diluted portion of that debilitating potion themselves. This experience may actually have tempered Johnson's views about slavery, and had something to do with him siding with the Union at the time of the Civil War.

Johnson married at a younger age (nineteen) than any other President; likewise, his wife Eliza was sixteen at the time of their wedding, the youngest of any future First Lady. Johnson was what might be termed functionally illiterate at the time. He had never been to school, and had been taught only fundamental reading skills by a workmate. Eliza tutored her husband in math and improved his reading and spelling, too. Their marriage was performed by Mordecai Lincoln, a distant relative of Abraham.

When he was Governor of Tennessee, Johnson still tailored his own clothes, and even made a suit for the Governor of Kentucky as a gesture of good will to his "neighbor."

During the time that he was a Senator from Tennessee fighting against secession, Johnson came close to being lynched by a mob in Virginia. Although it was plain he was taking his life in his hands, he traveled throughout Tennessee with his message that national unity should supersede sectional rivalry.

One of Andrew and Eliza's sons died fighting in the Civil War (on the Union side).

Johnson only served as Vice President for one month (Hannibal Hamlin had been Vice President during Lincoln's first term, but Lincoln wanted a Southerner, to balance the ticket, as a running mate in the 1864 election).

Johnson was called "Old Sot" by some because he downed several shots of whiskey before being sworn in as Vice President, some say because he was feeling woozy from a bout with typhoid fever and needed to "fortify himself" in the stuffy chambers; his acceptance speech was rambling and incoherent, causing many there to conclude that he was inebriated (and who wouldn't be after several shots of whiskey?).

According to John Wilkes Booth's conspiratorial plans, Johnson was to be assassinated the same night as Lincoln, but the would-be assassin assigned to Johnson didn't go through with it. Secretary of State William Seward *was* attacked, along with many others at his house, where Seward was convalescing from a carriage accident, but survived. Ulysses S. Grant (#18) was also on the terrorist's hit list, but was not in town at the time. Originally, Grant had planned to be at Ford's Theater that night, along with the Lincolns, but he belatedly changed plans and was on a train when the assassination took place.

Johnson-appointed governments all passed "Black Codes" that assigned second-class status to the Freedmen (former slaves). This was so even though Johnson had once said: "The better class of them will go to work and sustain themselves, and that class ought to be allowed to vote, on the ground that a loyal negro is more worthy than a disloyal white man." In response

to these Black Codes and worrisome signs of Southern recalcitrance, the re-admission of the States formerly in rebellion was blocked by Congress in the Fall of 1865.

Some say that Congress was acting as if they 'wanted to treat the South like a conquered enemy' (which is exactly what she was, of course). Johnson's enemies favored "radical" reconstruction (making the former slaves citizens, and legislating racial equality) as opposed to Johnson's proposed "mild" reconstruction (pardoning almost all of the rebels, excepting only the leaders of the Confederacy).

Because of this conflict between how Johnson wanted to proceed in dealing with the South and how most others in his Cabinet and in Congress wanted to go about it, there were two attempts to impeach Johnson, first in 1867 and then again in 1868. Congress had passed the Tenure of Office Act in 1867, preventing Johnson from firing any of his Cabinet, who were all holdovers from the Lincoln administration. Johnson had been firing some of those who were adamant about pursuing radical reconstruction. Johnson claimed the Act was unconstitutional and tested it by firing Secretary of War Stanton. Johnson missed being found guilty of the "high crimes and misdemeanors" that would have turned him out of the presidency by a single vote in the Senate. That single vote was one of the events John F. Kennedy wrote about in his book "Profiles in Courage," wherein Kennedy credits Edmund Ross of Kansas with defying peer pressure and "sparing" Johnson an ignominious ejection from office.

As the only Southern Senator to denounce secession, Johnson was viewed as a traitor by most in that region of the country during the Civil War. When his Presidential term expired, though, he was welcomed back to Tennessee as a "patriot" due to his support for mild reconstruction during his administration.

Johnson is considered by some historians to have been the only President from the (socioeconomic) lower class. Lincoln and others who were relatively "poor" growing up are presumably considered to have been from the lower-middle class.

Johnson was the only former President elected to the Senate.